



The Power of Lunchtime Learning Conversations

John Muskovits



Food plays such an integral role in our society. It is no different in Education. British three star Michelin Chef, Macro Pierre White said *“eating is one of the most important aspects of living. I like to eat one food at a time, to savour each individual thing.”*

Many of us have fond childhood memories of gathering at the table with the people we loved. Meals were shared, stories told with much laughter and tears. We remembered and dreamed and they were often places where we were most alive and animated. They were places of important human connection which affected all our senses (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting) and involved memory and imagination.

And to take up a place at the table, as Jones says, *“was to occupy sacred space... what the Celts called ‘thin places – where the veil that separates heaven and earth seems exceedingly thin.’”*

And so these spaces became transformed as

“In my thirty years of teaching I have never been waited on. It was a wonderful experience”

they *“implied a hierophany, an eruption of the sacred that resulted in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.”* [Elidae (87:26)]

Meals in a religious sense are sacramental as Martos (82:237) recalls, *“it was the social interaction among participants which affirmed and intensified a bond among them.”* These time-honoured rituals *“pass on values and involve symbols which are used to express and articulate meaning.”* Harris (92:11,18)

Conversation, story and narrative then find themselves at the heart of a meal. Margaret Wheatley captures the essence of conversation when she says *“human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the*

conditions for change- personal, community, and organisational change.”

In the College’s charism, *conversation* is a way of life in common with others. As such it is the process of letting go in day to day life of self-centred preoccupation and false securities. The aim being to be transformed in every part of one’s life, to engage in practice that over a life time brings about conversion (in small steps).

And for this to occur, our *“approach to truth for our generations [must] start from life not dogma”* (Bausch) which is best expressed through stories that: provoke curiosity and imagination; that unite us; that are a bridge to one’s culture and provide us with a basis of hope. Emblematic are the parables: When we ask a question, we expect a direct answer. What we don’t expect is to be told a story.

Joseph Campbell (92:11) also captured this sentiment well when he said that *“the prime function of mythology and rite [is] to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in*

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counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back”.

We find a clue in how to do this in the charism of the Good Samaritan Sisters in the Order of St Benedict. Sr Clair Condon urges us, in the opening words of the Rule of St Benedict, to ‘Listen with the ear of the heart’. She argues that this does not come easily:

“It is a difficult and challenging journey. I need to empty my heart of my own agenda, of all that clutters my life and my survival: to empty my heart of my own assumptions and prejudices; to empty my mind of all the preconceived answers and solutions I might conjure up.”

Incidentally, more and more this type of conversation is finding an integral place in our schools with our students. Fullan argues that “once the students felt that the adults involved were interested in who they are, their willingness to make a positive contribution rose.” The implications for student well-being, engagement, motivation and performance are self-evident.

Conversation about learning through a meal is the perfect conduit for individual and communal transformation. These lunchtime learning conversations were shaped by a number of significant figures in the educational landscape.

Hattie’s premise that schools need a reboot was explored as was the notion “that [it is important] we build a narrative that is based on identifying and valuing expertise, working together and opening classrooms to collaboration, targeting resources at need, and teachers and leaders accepting evidence and evaluating progress transparently over time”.

