

CANADA

(British Columbia)

System Note from the Networks of Innovation and Inquiry and the Centre for Innovative Educational Leadership, Vancouver Island University, Province of British Columbia, Canada

Prepared by Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

Introduction

It has been professionally rewarding to be part of the ILE project strand 2 innovative cases. Our shared goal as two of the directors of the Centre for Innovative Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University (VIU) and as founders of the Networks in Inquiry and Innovation (NOII) is to be part of a system transformation in the province of British Columbia and to realize the network vision of ‘every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options’ by Canada’s 150th anniversary in 2017. We are determined to draw on the best international knowledge evidence and most promising innovative practices to inform our work. It is for this purpose that we submit this proposal to be part of the third strand of spreading and sustaining innovative learning.

This system note is organized in three parts: the first is connected to the graduate program (Certificate in Innovative Educational Leadership) at VIU, the second reflects our on-going work with school-to-school networks, and the third contains some views about implementation strategies that we deem to be less successful.

CASE 1: Certificate for Innovative Educational Leadership (CIEL) – Vancouver Island University

1. Aims

This program has been designed as an intensive one-year graduate program for formal and informal leaders interested in transforming their schools to higher levels of quality and equity through focused inquiry and innovative practice. This program has been inspired by our shared work with hundreds of schools and thousands of educators across BC in an inquiry network over the past decade, our determination to create strong graduate programs that are located in a Canadian university and informed by international research and practice, and our previous experience with a successful graduate certificate program at the University of Victoria.

Critical issues facing educators in this province are the underachievement of Aboriginal youth, the intellectual disengagement of many adolescent learners as evident from national and provincial survey data, and the need to create more engaging and relevant learning environments for all learners. The province has been involved in consultations that have led to the publication of a new educational plan focused on creating greater flexibility and choice, more personalized learning, higher quality teaching and learning, high standards and learning empowered by technology. The political climate in British Columbia is challenging and sometimes the disputes between the government and the teachers' association can derail the best of plans. It is partly for this reason that we have sought to establish 'third spaces' outside the rhetoric of conflict where educators can engage in inquiry, experience new learning and try out new practices that will benefit their learners.

The participants in the CIEL program come from a range of backgrounds and settings. They are early, mid and later career educators. They work in small remote rural schools serving primarily Aboriginal communities and in large complex urban settings. While the first cohort of participants were all from this province, the program is designed to be accessible to anyone anywhere in the world and the second cohort, beginning in August 2012, includes participants from Asia and other parts of Canada.

2. Leadership and Partners

In the design phase of this program an advisory group was established. This consisted of school district superintendents, Ministry staff, school principals, and faculty from VIU. International research has also informed the design of the program. Please see attached "Developing New School Leaders: Application of International and Local Knowledge to Practice," Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2010) in *School Leadership International Perspectives*, Stephan Huber editor, Springer Publications. Informal partnerships with the Ministry of Education and other faculties of education are on-going and a strong partnership with the BC Principals' and Vice Principals' Association is in place. A partnership with the Vancouver School Board provides for space for the summer program.

3. Strategies and activities

The program is designed to immerse participants first in the research knowledge about learning and leadership through an intensive face-to-face summer institute and then to take informed action during the school year. Working with a spiral of inquiry (*Spirals of Inquiry for Equity and Quality*, in press 2012 Halbert & Kaser), each participant identifies a key challenge for learners in their setting and designs new approaches following the phases of the inquiry spiral during the school year. Regular reflections on the process of their inquiry as well as responses to a range of readings and on-line resources take place as part of an on-line community.

