Language for learning leadership

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OCCASIONAL PAPER 167

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Contents

Introduction

Equipping children and young people for life in this dramatically changing world is very different from how it was for previous generations. We need a paradigm shift in the way many people still approach this complex endeavour. The impact of new technologies, climate change, increased life expectancy and more on the nature of work, health and wellbeing, is leading countries to update their curricula. They are supported by collective international efforts focused on ensuring that students will be ready to take control over and transform their future lives (eg, the OECD 2030 initiative). Also, in a matter of weeks, a global pandemic has exposed chasms in education systems, raising fundamental questions about many taken-for-granted educational assumptions. An opportunity presents itself to rethink the purpose of education and how we can arrive at our desired destination. In addressing these deeply complex and intertwined challenges, learning leadership is vital to reshape and reframe how we move forward.

Learning leadership models and keeps individual, group and collective learning at the heart of the endeavour to realise its vision, infusing this throughout daily practice (Kools and Stoll, 2016). In a world full of 'compelling disturbances' (Mitchell and Sackney, 2011), learning leadership provides direction by ensuring that individuals, teams, organisations and systems learn their way forward while keeping **all** students' learning and wellbeing front and centre. Learning leadership is not located in one place: it is exerted 'through distributed, connected activity and the relationships of a range of formal and non-formal leaders throughout

a learning system' (OECD, 2013a, p 4). It can be found in and among students, teachers and other staff; teams, schools, districts, municipalities and other middle tier organisations; among community, third sector and business partners, universities and research organisations; and regional, national and international agencies and governments. Both strategically and practically, learning leadership influences the design, bringing to life and sustainability of innovative, powerful learning environments (Istance and Stoll, 2013, p 14). Formally, it binds together separate parts of a learning community, organisation, network or system, ensuring that, in combination, they add up to much more than the sum of those parts. So the word 'learning' does not merely refer to an outcome; it is a way of being.

Learning leadership exerts influence in multiple ways. For some time, I have been thinking about the different words and terms I hear, read about and even use myself. In this paper I want to shine a light on the language – spoken or written – that leaders choose to express what is important. I am not a linguist, critical theorist or discourse analyst. My core interest is in how leaders at all levels of systems can create capacity for learning, and how the language they use plays an influential role. First, I reflect briefly on why the words leaders use really matters and contend that to embrace learning leadership necessitates changing several terms in common use. Next, I offer examples of words and expressions that I think better exemplify the intent of learning leadership than alternatives in the current lexicon, and give the rationale for my selections. Some of these words and expressions also indicate ways to support changing language. In concluding, I offer questions for personal and collective reflection.

> Changing how people talk actually changes how they think.

Language matters

Words are powerful. Created by one person, they 'are owned by a community rather than an individual. If a word isn't known to everyone around you, you might as well not use it because no one will know what you're talking about' (Pinker, 2007, p 15). Successful communities frequently share vocabularies. Having words for important concepts enables community members to talk about them, think together and agree on their meaning, interrogate them for deeper understanding and gain collective clarity around related action and impact.

Language shapes thought and affects how people respond. The way we think influences the way we speak and the other way around. Changing how people talk actually changes how they think. For example, if you teach people new colour words, this changes their ability to discriminate colours (Boroditsky, 2011). In addition, in an experiment evaluating humour in cartoons, Ellen Langer (1997) found that people approached the task differently, and enjoyed it more or less, depending on whether the activity was described as work or play.

Language is also critical to workplace motivation. Policy language that labels schools as failing – a number of terms are used – does not support them to improve (Myers and Goldstein, 1998). How we function at work is also influenced by what and how leaders and managers communicate. It can be motivating or demotivating; it matters for job satisfaction (Sullivan, 1988). At the most basic level, language reduces uncertainty, is involved in making meaning, and reaffirms employees' sense of their self-worth as human beings, which is why it is so fundamental to workplace motivation (Sullivan, 1988).

Successfully motivated employees get information and feedback they need from managers, who are genuinely interested in engaging frequently with them in informal communications, and who advocate the organisation's values and goals. Language conveys what is important.

