Creative harmony: Songlines for changing learning landscapes

Professor Louise Stoll, Professor of Professional Learning, UCL Institute of Education, London

Global shifts in societies, economies, working patterns, the environment and technology have major implications for children's and young people's learning and for school leaders. Governments around the world are responding to the need to develop 21st Century skills, or "survival skills" as Harvard University's Tony Wagner (2007) describes them. And increasing evidence from the learning sciences suggests that being smart in today's world includes developing learning dispositions (see, for example, Lucas & Claxton, 2010). Now, more than ever, being able to learn, unlearn and relearn is critical; that means continuous and sustainable learning (Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003). As schools travel in new directions, seeking new learning landscapes, leaders have to create capacity for learning: new songlines enabling their schools to navigate paths to their destinations.

Aboriginal songlines represented the singing of the world into being and, by appropriate sequencing, provided a navigational direction of travel across vast distances and landscapes. They offer important insights for schools in changing times. In songlines, song provided the compass, and thousands of emerging songlines connected many aboriginal communities. As an enthusiastic member of a vocal harmony group, this is music to my ears. I hope I'll be forgiven for taking a powerful tradition and interpreting it my way as I connect it with my own field of interest – how leaders create capacity for learning. Using analogies from the world of jazz harmony and song writing, I argue in this article that designing and embracing new learning landscapes depend on leaders' ability to promote creative harmony, before exploring how voices can be blended to produce wonderful sounds.

Creative harmony

Harmony, the collective intelligence and responsibility of professional learning communities

From a musical perspective, harmony suggests blend, attunement, consonance and richness. It results as several notes are sounded simultaneously: you might call it a collective concept. Taking a non-musical interpretation, and thinking of harmony as balance, other related words are integration, congruity, togetherness and agreement. If the word represents social agreement, connected words are like-mindedness, affinity, cooperation, consensus, meeting of minds, peace and rapport. Searches using different meanings of the word "harmony" all throw up the word "unity".

New learning landscapes necessitate harmony: learning alone is no longer smart. We may have had it ingrained in us that successful people tackle challenges alone; and in my country, pupils are evaluated individually and inspection judgements of schools are fundamentally based on individual performance. But it's a myth that intelligence is only an individual concept. Plentiful evidence confirms that thinking interdependently, being able to work and learn well with other people, and learning from and with others, is what Costa and Kallick (2000) call a habit of an intelligent mind. And when schools develop professional learning communities, it can make a real difference if they are persistently focussed on improving learning and teaching.

Social networking is the norm. An increasing number of readers of this article have grown up viewing digital technology, to use Don Tapscott's (2009) words, as "no more intimidating than a VCR or toaster". The Net Generation collaborate naturally, staying in touch on Blackberrys, iPhones or mobile phones wherever they are. They also want to work hand-in-hand with colleagues to create better goods and services, design products, influence decisions and improve work processes. But, even though social-networking sites help people connect, as Charles Leadbeater (2008) reminds us, they don't produce collective intelligence. So, people's natural desire to collaborate needs harnessing into learning power – collaborating with others, and learning with and from them, to achieve personal and collective goals in changing times. At their best professional learning communities capture the spirit of harmony: they are inclusive, supportive, united in their learning vision (Stoll, 2011). They're also challenging environments, places and spaces of constant learning and inquiry of practice for the purpose of improvement. Learning, rehearsing, unpacking the harmonies and improving them at a rehearsal requires attention to detail, thinking about the relationship between the individual voice and the group sound, commitment to the whole, collective responsibility for the outcome – and, often, a good dose of patience and humour!

Learning with and from others means connecting beyond one's immediate community. Some of my singing group's most challenging and exciting experiences have been when we joined with other groups and choirs, learning their, our own or new arrangements together. And we must adapt to other ways of rehearsing and different group norms. To create new learning landscapes, the notes in the chord need extending, introducing unfamiliar ones; that is, connecting with different people. That's what the composer Eric Whitacre did in September 2010 when he invited his fans to create the world's largest online choir. Over 2000 voices from around the world participated in his Virtual Choir 2.0, singing Whitacre's "Sleep" (2011) on synchronised YouTube videos and creating extraordinary harmony. A singer who had uploaded a testimonial on to a Facebook page was thrilled that, "Aside from the beautiful music, it's great just to know I'm part of a worldwide community I never met before, but who are connected anyway".