In addition, participants are asked to explore the case studies from the ILE project, identify a case that is of particular interest, do additional research on the case, and then demonstrate how they will apply ideas from the international case to their own setting. The program culminates with a second summer institute scheduled in a way that those continuing to the masters program can do so seamlessly. During the second summer, participants provide a visual presentation of the ways they have applied their new learning and what they are seeing as a result. For a more complete description of the CIEL program, please see <http://goo.gl/1txxw>

4. Context

British Columbia is by most measures a high performing system in terms of both quality and equity. Yet, significant inequities exist and the political educational context is challenging. Tensions between the teacher association and the government have sometimes made it difficult for sustained progress at the system-wide level to take place. Until relatively recently, there has been limited understanding of the importance of indigenous ways of knowing in supporting Aboriginal learners. Several universities from outside Canada, with limited knowledge of local contexts, provide graduate programs within school districts. Most times, cohort groups in these graduate programs are from a single school district. This significantly limits the range of perspectives that can so enrich learning.

CIEL provides a space where formal and informal leaders can learn together as equals. A strong emphasis on indigenous ways of knowing makes this program particularly relevant in the BC context. Both Canadian and international perspectives are central to the curriculum. The diversity of learners is encouraged through a blended model and a structure that works for learners from diverse locations. One of the key aspects of the CIEL is the link with NOII (see below) and a regular spring learning seminar that provides a consistent way to support on-going connections and collaboration.

5. Resources

Participants pay fees that compare favourably with other graduate programs. The Vancouver School Board, mentioned above, provides a location for the summer institute and technological access at no cost as part of their partnership with the program. School districts may support the participation of local educators at their discretion. VIU pays the salaries of the instructors and provides all the supports open to regular graduate students.

6. Development over Time

The CIEL program was initiated in 2011. CIEL builds on the experiences that Judy Halbert & Linda Kaser had in leading a similar program (CSML – Certificate in School Management and Leadership) at the University of Victoria from 2005-2010. It was a conscious decision to move the program to VIU with its emphasis on innovation and connections with practice. While many of the core design principles have stayed in place, the major emphasis on innovative learning environments, learning from international case studies, and applying that knowledge in a local context are new and important developments.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

At this point the evidence of the effectiveness and efficiency of the program comes from feedback from participants and their supervisors in their school districts. The feedback has been very positive with impressive changes taking place in a number of locations as a result of the leadership of the CIEL participants. Several of the changes being made are a direct result of the exploration of the innovative learning environment case studies. A proposal for a formal research study on the impact of the program is under discussion. A review of the earlier program at the University of Victoria provided strong evidence of the impact on learners and learning environment from the leadership work of the participants in that program. A copy of the full report is attached to this submission.

8. Success Factors

Among the factors that are contributing to the success of the CIEL program are:

- A supportive Dean and faculty
- Current knowledge base and international connections of the lead instructors
- A mix of international perspectives and local contexts
- A blended program of face-to-face and on-line learning

- A disciplined approach to innovation focused on equity and quality through a research-informed spiral of inquiry
- Clarity about leadership mindsets and behaviors that influence learning
- Interdependent coaching groups
- A judicious weaving of indigenous wisdom, strong research-based and evidence informed practice with new and innovative approaches.

9. Tensions and impediments

Provincially, one of the major challenges is to ensure that system changes are based on deep understandings of learning and learners and not on what is currently seen as trendy. For instance, scores if not hundreds of BC educators have visited High Tech High in San Diego over the past few years. Without the opportunity to seriously unpack the learning principles and designs in this one setting, rushing to replicate this one model could become yet another initiative tried and then rejected as educator motivation falters. We have written elsewhere (see attached *Inquiring learning environments: new mindsets required*, CSE April 2012) that innovation is about recognizing that old forms are not working for all learners, identifying what the key needs of learners are, and then creating new forms based on knowledge about what does work. One of the goals of the CIEL program is to ensure that all participants have a deep understanding of the learning sciences research so effectively presented in *The Nature of Learning* as a basis for designing more innovative practices appropriate in local contexts. Educators need to understand the *why* of changes as well as the *how* – and we are working hard to ensure the knowledge of CIEL participants goes well beyond a shallow or superficial set of understandings.

