

Respondents to, or agents of, change? Teaching ‘soft skills’ in a school-university partnership project

Michelle Ludecke

Monash University
michelle.ludecke@monash.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper is the first interim report on a year-long case study about my partnership with a group of school teachers, and their experiences of designing and implementing their College Experience (CEX) program. The CEX program has been designed for Level 9 students, and both the program and the mandated curriculum which it is guided by were new in 2017. The CEX program centres on ‘soft skills’—Thinking, Ethical, Intercultural, and Personal and Social Capabilities—in practice. I use the term ‘soft skills’ in place of more static terms such as 21st Century Skills to draw attention to the fluid and liminal nature of these skills, as they shift in response to contextual change. The case study is framed within the concept of liminality—a time and place of transformation, where the separation from old ideas creates a phase of exploration before the aggregation of new ideas takes place. I consider whether practitioners position themselves as respondents to, rather than agents of, change, within this liminal space.

This particular paper focusses on the initial phase of the case study, which was my own curriculum work for the project, through a reflective journal. Emergent themes include the excitement of newness countered by lack of resources, change fatigue, and developing autonomy within a top-down approach to curriculum change.

KEYWORDS: soft skills, capabilities, curriculum reform, liminality, agency.

1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to embarking on my career as an academic I was a secondary teacher. I came to realise that curriculum reform was commonplace, and addressing curriculum reform was expected to occur as central to teachers’ work. Such expectations resulted in myself and my colleagues working within a liminal space—a time and place of transformation, where the separation from old ideas creates a phase of exploration before the aggregation of new ideas takes place. I found this space, created by top-down reform, to be full of possibilities, as well as being problematic. Possibilities included taking part in active renewal of old ideas. However, liminality can be problematic when teachers position themselves as respondents to, rather than agents of, change

(Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2017; Fullan, 1993; Mellegård & Pettersen, 2016; Noack, Mulholland, & Warren, 2013). Like many Western countries, in Victoria, Australia the 1990s promised to be a decade of national reconstruction and curriculum frameworks, as the systems reclaimed the curriculum control which they had lost to the schools in the seventies and early eighties (Barcan, 2003). Since the introduction of the Curriculum and Standards Framework in 1993, when I entered the teaching profession there have been four additional periods of curriculum reform in Victoria, most recently to an adaptation of the Australian Curriculum in 2017 in the Victorian Curriculum (VC).

When posited as 'reform' or 'change' the implications are that teachers are falling behind or failing to address the needs of learners, and that universities are failing to prepare teachers adequately. My experiences in schools and universities, and my own Doctoral research (Ludecke, 2013) revealed that many pre-service teachers since the 1990s in Victoria experience their first curriculum reform or change either during their teacher education or in their graduate years as an in-service teacher. More recently, and internationally, curriculum reform in the 21st century emerges in response to many factors, including but not limited to: globalization; reflexive modernization (individualism); unpredictability of the workforce; transition from industrialism to post-industrialism (a knowledge-driven economy); anxiety over the country's economic competitiveness locally and globally; and employers lamenting the inadequate vocational preparation of the youth of today, intensified by the concern of parents and, to some extent academics, over the nature and quality of education.

The most recent change in the VC is the addition of four capabilities to the existing learning areas. The capabilities represent sets of knowledge and skills that are developed and applied across the curriculum. Looking internationally the capabilities have similarities to P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning in the USA (<http://www.p21.org/our-work/p21-framework>); British Columbia's Core Competencies (<https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>); 21st Century Competencies in Singapore (<https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/education-system/21st-century-competencies>); and transversal competences in the Finnish Basic Education curriculum

(http://oph.fi/english/curricula_and_qualifications/basic_education/curricula_2014). Voogt and Roblin (2012) provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of international frameworks for 21st century competences. Commonplace here is constant reform in response to changing times. What this means for teachers in schools is a continual adaptation to new ideas that are future focused yet unpredictable. Compounding the problem, the

capabilities were to be implemented in 2017, however curriculum support from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority was not fully delivered in relation to support material for teachers, and is still not fully developed at the time of writing.

