4 Minute Walk Throughs

ENGAGING TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Provided by Tony Burkin

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INTERPRETING LEADERSHIP

THE ORIGINS OF 4 MINUTE WALK THROUGHS

"I've learnt more about my teaching today than I have in 22 years!"

In 2004 a close friend (and Principal) asked if I could help him and his leadership team with a nagging problem. It had been gnawing away at them for a while.

They had identified teachers with poor and mediocre teaching practice and whom they had been supporting in a number of ways. Teachers' gaps fell across a range of areas - combinations of behaviour management, cultural responsiveness, curriculum knowledge, learner-teacher relationships, teacher credibility, dynamism, and classroom communication were key areas. Teachers were of varying ages, stages of career and experience.

Traditional influence strategies had been used - observations with follow up feedback, modelling of lessons, traditional professional development & learning, observations of peers, establishing critical friends - but each approach had failed to influence.

When my friend contacted me it was an acknowledgement that he and his fellow leaders were at a dead end; they had failed to engage their adults as learners. He asked what else they might try. There was a hint of desperation - a couple of teachers were close to competency proceedings.

Using the work of psychologist Albert Bandura we developed a programme based on ***vicarious learning*** experience to engage the group as ***adult learners***. We put aside a day to work with them.

When we met the first thing I asked each participant to do was divide a piece of A4 paper in half. On the top half they were to write down those things within their teaching practice they believed were strengths, and on the bottom half, those things they believed needed developing or strengthening. After 5 minutes the top halves were full and the bottom halves eerily devoid of writing.

Each participant was provided the same research backed questions. Their challenge throughout the day was to find answers to these questions when we visited colleague's classrooms. The catch was that they had only a brief period of time (around 4 minutes) to do so. Prior to entering colleagues' learning spaces a series of protocols by which everyone had to abide by were established - both when we were in classrooms and afterwards when we shared our answers.

We then visited our first classroom as a group.

After 4 or so minutes we left the classroom and walked back to our workroom. As we walked, I heard teachers starting to talk about pedagogy - learner motivation, layout & environment, questioning, prompting & thinking time, relinquishing control and formative assessment.

Over the course of the next 2 hours, as we shared our answers, conversations moved away from what we saw to what we thought and why. Superficial discussion morphed into profound dialogue and for the first time in their lives these participants found themselves professionally thinking together with colleagues in a profound conversation about their pedagogy.

Going beyond *listening for agreement* and *disagreement* each listened to help each other understand. Listening to each other's ideas and perceptions about their colleagues' classrooms and teaching practices, they found doors to open and avenues to explore they never knew existed. They had taken the first tentative steps to exploring the ***inner landscapes of their teaching practice***.

Throughout the day we completed only three 4 Minute Walk Throughs. We spent some twelve minutes in classrooms and some 280 minutes in dialogue. The day had not been planned in this way.

At the day's conclusion I asked everyone to retrieve the paper they had divided in half at the start of the day and to make additions and changes.

Within seconds I watched one participant draw circles around items they had identified as strengths 6 hours before, and with arrows indicate they now belonged to the developmental section below. After a very brief period of time each participant had filled the bottom half of the page and was scribbling on the reverse.

By way of discovering how the day had been for my learners I asked them to summarise their feelings and thoughts on the day in a single sentence. The first responded enthusiastically, *"I've learnt more about my teaching today than I have in 22 years!"* Other participants echoed similar thoughts.

Within a few weeks I received a phone call from the Principal. "*What had I done?",* he asked. Fearing the worst I tentatively asked, "*Why?"*

"Because they've all come to me asking for different professional development and support. And we can clearly see in every one of their classrooms changes taking place - their learning is clearly visible. What did you do?"

Breathing a little more easily I struggled to find an answer. How do you tell someone the approaches they had been using for years to engage their adults as learners were fatally flawed? *"I just gave them an opportunity to talk about their teaching practice in a psychologically safe way. They actually changed their own thinking",* I responded, "*but with protocols in place to create the psychological safety they needed to not feel ignorant, incompetent, negative or disruptive*".