10. Sources

www.viu.ca

CIEL blog <http://ciel1.edublogs.org/>

CASE 2. Networks of Inquiry and Innovation

1. Aims

The Networks of Inquiry and Innovation in British Columbia include three specific networks – the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS), the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN), and the Healthy Schools Network (HSN)– and are directly associated with a number of other provincial initiatives including a recently announced Early Reading Success network and a rural school literacy project. While each of these networks and initiatives has a slightly different focus, the main principles guiding the work are the same: achieving high equity and quality for all BC learners through inquiry, application of strong evidence-based practices, respect for indigenous ways of knowing, and the development of new and innovative approaches to the ‘wicked’ issues of success for all groups of learners, intellectual engagement and ownership of learning.

The original network, NPBS, was formed in 1999 to encourage voluntary teacher use of a well-developed set of learning progressions, called the BC performance standards. From its inception, team inquiry, leadership across roles, participation across districts, and the development of expertise in formative assessment to deepen learner ownership have been central to the work. In 2012 the networks have expanded to include 16 regions of the province with upwards of 500 schools involved in one way or another.

2. Leadership and Partners

The main leadership for the networks originally came from Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser with financial support provided by the Ministry of Education. While financial support from the province has declined recently, a number of school districts provide support for school participation, the federal government provides some support for AESN, and the Directory of Agencies of School Health (DASH) supports the Healthy Schools Network. 55 regional leaders across the province provide voluntary and invaluable leadership to the networks. Vancouver Island University has become an important partner to this work in recent years.

3. Strategies and activities

The design for the network participation is straightforward. School teams identify an area of important student learning, generate a focused question, agree to use the BC performance standards or other valid measures for determining growth, attend local meetings – either on line or face-to-face, share the findings from their inquiry at regional year end sessions, and submit a short case study for publication on the web. Upon completion of the network inquiry, we have been able to provide a small recognition grant to school (\$300-\$500 range) to acknowledge their contribution.

Communication takes place through blogs, wikis, email listservs and the web. Articles are regularly published in the provincial journal *Adminfo* and network participants take advantage of every opportunity to present their work to provincial, national and international audiences. For instance, in 2009 when ICSEI was held in Vancouver, 25 network educators presented their inquiry work and since then, a number of these teacher leaders have presented in Malaysia, Cyprus and Sweden.

A key aspect of the networks is to determine and demonstrate what changes have been made to student learning using shared classroom based measures (the BC performance standards) to do so. This has ensured accountability, focus, and the opportunity to speed up the transfer of knowledge from one school to the next.

4. Context

As mentioned earlier, the political education context in BC presents a number of challenges. Creating a third space that is not dominated by provincial politics or local rivalry has been extremely important. Because participation in the network is voluntary and cuts across roles, the teachers' association has been silently supportive. We have experienced two protracted labor disputes since the network started and in both occasions, teachers and principals valued the opportunity to sustain their network involvement despite job action precluding any participation in other forms of joint professional learning. A key reason this initiative has been sustained is that it is neither owned nor controlled by the Ministry, teachers' associations or school districts.

5. Resources

Resourcing the network is and continues to be a challenge. Nevertheless, from these challenges has emerged considerable resourcefulness and creativity. The annual seminar generates some funding, a small federal grant has provided for video tapes of strong practice, a provincial grant in 2011-2012 provided some infrastructure support, and we are currently seeking foundation support. School districts contribute support in a variety of ways including supporting regional leaders to attend the seminar and fall planning sessions, providing support for regional meetings and release time for teachers, and supplementing the recognition grants to schools. DASH, which receives funding from the Ministry of Health, has been generous in providing support for regional leaders and for the annual seminar.