The term 'soft skills' stems from military business models, and is used today to describe skills different to 'hard' skills that are quantifiable and measurable (Mitchell, Pritchett, & Skinner, 2013). The use of the term 'soft' is problematic in that it gives the impression that they are weak; however, these skills, traits, attitudes, attributes and intelligences are deemed by employers to be the foundation on which other skills can be built. I am using the term 'soft skills' to draw attention to the fluid and liminal nature of these skills, demonstrating that they shift in response to the current context, and as such are more problematic to include in curriculum that asks such skills to be assessed and reported on. Soft skills, under various aliases, include creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, collaborative skills, information technology skills, and new forms of literacy, and social, cultural, and metacognitive awareness. Soft skills are also known in educational contexts as employability skills, or work skills. They are developed through inquiry-based approaches, serving to enhance students' potential to transfer skills to a variety of areas, and to be able to problem solve in a variety of situations. In an integrated curriculum, the aim is to build solid connections between the development of 'soft skills' such as the VC capabilities and the teaching of content, because the capabilities may be helpful, even essential, to students unlocking the content.

Level 9 programs are popular in Victorian schools as the point of beginning to address soft skills. In theory such programs are individually designed by schools to engage students in learning, and prepare them for post compulsory options. In practice aligning these programs with new curriculum, such as aligning CEX with the VC capabilities, present a number of opportunities and challenges for teachers working in the liminal space of curriculum reform, that are transferable across contexts.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In my previous research I have examined the liminal spaces teachers encounter and work within, in various transitional phases (Ludecke, 2013, 2016; Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, & Kline, 2015). Similarly, in this work, the theoretical framework has its foundation in the concept of liminality (Turner, 1974, 1975, 1994, 2008) as a tool to make sense of the 'passage' between teachers' responses to changes in their work lives and identities and the changing curriculum landscape. Liminality provides a way to situate the daily, micro

context of teaching life within that of the wider macro, curricular changes taking place.

Teachers are not mere puppets of macro globalisation, policy, and curriculum changes. They work within and amidst them, are shaped by them and, in turn, their own thoughts and actions reshape the school in which they work. This is where Turner's understanding of liminality comes into play. Turner (2008) maintained that when individuals entered the liminal period, they shed previous roles but did not yet take on new ones. Thus, liminal individuals experience a type of paradox in which they let go of their previous roles and responsibilities but have not transitioned to the new state and its accompanying roles and responsibilities. This understanding of liminality helps explain the confusion and anxiety of teachers as they respond to macro level, top down changes. The individual negotiates the liminal period as well as an awareness of the changing macro contexts. Turner's concept of liminality also assists to view this betwixt and between time as one of possibilities, of trying on different identities so that 'yesterday's liminal becomes today's stabilized' (Turner, 1974).

Having employed the concept of liminality in previous works I am aware that this concept (as do other concepts) has some limitations. These stem from the fact that Turner's early work centred on the liminal in rites of passage, namely adolescence, in anthropological research. However, others have developed the concept of liminality further, for example: shifting landscapes (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009); betwixt and between (Pierce, 2007); and rites of passage (Berman, 1994). Zukin (1991) thought about the process of economic restructuring as liminality, and more recently Aronowitz et al. (2006) have employed the concept of liminality as a conceptual framework for explaining the macro intellectual and economic changes, and instances of global and resulting institutional restructuring taking place alongside inescapable social changes. Such appropriations of Turner's earlier understandings of liminality demonstrate the strength of the concept in its ability to be applied to a range of phenomena. Therefore, when I use liminality I use it to explore the space created by change, and the shaping of identities and practices within the liminal space.

3. METHODOLOGY.

This case study (Stake, 1995, 2005) centres on one particular program; a bounded system of seven teachers' and my own experiences over the period of one year—from preparation for, to the conclusion of, the school year. It is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 2009). Particularistic in that the case is important for what it reveals about the program itself, and for what it might represent through the situation of coping with curriculum reform, arising from everyday teaching practice.