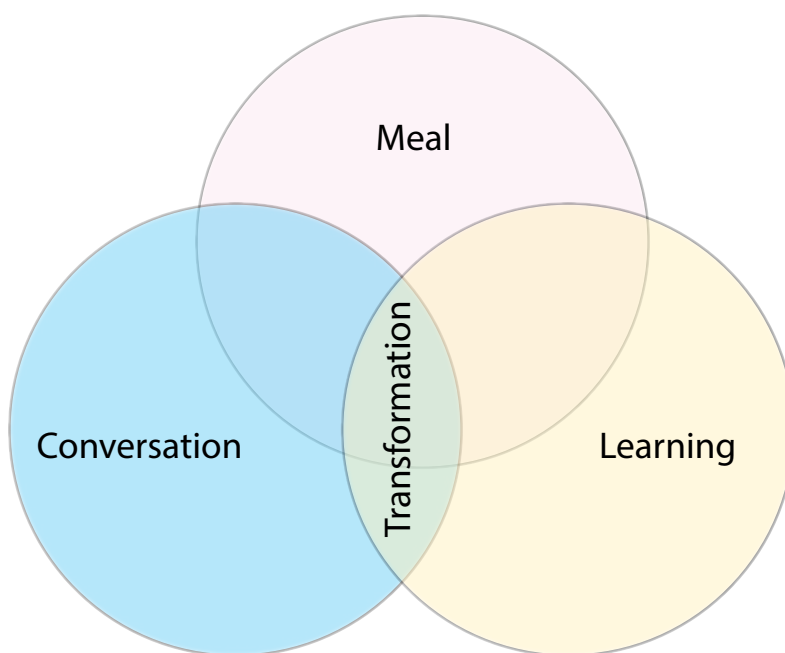
We reflected on Valerie Hannon’s assertion that there is a demand for a new range of literacies such as “cultural literacy – what Yong Zhao calls cross-cultural competency (the ability to move across cultures comfortably and fluently) and Ecological literacy.”

Czikszentmihalyi’s flow (90:4) “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” was explored through the recipients’ sharing of classroom experiences.

We endeavoured to challenge teachers to reflect on practice that moved beyond, as Meyer (13:9,10) calls them, “ritual knowledge which has a routine and rather meaningless character to troublesome knowledge which appears counter intuitive, alien (emanating from another culture and discourse) or incoherent.”

We debated Prof John Fischetti’s goal of reforming schools to prepare students for the 22nd Century by: “preparing young people to work together to create knowledge or solve problems that improve the human condition in the Collaborative, Global, and Innovation Age.”

And the spine of our thinking was authentic education, which as Mudge says “is allied to one’s capacity to encounter and cross various threshold



transitions ...from knowledge to wisdom. Such transitions require courage and often the taking of risks in order to move, from the safe ‘known’, through the vagaries of the liminal zone, and onwards to the threatening ‘unknown’.”

The genesis of our lunchtime conversations

The genesis to have a series of lunchtime learning conversations was founded on the waters of Helsinki. After attending the International Principal’s Conference and catching a ferry across to an island, I noticed the ferry master giving instructions to his apprentice on how to navigate the channel.

From this, lunchtime learning conversations were born. Held on three occasions over the three terms, during lunch and the subsequent period thereafter. Teachers new to the profession and the College community and experienced staff were released from class and invited to engage in meaningful conversations around learning.

The lunches were underpinned by the three elements of Meal, Conversation and Learning elaborated on above.

The provocations or questions during the three course meal which provided a framework for deep sharing from experienced teachers on their lived practice of high quality teaching and learning and an opportunity for new teachers to reflect on their insights and learning in and outside the classroom. Facilitated by the Dean of Curriculum, 16 different teachers with the Principal gathered at table for each lunch.

A menu make our staff feel special

The lunch began with canapés of either a Smoked salmon and dill crème fraiche on blini or caramelised beetroot and goats cheese tartlets, followed by a choice of herbed lamb on a bed of wild mushroom and truffle risotto

or pan seared chicken with irish champ puree, asparagus, and tomato salsa verde, and then finished off with either a white chocolate panna cotta with candied pear or individual pavlova with Chantilly cream and forest fruits, followed by tea or coffee.

The food was prepared in our hospitality kitchens by a Chef whom we hired (so our students benefited from real-life exposure) and each course was served by a staff member (we found it more cost effective than to cater). Each teacher had a small gift bag of goodies such as pens, pencils, posted notes, stickers and lollies which were presented to the teachers as they left the lunch.

We wanted to give the message to them of being pampered for their extraordinary contributions to education and to the lives young people (and their families), and how proud we are of them, without saying it!

Being our Jubilee Year it was the perfect setting to host these lunches. It captured the intention of the year well as we sought to “recognise the foundations which have brought our community into being – those which shape it and nurture its true character... to reflect on our work to discover its deeper purpose, to renew its beauty and recapture its vision.”

The conversations

The conversations around learning were rich, varied, thought provoking, refreshingly honest and revealing. Like good conversation they were immersed in story, transformation and flow. The lunch started with all participants asked: Why did you get into teaching? Was there a catalyst or an experience(s) that brought this decision into sharper focus for you?

