

# Avila College strikes PD gold at 50-year celebration

Annie Facchinetti

An anniversary is a special occasion. When you've been married for 50 years, there is normally a big celebration with family and friends, and the traditional gift is gold. But what do you do when a school reaches the same milestone? In the case of Avila College in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, you run a highly successful education conference.

Avila's *Spark, Amplify, Evolve* conference itself evolved from the staff's desire to find a fitting way to acknowledge the school's achievements since its establishment in 1965. "We really wanted an event to celebrate our 50th in a way that celebrated our core business, which is teaching and learning," explains Deputy Principal Learning and Teaching Madeleine Franken.

In the beginning, the school sought a big name keynote speaker supported by Avila staff as presenters in the break out sessions, but when it became apparent that scheduling constraints were going to make organising the keynote difficult, the stage was set for the contributions of the college's staff to become more pivotal. With a strong tradition of innovation at the school, both Franken and Avila College's Professional Practice Leader Jason Isma were confident that there would be enough teachers who were prepared to share their ideas and experiences.

Named after St Teresa of Avila, herself renowned for embracing wisdom and the unconventional, Franken explains that the college was one of the first to introduce a four-period day, with lessons lasting 80 minutes rather than the accepted model of six 50-minute lessons. It is also a school without bells to mark the beginning and end of periods; students and teachers just move to where they need to be at the allotted time. The spirit of innovation also extends to teaching practice and Isma is supportive of those who want to improve their pedagogy. "I encourage a lot of people to present at conferences... I think it's a great way to get feedback on your practice. I think sometimes as teachers, we actually don't see the great work that we're doing," he says.

In order to ensure the conference both met the needs of delegates and showcased Avila College's achievements, the school engaged Education Changemakers to manage the event's architecture and to facilitate the day. With a mission to turn "good schools into great ones" (Educationchangemakers.com, 2015), Education Changemakers were able to clarify the vision for the conference from the outset, a step that Isma largely credits for the success of the initiative. After considering the concepts of *Spark, Amplify* and *Evolve* in isolation as conference themes, a staff member suggested that all three together summed up the spirit of the event and these ideas gave focus and cohesion to the formulation of the program.

While many conferences expect their speakers to independently conceive and prepare their contributions, the support given by Education Changemakers inspired the presenting teachers to craft practical and engaging sessions that pushed beyond the traditional conference presentation. This was achieved through an afternoon workshop conducted with presenters to ready them for the challenge of sharing their ideas and strategies with delegates. "It's easy to run professional learning for the middle band of teachers," Isma asserts. "But what do you do with the teachers who are really running with it and doing great stuff? And one of the ways we saw this benefitting different people in different ways was the presenters were going to get extended and they were really pushed... everyone was feeling that they were being extended and put outside their comfort zone."



The day was structured to reflect the school's drive for innovation, and represented a break away from the quintessential educational conference format of long keynotes, shorter breakout sessions and lots of time sitting and listening. The keynote or 'Spark' presentation featured Education Changemaker's Aaron Tait, and ran for only around 20 minutes as opposed to the hour- to hour-and-a-half that is common at more traditional conferences. Tait shared his experiences as part of the first military deployment to Iraq the day after the 9/11 terrorist attacks at only age 18, and as a 24 year old caught up in Kenya during civil unrest and then running a school in incredibly difficult conditions in Tanzania. "Essentially it was designed as a disruptive keynote. It set the pace about what is it that students need to be learning and why," observes Franken. The presentation was compelling, setting a standard so high that one might have been forgiven for wondering if the Avila presenters would measure up.

The Avila staff 'Spark' sessions that followed, however, quickly proved to delegates what Isma and Franken had already recognised – that the teachers were more than capable of holding their own. These seven-minute presentations were designed to give a taster about what each longer or 'Amplify' session had to offer, replacing the practice of sending out the conference program to delegates in advance so that they can choose which workshops to attend, with what in effect was a pitch by presenters to interest people enough to come to their presentations. "People largely talked without notes and the preparatory work that Education Changemakers had done with our presenters was about how to be a bit cheeky and have a catchy title and just how to structure that seven minutes; a lot of work had gone into that and it was a bit different and that came across quite consistently," Franken says. "I think people were incredibly impressed by that." Isma adds, "Many people said it was difficult to make a choice of what to go to and I quite like that that was where it was at, but also it meant that in that seven minutes you actually got a really good idea of what the person was doing and you could still get things from there that you could apply."

The content of the Amplify sessions on offer covered a great breadth of topics, from technology to meditation. Some of the catchier titles included *My students' work is better than mine*, *The faults are our stars*, and *Of course I'll come home with you*. As an example, the description accompanying



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the last of these titles was, “Assessment of, for and as learning using video; sending myself home with all my students”, a tagline that echoes the mantra of “not like you think a presentation is, but like you want it to be” that Isma’s vision for the day espoused.