So, the language that leaders use really matters. Both what they say and how they say it have consequences. While their actions are critical too, the foundation of this paper is the words leaders choose. Note the word 'choose'. It is always a choice to use one word rather than another, even if it has become habitual. The trouble with always sticking with the same terms is that language evolves over time, with experience and in context. As David Shariatmadari (2019, p 36) points out,

> There is no perfect dictionary in the sky with meanings that are consistent and clearly defined: real-world dictionaries are constantly trying to catch up with the 'common definition' of a word.

In thinking about learning leadership, what then are the words that come to mind?

A lexicon for learning leadership

In the lefthand column in Table 1 are words or terms that I believe belong in a lexicon for learning leadership. These examples come from the vocabulary I associate with flourishing and adaptive learning communities, learning organisations, learning networks, learning systems or learning ecosystems. Many of these words are interrelated. Alongside, the second column contains other terms in current use. Sometimes, the words in the two columns are intended to be different; in other cases, it is often assumed that they have identical meanings. After the table, I explain the choices, reasons for including them, and associated terms that fit in my lexicon.

Before further explanations, let me make several points.

- First, the vast majority of the terms in the learning leadership column are already 'out there', even if some are not heard widely. Colleagues have

Table 1. Some examples from a lexicon for learning leadership

Learning leadership language	Word/term usually used – Rather than …
Fundamental competencies	Soft skills, outcomes
Learning and teaching	Instruction
Learning environments	Classroom, school
Social and emotional learning	Cheating …
Collective – We	Individual – I
Professional learning	Professional development
Evidence-enriched	Evidence-based
Knowledge exchange, knowledge creation	Dissemination, knowledge mobilisation
Responsibility	Accountability
Realising change?	Implementing
Mindsets, being mindful	Being mindless
Improvisation, adaptive, Yes, and …	Routine, Yes, but …
Dialogue, learning conversation	Discussion, debate

> language has to belong to members of a community or system using it; it is they who bring it to life.

invested time, energy, persistence and passion to research, write about and engage others in their theoretical and experiential underpinnings and associated practices. Local, national and global efforts exist to explore and develop them further. I can never do their work justice; just briefly highlight it as I unite it with other words that personally resonate and belong in my lexicon, even if they do not appear in the table.[1]

- Second, the list of learning leadership terms is not exhaustive. These are not the only words that could or should be used. Rather, I believe that everyone needs to think carefully about the language they use, its meaning and the intent that words convey to colleagues, children, their parents and the wider public. The only 'rule' is that the terms have to exemplify learning leadership.

- Third, I am aware that the simplest phrases often resonate most with practitioners and policy makers. Certain words or terms may come across to some people as jargon. It is a fine balance to convey complex ideas clearly and simply. A key point is ownership – language has to belong to members of a community or system using it; it is they who bring it to life. This may mean developing your own version of the language that fits within your community and context. The rider is that you need to define your terms and be clear how they relate to other words used by colleagues, parents, policy makers, researchers and wider society.

- Finally, context affects language use. People who speak different languages pay attention to different details and describe them in diverse ways.

Countries do not always have a word for something in another language. When I participated in a European project around 20 years ago, Portugal had no word for 'accountability'. Similarly, other countries have many words for a particular English-language word, each with a meaning distinctively different from the English original. Research and other publications written in English can be highly influential in countries where English is another language, but it is critical to think carefully about translating the English word and about whether your translation fits with the idea of learning leadership.

Without further delay, what is the rationale for these particular choices?