6. Development over Time

This initiative has been in place since 1999 and since then has expanded, morphed, and spread considerably. Initially only 34 schools within driving distance of the urban centre of Vancouver were involved, now participation is open to any school in any part of the province or the Yukon territory. At

different times this means that upwards of 500 schools are involved in one way or another. While the initial foci were on improving reading, writing, mathematical problem solving and social responsibility, the networks are now involved in healthy living, sustainability through Pop-Up Farms, innovative learning environments through the connection with the CIEL program, self-regulation, scientific understandings, Fine Arts, and Aboriginal understandings.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

Two research studies have been conducted. One focused on the impact of network involvement on principal leadership behaviour and the second was on the impact of network involvement generally. A review of the school case studies indicates that where schools stick with a focused inquiry over a 2-3 year period, substantial gains in student learning are realized. Further to these studies there is considerable anecdotal evidence about the impact of network involvement in creating linked inquiries across the province, sharing resources much more effectively, developing a common language and set of understandings particularly with respect to formative assessment and learner self-regulation, the development and sharing of innovative approaches, and improved outcomes for learners.

8. Success Factors

The sustained focus on a discipline approach to inquiry, accountability through sharing of results, the leadership of the two provincial network leaders and the 55 regional leaders, the provision of an annual seminar, and the emphasis on the use of shared measures have contributed to the success of the networks. Also, providing a space where the focus is on learning and is not constrained by politics has been extremely important. While we believe that the recognition grants are very important – and respectful – schools have not been deterred from continuing with the networks even when the provision of the grants have been uncertain. We think that schools are motivated by the chance to be involved in something bigger than their own district or local area, and the chance to be connected to like-minded inquiry-oriented educators.

9. Tensions and impediments

The network has been successful in capturing the imagination and channeling the determination of leading edge educators through a disciplined and team oriented approach to inquiry. Now that inquiry seems to be in vogue and networks are seen as a powerful strategy for changing practice, we are seeing a proliferation of district-based networks and lots of talk about inquiry as a way forward. One concern with district based networks are that they can tend to be constrained by district norms. Some schools are seen as keeners; others seen as dragging their heels. A network that spans district boundaries releases schools from previous reputations and creates a safe space where the focus is purely on learning. We are also concerned about the recent enthusiasm for inquiry. Without a more disciplined approach focused on important areas of student

learning, there is the danger of a thousand questions blooming – and nothing really changing substantially for learners. It is partly for this reason that we are now writing a book titled *Spirals of Inquiry for Equity and Quality: a handbook for inquiry teams*. This will be published in the fall of 2012 by the BC Principals and Vice Principals Association with all proceeds going to network schools.

10. Sources

www.noii.ca

<http://networksofinquiry.blogspot.ca/>

B. Less successful initiatives/ strategies

From our perspective and experience, the following factors contribute to some of the less successful initiatives designed to promote inquiry, networking, and innovative practice:

- Overly tight centralized control – whether this comes from the school district, the Ministry, or a professional association, overly bureaucratic mechanisms for participation and reporting reduce commitment and effectiveness. Networks by definition are organic and attempts to place too many boundaries around networks work against their very essence.
- Too narrow a perspective – sometimes when networks are bounded within a school district, the perspective is too narrow and existing district norms can work against openness to new learning. Similarly, our experience has shown that where there is a range of types of schools involved – e.g. primary, secondary, independent, band, distance education, and alternative - the learning and understandings of all are enhanced.
- Lack of focus on results – there are many opportunities for educators in our province to be involved in action research projects based on individual teacher interest. Our experience has shown that simply pursuing a question of interest, without any expectation that the new knowledge will lead to a change in results for learners lacks accountability and is hard to sustain. One of the weaknesses of the networking strategy in England in recent years was the lack of any shared measures to determine impact. It is hard to convince policy-makers and politicians to support initiatives where there is no way to determine impact.
- Mandatory participation – in our political context, mandates often lead to resistance – even if the proposed action has considerable merit. We have learned that, although frustrating for politicians who want quick results, long lasting change takes place by engaging teachers' hearts and minds and this cannot be done by fiat.