

Creating authentic collaborative staff learning cultures — ‘The Buzz’

By Tracey Ezard

Biography



Tracey Ezard is a speaker, author, educator and facilitator. She works in schools, networks and systems throughout Australia in the areas of leadership and collaborative learning cultures. She is the author of two books, *The Buzz, Creating a Thriving Staff Learning Culture* (Lulu Press, 2015) and *Glue: The Stuff That Binds Us Together to Do Extraordinary Work* (Lulu Press, 2017). She is currently writing her next book for release in 2020: ‘Ferocious Warmth: Connecting Heads and Hearts to Transform Education’.

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I was honoured to present the keynote at the ASLA 50th Anniversary National Conference in April of this year. Not only was the conference held in the magnificent National Library of Australia, the room was bursting with people full of energy and passion for the work that they do in school libraries all around Australia. There was indeed a ‘buzz’ in the room as we investigated the exciting possibilities that collaboration and co-creation gives to a school and the integral part library teams can play. My other thrill was presenting on an agenda with one of my favourite authors from my time in the classroom, Morris Gleitzman. I had a fan-girl moment!

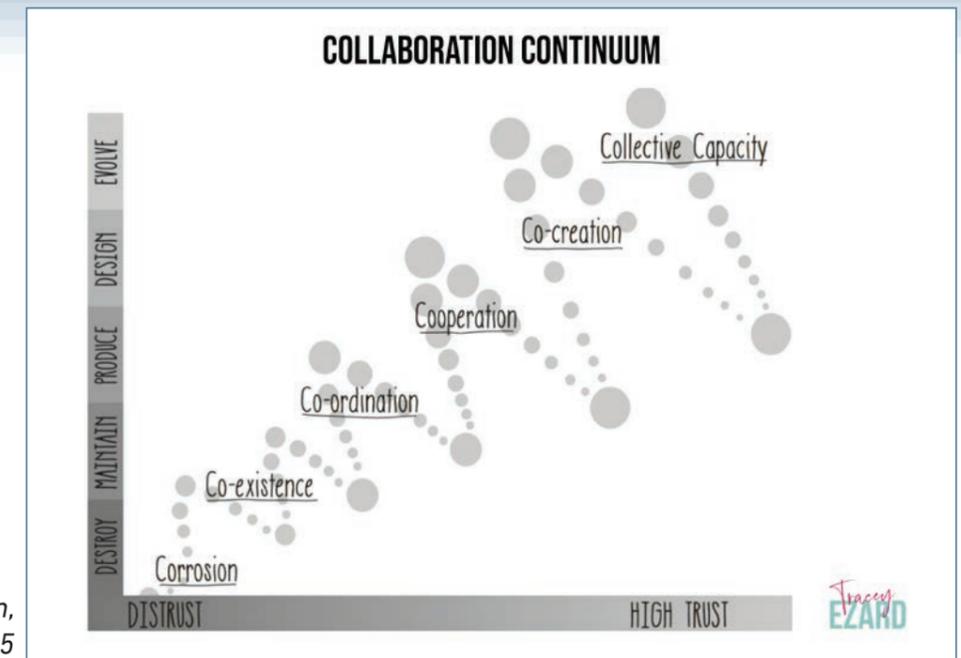
My work with schools and school systems focuses on leadership and on the critical area of collaboration. Collaboration within our own teams, and most importantly, between our own team and the rest of the school. The evidence base is clear that the impact on students is far greater when education staff work together as collective change agents, rather than as individuals. Professor John Hattie’s meta-analysis work puts the effective size of collective efficacy at 1.57. Most schools in Australia are embarking on a journey of building this collective efficacy.

‘Collaboration is learning out loud’

Collaboration is all about learning deeply together. When we come together as professionals who are seeking to improve our impact, we share our thinking and approaches, challenges and strengths. It’s about building our teaching toolkit to shape teaching and learning. The dialogue is critical, as is the trust and purpose behind the collective working together.

It’s not a fad or innovation, it’s a way of being

Professor Michael Fullan has been leading this work globally for many years. While



Collaboration Continuum,
Tracey Ezard 2015

some schools are only just starting the journey of getting out of the silo of the classroom, many have been on the path of collaborative professional learning for a number of years. In 2006, Michael Fullan wrote:

Collaborative cultures are ones that focus on building the capacity for continuous improvement and are intended to be a new way of working and learning. They are meant to be enduring capacities, not just another program innovation (Leading Professional Learning, The School Administrator, November 2006).