Fundamental competencies

The first term relates to starting with the end in mind – what we hope young people will take with them into the world. An outcome is the result or consequence of action. For many years researchers have studied cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes: eg, reading, behaviour etc. More recently, the word 'learning' has appeared before outcomes. It usually still means the same subject-oriented outcomes. As we have moved to thinking more deeply about preparing students for their future, new terms have appeared. These include competencies and capabilities. Both fit well in my lexicon for learning leadership, even though I use the former here. Business partners, labour organisations and recruitment agencies, however, still frequently use the term 'soft skills'. Learning leaders need to influence them to change their language. Many attributes that make us human and involve connection with others are frequently described on work-hunting websites as 'soft'. Some people argue that the word

'soft' is important – we need to be 'softer' in our relationships with others, and we do; but 'soft skills' are often named as such because they are more difficult to measure and what gets measured gets valued. Leaders also exist whose actions shout that being 'soft' is weak and, indeed, feminine. Such competencies are critically important and need to be emphasised. They are not just skills – they are underpinned by fundamental values.

A read through various business websites also highlights that problem solving, creativity and adaptivity appear on lists of 'soft skills'. Such competencies are the lifeblood of learning organisations, networks and systems; they are also important for learning and wellbeing (Lucas, 2016). Of course, they go beyond what have traditionally been viewed as 'soft skills'. Furthermore, we should be thinking about education for life in its fullest sense, and the critical importance of wellbeing and agency to have an impact on not only our own lives but our community, our world and the planet. We are not just talking about preparation for work; we should be talking about fundamental – or even 'transformative' (OECD, 2019a) – competencies. Advocacy and educating wider stakeholders is a key issue here. Widening the sphere of learning leadership influence is vital, to ensure that all stakeholders understand the essential competences to flourish (eg, Seligman, 2011) or thrive (Hannon and Peterson, 2021, in press) and use appropriate language.

Learning and teaching

Suggesting this change is probably stepping into a minefield. In some countries a long and well-respected history exists around the word 'instruction'. Colleagues I admire write about this and instructional leadership.[2] The term was not commonly used by leaders in my country but is now increasingly part of the language. In raising this with some colleagues internationally, common responses are 'well, that's what we mean' or 'the terms are interchangeable'. Despite descriptions and good intentions, the first definition of instruction in dictionaries relates to something that someone tells you to do. A synonym check brings up words such as 'demand', 'dictate', 'imperative' and 'order'. According to Merriam-Webster, the first known use of the word was in the 15th century, as a direction calling for compliance. While the action, practice or profession of teaching or a teacher are also noted, the word 'instruct' places learning in a passive position. I 'instruct', you then 'learn'. Even synonyms related to teaching are oriented towards 'give lessons to', 'enlighten', 'inform' and 'edify' (lexico.com). Accepting that dictionary compilers may not be current in educational terminology, the language we use conveys messages to children, parents and the outside world. It is critical to understand as much as we can about learning, what makes it successful, under what conditions etc, and draw on this to inform teaching. As the act, practice or profession of a teacher, 'teaching' – a word first used in the 12th century – is open to broader interpretation. Some countries prefer 'pedagogy', which indicates a wider reference frame, including the act of teaching as well as related theories, values, evidence and justifications (Alexander, 2010). Coming from the Greek 'pais' or 'paidos' – a child – and 'agogos' – leader, it conveys a sense different from 'instruction'. Elsewhere, 'didactics' is chosen. This term, as defined by dictionaries, is more closely aligned to instruction, often with less positive undertones.

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I prefer to start with 'learning' – ie, learning and teaching, rather than teaching and learning. Ordering it this way emphasises learning as an experiential and ongoing process – not just an outcome of teaching, as in lifelong learning, learning to learn etc – a deep understanding of learning to inform great teaching.

Learning environments

Ask someone to close their eyes and picture a child learning. Many people – especially those who are not educators – will locate them in a classroom. Does all learning occur in classrooms? During the pandemic, it has become blatantly clear that this is not the case. Home has become a location for learning, not just for 'homework'. Virtual learning environments proliferate and there is now much greater consideration about blended learning – a mix of face-to-face and online learning. Learning hubs are surfacing – both virtual and physical communities or networks of interest. Several countries are also extending already popular opportunities that outdoor learning can offer their children. Many other learning environments exist (OECD, 2013b). Proponents of place-based education remind us how 'cultural experience is "placed" in the "geography" of our everyday lives, and in the "ecology" of the diverse relationships that take place within and between places' (Gruenewald 2008, p 137). Fundamental to indigenous people, this takes on wider significance as whole communities, towns and cities consider what it means to think together, connect place-based learning approaches and create local learning systems. 'Learning environments' is an inclusive and expansive term, which is why it finds its way into my lexicon. Schools are now one of many learning environments, although a special one, and can be the heart of a community. Learning leadership in and of schools is critical in locating and connecting with other learning environments, thereby extending learning opportunities and developing diverse learning communities.

