Grass Roots Project Report

Lower Mataura Valley Community of Learning – Collaborating and Connecting

Introduction

Background

We are a Community of Learning (CoL) made up of five small schools in Lower Mataura Valley (LMV). Four of them (Wyndham, Glenham, Tuturau and Edendale) are contributing primary schools ranging from a sole charge teaching principal to a released Principal with a school of seven teachers. The four primary schools predominately contribute to our one college (Menzies College).

Once our Achievement Challenge was endorsed, we appointed our first CoL Lead and Across School Teacher in May of 2016.

Being rural we see digital technologies as a means to connect each of us together, and to connect our children to the world.

The Research

"Digital technologies can play a powerful role in the networks, accelerating the pace of improvement and giving students, teachers and communities the means to create engaging learning environments, work together and share information and data." (Future Focused Learning in Connected Communities)

Methodology & Design

Methodology

The effectiveness of our CoL project was around qualitative information from feedback surveys, comments and interview.

Project design

Phase one – The teacher space (group interaction)

Enable our teachers to establish a coherent and consistent digital pathway for our children.

Phase two – The online space (both group and one-on-one)

We would like them to establish an online collaborative COL Learner Community that enables video connection, collaborative projects and peer to peer critique.

Phase three – The learner space (one-to-one)

We would like our expert practitioners to then work with the teachers to empower them to take what they now know and apply it with priority children. This would involve the expert practitioners trouble shooting with teachers and providing one-on-one 'how to' support.

Findings

We have learnt so much from this project.

- One school has completely transferred its systems to Google and the teachers are now collaboratively planning across the staff. A new teacher to that school has stated "I can't get over how collaborative everything is here."

- One school has seen the benefit of collaboration and sharing of information. This has opened their eyes to the possibilities and they have extended their learning to include a home and school platform call Seesaw. Every one of their students now has direct connection with their family to share their learning with and make comments. Students are providing feedback to each other. This is across all year levels and down through time.

- Shared sites, drives and calendars are being established within schools (for staff and Board of Trustees) and across schools for event organisation.

- A shared understanding has been established across our four schools all based on the Google Platform. Comments like "Share that with me and I will comment on it" are common now. This has come about as we all have been part of a shared training experience and know that each other is on the same page in terms of Google.

- Tailored, voluntary workshops, work best. When it is like that, the learning for the teacher is the most powerful and most likely to be applied. If it is not, it can be seen as a waste of time and grow resentment in the minds of the participants.

Discussion

Supporting our teachers

In order to develop a coherent and consistent digital pathway we needed to get an understanding as to what type of digital platform teachers would use to grow their knowledge. One school was using Microsoft 365 and others using Google.

The decision was made to upskill staff on the Google Platform. This meant that one school had to run dual systems whilst staff were upskilled in the new platform. This created a complication for them and their staff as they were using one platform whilst discovering another.

Our **first** design for implementation teacher upskilling involved three phases:
- Collective education for teachers.
- One-on-one programmed support.
- Specific 'surgery' support as needed.

However, this had to be revised due to unforeseen circumstances with our expert practitioners (medical leave, stress) which meant a loss of continuity in delivery. This led us to rethink and start another model.

Our **second** design to support upskilling teachers involved:
- Specific group of pre-selected teachers being trained to a high level (Google Level One) in order to be support teachers within their own schools.
- Voluntary Google Workshops for teachers at their level of need and desire which was supported through COL PLD hours.
- One-on-one programmed support.

This worked much better as it meant schools had staff accessing support at the level that they required. It spread the knowledge further and built into schools lighthouse practitioners to provide momentum forward. The net result was a growth in confidence within teachers.

The online space to share knowledge

We developed four high level sharing functions that has helped us grow our skills and understanding of what can be achieved through a shared portal.

- The first site was an open site for general information about our Kahui Ako.
  https://sites.google.com/site/lowermatauravalleycol/
- Our second was a closed site was for our LMV CoL Kahui Ako Governance Group.
- The third was a controlled drive for Principals, Management Team and Governance Group of our Kahui Ako to access.
- The fourth was a shared calendar of events that were occurring that were relevant for all schools.

The strengths of these sites and drives were:
- We had the power to edit and adapt them.
- It tied together a range of facets of our CoL into one accessible space.
- It gave a place for all who were interested to visit.

The weaknesses of these sites and drives:

- **Participation**: For a shared site to work teachers and Principal need to visit the site.
- **Comments**: The comments function of the Google platform enables for a collaborative approach. This however can be abused and used as a point for constant criticism that can become overpowering for those at the end of it.
- **Access**: Google has a process of sharing documents and folders. Whenever there was a change in membership of the groups meant continual shifts in access.
- **Privacy**: With multiple schools feeding information into the one place the whole area of privacy arose.
- **Trust**: With such a higher level of collaboration developing across schools issues of trust began to develop.
- **Relationships**: For a shared site and drive to work, first there needs to be strong shared relationships across all four schools. What we thought was there, was not. Several relationships became strained.