New harmonies can be found in education by connecting with others beyond our field – from other public services, the private sector, creative industries, etc. For a while it may feel discordant, but the diversity can only enrich the community's knowledge.

Creative leaders and teachers

A learning and inquiring community is necessary but insufficient in changing times. To bring about the changes embodied in 21st Century skills and to create the kinds of learning environments that will enable learners to be more self-directed require major shifts in many teachers' current practices. Teachers will need to be creative; to experiment with their practice and try out new approaches to teaching and learning and designing curriculum. Special conditions are needed in schools to facilitate this. Schools have to be places where teachers can develop the intellectual confidence to explore new ideas, to ask questions and to make mistakes from which they can learn. As Max DePree (1993, p. 9) argues, "jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals". The conditions most conducive to nurturing teachers' creativity can be found in effective professional learning communities where leaders of learning find ways both to explore their own creativity as well as to encourage and promote colleagues' creativity.

My work with English schools has demonstrated that, with creative leadership, a professional learning community can become a springboard for creative practice and provide an environment in which teachers' and students' creativity can thrive (Stoll, 2008; Stoll & Timperley, 2009). Colleagues and I think of schools like this as creative learning communities.

What is creative leadership?

Creative leadership is an imaginative and thought-through response to opportunities and to challenging issues that inhibit learning at all levels. It is about seeing, thinking and doing things differently in order to improve the life chances for all students. Creative leaders also provide the conditions, environment and opportunities for others to be creative. The English schools we have worked with have applied these ideas in a range of projects, a number of which specifically focus on curriculum and learning innovation: rethinking what they offer to students; focussing on the skills they need to be successful in the world into which they will graduate from education; and creating new learning policies and strategies that will enable the kinds of experiences needed to achieve these goals.

What conditions help promote creative practice?

Elsewhere I describe changes that school leaders can make to their established practice to become more creative leaders themselves (Stoll, 2008; Stoll & Timperley, 2009). Here my focus is on conditions required in schools for teachers to become more creative in their practice. Anyone in a leadership role in school can contribute to creating these conditions, not just principals. We have identified nine conditions that leaders need to work towards in order to promote and nurture creativity in their colleagues:

- Model creativity and risk-taking
  A very powerful way leaders support others' learning and development is through modelling; this is true of creativity, too. Teachers are unlikely to take risks in experimenting with new ideas if they constantly see their leaders being cautious. They need to know that it's acceptable to act in this way, that it's the norm.
- Stimulate a sense of urgency
  Learning occurs as a result of dissonance, when new ideas or situations don't fit with current beliefs or ways of working. When this dissonance becomes uncomfortable, it creates a sense of urgency that something needs to be done, that "the way we do things" needs to be changed. If this is supported by positive conditions, productive change becomes more likely.
- Expose colleagues to new thinking and experiences
  Creativity is stimulated in an environment full of new ideas and experiences. The more exposed teachers are to ideas and others who think differently, and the greater the opportunities they have to think through new ways of approaching work, the more adventurous they tend to become. Given many teachers' natural comfort with routine, this sometimes requires taking them out of their comfort zones, forcing them to push the boundaries of their thinking about what is possible.
- Self-consciously let go
  Schools can feel like places of control where teachers feel highly scrutinised and accountable. Fear of letting colleagues, pupils and parents down is an issue, too. Teachers need opportunities to experiment and step out of the boundaries, or they may be inclined to stick rigidly to what they know. Many people seem to feel a need for a licence to think creatively. This also relates to trust and feeling valued; it's important to be able to speak your mind and to know your opinion is valued, even when it's not shared.
- Provide time and space
  Creative thinking is facilitated by time and mental space for ideas to evolve and develop. Interestingly, we found that some pressure of time seemed important for creating the sense of urgency that concentrates energy and effort. This may mean setting deadlines. But this needs to be balanced with allowing enough time and space for creative possibilities to emerge.
- Promote individual and collaborative creative thinking and design
  Opportunities need to be created both for individual thought and for collaboration. Stimulation of other colleagues was necessary for a considerable number of teachers: many people need a combination of time alone and time with colleagues to "spark" and share ideas.
- Set high expectations about the degree of creativity
  Promoting and valuing innovation are critical to unlocking creative practice. We found that, often, starting to think creatively bred a desire for greater creativity. The mindshift often came from the top of the school, where a passionate interest in how learning and teaching could be different helped create a culture that expected people to think differently about learning and teaching.
- Use failure as a learning opportunity
  Teachers worry considerably about what they perceive as risks associated with experimenting with their practice. These turn out to be low risks in the long term; for example, the pupils who are not learning what they are supposed to in one lesson. By valuing things that go wrong, there is an opportunity to neutralise at least the fear of censure that teachers imagine might follow failure, and to challenge their beliefs that failure on this scale constitutes a serious risk to student learning.
- Keep referring back to core values
  While the possibilities of creative thinking, and the inspiration it seems to provide many people, can be exciting, staying close to core values provides the bedrock for development. Being clear and explicit about values, and holding them in a steady state, offers a context and stable point of reference for people.