Social and emotional learning

The word 'social' in the browser brought up 'about 9,000,000,000 results' in 47 seconds. We are social beings; we need human connection. At my school, when a teacher saw me collaborating with another pupil I was informed that this was cheating – admittedly this was not recently. Benefits of cooperative learning for students are now well known. Most people with access to devices use social media to stay in touch, accumulating 'friends' through a multitude of social networks and sharing mutual interests. Yet a global pandemic has shown how even such virtual connection cannot make up for the isolation and loneliness that arises through the loss of close physical proximity. Some countries and jurisdictions chose the word 'physical' to describe necessary distancing. Most, though, opted for social distancing. Do we want social distance or physical distance? As schools are reopening, it is apparent that while many children are overjoyed to be back with friends, others are experiencing social anxiety; they are fearful of returning to school. Teachers in many countries are experiencing similar anxiety. Social network theory provides valuable insights into how important relationships between teachers are for educational change (Daly, 2010). Right now emotion is riding high, and learning is deeply emotional (Boakerts, 2010). The implications should concern us all. With online learning and collaboration increasing, we need to know that they can support the relational closeness of meaningful face-to-face

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collaborations – especially if students and teachers or colleagues did not know each other well before using digital forms of connection. We must also ensure that they produce great learning. With technological advances, online learning communities present opportunities for virtual collaborative learning, though participants do not always engage deeply (eg Berviken-Rensfeldt et al, 2018). Creative approaches to deep and meaningful social learning are crucial, especially during and in the aftermath of a pandemic. When students return to schools they are physically distanced from peers, at least initially. This makes social learning less practical. Further thinking and action will hopefully help create powerful and blended social learning experiences – both in relative physical proximity and during online learning.

Collective

I have looked at social learning and the associated emotional connection, but why is collaboration important? What can it achieve that individuals cannot attain alone? Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach (2017, p 5), cognitive scientists, explain as follows.

> *Our intelligence resides not in individual brains but in the collective mind. To function, individuals rely not only on knowledge stored within our skulls but also knowledge stored elsewhere: in our bodies, in the environment, and especially other people. When you put it all together, human thought is incredibly impressive. But it is a product of a community, not of any individual alone.*

The purpose of educational collaboration is to enhance the learning and wellbeing of all students. Faced with a challenging educational agenda, it is clear that no-

one can do this alone. Collective agency is fundamental. This is a group's power to shape events and produce desired results. A group's shared beliefs in their collective efficacy are a key influence. As Albert Bandura (2000) explains, collective efficacy influences the kinds of future the members of a group will seek to realise through their collective action, how they use resources, and the effort that they put into this. Collective teacher efficacy – the collective self-perception that a group of teachers can make a difference to students' learning – has benefits for their practice, commitment, job satisfaction, orientation to professional learning, risk taking and more (Donohoo, 2018). People's natural desire to collaborate needs harnessing into powerful professional collaboration and learning, with and from others, to achieve personal and collective goals in changing times. Strategies for collaborative professionalism (eg, Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) aim to develop collective efficacy. Diverse minds enhance critical thinking, problem solving, designing, crafting, carrying out and evaluating projects and much more. Peers' feedback supports reflection and further development of teachers' practice. When everything comes together, it produces harmony – collective intelligence of learning communities, organisations, networks and systems (Stoll, 2020). In music, harmony results from sounding several notes simultaneously. The word suggests blend, attunement, consonance and richness and unity. In choral singing, learning, rehearsing, unpacking harmonies and improving them requires attending to detail, patience, thinking about how individual voices and group sound relate to each other, commitment to the whole and collective responsibility for the outcome. It is about 'we' not 'I'.