My focus is the teachers' experiences of curriculum reform, and the liminal spaces created by change. The purpose of the study is to examine how teachers manage curriculum change. I specifically ask whether teachers (myself included) working in liminal spaces created by change are respondents to, or agents of, change? In the process of separation, margin/limen, and aggregation, are teachers empowered by change? How does change play out in relation to their practice in terms of developing and delivering curriculum, engaging learners, and assessing learning? Such questions are posed with the view that this case is transferrable to other sites (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995), applicable to teachers working with 'soft skills', and planning, teaching, assessing and reflecting on these skills in educational contexts across the globe. The qualitative research strategy for the overall case study includes self-reflection, participant interviews, observation, and data validation—where participants engage in reflection and reflexivity. The semi-structured interviews allow participants to steer the conversation in such a way that the aspects which are salient to them become prominent in the discussion. My observation of teachers delivering the program provides an additional perspective. Data validation of de-identified individual data with the respective teachers themselves forms part of a reflexive process where individual teachers propose further action and report on their actions. Teachers will also report on a summative evaluation at the end of the program, as part of their preparation for future iterations.

In relation to this particular paper, the focus is on the initial phase of the case study: my own curriculum work for the project, through a reflective journal.

4. RESULTS.

In the latter part of 2016 I was presented with a problem – to develop a curriculum for a school's new Level 9 program. A co-researcher asked me, as an 'educational and curriculum guru' (her words!) to help her out in her new role as head of the CEX Program. She and her teaching team had 2 school days of release from teaching in order to flesh out a year-long program, replacing the previous 2-week program. The new program to be launched 8 weeks later in February 2017 needed to align with the new VC general capabilities. My task was to look over the teachers' ideas and match them to the capabilities, create learning intentions and success criteria for each week, and prepare assessment tasks and rubrics for each of the four units within the program. At that point in time here's what I knew:

That's right, absolutely nothing. Nothing about the school, the students, the new area of general capabilities in the state-wide curriculum to be implemented in the following year.

I reviewed what little information had been released regarding the new VC, and in particular the capabilities at Level 10, to which the Level 9 students would be 'working towards'. It was during this stage, having the luxury of some down time in my university teaching schedule, that I realised how important time was in adapting to curriculum reform.

Journal Excerpt:

I'm in a liminal time here - a time of separation from previously held ideas; both a moment in time and a period of time. It is quite luxurious, and I can see it stretching out in front of me...but there's an end point. A deadline. Here at the start it seems such a generous amount of time, and within the days available there are long blocks of hours where I can wallow in this new material, explore connections to previous ideas, and have the luxury of allowing new ideas to take their own shape... But the deadline looms, ever-present, and I don't know if I will be ready by then to say that this liminal time is over, and that I've achieved 'aggregation'.

Turner (1994) posits that states of transition include separation, margin (limen) and aggregation, and considers the idea that if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it potentially can be seen as a period of scrutiny for central values of the culture where it occurs—one where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behaviour are undone.

In this liminal space there is a combination of an excitement of newness countered by lack of resources. The units in the program sounded fantastic to me, and looked good on paper. Each of the four term-long units: Looking Around; Looking Beyond; Looking Out; and Looking Within, already incorporated soft skills that could readily be connected to the capabilities. For me this was a kind of backward mapping, and I was quite excited to embrace the new ideas by making some connections to what I already knew about soft skills. I reflected 'I can't understand why the teachers aren't as excited as I am by this task, and have passed it to me to do. They know the students, so they would be able to see more possibilities and practicalities that I can...' However, the initial excitement soon wore off and I found myself frustrated with the new curriculum, due to the lack of resources available. I wanted to be excited by all the possibilities that the concept of 'new' holds, and I wanted to be energised by my excitement. After four days working on the program I began to experience a frustration similar to what I understand the CEX teaching team also experienced. The lack of resources available for the capabilities in the form of support material, assessment material, and examples was made all the more frustrating when compared to the resources available for the other learning areas. I began to think that our Curriculum and Assessment Authority was struggling as much as we were.

