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# Engaged Learning for School Leaders: The Future School Project of the Leaders in Education Programme

Ng Pak Tee

## Abstract

*In an engaged learning paradigm, learners are responsible, strategic, collaborative and energised through the learning process. As the Singapore education system changes rapidly to respond to an emerging global economy in a knowledge age, school leaders have to be engaged in learning, especially in the areas of futuring, knowledge creation and innovation. This article describes how the Future School project of the Leaders in Education Programme attempts to engage school leaders in deep learning and provides some pointers as to how engaged learning can be achieved in leadership programmes.*

## What Is Engaged Learning?

The picture of an engaged learner is one where learning consumes the whole being of the person. The person's attention, energy and intellect are all directed towards the object of learning. Intuitively, the quality of learning increases with engagement. But engaged learning in itself is an elusive term.

We often associate traditional models of learning with teachers providing information for students to memorise and regurgitate. Students are thus passive participants in the learning process. In the paradigm of engaged learning, there are no passive learners. According to Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998), engagement entails intrinsically motivated involvement of integrated cognitive processes: creating, problem solving, reasoning, decision making and evaluation. Bangert-Drowns and Pyke (2001) describe engagement as a mobilisation of cognitive, affective and motivational strategies for learning. Learners are involved actively in learning activities such as dialogue, brainstorming, categorising, debriefing, problem solving and peer teaching. This brings to mind various modes of learning that have the potential to engage learners, such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning and project work.

According to Jones *et al.* (1994), engaged learning involves the following four elements:

- The learners are responsible for their own learning. They take charge of their learning and are self-regulated. They define learning goals and tackle issues that are meaningful to them. They know how the learning activities they undertake relate to the goals. They develop their own standards of excellence.
- The learners are strategic in their learning process. They know how to learn, develop and refine their learning. They can apply and transfer the knowledge generated creatively.
- The learners collaborate with others. They understand that learning is social. They recognise that different people can have different views about the same issue and the multiple points of view can enrich the learning process.
- The learners are energised throughout the learning process. They derive excitement and pleasure from learning. They find learning fulfilling.

Therefore, engaged learning is about empowering learners in the learning process. Engaged learning is about active involvement. Engaged learning is about engaging others in learning. This is highly relevant learning, and the skills are transferable to real-life situations. In an engaged learning paradigm, learners acquire life-long learning skills.

In such a paradigm, the learner is expected to play the roles of an explorer, an apprentice, a peer teacher, a researcher, a problem-solver and collaborator with peers and teachers. Teachers of engaged learning are designers of learning opportunities. They create a learning environment where students work collaboratively to solve problems, do authentic tasks and construct their own meaning. Teachers are not expected to have “all the answers”. They find it rewarding to learn along with the students.

### **Why School Leaders in Singapore Need to Be Engaged in Learning**

The 21st century promises a future of intense global economic competition and shifting competitive advantages. Knowledge is fast becoming the most precious asset of production, sidelining capital and labour (Drucker, 1993). The world is becoming borderless (Ohmae, 1990). In such a global and borderless economy, national borders, as defined on a map, are going to be less and less important to economic development (Ohmae, 1995). Singapore needs citizens who can think beyond its shores, work creatively and engage in innovation. These forces make demands on schools vastly different from a past era. Singapore needs a different kind of school.

Responding to the emerging global trends, the “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation” vision, which was launched by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997, focuses on developing all students into active learners with critical thinking skills

and on developing creativity and entrepreneurship within schools (Goh, 1997). Many initiatives were introduced to respond to the vision of developing thinking schools and a learning nation. In particular, an ability-driven paradigm was adopted for the education system. Under this paradigm, schools aim to discover the talents of individual students so as to develop their potential to the fullest. Schools are given more autonomy so that they can be flexible and responsive to the needs of their students. A fundamental factor that is crucial to the success of this policy initiative is the school leaders. Principals are encouraged to think of themselves as the CEO of their schools. They are to lead their staff, manage the school systems and produce the desired educational outcomes.

No longer is it, therefore, sufficient that school leaders operate in the old management paradigm, merely keeping the ship afloat. The principals' leadership is critical for successful school reforms (Sergiovanni, 1996; Leithwood, 1998). There is therefore a need in Singapore to develop a different breed of school leaders. The new breed of school leaders have to reflect upon their practices, break through their mental models and innovate continuously to bring their schools to a higher level of excellence. They have to be forward looking and have the foresight to anticipate future trends. There are a few pressing reasons why such leadership traits are critical in the 21st century education scene.