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Professional learning

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a well-known term. The word 'development' is not problematic per se, but historically had strong associations with going out on short courses (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), a reputation hard to shake off. In a lexicon of learning leadership, 'professional learning' is more active. The findings from the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2019b) highlight that more than three quarters of teachers associate active learning with effective CPD. Other research also suggests that professional learning better reflects the kinds of ongoing, challenging, inquiry-focused, collaborative, workplace-oriented and theory-enhanced experiences that make a positive difference for teachers and students (Timperley et al, 2008). Similarly, in 2010 the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) in the US changed its name to Learning Forward. As Stephanie Hirsh, its Executive Director, then commented, 'staff development is an outdated term' (Learning Forward, 2010). Some organisations join the terms (ie, Continuing Professional Learning and Development); a possible compromise. The same argument is applicable to leadership learning.

Evidence-enriched

Frequently, we hear or read that practice must be evidence-based. This generally implies based on research or test data. Evidence use is important. I have come across schools that I would call evidence-deprived; they are the poorer for it. People rely almost completely on their own experience and judgement; what they already do and what they hear from colleagues. My definition of evidence includes three types: external research findings; data such as results of student assessments, surveys etc; and findings of practitioners'/teachers' and leaders' own inquiry efforts. The expression 'evidence-based practice' suggests that teachers and leaders must follow precisely what evidence tells them, whether it is data or research findings. A term that indicates greater agency is 'evidence-informed practice'. Here, teachers and leaders are in charge. They are in the driving seat, not the evidence. They have a purpose, a problem of student learning or wellbeing to solve, and the evidence is there to help them. They bring their experience, professional judgement and knowledge of their context to the problem, using the evidence as a source to probe deeper, investigate and come to thoughtful and practical solutions. My preferred expression is 'evidence-enriched practice'. Here, using evidence is part of a school or district's way of being. People are evidence-hungry and evidence infuses other activity as colleagues bring evidence to life in creative, thoughtful and sustainable ways as they learn their way forward.

Knowledge exchange and creation

In moving toward evidence-enriched practice, researchers are keen for their research findings to inform this and policy. A plethora of terms are used to describe this activity. Here are a few. One in vogue is 'disseminate'. I disseminate my research findings to you, the 'user' (this word has interesting connotations too); but how is the user engaged? The word 'diffusion' evokes scientific images of dispersion, spreading and intermingling, though engagement of leaders and teachers is equally unclear. Another term is 'knowledge mobilisation'.

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Mobilisation is usually associated with active service – mobilising troops. While the service of research to support practice and suggestion of movement are positive features, 'knowledge exchange' better captures the connection more likely to foster engagement. This highlights a relationship between researchers and decision makers. Most knowledge exchange definitions emphasise collaboration and dialogue between the different communities. For some the end goal seems merely to be helping research to influence policy and practice. Others get closer to the essence of a committed two-way relationship in accentuating collaborative problem solving that results in mutual learning. Such learning is more likely to occur through

> A true knowledge exchange process [which] would involve opportunities for dynamic information sharing and exchange amongst all stakeholders, with those traditionally considered the users of information as active participants rather than just passive recipients of knowledge.

(Canadian Mental Health Association, 2008)

Researchers can enable this knowledge exchange through facilitating knowledge animation (Stoll, 2010). By co-designing materials and processes that make research knowledge accessible and help teachers and leaders make learning connections, practitioners bring their own experience and contextualise the research to fit their own situations. It is the practitioners who ultimately animate research findings and, through this, create their own new knowledge and practice. In exchanging/sharing and analysing their own practice together, they are also creating knowledge, which is a powerful form of organisational learning (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Responsibility