The responses gave a good insight into not only the person but also an appreciation of the wealth of experiences they bring, often from

other professions, into our schools.

"I started as an engineer. I got into teaching because my mother-in-law suggested I should spend more time with the children ...but I loved it and had a passion for young people."

"I probably moved into teaching for the wrong reasons but I stayed in teaching for the right reasons."

"I knew I wanted to be a teacher when I was eight years old. I had a great aunt who was also a teacher and ...I admired this woman a lot."

"My Society & Culture teacher the way she taught the multiple thinking ...I now try to pass that on to other people to try and make an

impact as that teacher did on me."

"Got into teaching late, started working in a five-star hotel ...did a Maths degree and worked in finance where I was bored. I knew I wanted to be around people. I love children, that's why I started teaching."

"I got into teaching from youth work, Clifton Lodge, working with disadvantaged children, children who have left school early, working long hours in low paying jobs."

"Fell into teaching, but the passion for sport as a subject was there long before, involved in coaching and drawn to the University course of sport movement and then moved toward a

teaching focus."

"Interested in teaching from an early age, I would teach my teddy bears in my bedroom and always loved the idea of teaching in some way."

"I loved teaching and reading from an early age, as an ESL child (from Portugal). I loved learning new things and certainly have an interest in teaching children."

"I was late into teaching, I was a children's book editor previously, I loved working with children and I have a love of the subject."

"I did it for the money! There were teaching scholarships available and had a wonderful experience at Bennies back in the day as a student."

Provocation: Starter Questions

1. Why did you get into teaching? Was there a catalyst or an experience(s) that brought this decision into sharper focus for you?

2. There has been a lot of changes in teaching over the last three decades such as the proliferation of 1 to1 laptop programs and technology, a movement towards incorporating 21st century push for skills as well as knowledge into learning, and an awareness of the need for flexibility in design spaces.

What do you think has remained constant, and has not changed in teaching? Is this still relevant and important for students? For teachers?

3. BOSTES in the accreditation process have as their first standard Know your student. The Positive Education framework is solution focused approach using the VIA character strengths and virtues.

Acknowledging that building relationship is important in teaching and learning, how hard is this to develop? What does it look like in your classroom? What learnings have you had in this area that have changed the way you teach?

4. Spoon-feeding or Independence? Differentiated or common tasks? Constructivist or Instruction? Lap tops or a posted note approach?

Do we set up a duality if we say one approach is better than the other? Or is one more right or better than the other? Is it a matter of Context?

5. Arguably, a lot of the Education narrative is around 21st Century teaching/schools and learning. Prof John Fischetti, Dean of Education Newcastle, says schools of the 22nd Century are about reforming education for global collaboration and innovation.

What might schools like in the latter half of this century? Will design space and values play a role in this?

6. Valerie Hannon of the UK Innovation unit states that the purpose of education "has to be about saving our species on this planet, and in conditions which do justice to our aspirations for good lives". This sentiment is picked up in one of the four AITSIL's design principle of Connectedness, where learning is designed with a clear and real world purpose.

Is this sentiment aspirational or achievable? Does it or should it have any relevance in the contemporary education landscape?

7. Prof John Hattie in his research says that the "biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers".

Can you recall times when this has been so? How has it been beneficial to both you and the students?

8. Much has been written about the concept of flow (Csikszentmihayli) where the teacher and students are so immersed in the activities that they are deeply engaged in the present moment, deeply restful, as if time had stopped.

In your teaching career have you had something similar to this experience? What was it like?

9. In recent times Play is playing an increasing role in learning with countries such as Finland leading the way.

Can you think of occasions when you have had the spirit of play in your learning? What did it look like?

10. Lee Crocket, Michael Fullan, OFSTED and others talk about de-privatising the classroom with learning walks and classroom visits.

Is this important for the profession? Or does it just get in the way of good learning?

11. MSB has the tagline *Inspiring Young Women~ Transforming the future.*

What would be your tagline to describe what you hope to achieve, or have achieved, in your teaching profession?

12. What advice would you give your students who are thinking about entering the teaching profession? What would this advice say about you? About our profession?