While the Ministry of Education can develop policy initiatives, it is the school leaders who must determine what the policy means to the school and the students in the classroom. Former Education Minister Teo Chee Hean said, 'Our education professionals must be confident and pro-active enough to want to cook their own food instead of waiting for the central kitchen to serve up a complete meal' (Teo, 1999). This is in line with Elliot's (1996) model of the new professionalism of educators in which the acquisition of knowledge about the profession should proceed interactively with reflecting about real practical situations.

Moreover, school leaders must reflect so that they are not lost in a sea of changes without purpose or direction, implementing changes for the sake of change. With the influx of management ideas and models from the commercial world into the educational arena, school leaders must be able to reflect and create knowledge that is applicable to their context. They must be able to select wisely and adapt good principles to the school context to bring actual benefits to the school. To follow blindly practices in the commercial world may be detrimental to the school. Minister Teo said, "In this sea of change, some things remain the same. As teachers, your most important contribution is to be a source of inspiration, to be a guide and mentor to our young. You must seek to nurture the whole child, by focusing on his character development, by whetting his sense of motivation and by bringing out his capacity to learn" (Teo, 1998).

In this era of uncertainty and rapid change in the Singapore education system, management philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy change quickly to prepare young people for a future that no one can categorically state with certainty what it would be like. School leaders need to learn constantly to keep themselves ahead of

the times. They have to develop the foresight to anticipate world and local trends to develop and deliver an education package to young learners for an emerging reality.

Therefore, school leaders need to be engaged in learning individually and with fellow professionals in the field. Such leaders cannot be trained through the traditional lecture and regurgitation mode. In this respect, how can a leadership programme for school leaders really engage its participants in learning and learning together? This article describes the case study of a project that really engages school leaders in active learning. The project, called the Future School project, is part of the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore.

### **The Future School Project in the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP)**

The LEP is a 6-month full time programme for specially selected vice principals and MOE officers to prepare them for school leadership. The LEP aims to produce school leaders with the capability to transform schools to be innovative learning communities that nurture innovative students and teachers in a rapidly changing and complex new economy, one that is driven essentially by knowledge and learning (LEP participants Handbook, 2003). Knowledge creation and innovation are thus the central themes in the LEP. The LEP has a very different learning agenda from many other leadership programmes. It aims to engage school leaders in deep learning to develop visionary leaders who can articulate inspirational images of the future and futuristic leaders who can anticipate likely future scenarios and develop schools for tomorrow.

One of the projects that the LEP participants engage in is the Future School project. In this project, the LEP moves from a model that was based on individual cognitive learning of current knowledge to one that is based on knowledge construction and futuristic thinking. The project approach is anchored in two important philosophies that are different from the traditional mode of lecture and regurgitation of current knowledge, namely "futuring" and "social constructivism".

### **Futuring**

All over the world, changes have been taking place at an exponential rate. Transformations in political situations, demographics, economics and technology are bombarding many countries and organisations with new and difficult challenges. Increasing concerns are being expressed about how people can chart their journey into the future. This requires a skill known as futuring. According to Albrecht (1994), futuring is about riding shock waves, monitoring critical indicators and exploiting trends. Planning is about defining goals, determining actions, committing resources and aiming for defined targets. Futuring is the process of deciding how to ride the crest of the waves. Planning is the translation of that decision into manageable actions.

School leaders in Singapore have been used to planning but not necessarily futuring. But, increasingly, in a turbulent world, school leaders need to be comfortable with both because it is difficult to plan adequately for a confusing and ambiguous future. School leaders need to have the skill and discipline to interpret continuously the future into strategic actions and responses and then use their planning skills to accomplish the plans that make sense. School leaders have to navigate nonlinear change paths, and learning how to navigate this kind of change is a critical competence for 21st century change leaders in school systems (Duffy, 2003).