Schools that have developed these capacities now cannot imagine going back to an individualistic approach to what goes on in the classroom. Whole school improvement, innovative practice, transformation of teaching and learning, inter-disciplinary approaches — none of these can be achieved without collaboration at their foundation.

Beyond cooperation

Where are your opportunities for greater collaboration and collective impact? Is it

cross-school learning and pedagogical approaches? Perhaps you want the library/resource area to be more integrated into the culture of the school. Is the highly developed teaching of literacy and other skills that sit within your library team accessed by the rest of the staff (there’s a gold mine of expertise right there!)? Do you want greater cross-pollination in initiatives that you are leading? Working with others is key to just about everything we do, and rigorously learning together is the layer that makes this work impactful on the teaching and learning in our schools.

The Collaboration Continuum is a useful model to use when reflecting on where the work is currently sitting. Teams that are serious about working collaboratively together know that the top two levels are the goal: Co-creation and Collective capacity. When we’ve got more than one person at the table, amazing things get created.

Here’s an overview of the levels, starting at the dreaded bottom:

Corrosion

It’s a pity that we need this level at all, but

unfortunately corrosive environments exist in some teams and schools. When it is happening at a leadership level, the whole school is in a huge amount of pain. At this level, power plays and egos run rampant, creating havoc on any plans to work together. Opportunities to collaborate are derailed by lack of trust and poor behaviour. A horror story from a student on the receiving end of this corrosion was told to me recently. An English Year 12 internal assessment, set by one English teacher, was on completely different topics than those the other English class had been studying for. The reason: lack of any sort of professional communication or relationship between the teachers. In the words of the 17-year-old student, 'We know

learn. This happens for a number of reasons, some of it simply historical — 'we don't do that around here' — or because their relationship doesn't extend beyond civility. They don't know each other and don't seek to find out. At the other end of the spectrum, but with the same impact, they're good friends and don't go near the teaching and learning discussion. So, they simply bob along in their comfort zone, not realising that gold gets discovered when we uncover what we can learn from each other.

Cooperation and coordination

The most familiar levels of collaboration. When organisations say they are

At this top level, we have a belief that the role of our collaborative work is to build our own and each other's capacity.

This level is the true nature of a collaborative culture — we are all seeking continuous improvement and growth, together.

they hate each other'. How's that for an example of toxic interpersonal relationships affecting student futures!

Coexistence

Colleagues inhabit the same space or 'subject' area only. Roles may be similar. There is little or no interaction beyond being part of a group that coexist in the same space or content. Coexistence still happens in too many schools. I still get amazed by how many times the Year 8 Science (Maths/English/Drama) teacher sits next to another Year 8 Science teacher in a staff room, yet they never discuss how they teach those Year 8 students. They don't discuss how they teach concepts and differentiate, or what strategies they use to help students

collaborating, these are the two levels where many teams are sitting. While these two levels are important, they are on the lower levels of collaborative maturity. Transactional rather than transformative, at these levels, knowledge and information is shared and discussed. Work tasks such as planning are divided between members to use time more effectively and build consistency. Duplication of thinking and delivery moves towards collective and integrated approaches. Information is disseminated and discussed for coordination and management purposes. Interaction is about smooth processes and organisational issues.

For many schools, creating psychological safety and trust for adult learning is where

the work needs to be done to lift beyond these levels, to the higher levels of the continuum. These higher levels are where the deep learning occurs.

Co-creation

Discussion and activity are centred on working and learning together to design the quality and thinking behind the team's work. The team comes together to create better ways of working, resulting in more effective results. It is where collaborative projects sit, where finding a new way forward is critical. For teaching teams, the work is also based around student learning and diving into pedagogical discussions. It uses evidence to guide the conversation and is the level where psychological safety is critical for all members to have a voice. Professor Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, is a leading researcher and expert in psychological safety, high performance teams and learning cultures. Her definition of psychological safety is:

A climate where people feel safe enough to take interpersonal risks by speaking up and sharing concerns, questions, or ideas (The Fearless Organisation, Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth, Wiley, 2019).