But what is the language of connection in creative harmony spaces? How can voices be blended to create a harmonious and penetrating sound?

Songs as language – stimulating learning conversations

In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin (1986) argued that language started as song. And my brother David, who is a composer, explained to me how "the essence of a line of a song is a marriage between two parts: words and tune. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts". The nature of talk is critical in learning communities. In my 2010 ACEL National Conference keynote address, I described learning conversations as the way that educators make meaning together and jointly come up with new insights and knowledge that lead to intentional change to enhance their practice and student learning. In exploring new ideas and evidence, people offer diverse perspectives, challenge 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. As we paint new learning landscapes, learning conversations are the songs helping us navigate our way to new understandings and places.

Many people describe jazz improvisation as a conversation. For Karl Weick and Frances Westley (1996, p. 453), "good jazz, like good conversation, is collective improvisation. Both mix together listening to others with listening to self, mutual elaboration, online invention, all with an underlying structure". Mutual elaboration ensures the building on what has gone before and blending into the whole. As Paul Newton (2004, p. 98) explains: "Each player in the group setting is required to incorporate not only their own part in the improvisation, but also the improvisation of others and the interaction of their contributions with those of other players". And with the best group harmony, the same thing occurs. Dee Griffiths, one of my group's musical arrangers and sometime musical director, talks about how more advanced group performers adjust their contribution to maximise the contributions of those around them, "so there's a group enhancement of the sound".

Powerful learning conversations that help paint a new learning landscape have the following features:

- Purpose and process
  Just as songlines provide direction, learning conversations must be purposeful, intentionally exploring creative and innovative ways that are likely to engage learners and extend learning. The conversation has to start with the end in mind, the purpose being to make a difference for students. When participants' experience is blended with external expertise (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008), it can deepen conversation, stimulate reflection, challenge the status quo and, as a Norwegian principal said, "lift teachers' thinking". Frameworks and guidelines can also help participants structure their dialogue and interrogate ideas, and facilitation – whether from inside or outside the group – can elicit and support intellectual exchange as well as maintain open and honest dialogue and, sometimes, inject new energy. Skilful facilitation often leads to a productive balance of comfort and challenge.
- Participant engagement
  Participants need to bring an inquiry habit of mind (Earl & Katz, 2006), engaging in the conversation with a spirit of curiosity – a "need to know" even when what they find out may not fit with existing beliefs. In the best conversations, people proactively seek out new evidence and ideas, and are open to being challenged. Trusting and mutually respectful relationships are the bedrock of successful professional learning communities. Listening attentively to others and developing positive relationships are essential for substantive and critical exchange. And challenge is necessary. Educators find it hard to challenge each other's ideas and practices, preferring to stay in the "land of nice" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2010), so it can be a risk taking people out of their comfort zones. But people's creativity is stimulated by responsible risk taking, even when they find this hard to do.
- Conversation that leads to change
  Reflection is central to making meaning. As they talk, learners draw on prior knowledge and experience to make meaning of new information or problems – sharing, challenging, negotiating and justifying ideas. As people engage in deep conversations, they discover that ideas they believe to be true don't hold up when under scrutiny. This recognition can be used as an opportunity to rethink what they know and do (Earl & Timperley, 2008). Talk between colleagues helps transform tacit knowledge (what we know but don't articulate) into explicit knowledge and the process creates new shared knowledge and innovative solutions to problems. But learning conversations ultimately have to lead somewhere, or else it's just hot air rather than sweet music. A deep learning conversation is energising in its possibilities. Further conversations may be needed, or individuals may agree to seek out further evidence or ideas. But there is underlying commitment that the new learning will be applied to help enhance students' learning.