School leaders need to do futuring as they move into an era of education changes and challenges. The rapid changes in knowledge, technology, markets, products and services have presented a serious challenge to the education system that requires leaders to look more critically at the future to ascertain what is likely to happen to schools in the coming years. School leaders need to do "futuring" skilfully and effectively to look beyond the immediate vision for their current school to develop a "new" school suitable for the future. School leaders have to learn to examine critically the future of education to gain foresight into significant events that will affect education and determine how reliable that foresight is, especially when they have increasingly greater autonomy in school leadership and management. It is therefore a strategic capability to develop in school leaders. They must go through an "authentic" experience in futuring to develop the futuring orientation that could help them to develop a school for an uncertain future.

## **Social Constructivism**

In the social constructivism paradigm, knowledge is seen as a social, consensual interpretation of reality and knowledge creation as a group interactive process rather than an individual one. Knowledge is created in the interaction among the LEP participants as they operate in their groups. Learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge. Whatever gets into the mind of an individual has to be constructed by the individual through knowledge discovery (Piaget, 1960). This is the constructivist position of knowledge. Moreover, knowledge is created through interaction with people. The social orientations of constructivism, commonly linked to Vygotsky (1978), emphasise the cultural and social context in which learning takes place. Knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads but rather something people do together (Gergen, 1985).

Dilworth (1996) noted that many leadership programmes produce individuals who are technologically literate and able to deal with intricate problem solving models but are essentially distanced from the human dimensions that must be taken into account. The LEP anchors itself firmly in those human dimensions that may otherwise be overlooked. It is in line with a recent emerging school of thought that places self-organising interactions, with their intrinsic capability to

produce emergent coherence, at the centre of knowledge creation. Through complex responsive processes, knowledge is created and transformed through networks of human interaction (Stacey, 2001).

### **The Future School Project in Action**

The Future School project requires each group of about six participants to design a school in Singapore that can address the needs of Singapore in 10 years' time and has the potential for long-term sustainability. The group is to describe in detail various important facets such as the mission and vision of the school, the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, staff development, financial viability and the leadership and management model. There are no official classes allocated for the project. The groups use their free slots in the timetable to meet up and discuss the project throughout the programme. So far, some groups have chosen to meet informally outside the NIE campus to hold discussions over coffee. Others have made study trips to schools and industries to pick up ideas. Yet others have used their time to interview industrialists about the school that would meet their needs in the future.

This project requires the participants to be futuristic in their thinking so as to create a workable plan for something new. They have to scan the horizon for future trends and talk to different stakeholders to gather environmental data. They have to produce the blueprint of such a school and a plan of how this school can be founded in 10 years' time. In the Future School project, the participants have to do futuring and translate the insights into a plan. The project is not a regurgitation of facts from lectures. Instead, this creative theme of Future School drives the group members to generate dialogues about the school and at the end of the day help one another come to a better understanding of it. The project has twin learning aims: the processes of futuring and "social constructivism", as well as the outcome of developing a model of a future school.

The Future School is a theme that LEP participants have to grapple with to understand what it really means to each of them. Each dialogue may represent the coming together of two or more systems of thought. It is a rare opportunity for fellow professionals to hear candid opinions from one another about issues that intrigue them and matter to them. The different interpretations of the same concept, the diversity of opinions of the participants and the intellectual thrust of different people in the group enrich the learning experience greatly.

The Future School group creates opportunities for participants to search for their own understanding of what a school is about and learn from one another's perspectives. It encourages an open climate where participants will both support and challenge one another. Members are encouraged to challenge individual and group assumptions, provide honest feedback to one another, and ask questions that help participants explore the reasoning behind their positions. The group members are like comrades in battle. The synergistic questioning and debating often result in new insights and creative ideas.

The Future School group creates the conditions in which participants learn about themselves and one another in a "real-life" project. They submit their ideas about the future school to the constructive scrutiny of persistent but supportive fellow participants. Through this process of presenting and debating ideas, participants are "forced" to reflect on why they say the things they say, do the things they do and assume the things they assume. Rather than being taught through lectures, participants are engaged in active learning from one another's insights. Leaders learn best with and from one another.

The Future School group is responsible for its own learning. No professor from NIE is attached to the group as a tutor, though professors are available for consultation at the group's request. The group thus plans and schedules every activity in its project. Some groups have spent their days at one member's house to brainstorm ideas. Others went to visit school or industry leaders to gain ideas. Dialogues that started as an impasse because of the different views of individuals became more and more generative along the way as the participants began to challenge their own mental models. The participants learnt how to learn better as the project progressed.