Collective capacity

At this top level, we have a belief that the role of our collaborative work is to build our own and each other's capacity. We actively seek to learn from each other and test our thinking and judgement. We test out new ways of working and support each other to try new ways of teaching, assessing impact on learning. We are actively modelling a

collective growth mindset. The work evolves and transforms. 'A rising tide lifts all boats.' This level is the true nature of a collaborative culture — we are all seeking continuous improvement and growth, together.

Where does your team sit? Your whole school? Where is co-creation critical? How could you lead this work by modelling moving up the continuum in your sphere of influence?

Are you out there collaborating?

At the ASLA conference, I mentioned a well-used phrase in the human resources world: 'If you are at the table, you're not on the menu'. Librarians, as integral parts of the collaborative fabric of the school, increase colleagues' and leaders' understanding, not only of what you do, but how you work. They then discover what they could learn from your approaches and the impact you have on students. If we cloister ourselves away in our 'patch' and only collaborate when people seek us out, we are helping those silos and divisions strengthen. When we open up and seek out opportunities to collaborate, our place in the culture and relevancy to the school is embedded and meaningful. Our opinions and perspectives are heard more, and we open ourselves up to working in different ways to increase the impact on students.

What stops us?

In my work with schools and systems, I have found that the biggest barrier to us working more collaboratively with one another is our mindset and the environment we set up to learn from one another. As educators, we pride ourselves on knowing our 'stuff' and work hard at providing the best possible learning for our students. Yet, when we first start learning more deeply as

a collective, we can experience interesting internal dialogue. Using stronger evidence as a basis for discussion and action can be confronting. 'What if what I am doing is seen as not good enough?' 'Is what I have been doing for all these years "not right"?' 'I feel very uncomfortable with this level of discussion on my professional judgement'.

Professor Dylan Wiliam, Emeritus Professor of Educational Assessment, UCL, and author of *Embedding Formative Assessment*, captures this in a powerful statement that brings the key cultural and leadership work to the fore:

If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they are not good enough but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

In my observations of what goes on in education cultures, there is such truth in this statement. It holds the secret to where most of the work needs to focus to create collaborative cultures.

Where should we focus?

Over the 15 years of observing this work in action, certain patterns emerged. It became evident, both through observation, collaborative discussion and through more recent data collection through The Buzz Diagnostic* and other evidence-based research, that three pillars are the foundation for this collaborative culture work to thrive.

These three elements of The Buzz are:

1. **A collective growth mindset**
2. **A compelling environment**
3. **Authentic dialogue**

Here are some indicators that can guide what the elements look like in action:

Mindset

We explicitly work on our individual and collective growth mindset, to cultivate a rich learning environment.

- As a team we collectively discuss and commit to the behaviours of learning
- When we are stuck we put strategies in place to help us get moving again
- We see feedback as a critical part of our individual and group learning cycle
- We assume the positive intent of actions and seek to understand
- We believe building collective wisdom will impact improvement
- We see failure and mistakes as opportunities for learning

Environment

We create an environment where we thrive learning with and from each other.

- We create a warm and inviting space to have rich debate
- Our meetings are purposeful
- We use processes that help us get our outcomes
- Our behaviours and norms build trust and psychological safety so that we can be open and vulnerable with each other
- We learn out loud with each other, exploring our thinking

Dialogue

We focus and explore what really matters, having authentic discussions.

- Our students are at the centre of our collaborative learning
- We focus on growth in both learning and teaching
- Our conversations build trust and understanding
- We challenge ourselves with curiosity, not with judgement
- We clarify our misunderstandings as soon as they arise

Our part to play

Every individual within a culture makes an impact on that culture through their behaviours. If everyone increased their positive contribution to a thriving culture and applied it, then as Professor Dylan Wiliam says, anything is possible.

Here are five areas that we can all be more aware of:

Five things to bring to the table

1. Be easy to work with

Compel people to come and work with you. Don't be that prickly person that people don't want to collaborate with. Prickliness does not compel, it repels. Kindness and compassion, approachability and empathy — the more we approach our colleagues with these attributes, the more co-creation thrives.



ASLA Conference 2019

2. Be curious not defensive

We have two choices when our thinking is challenged. One is to close down, get defensive and invalidate the other person's statement in some way. The second is the road less travelled, the one of a growth mindset. This mindset firstly notices the internal reaction of defensiveness and then gets curious. Curious about the reaction and what that might be about, but also curious about what the other person actually thinks. It's about responding rather than reacting. Responding with curiosity is the path to learning and growth. It also builds trust.