Journal Excerpt:

I think there's too much of a rush here to get this new curriculum out, before the end of the school year, in whatever format, so that teachers at least have some idea of the changes they will need to make. But this half-completed work makes me want to give up, to down tools until there are more concrete examples...and this makes me feel like I have no autonomy. I'm just waiting for more information to be spoon fed to me, and I'll just do what everyone tells me to, for fear of trying something new and getting it wrong, or being told 'that's not what we had in mind'. I'm really worried now about what the teaching team will think of my work. Will they think I have no idea? Because I don't! But I don't want them to think that!

I didn't know much about the CEX teaching team at this point in time. My knowledge was second hand, derived from the head of the program through our discussions and emails. Through this information, I formed in my mind an image of a teaching team that was experiencing end-of-year fatigue, and with it a form of change fatigue (Day & Gu, 2009; Mellegård & Pettersen, 2016). I imagined the teachers had reached a liminal space of neither excitement nor optimism about the new program and the new curriculum. I wanted to be their excitement and optimism, but I found myself increasingly doubting my ability to demonstrate any form of agency over my work for them. Agency is both a temporal and a relational phenomenon; it is something that occurs over time and is about the relations between actors and the environments in and through which they act (Biesta et al., 2017). In this liminal space, where agency is shaped by experiences, my past experiences of curriculum reform shaped me to respond to, rather than become an agent of, this change.

5. IMPLICATIONS.

How teachers manage curriculum change depends on a range of contextual factors. When change is in response to students' prospective learning and development of soft skills in an increasingly unpredictable employment environment, teachers' sense of agency can be challenged. Veteran teachers, who will have been recipients of generations of changes in educational policies and societal values over the past two or three decades, are constantly challenged by the need to adjust (Day & Gu, 2009). What may be communicated as extended freedom by policy makers has been shown to be perceived as extended demands (Mellegård & Pettersen, 2016). Unless teachers have the time to embrace the liminal space that change creates their commitment to change will result in a temporary response to top-down approaches to curriculum change. The message to policy/curriculum makers is to provide sufficiently clear examples of the evolution of new ideas, coupled

with well-developed support material and examples at the time of expected implementation. School leaders need to play a part in allowing teachers sufficient time to embrace the possibilities afforded in a liminal space in order to increase teachers' sense of agency. Noack et al. (2013) provide recommendations for a four-phase nested model of change implementation for schools, where teachers are afforded the opportunity to explore their personal approaches to change as well as their implicit assumptions about learning and learners and the reform agenda.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This is the first report on this particular case. Future research and analysis will certainly continue to centre on teachers' agency, as they move through the liminal space. As the program progresses and the term-long units are repeated and refined it will be interesting to track the development or decline of these themes, and the emergence of new ones. The liminal space of separating from an old curriculum and adapting to a new one, affords us the opportunity to examine our own professional identities and sense of agency in relation to change. Teachers' identity can be shaped by school reform and political contexts (Cohen, 2008; Lasky, 2005). Soft skills, however we term them, are recognised as valuable in a rapidly changing world. Teachers need to be increasingly aware of the teachable moments around soft skills in their learning environments—in themselves and their students—that assist to develop autonomy and agency. Like their students, teachers need a clear understanding, sound examples, a strong rationale, and time to aggregate new information, as they move through the liminal space (Wendling, 2008). Well-developed soft skills provide an individual with the foundation for a strong sense of agency. The irony of teachers grappling with new curriculum in order to teach students the skills required to develop resilience, problem solving and autonomy is not lost here.

REFERENCES

- ARONOWITZ, S., BENDER, T., BETTIS, P. J., DEMARRIAS, K., LECOMPTE, M., TIERNEY, W. G., . . . ZUKIN, S. (2006). Liminality and the Study of a Changing Academic Landscape. In V. A. Anfara & N. T. Mertz (Eds.), *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- BARCAN, A. (2003). The struggle for curriculum reform in Australia 1987-1993. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 30(2), 108-139.