"Leadership" has been associated traditionally with power derived from a higher position in the organisational hierarchy. But true leaders do not need a position of power. They persuade. They influence. The people follow their lead because the people identify with their vision. The people follow because they want to, not because they have to. In the Future School project, the participants have to get people to buy their ideas by merely influencing them. They have to sell their ideas to a panel of NIE professors, heads of department attending courses at NIE and other invited guests, including cluster superintendents and school principals. Not only have they to envision together as a group, they have to paint an exciting future and learn to communicate the vision. Moreover, the plan must be written such that it becomes a publishable book (though not necessarily published) that can capture the imagination of readers or even venture capitalists.

In a way, such an approach can engage school leaders in many different areas of learning. Because of its creative and social constructivist nature, it is flexible and adaptive. The process builds upon the members' independence and experience. It does not need to conform to a fixed "syllabus" or curriculum structure. The Future School project works in an engaged learning paradigm because the participants are responsible, strategic, collaborative and energised in the process.

### **Ideas of the Future School Generated through the Project**

The ideas generated through the Future School project have been interesting. All the groups argue for a school vastly different from the average school found in Singapore today. This article does not intend to present all the details of the various future schools. But a few of the more unusual features from different

future schools will be presented here to give readers a feel of the output of the Future School project:

- Strategic link up with established local and overseas tertiary institutions so that the programmes offered are accredited by these prestigious institutions, rather than put the students through the usual GCE "O" or "A" level examinations.
- Formative rather than summative assessments, where students receive regular feedback and inputs on their performance instead of one-time examinations by an external examination body with little feedback except the final grade.
- Portfolio, reflection journals, reports and oral presentations instead of paper examinations.
- Virtual classrooms through the e-learning platform, thus serving both local and international students.
- Local and overseas campuses to provide seamless continuity of learning programmes for children of jet-setting parents.
- Schools serve as a broker of learning platforms for students so that they are actually based at different industrial settings to provide authentic learning experiences.
- Emphasis on "process as content" and "habits of mind" (Costa & Kallick, 2000) rather than content-driven curriculum.
- School as a self-funding enterprise, relying on fee revenue and business with stakeholders, rather than government funding.

## Feedback from Participants

Why did the LEP participants find the future school project engaging? There were a few factors according to the participants:

### Challenge

*"We were given the opportunity to dream of what can be in the future. Our mandate was to conceptualise a future school, which will be ready in 10 years. Ten years is a duration long enough to expect the unexpected ... we really do not have the luxury to remain conservative or realistic. We have to stretch our imaginations to the limit in many instances. We have chosen to break some of the current rules to come up with our future school."*

*"My takeaway for the LEP would have been the future school project. It forces us to examine our own mental models with matters pertaining to education. We looked at a variety of issues such as our beliefs about education, our understanding of core values, what is important for the children in the future — issues on curriculum, co-curricular activities, nature and purpose of assessment and staff professional development."*

*"Highlights the difficulty of agreeing what 'education' is about."*

*"It provided an authentic learning situation for us to put our learning from the course together. In envisioning what our future school would look like, we had to look at all aspects of a school: leadership, curriculum, organisational structure, culture, staff development and physical environment. We learnt many theories but somehow had to envisage how these theories would all work out in a school situation."*

The Future School project provides a challenging learning task to the LEP participants. It forces the participants to examine their own mental models of many aspects of the school that may have been taken for granted. It forces them to ask what "education" is all about. It forces them to think through how theories can work in a school. Many realised through the project that these were not trivial questions.

### **Team Learning**

*"Putting five or six people with different views to come to a common consensus was no easy feat. We had to listen to and evaluate competing ideas and learn to work through disagreements. But we often came up with stronger ideas through the process of debate."*

*"The networks and friendships deepened through this robust process of debate. Even when relations were strained, which was seldom, they provided strong learning points for self-reflection and a better way of engaging the team in later meetings. In a way this prepared us for leading our team in schools: how do we reconcile the differences and move on when they arise?"*

*"The way we collaborated as a team was an enriching team learning experience."*

The Future School project facilitates people learning from and challenging one another. The differences in opinions about taken-for-granted issues provide a rich source of learning and room for synergistic collaborations. The participants found the team learning experience engaging and fruitful.