"I taught at a neighbour's place down the road as they had a chalk board and I found myself teaching Maths."

"Started in nursing, but loved English and History. We moved a lot when the kids were little, got into teaching later in life."

"I had cats as students when I was young, I really wanted to be a doctor but found I always had a love of reading as well as English and ESL."

"An 11-year-old girl changed my life when I was teaching her English I realised that you are having an impact on a person's life and the awesome responsibility surrounding that."

"I was a Chemist and it was the most boring job, I wanted a job where no day was ever the same so I decided to pursue teaching."

We then proceeded to open-up discussion about what has not changed in schools:

"Care for the child, you're communicating with another individual and having an impact on their life."

"The ah-ha moment was when I was trying to teach a concept and one of the girls put up her hand and asked a completely irrelevant question about me and I thought 'what does that have to do with what we are talking about?'... 'but Miss I just want to know'. They just wanted to know what school I came from. They were saying 'we want to know who you are so we can put it into context to learn.'"

"Thirst for knowledge, and it's a reciprocal and holistic approach... the students teach us as well."

"One of the constants is change and the flexibility to adapt to that change. Through all the years that I have been teaching the content is constantly changing in our subject and requiring the teachers to be more flexible."

"The relationship you develop with a student – I don't think anything else flows unless you have that. I have a quote on my computer – 'Kids don't care what you know until they know that you care.' I think that is the basis of everything that we do. I could have endless letters after my name but if they don't know I care they just don't listen."

There were many questions discussed such as: **Spoon-feeding** "I try not to get drawn into that way of spoon feeding but an overcrowded curriculum and an overburdened assessment regime actually feed into that"; **Failure** "It is one of the things we talk about in design in STEM... we talk about there always has to be a problem. We are looking for design thinking, what works what doesn't. In a sense we are not looking for specific answers but the ability to solve problems"; **De-privatising the classroom** "I think it is having those open spaces and it opens up some opportunities for different types of teaching. I have done a lot of tier teaching and inter faculty, cross faculty and you learn so much from really experienced teachers and new teachers and seeing people who taught in a very way to me was great"; **Flow** "It's like having the perfect recipe, where students are thinking and bouncing off each other"; "In Science I have found particularly in practical if you set it up properly the girls become

totally immersed in conversation and questioning. When you have to ask them at the end of the lesson to stop you know it has been worthwhile". "When the students become the captain of the journey that's a great moment".

Finally, they were asked What advice would you give your students who are thinking about entering the teaching profession? And what would this advice say about you or our profession?

"Do it! Because you love it not because you get school holidays. Unless you really-love being in the classroom. That's when you will last the distance."

"You will know on the first day of your practicum at your first school. When you get into the classroom you won't know if you are made for teaching until that day."

"You have a passion and a general interest in young people... because at the end of the day you are working with them and having an impact on who they are going to become. You are involved in their lives. If you don't want to take that on teaching would be a really tough gig."

"Still go into teaching but maybe do something else before, have some other life experience first as it will be invaluable throughout your teaching."

"One of the worst things I have heard over the years is saying to young people don't do teaching if you have a good ATAR and do something else. My response to that would always be go for it as it is a wonderful rewarding career with huge opportunities for growth and development in yourself apart from what you do for young people."

After lunch outcomes

Many positives came out of these lunches. Teachers felt valued and very affirmed for their work; a stronger bond of collegiality and conversion of learning was nurtured; an opportunity for the Principal to listen to teaching and learning landscape was provided; the 'wisdom of the elders' was passed onto new staff and, new staff shared with the 'elders' in the spirit of the Rule of Benedict, where "often the Lord reveals what is better to the younger"; and wonderful ideas for change were generated such as: "Following on from the lunchtime conversations, my colleague and I were speaking and felt it would be a lovely idea to continue these conversations next year, in a simpler format."

"It was such a great chance to sit, talk, learn and wonder about the possibilities. I think trying to come up with a 'tag line' and this may linger in my mind for quite some time."

It was a wonderful and sacred journey full of surprises and one that is highly recommended for anyone who delights in good company, fine food and has a passion for learning. All the ingredients that provide a fertile ground for change and action.

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