A close relationship exists between accountability and responsibility, but the words are distinctly different. Responsibility denotes a sense of control, of being in charge. When someone has responsibility – or when they take it – they are agents of change. In contrast, the word 'accountability' means that even if someone has responsibility, they have to answer for this – they must account for their actions. So the word 'responsibility' often features in accountability. Three types of accountability systems exist within education (Anderson, 2005), and educators often navigate these simultaneously. The first is compliance-oriented. Here, they must adhere to the rules of bureaucracy. In the second, professional accountability, they must observe professional norms and are held accountable by colleagues, as in peer review. The third is performance-based accountability. In this, they are accountable to the general public for student outcomes. Relationships and consequences differ significantly across these types. Efforts to qualify the term, or associated language, focus on increasing the emphasis on trust and promoting more meaningful learning. The term 'intelligent accountability' (eg, O'Neill, 2002; Tolo et al, 2020) is one example, which would include forms of professional accountability. Several school districts in British Columbia, Canada choose the phrase 'communicating student learning' over 'reporting student progress and achievement', to highlight broader and more detailed demonstrations of student learning and wellbeing.

Accountability is unquestionably important, but it has to be motivated by a deep sense of collective responsibility

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to students, their families, society and to colleagues – not by fear of punitive external accountability. Feeling fearless – psychologically safe – can exist hand-in-hand with high quality (Edmondson, 2019). We must be responsible for doing the best that we can for all students, but this cannot just be individual responsibility – it has to be collective. This requires a consistent, joint focus on ensuring the learning and wellbeing of students and each other. Peer pressure, rather than external pressure, supports motivation, eases isolation and enhances commitment. It is one example of distributed learning leadership in action.

Realising change?

Changing language is one key aspect of bringing about change more generally. What kind of words does learning leadership need in the lexicon when thinking about change?

'Implementation' has a distinguished history and research base in educational change, reform and policy. It has played an influential role in supporting improvement. In thinking about the aspirations of learning leadership at all levels of systems, the word 'realising' is more helpful in moving us forward. An evaluator of curriculum implementation in New Zealand chose this word because success of curriculum reform efforts involves considerably more than implementation through adhering to use of particular strategies – it is about the importance of 'more generic practices deemed to be indicators of curriculum intentions being realised' (Sinnema, 2011, p 13). The term is now associated with new curricula in some other countries and jurisdictions. 'Realising' is an active term, associated with aspiration, a sense of agency and ownership of those involved in making something happen and bringing it to fruition. Implementation can convey

a picture of implementors as passive recipients of someone else's reform or idea. I recognise that some of those using the term intend it to be active and inclusive. For example, its use in relation to complex education systems is not about executing the policy; rather it is more concerned with building and fine-tuning it collaboratively. Implementation proponents also sometimes draw on improvement science and its associated ideas, such as networked communities and disciplined inquiry to learn by doing.

Even good intentions can be misinterpreted. In evaluating the implementation of the pilot middle years strategy in my country, while the originators meant that the strategy should be adapted to fit diverse contexts, many perceived it as prescriptive; others experienced it as such through the received chain of messages (Stoll and Stobart, 2005). Realising does not ignore implementation science, but draws selectively from it. For example, working together to articulate, consider and test out your theory of change is important to realising. It is another term that belongs in my learning leadership lexicon. Originating in evaluation theory, it is used in social agencies, community development, healthcare and, increasingly, education. Put simply, it is a theory of how and why an initiative works (Weiss, 1995). Working through a theory of change process pushes you to interrogate the assumptions, enablers, preconditions etc that frame your work, and to explain why you think particular activities will lead to desired goals. Having theories of change are also part of being evidence-enriched. Realising generates ownership and investment in the journey of change. This occurs through active, non-hierarchical involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in co-designing and co-constructing the way forward,

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for example co-creating new curricula and associated learning experiences, teaching and assessment. The prefix 'co-' significantly features within a learning leadership vocabulary, to emphasise coequal partnership – having the same importance – as well as thinking together, joint action and mutual learning.