Whilst we were working on exploring how online CoL-wide collaboration could look like, we had two of our Community of Learning Kahui Ako principals became highly involved with the behind the scenes designing of the Kahui Ako curriculum tool. Throughout 2017 they attended forums and provided feedback to the development group around this new tool. The net result is that CoLs around New Zealand now have access to their personalisable site for CoL activities. Our site is https://curriculumtool.education.govt.nz/mi/Col/99028

The strengths of this site:

- It has a strong framework for its structure.
- It is independently supported by the Ministry of Education and so has continual design features being added.
- It gives a place for all CoL collaboration to occur and various levels and with various projects.

The weaknesses of this site:

- It requires teachers to have a specific education login that they must apply for.
- The site is closed.
- The site is currently highly teacher focused.

Limitations

Trust: Prior to the project starting we had had a functional team of Principals that had worked together at a support and encouragement level. This project was requiring a deeper level of integration that was exciting but more challenging. We have to trust each other with information about our schools and the direction we were going.

Autonomy: At a fundamental level the project was bringing a level of challenge to school's autonomy. The Board of Trustees model was one of 'We are better in competition with everyone'. This project was saying 'We are better when we are together.' This foundational clash caused stresses in relationships as we sought to work out what unity and collaboration looked like when working across multiple schools.

Conflict resolution: We have made a number of assumptions around our ability to co-operate and work with each other that were soon exposed when things got tough.

Workload and experience: Two of our four school's had first time principals who were coming to grips with the role of being a Principal. They had considerable teaching components that stretched

them. They had the work of the Community of Learning, the Grassroots Fund and also an MOE Accelerated Literacy Learning project. This was too much for them.

Illness: One of our practitioner trainers had to take a term's leave.

Stress: One of our other practitioner trainers pulled out of the first phase due to interpersonal stress and the loss of their support trainer.

Skill diversity: The teacher ability spread across all four schools was considerable. One school had little Google knowledge whilst another very highly skilled.

Multiple schools: The complication of rolling out a programme across four schools, with four calendars, four different cultures, four different priorities. We thought we were on the same page. We soon discovered that this was not the case.

Staff turnover: Most of our schools have experienced an undesirable amount of staff turnover of recent time which makes continuity and progression hard.

Voluntary vs compulsory: Initially we had made the programmes compulsory. For some staff this felt like a waste of time as they were already 'doing it'. This built up resentment and frustration for them. Other staff were at a very basic beginners phase and so needed a lot of support, some quite one on one.

The net result of the above was:
* A lack of desired momentum.
* A lack of continuity.

Implications and Recommendations

MicroCollaboration before MacroCollaboration: The Google platform is a powerful tool to allow work to be shared in an online forum. Teacher need to experiment with it in the rooms first. Then within the school how this can connect with each other and then finally with other schools.

Start smaller: It would have been best for us to trial first with a small group of teachers in one school and the scale it up to go across schools. We were excited and ambitious and bit off more than we anticipated.

Prepare for difficulties: We had not prepared ourselves well for difficulties. We had thought that we had everything in place and going well but circumstances meant certain aspects of what we desired unravelled and had to be rethought through.

Online is only part of it: We needed to set up an understanding of how online comments should proceed. The important point to note is that some things CAN NOT be online first, they first need to start with a face to face discussion, that gets migrated to on-line where it can be tweaked, and then from there confirmed in a later face to face discussion. Attempting to do everything online soon became a place for misunderstandings.

Target the programme to the point of need: Not all staff needed to be part of learning. By having a differentiated approach we would have helped to avoid ongoing stresses for staff who are already busy.

Manage the big picture: We had a vast amount going on across our four schools including the formation of a Community of Learning Kahui Ako. This project was believed to run very easily and simultaneously in that space. However, our enthusiasm meant that it would have been better time for the following year, or year after that.

Change takes time: What we learnt, when multiplying a project across four schools, is that change takes time. We were causing some level of disruption to thinking, internal processes and cultures. More than we anticipated. Going slower and anticipating the impact on schools would have helped a lot.

Work with the teacher first: We found that our project whilst aimed at the students we had to start with their teachers first. We could not get the students to be doing anything unless the teachers we aware, had the skill and confidence to empower the students.

Conclusion

The momentum of the project, despite its challenges, has continued and grown.

- The Secondary school that all four primary school contribute to, has seen what has happened for the four primary schools and has become more receptive to the Google platform as a school wide system.
- All the teachers have a shared understanding of the capabilities of the Google Platform.
- Schools have experts in them now that can share their skills, on an ongoing basis, to continue to drive the intentions of the project forward.
- Voluntary workshops are continuing for all schools and teachers being delivered by teachers in the CoL and outside providers.
- One primary school has begun training its Office Manager in all the functions of Google so that all administration functions in that school have transferred over to Google as well.
- One school is looking at going with Hapara, a Google based platform, for classroom sharing of Google work.
- One school is exploring the use of Google Classroom for a shared collaborative approach to in class work.

There is now the groundwork in place for the project to grow and move from being one of teachers-with-teacher to teachers-with-students and then to students-with-students. This will take time, longer than we thought, but we will get there.