



# Not new teachers – new Educators

**Darren McGregor** Principal of Marist College Bendigo describes how new staff learn to ‘Speak Marist’



**F**or the first two days of the recent school holidays I hosted 20 very special visitors to Marist College Bendigo. These 20 people had recently been appointed as Educators at Marist from the beginning of 2018. Our applications closed at the beginning of Term 3 and the next eight weeks were spent finalising these successful applicants from well over 100 applications.

Our time line has been similar for the last three years as we continue to cater for the large growth of enrolments in this new learning community. Why advertise early? A key reason is to maximise the time available to prepare these Educators for their entry into Marist. You see, they need to learn to speak Marist.

At Marist we are currently nearing the completion of our third year. We have grown from two year levels, 221 students and 37 staff through to next year’s situation of 9 year levels, 820 students and 90 staff. In this time of rapid growth and constant change the key focus for leadership has been to build and maintain the culture of the learning community. This culture must remain true to the vision and ideals articulated just three years ago. This has been achieved through many aspects. However, the most crucial has been an overt and concerted approach to developing, and utilising, a common language.

*The Admin Educator, attending the Village Forum was keen to update Educators on her work in the Sports Discernment Group for the La Valla Learning Experience.*

*She was hoping for some challenging I Wonders from the Literacy Learning Leader.*

When we gathered with these 20 new educators, on the first induction

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day, I introduced two Learning Leaders to the new staff members. In my introduction I explained that these two learning leaders speak fluent Marist. The new staff laughed and then they listened to them. Over the next 90 minutes the Deputy Principal and I served as the translators.

All schools are seeking to implement change and improvement at various levels. As a new learning community our focus is on creating, but there are many similarities which can be drawn between creating and recreating. This article seeks to provide an opportunity for the reader to reflect on their language. Is it unique? Does it serve its desired purpose? Words are perhaps the greatest vehicle to support change and they need to be chosen carefully to ensure they reflect the correct meaning. They also need to be chosen carefully so that the mindset is changed when the word is heard. This article looks at how we successfully created a new culture centred around our unique language.

Let’s look at the key terms and how they created a culture.

## **Challenge 1: Learning is always student centred**

In theory, education has always been about the student. However, reality tends to traditionally have the teacher as the actual focus of daily



operations. This is understandable for it is the teacher who is the constant. Students pass through the year levels and subjects and the teacher stays.

The teacher knows the culture and the way things work. They know what needs to be learned and how it will happen and when it will happen. Education is a system and is one of the remaining bastions of the Industrial Revolution. Place the student on the production line and let it experience education as it passes through various teachers' rooms.

To try and break the centrality of the teacher we looked for another name. In the end we chose Educator. This comes from the word *educare* which can be translated to: 'draw out what lies within'. This term brought the student, and the learning of the student, to the forefront. When old habits return at Marist we pause and reflect on how we can be educators rather than teachers. Yes, there is a time for explicit teaching but this is just one of the skills of the educator.

### **Challenge 2: All employees have a role in student learning**

The term 'Non-Teaching Staff' has always rested uncomfortably with me. In institutions where learning is the key focus it seems incongruous to have a phrase stating a person's category is just the opposite. At Marist, in role descriptions, it is an expectation that every employee has some role in the learning of the students. To emphasise this all employees who are not teachers belong to the group of Administration Educators. Admin Educator, for short, is the general term and then each staff member still has a specific role title e.g. Office Leader. With these titles all staff are reminded of their crucial role as an educator of the children within our learning community.

### **Challenge 3: Meetings need to be places for dialogue**

The role of gathering for true dialogue, rather than administrative matters, was a key focus for our new learning community. Administrative tasks are

addressed through emails, online documents and occasionally pieces of paper. These tasks do not belong in meetings.