The following year we put aside 6 more days of professional learning in the same school to work with the rest of the staff. They had heard about the first day and wanted to taste experiential learning first-hand. It was the first time in this Principal's career he had had staff demanding professional development. These were his *solid citizens* and *super-stars*. The same results occurred.

Profound conversations, immediate changes in practice, honest assessment of one's own practices and a means for teachers to become more insightful and to make better more informed choices and decisions around where they needed to *stretch*.

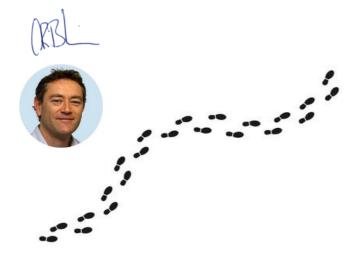As Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan and Switzler (2008) noted in their book *Influencer – The Power to Change Anything*, 4 years later:

"The great persuader is personal experience. With persistent problems, it's best to give verbal persuasion a rest and try to help people experience the world as you experience it. Personal experience is the mother of all cognitive map changers....

Let's take a moment to consider the most profound and obvious implications of what we've just learnt. When trying to encourage others to change their long-established views, we should fight the inclination to persuade them through the clever use of verbal gymnastics and debate tricks. Instead we should opt for a field trip – or several of them. Nothing changes a mind like the cold, hard world hitting it with actual real-life data." [p. 51]

From here the **4 Minute Walk Through** programme was born. Since then we have undertaken hundreds of 4 Minute Walk Throughs and through modification, trial and error, we have developed different 4 Minute Walk Through models depending on the unique needs of each school.

Tony Burkin

Engaging Teachers as Learners

Reframing *relationships* teachers have with each other to *partnerships*, where the purpose is to sharpen pedagogy by talking openly & honestly with candour and without fear, lies at the heart of improving pedagogical improvement.

Emotional integrity sits within all relationships. Yet it's *emotion* that can hijack crucial conversations. As Roland Barth notes, teachers can confuse *congeniality* with *collegiality*. In partnership, emotional integrity is replaced by a clear purpose; that purpose is to work collegially to achieve desired outcomes without emotion and associated *catastrophisations*. We put aside our egos, sensitivities and forego impression management to think deeply about what and how we can improve.

Undertaking 4 Minute Walk Throughs teachers are required to work in partnerships because protocols remove the threat of being emotionally hijacked. Existing relationships teachers have with each other, laced with emotional integrity, are protected within in the Walk Through process because protocols require them to work in partnership with each other; their relationships cannot be harmed or damaged.

The Four Minute Walk Through process uses a proven methodology for engaging teachers in on-going professional learning which they drive. Participants, once they have mastered the process find the undertaking of Walk Throughs challenging, fun, relevant to their needs and personally engaging.

Research (refer to research provided at the back of this document) has established the powerful impact Walk Throughs can have in making significant improvements in teacher instruction, improved teacher attitudes to improvement & growth, improved student discipline, enhanced teacher satisfaction and improved student learning.

When school leaders engage in the 4 Minute Walk Through process, in a systematic way, reflective conversation around practice becomes part of *the way we do things around here*. People are thinking about their work as professionals. They are moved to talk and think about the work they do and innovations that might enhance student learning.

Rather than asking *How can I improve learner outcomes?* the question teachers come to ask is *How am I an impediment to advancing outcomes for my learners?* This is a fundamentally different question resulting in very different outcomes.

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The Right Time

In 2004 when we ran our first 4 Minute Walk Through programme, *systems*, *structure* and *thinking* in education were not so ready for approaches bestowing upon teachers the responsibility for being agents of change in their own practice.

Traditional appraisal at the time was very much top down based more on compliance, and in this *world,* teachers were required to prove Professional Standards were being met. It felt for most teachers and leaders like a ticking-the-box exercise.

Shortly afterwards we entered the world of higher stakes appraisal. The Teacher's Council introduced 12 Registered Teacher Criteria, which became 12 Practicing Teacher Criteria, around which teachers were expected to curate evidences (which were to be back-mapped).

Shortly thereafter, the 12 Practicing Teacher Criteria were replaced by 6 new Professional Standards.

At the heart of these changes was an attempt to move away from *somebody doing appraisal to someone else* to more and more, *placing the professional responsibility for gathering evidence on each teacher's shoulders*.