What else is needed to support learning conversations?
Leaders of creative professional learning communities need to provide the right conditions to stimulate and support learning conversations. Trust enables the hard effort of true colleagiality to take place; that is, trust between teachers and between teachers and senior leaders, or else risks are not taken. Individuals are more likely to be inquiry-minded if they are located in a wider culture of inquiry (Stoll, Halbert, & Kaser, 2011). Learning conversations are also enriched by diverse exchanges. A community can get caught up in "group-think", the antithesis of a learning community. Diverse viewpoints are vital to collective intelligence. Learning communities have to keep challenging themselves and invite outsiders to act as critical friends and help push their thinking further. As Charles Leadbeater (2008) argues in *WE-THINK*, in most fields "creativity emerges when people with different vantage points, skills and know-how combine their ideas to produce something new" (p. 19). Differences can drive learning. And, like for creativity, time is essential. Virtual learning conversations can offer more flexibility around time – "hotseats" offered by some websites and online conferences are two examples using asynchronous communication – the stimulus is there, and you communicate when it suits you. If members of the learning community live far apart they can connect virtually. Finally, dialogic skills need developing. Doing this isn't foremost among the professional learning activities in most schools. Skills such as listening, questioning, challenging, probing, connecting and building, support critical friendships, enabling members of a learning community to explore assumptions and develop shared meaning. Some of these skills can be honed through developing coaching relationships.

Conclusion

Right now, school leaders and teachers need new songlines to help them map out a range of learning landscapes that will engage and meet the needs of children and young people as we move forward. The combined effort of working in creative harmony and ensuring careful blending of voices seems to be a promising way to give them a headstart. How does that sound?

This article originally appeared in the *AEL* Journal, Volume 33, No. 1 (2011).

Louise Stoll PhD is Professor of Professional Learning at the UCL Institute of Education in London and an international consultant. Her R&D activity focusses on how schools, local and national systems create capacity for learning, with an emphasis on schools as learning organisations, professional learning communities and learning networks, creative leadership, leadership development and connecting research and practice. Louise is an OECD expert and former President of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement. Recent publications include *Catalyst: An Evidence-Informed Collaborative, Professional Learning Resource for Teacher Leaders and Other Leaders Working Within and Across Schools* (2018, UCL IOE Press).

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Dee Griffiths and David Stoll for stimulating conversations about jazz harmony and songwriting, and to Dubravka Vukic-Presland for setting an assignment that enabled me to combine two passions!

References

Chatwin, B. (1986). *The songlines*. London: Franklin Press.

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E. & Teitel, L. (2010). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning.* Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Costa, A. & Kallick, B. (2000). *Activating and engaging habits of mind.* Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

DePree, M. (1993). *Leadership jazz*. New York: Dell Publishing.

Earl, L. & Katz, S. (2006). *Leading schools in a data-rich world: Harnessing data for school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Earl, L. & Timperley, H. (2008). *Professional learning conversations: Challenges in using evidence for improvement*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Leadbeater, C. (2008). *WE-THINK: Mass innovation, not mass production.* London: Profile Books.

Lucas, B. & Claxton, G. (2010). *New kinds of smart: How the science of learnable intelligence is changing education.* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Newton, P. M. (2004). Leadership lessons from jazz improvisation. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, *7*(1), 83-99.

Stoll, L. (2008). *Creative leadership: Preparing for our pupils' future*. Invited article for 10th anniversary edition of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT's) Secondary Leadership Paper Series.

Stoll, L. (2011). Leading professional learning communities. In J. Robertson & H. Timperley (Eds.), *Leadership and learning.* London: Sage.

Stoll, L., Fink, D. & Earl, L. (2003). *It's about learning (and it's about time).* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Stoll, L., Halbert, J. & Kaser, L. (2011). Deepening learning in school-to-school networks. In C. Day (Ed.), *International handbook on teacher and school development*. London: Routledge.

Stoll, L. & Timperley, J. (2009). Creative leadership: a challenge of our times. *School Leadership and Management*, *29*(1), 63-76.

Tapscott, D. (2009). *Grown up digital: How the net generation is changing your world*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Wagner, T. (2007). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need – and what we can do about it*. New York: Basic Books.

Weick, K. E. & Westley, F. (1996). Organizational learning: Affirming an oxymoron. In R. S. Clegg, C. Hardy & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Whitacre, E. (2011). *A virtual choir 2,000 voices strong.* Retrieved from the TED website: https://www.ted.com/talks/eric_whitacre_a_virtual_choir_2_000_voices_strong