From the earliest planning stages, Isma was also conscious that the day needed to offer attendees ideas and strategies that they could relate to their own classrooms and contexts. The final ‘Evolve’ session, again facilitated by Education Changemakers, therefore involved hands-on problem solving designed to equip delegates with techniques to take back and implement. “What they did in that final session was give quite a few tools that made this conceptual idea very tangible for people,” Isma affirms.

The opportunity to collaborate, interact and learn with others in this format was a highlight for many delegates. “One of the things with secondary schools is that teachers don’t get into each other’s classrooms. They know what’s happening in their specialist area but they don’t actually get into each other’s classrooms... but what was happening in our conference was really about sharing good pedagogy that was applicable in any classroom, that wasn’t subject specific; it was about good learning and teaching practices generally,” Franken says.

Staging the conference was not without its challenges, not least of which was the tight timeframe in which the event was organised. With delays caused by the difficulty in finding a keynote speaker, it wasn’t until first term this year that Education Changemakers were brought on board, and the list of speakers was only finalised at the beginning of second term. “If we’d waited until we knew what we were doing, we probably never would have done it. We just had to jump in and have a go and learn along the way and make a few mistakes,” acknowledges Isma. “I just kept thinking, essentially it’s a group of people coming together, how wrong can it go?”

The feedback that poured in spontaneously during the conference and through emails immediately following it is a sound indication that in fact Avila got things very right. Attendees appreciated the quality of the presentations and saw immediate connections between what they heard and their own experiences. Isma cites the willingness of presenters to open themselves up, and talk about what went wrong as well as successes, as an essential component in making the conference relatable for delegates, “... because otherwise it’s like watching a superhero and thinking, oh well, there’s no way that I can do that.”

Delegates reported feeling re-energised and inspired by what they saw, helped along by the fast pace of proceedings. “People have been coming to me and saying the pace was really good, and I think when you go to a conference, often you can get an idea of what the person is about in the first five or 10 minutes and then you have to sit there for another 50 minutes or something like that hearing them go over it again. People really liked having these seven-minute things,” Isma explains.

Franken adds, “...really the key win was what it did to staff morale. The smiles it put on people’s faces, the buzz and the way it raised the level of professional dialogue... this conference actually enabled people to open up some pathways that they can have those conversations and think about



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doing some things differently in ways far broader than we’d anticipated.” Perhaps, however, the most telling of all is that a number of external delegates commented, “I want to work at Avila.”

The attention given to details of the day is also notable. In line with Avila’s strong social justice ethos, Asylum Seekers Resource Centre Catering was appointed to provide the food. “It really added to the whole idea, you know; try something new, taste a new flavour and in your teaching kind of take or adopt a similar approach,” Franken avows. Students from the college were also used as guides and to serve lunch to fulfil their community service obligations.

The immediate success of the conference was evident not only in the feedback but in the behaviours observed on the day. “At one point I looked around at three o’clock and everyone is active, discussing and engaged because the final session was this very active process and I just thought wow, it really has come together,” Isma shares. “What we could see quite obviously was that people certainly looked happier and seemed visibly lifted by the day,” notes Franken.

It is the way people take their learning on board, Isma suggests, that will indicate the initiative’s success in the long term. “A lot of the measurement from my side is going to be watching behaviour over the next 12 months and particularly to see how people respond to or the kind of ideas that come up around how do we support innovation at our school now? Are people trying more new things, are they collaborating more?”

Authentic and sustainable professional development for teachers is harder to find than you would think. According to Vrasidas and Glass (2004), “Much has been discovered in the past five decades about how humans learn. Students learn best when they are actively engaged in meaningful activities; when they collaborate with peers, exchange ideas, and provide and receive peer feedback; when they reflect critically on what they are doing; when they work on real-world, challenging, authentic activities; when their work is constantly evaluated; and when they are intrinsically motivated. But we tend to forget that teachers learn best in these ways too.” Avila College’s *Spark, Amplify, Evolve* conference managed to successfully draw these elements together into an event that was not only a meaningful celebration of the school’s history and traditions, but also a genuine catalyst for renewal and reconceptualisation of pedagogy and practice that will help delegates move from good to great. One can’t help but think that St Teresa would be proud. **ET**

#### **Further reading**

Educationchangemakers.com, (2015). *Education Changemakers*. [online] Available at: <http://www.educationchangemakers.com> [Accessed 13 Jun. 2015].

Vrasidas, C. and Glass, G. (2004). *Online professional development for teachers*. Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Pub.