Be curious not defensive

3. Co-create a vision that excites everyone

This helps create mutual success. Have conviction about what you can bring to the collaborative table. Articulate the benefits for everyone, most importantly the students.



Creating The Buzz: ASLA Conference 2019 participants discussing their 'Joy Bubbles' — a story of joy in their work.

Specifically, for the future of libraries in our schools and communities, and as a member of the ASLA community how could you collaborate more across the school and system to increase impact and relevancy?

When we have created a vision that everyone loves, it's exciting and it creates a vision we all want to work together to achieve.

4. Focus on building the three pillars of The Buzz

The mindset, the environment and the dialogue. You can't change trust and psychological safety in a day. I have worked with a school that shifted from quite a corrosive and siloed culture. A different leader came in, changed the quality of the dialogue and the safety, and the trust was changed in a month. All of a sudden people felt heard, seen and valued. I don't think we should underestimate how strongly and quickly we can change culture, simply by building stronger relationships that focus on the right drivers.

5. REALLY be a learner (no, really!)

Walk the talk. Please don't say, 'I'm a learner. Of course, I'm a lifelong learner!' and then not be willing to change or iterate anything that wasn't your idea. Let's make sure that we are pushing ourselves, feeling the discomfort, trying new things, having courage, stepping into the learning zone. Seek out people who

challenge thinking. Challenge your own thinking and assumptions with curiosity and compassion.

We need to be bold. Working collaboratively helps us to do that. We need to be pushing the paradigm on how we work in schools, libraries, anywhere where the future of our students' growth as a learner and as a great human is involved. Specifically, for the future of libraries in our schools and communities, and as a member of the ASLA community how could you collaborate more across the school and system to increase impact and relevancy? I would encourage you all, in this 50th year of ASLA, to ask yourselves, 'What are we doing to make sure that we're bold and have courage?' I wish you all the best as you co-create with others to increase the reach and impact of your important work in the world.

** Currently over 3600 teachers and 400 schools have gone through the diagnostic across Australia. For more information, contact Tracey Ezard: tracey@traceyezard.com*

Sphero® brings STEM-based learning to the living room with the release of new Sphero Mini Activity Kit

Sphero has released the Sphero Mini Activity Kit — the tiny, wildly popular, app-enabled robotic ball now with even more to explore.



The Sphero Mini Activity Kit combines miniature accessories with step-by-step, STEM-inspired projects that sync with the Sphero Play and Sphero Edu apps to encourage kids to start, grow and graduate through play and learning.

The Sphero Mini Activity Kit has everything kids need to get rolling, coding and playing within minutes, including an exclusive clear Sphero Mini app-enabled robotic ball, buildable mazes and tunnels, pins and cones to construct your own experiences, plus 15 Activity Cards with guided instruction for hours of play. Packed with teeny tiny tech, the Mini robot has a gyroscope, accelerometer, LED lights, and a rechargeable battery with 45 minutes of playtime. The Sphero Mini Activity Kit is ideal for early learners to have fun while learning to code from the comfort of their living room.

A variety of mini games, different drive modes, and the ability to change the LED light colours are all available through the Sphero Play app, which integrates the various guided activities on the included Activity Cards. New learners can also explore the Sphero Play app's latest feature — Block Drive. This coding-based driving mode provides a friendly introduction to basic robot coding, perfect for beginners. Movement Blocks tell your robot which direction to roll, while Light Blocks add playful, colourful LED effects. This feature

is also compatible with Sphero's full line of robotic balls.

Advanced users can graduate to the Sphero Edu app — empowering them to program the Mini and begin to learn coding skills. Learners start drawing paths, then progress to basic scratch blocks, and eventually have the ability to write their own JavaScript text programs using actions, controls, operators and more.

Paul Berberian, Sphero's CEO explains:

Mini Activity Kit takes our popular Mini robot a step further by offering an affordable at-home learning experience that mirrors guided lessons taught in schools. We wanted to give kids and their parents even more tools to create, explore and invent. Sphero has always been about helping kids go beyond code to unlock their creative potential.

Watch it in action [here](https://www.sphero.com/mini-kit) and learn more at <https://www.sphero.com/mini-kit>.

For further information, visit [Sphero.com](https://www.sphero.com)