### **Responsibility**

*"We set our own pace and agenda. We have control over how we want to do this project."*

*"As school leaders, we have to be role models of learning and be committed to it. Otherwise, how can we ask others to improve themselves?"*

*"Since (our) projects will be presented to others, especially the DDM participants (heads of department on course at NIE), we need to set certain standards."*

*"I believe in giving my best, if that is what is expected of me."*

By design, the Future School project allows the participants to be responsible for their own learning. They set their own pace and have control over how they approach this project. This raises the level of engagement because the project invokes intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic compliance.

### **Applicability**

*"The process (of working together) is as important a learning as the content of the research we are working on."*

*"We have gained a deep appreciation of the issues involved in the setting up of school systems and structures, insights valuable to school leaders."*

*"As a personal anecdote, I am excited to see how 'The Learning Community', which our group, did would materialise in (my current school). I hope our metaphor of a 'kampong' with the spirit of 'gotong royong' can really become true ... we are already planning a Learning Street to hold festivals and performances like busking. I read our proposal often to get ideas on how my school will look and feel like."*

As the LEP participants prepare themselves for school leadership, they treasure an opportunity to think through the different aspects of the school. The knowledge generated through the project is applicable in their future role as school leaders.

## **Energising**

*"The first day (of our project) started at the Raffles Hotel and ended at the Esplanade. We stopped by for a drink, snack or meal at every opportunity — making use of each of these opportunities to study the environment and discuss possible paradigms for our school. By the end of the day, we were exhausted (by our many) ideas but filled with food and enthusiasm."*

*"All of us agree that the past months working on this project have been tiring but rewarding."*

*"This is so much more liberating than just writing essays and doing assignments. It allows one to explore issues that one wishes. The motivation is thus much higher."*

The project allows the participants to take charge of their own progress. They found it energising because they could plan their own day and explore issues that they wanted. The level of engagement was thus much higher. Generally, participants felt that this mode of leadership training was definitely more challenging and rewarding for them.

While there are many features of the Future School project that can engage the participants in learning, there are of course also limitations. Because the participants will be taking up leadership positions in existing schools after the LEP, they will not get to implement all the ideas in their plans, which assume the development of a school from scratch. Nonetheless, the project provides participants good ideas for developing the schools they will be posted to in future.

## **Pointers to Engaging School Leaders in Learning**

The Future School project suggests some pointers to achieving engaged learning in leadership programmes:

- Move beyond the previous school experiences. The most liberating aspect of the Future School project is precisely the way it has been defined, which frees the participants from the shackles of the current school structure and education policies. Instead of always discussing previous experiences and the limitations of current reality, the participants discuss the exciting future possibilities.
- Generate multiple perspectives. The requirements of the Future School project encourage participants to consider the future school from many perspectives. Many came to a better understanding of why the system has evolved in the manner it had and the real challenges faced by the system in responding to emerging global economic and social realities.
- Challenge mental models. The participants have to apply double-loop learning (Argyris, 1976) logic to their own cherished or taken-for-granted concepts, theories and practices. They are forced to ask why schools have been practising what they have been practising and whether these practices will still be valid in 10 years' time. These issues range from the need for physical classrooms in a school to the need for government funding.
- Examine issues that really intrigue or excite. The Future School project is exciting because the participants get to design their school in its totality for the future. This is like a dream come true as most will "inherit" an existing school,

being posted to one by MOE HQ. But the learning acquired through the Future School project will still be applicable because they can use the insights generated to gear the schools they are posted to for the future and understand the complexities and challenges involved.

- Present findings to an audience. The final output of the future school project is a publishable book that can be shared with other educators and people in the industry. The participants also have to make a presentation to an audience of nearly 200 educators, mostly heads of department attending courses at NIE and a number of school principals and cluster superintendents. Their work is not buried as essays underneath the professor's table.
- Emphasise reflection. Special emphasis has been placed on reflection as the key to making the Future School project yield real learning. Such reflection results in an expanded appreciation of the contextual and social significance of the school in an emerging globalised world.

## Conclusion

There are many exciting opportunities ahead in the arena of education. But school leaders must be given the chance to engage themselves in exploring the possibilities. The engaged learning philosophy, as practised in the future school project, gives us a model for engaging our leaders in futuristic thinking and deep learning. The team of NIE staff working on the LEP has begun to examine how the Future School project could be refined to provide an even better learning platform. One way is to provide a more solid foundation in futuring. Such a model of learning could be used to generate more learning opportunities and projects for school leaders and teachers, whether at the NIE or in schools.

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