Mindsets and being mindful

Educators in many countries refer to growth mindsets (Dweck, 2007) for students. Here, I want to focus on adults. Teachers, leaders and other educational stakeholders need growth mindsets and others. A great challenge for learning leadership is changing mindsets, long-held assumptions about ourselves, our capabilities and confidence – self-efficacy, curiosity, openness to being adaptive and trying new ideas, willingness to take risks, fail and try again and much more – in essence, to be a lifelong learner. Emphasising and focusing on staff mindsets are essentials to learning leadership. In addition, being mindful about and in learning, rather than mindless (Langer, 1997) also matters. This means focusing much more on what is going on around us, to other ways of thinking and acting, engaging in inquiry, listening to what it tells us, probing further to understand better before rushing to action, exploring promising practices, testing these out and reflecting honestly and openly about them with others. Cycles of inquiry (eg, Halbert and Kaser, 2013) do this. In short, they slow down the learning process to promote deeper and more powerful learning. In observing the pandemic, where everything seems to have slowed down and people have more time to reflect, it makes sense to think about slow learning. This also needs to involve thinking about meta learning (Watkins et al, 1998) – learning about our own learning – both individually and collectively.

Improvisation – 'Yes, and …'

In changing and uncertain environments, leaders face adaptive challenges, difficult problems to define for which solutions are not known (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002). In such situations, routine and technical approaches cannot be the only modus operandi. Learning your way into the future frequently necessitates new actions rather than established or habitual ones. This calls for a willingness to try something different and the ability to improvise. When someone suggests an idea or trying something new, the all-too-common response is 'Yes, but …' This is really another way of saying 'No'. A popular game in improvisational comedy, also recommended as valuable for life and work, is 'Yes, and …' (eg, Poynton, 2013). Each person in the group has to say 'Yes, and …' to whatever came before, then add something to it. Key aims are to accept and supplement new ideas, and to stop the blocking that closes down thinking and creativity. Improvisation in a jazz group is similar. Each player incorporates not only their own part in the improvisation, but also the improvisation of others and how their contributions interact with those of the other players (Newton, 2004). In reality, the musicians know the song or its form well before they substitute melodies that they compose on the spot for the original. They also keep clearly in mind that their melodies need to sound good against the more or less original harmonies played by fellow band members (Berliner, 1994; Faulkner and Becker, 2009). Jazz improvisation is not whimsical; the band members have deep knowledge of their subject, have spent many hours in practice and, I might add, have clear values about what is important. This enables them to extemporise in a new situation, but it has to work together with what the rest

of the band is playing. The term adaptive expertise (Hatano and Inagaki, 1986) shares some common features – being able to use knowledge to understand and work effectively in order to problem solve in new situations. Improvisation, adaptive and 'yes, and' all have places in my lexicon.

Dialogue and learning conversations

Finally, let's have a word about talk. Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey (2001, p 8) describe workplaces as language communities. Discussion and debate are very common in education's language communities. Debate focuses on getting your own point across and winning an argument. Discussion can avoid issues lying below the surface and blocking true and honest communication. People fiercely defend deeply held assumptions when challenged. It is easy to misunderstand others – both what they say and its intent. This leads to poor interpersonal communication, which ultimately affects relationships (Osborn and Canfor-Dumas, 2018). Getting the nature of talk right is essential. It needs to involve more openness and listening – 'the neglected stepchild of communication research' (Murphy, 2020, p 37) – in order to seek deeper understanding. Dialogue goes beyond any individual's understanding, as team members 'suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together" ... allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually' (Senge, 1990, p 10).

Dialogue helps build sustainable community relationships, in which deeper and challenging learning conversations can occur. During learning conversations, people make meaning together, jointly coming up with new insights and knowledge. These conversations challenge thinking and lead to intentional change to enhance practice and student learning (Stoll, 2012). Learning conversations must be purposeful, intentionally exploring ways to engage learners, extend learning and make a difference. When participants' experience is blended with external expertise, it can deepen conversation, stimulate reflection and challenge the status quo. If we apply this to new vocabularies, in exploring new terms, people bring their diverse perspectives, interrogate the words and each other in respectful ways, and are open to being honest and pushing themselves to reflect deeply in ways that challenge their thinking and move them to a new place. Both dialogue and learning conversations belong in my lexicon. They are also core learning leadership processes for changing both how staff talk and what they say, given that