- BERMAN, D. M. (1994). Becoming a Teacher: The Teaching Internship as a Rite of Passage. *Teaching Education*, 6(1), 41-56.
- BIESTA, G., PRIESTLEY, M., & ROBINSON, S. (2017). Talking about education: exploring the significance of teachers' talk for teacher agency. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(1), 38-54. doi:10.1080/00220272.2016.1205143
- CLANDININ, D. J., DOWNEY, C., & HUBER, J. (2009). Attending to changing landscapes: Shaping the interwoven identities of teachers and teacher educators. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(2), 141-154. doi:10.1080/13598660902806316
- COHEN, J. (2008). That's not treating you as a professional: teachers constructing complex professional identities through talk. *Teachers and Teaching*, 14(2), 79-93.
- DAY, C., & GU, Q. (2009). Veteran teachers: commitment, resilience and quality retention. *Teachers and Teaching*, 15(4), 441-457. doi:10.1080/13540600903057211
- FULLAN, M. (1993). Why Teachers Must Become Change Agents. *Educational Leadership*, 50(6), 12-17.
- LASKY, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(8), 899-916.
- LUDECKE, M. (2013). *Firsts: performing ways first year teachers experience identity transformation*. (Research Doctorate), Deakin University, Deakin Research Online - DRO. Retrieved from <http://dro.deakin.edu.au/view/DU:30057355>
- LUDECKE, M. (2016). The practice of survival: Reflexivity and transformation of contract-employed beginning teachers' professional practice. In u. Lynch, J. Rowlands, T. Gale, & A. Skourdoumbis (Eds.), *Practice Theory and Education: Diffractional Readings in Professional Practice*. Routledge.
- MELLEGÅRD, I., & PETTERSEN, K. D. (2016). Teachers' response to curriculum change: balancing external and internal change forces. *Teacher Development*, 20(2), 181-196. doi:10.1080/13664530.2016.1143871

- MERRIAM, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation Revised and Expanded from Qualitative research and Sacc Study Applications in Education*
- MITCHELL, G. W., PRITCHETT, C. C., & SKINNER, L. B. (2013). The Importance of the Integration of Soft Skills into the Curriculum as Identified by MBA Students. *Academy of Business Research Journal*, 2, 87-103.
- NOACK, M., MULHOLLAND, J., & WARREN, E. (2013). Voices of reform from the classroom: teachers' approaches to change. *Teachers and Teaching*, 19(4), 449-462. doi:10.1080/13540602.2013.770233
- PIERCE, K. M. (2007). Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Beginning Teaching. *The New Educator*, 3(1), 31-49. doi:10.1080/15476880601141615
- STAKE, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- STAKE, R. E. (2005). Qualitative Case Studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- TURNER, V. (1974). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology. *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies*, 60(3).
- TURNER, V. (1975). *Dramas, fields, and metaphors: symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca, United States: Cornell University Press.
- TURNER, V. (1994). Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites of passage. In L. C. Mahdi (Ed.), *Betwixt & between: patterns of masculine and feminine initiation* (pp. 3-22). Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company.
- TURNER, V. (2008). Liminality and Communitas *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (2nd ed.). New Brunswick, USA and London, UK: Aldine Transaction.
- VOOGT, J., & ROBLIN, N. P. (2012). A comparative analysis of international frameworks for 21st century competences: Implications for national

curriculum policies. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44(3), 299-321.
doi:10.1080/00220272.2012.668938

WALKER-GIBBS, B., LUDECKE, M., & KLINE, J. (2015). Pedagogy of the rural: implications of size on conceptualisations of rural *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 10(1), 81-89.
doi:10.1080/22040552.2015.1086292

WENDLING, G. (2008). Understanding Change Through the Rites Of Passages Framework. Retrieved from http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:N5rghg3H2usJ:scholar.google.com/+understanding+rites+of+passage+Gisela+Wendling&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5

ZUKIN, S. (1991). *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.