The next, and current *Professional Growth Cycle* iteration goes further. The professional responsibility for gathering evidence remains each teachers' responsibility but what is also required is proof of going beyond meeting criteria to proof they are learning, growing & developing aspects of their teaching practice. Teachers are learners first, teachers second.

4 Minute Walk Throughs now fully mesh with the requirements of the Professional Growth Cycle framework (and teacher endorsement) because they both challenge and support teachers to make the shift from *teacher to learner*.

Leaders Interested in Committing to Developing 4 Minute Walk Throughs

Leaders interested in committing to developing 4 Minute Walk Throughs generally share most of the following beliefs:

- They are driven by a strong moral purpose around enhancing student achievement.

- They expect their teachers to be learners just as much as they see their young people as learners.

- They expect teachers' learning to go beyond *informational learning* (knowing) to *transformational learning* (executing on *informational learning*) so that practice changes.

- They understand they have a key role in creating the high levels of psychological safety required for teachers to make themselves vulnerable.

- They understand teachers' knowledge, skills and abilities residing across their school often remain untapped; they seek a means for teachers to explore and to tap into each other's capabilities.

- They understand teachers are *knowledge workers* (remunerated for using their brains to solve problems) but some teachers can look for quick fixes and can externalise blame; they seek reflective processes allowing teachers to strengthen critical thinking capability.

- They are liking the idea of *Professional Growth Cycles* but want *the system* to impact on teaching practice – to go beyond teachers undertaking *project-based work*; they want learners to benefit directly from improvements in teaching practice.

- They understand adult learning requires powerful reflective practice; they seek a means to supporting their teachers to become skilled at self-evaluating their teaching practice (just as learners are encouraged to self-evaluate their own progress & learning).

- They are committed to *coaching* but are looking for a way to turbo-charge learning experiences and to create more *edge* within the coaching process.

- They are determined to unlock teachers' classrooms and are troubled some teachers' classrooms remain *black boxes* (what goes on in them is a mystery).

- They want to reframe *change* to *continual improvement*.

- They recognise one approach does not fit all sizes – that people at different stages of their career require different types of conversation.

- They are committed to developing a dynamic professional learning community but recognise something is missing.

Some Things You Need to Know

- A school wide understanding of protocols is crucial (for example after visiting a classroom, feedback is not provided to the observed teacher, and observed teachers should refrain from seeking feedback from colleagues after a visitation). Teachers require full understanding of processes.

- Questions teachers seek answers to when observing colleagues compel them to consider colleagues' teaching practice *through the eyes of learners in classrooms* - **not** as *teachers observing colleagues* (vicarious learning).

- How 4 Minute Walk Throughs are implemented looks different in each school - due to size, prevailing culture, structure of teams/departments & faculties, quality of middle leadership, on-going professional development & learning commitments, and existing coaching frameworks for example. There is no one best way to go about development & implementation because it is contextual to each school. Rather than *best practice* we work with *best fit*.

- Professional development & learning generally focuses on all or a combination of the following (what professional development & learning looks like in your school is dependent on the factors noted above):
  - Moving from pedagogy (leading children as learners) to andragogy (leading adults as learners).
  - Psychological safety.
  - Reframing the social contract from relationship to partnership.
  - 4 Minute Walk Through protocols.
  - 4 Minute Walk Through observation questions.
  - Undertaking actual 4 Minute Walk Throughs.
  - Facilitating reflective conversations.

- Some leadership teams prefer to develop the capacity of a small group of Walk Through leaders (training the trainers); they are exposed to professional development & learning and become responsible for developing capacity across the school. This provides very useful leadership development opportunities for aspiring leaders and those seeking to strengthen leadership within their existing leadership positions.

- Some leadership teams focus on providing all teachers with the same opportunities to learn the 4 Minute Walk Through process.

- A developmental pathway in your school would likely consist of between 2-4 days of professional development & learning spread across a 3-9 month period (investment is dictated by this). In all cases pathways forward are created in consultation with school leadership.

Research Base Supporting 4 Minute Walk Throughs

In developing this approach to growing teacher capacity we have researched extensively.

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