> *Though every person, in any setting, has some opportunity to influence the nature of the language, leaders have exponentially greater access and opportunity to shape, alter, or ratify the existing language rules.*

(Kegan and Laskow Lahey, 2001, p 8)

Conclusion

Gestating this piece of writing took many months. The global pandemic adds urgency to the topics at its heart – the critical importance of learning leadership and an associated change in the language we use. We cannot go back to where we were. For those in countries and jurisdictions emerging relatively quickly out of 'lockdown', or those in parts of

> Learning conversations must be purposeful, intentionally exploring ways to engage learners, extend learning and make a difference.

their countries fortunate enough to avoid the major effects of the virus, this is still an opportunity for change. Hopefully every one of you who reads this will view yourself as a learning leader or, at least, you are open to being persuaded that you need to be. Some readers may think that I am 'Pollyannaish'[3] in proposing language change; that it is overly optimistic. For me this misses the point. The learning orientation inherent in learning leadership is by nature positive and open, rather than sceptical or even cynical. It is not just the 'icing on the cake' or a 'pleasant little extra' to choose these kinds of words; it is fundamental to a deep and serious approach to learning the most positive ways to create the kind of environment that can help change mindsets, bring people together in challenging times through shared understandings and move them forward. These words are active rather than passive, adaptive not prescriptive, empowering instead of constraining, collectively rather than individually oriented, and multidirectional not unidirectional. Changing language is by no means easy. It takes determined effort to use certain words and expressions rather than others; to build them into a leadership narrative or story. It may well necessitate changing ingrained habits, challenging others in how they use language and, of course, challenging yourself. Language has to have a meaning for the people using it and meaning needs to be shared throughout an organisation or system to generate power and sustainability. It has to make sense, to be owned, to feel that it belongs. It is about new learning for everyone, which of course can be really hard, but it starts with you.

Questions for reflection and learning conversations

I invite you now to take the time to ask yourself, and talk about with others, the following.

- What resonated with you?
- What challenged your thinking?
- What kind of language would a visitor hear in your school/organisation/ system? What inquiries might you carry out to explore this further?
- What other words or phrases come to mind when you think about learning leadership?
- What changes might you make to your language, and how will you go about this?

Endnotes

1. This also means that I do not cite every reference I know, and I am conscious that there are probably others that I do not know. I have also sometimes chosen to cite an older reference, even if a better-known example has been written recently. A number of these terms are not new and some have seen a resurgence.

2. I have chosen not to include references here, although I could cite many.

3. Pollyanna, as described in the Oxford English Dictionary, is an excessively cheerful or optimistic person. This is based on the name of the optimistic heroine created by Eleanor Hodgman Porter (1868–1920) in a 1913 children's story.

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About the Author

Professor Louise Stoll is Professor of Professional Learning at University College London (UCL) Institute of Education, and an international consultant. Her research and development activity focuses on how schools, and local and national systems create capacity for learning in a changing world, with particular emphasis on professional learning communities and learning networks, creative leadership and leadership development. She is also passionate about finding ways to help make better connections between research and practice, and greatly enjoys collaborating with school and system leaders in different countries. Recent projects include a national knowledge exchange project in England, working with middle (teacher) leaders, a study of successful teaching schools for England's Teaching Schools Council, synthesising the findings of teaching school alliances' R&D national theme projects for the National College for Teaching and Leadership and evaluating progress towards an evidence-informed teaching system for England's Department for Education.

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About the Paper

The author's core interest is in how leaders at all levels of systems can create capacity for learning, and how the language that they use plays an influential role. First, she reflects on why the words that leaders use really matter and contends that to embrace learning leadership necessitates changing a number of terms that are in common use. Next, she offers examples of words and expressions that she believes better exemplify the intent of learning leadership than alternatives in the current lexicon, and provides the rationale for her selections. In concluding, she offers questions for personal and collective reflection.

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