To highlight the discussion element of gatherings the term Forum was introduced. Two regular staff forums are the Learning Forum (attended by Educators) and Culture Forum (attended by Educators and Admin Educators). These occur fortnightly and are times for real dialogue. The Culture Forum has a deliberate focus on the culture we are creating at Marist. A third significant forum is the Village Forum. Held each Wednesday morning between 8:30am and 8:55am the Village Forum is designed to engage staff in dialogue relating to personal development and shared professional development. Arising from the concept that the school is a village, and the village members need to care for each other, the staff developed this concept of the weekly Village Forum.

### **Challenge 4: Good decision making takes time and expertise**

At Marist any key decision relating to a new element of our learning community is made by a group formed for that purpose. Decisions require a process, information gathering and time for the team to work through the issues. In short they require discernment. Thus, at Marist a discernment group is set up to work through a process and make decisions relating to a given topic. At their first meeting, a discernment group clarifies its terms of reference for their decision making and acknowledges what is not within their terms of reference. Discernment groups may include staff, students and/or parents depending on the task.

### **Challenge 5: Keep learning as the real focus**

Learning is the key term in our Marist Language. There has been a very overt approach to include this in as many Marist terms and phrases as possible. Every POL includes the word Learning in its title. The key document that drives learning at Marist is the Learning Policy. This, in



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many schools, may be called a Learning and Teaching Policy or, most likely, a Teaching and Learning Policy. Experience tells me that such policies focus on Teaching rather than Learning.

A Learning Policy can certainly have points of reference for teaching activities but the focus is learning. Professional Development is named Professional Learning and in almost every situation the term teaching has been superseded by the term learning. It is significant to see the change this creates in the mindset of both teachers and students. Or are they educators and learners?

**Challenge 6: Flatten out the learning experience from Foundation to Year 12**

In an effort to remove the primary and secondary focus, our learning journey is divided into three experiences: Foundation – Year 4, Year 5 – Year 8 and Year 9 – Year 12. To ensure each learning experience has its own identity these were given names not relating to upper or lower as well as primary or secondary.

Based on our Marist heritage the experiences were called La Valla Learning Experience, Montagne Learning Experience and Champagnat Learning Experience. The POL which leads each experience is the relevant

Learning Leader. (e.g. La Valla Learning Leader). This terminology removes all necessity to say “down to primary” or “up in secondary”. Each learning experience has a name and each is equal to the others.

**Challenge 7: Clear connection between staff practice and student learning**

In the development of our learning model a key element is our commitment to project based learning (PBL). Our form of PBL emanates from a model developed by the New Tech network of schools in the USA. This form of PBL contains a rich and unique language. Staff have deliberately brought this language into our own learning work. Two simple examples of this are: Knows & Need to Knows and Likes & Wonders.

At the beginning of any unit the students are encouraged to develop two lists: What they know about the topic and what they need to know. The latter list then acts as a key document in driving the learning of the student through the unit. In the same way staff use this language when leading discernment groups, developing units or in a range of other professional tasks.

The Likes & Wonders comes from the process of critical friending where students provide feedback on draft work of each other by offering what they like, and what they wonder, about the work. This creates a language of affirmation and areas to deepen the work. Staff use this language throughout all drafting of work and documents.

**Challenge 8: Ensure the focus is on modern learners**

The final piece of language to name here is the move from being taught the three 3Rs to learning the 3As. When my generation attended school there was the catch cry that we were taught the 3Rs: Reading, wRiting and Rithmetic. Notice the focus was on an action being done to us. We were taught. At Marist our language is that a student learns the 3As: Anywhere, Anyhow, Anytime. This focusses on learning as the action and reminds us all that with technology to today this is a constant action.

Over the next six months our 20 new Educators and five Admin Educators currently being appointed will continue their induction into our learning community. There will be many experiences that will shape that enculturation and each individual will have a unique response to each of their set of experiences. They will become immersed in the culture. They will enrich the culture and they will hand the culture on to others. The consistency in all this will be the language. Each of these new staff will learn to speak fluent Marist and thus become agents of the culture.

Change of any type only occurs with a change of mindset. That mindset only becomes sustainable when there is a new language to describe and facilitate its essence. Next time change is to happen in your learning community, what language will you choose to enable it? **ET**



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