

Learning leadership and evaluative thinking



The overview section is based on the 2013 ILE report on learning leadership and on an approach to evaluating innovations developed by Lorna Earl and Helen Timperley. Learning leadership is presented around responses to a set of interrogatives (why? what? who? when? where? and how?), and guiding orientations. The evaluation steps are: defining the innovation; multiple stakeholders, different contexts; identifying the purpose(s) of evaluation; getting on with it; framing evaluation questions; collecting fit-for-purpose evidence; organising and analysing the evidence; making sense of it all; interpretation as building knowledge; and capturing and mobilising the new knowledge. Tool 3.1 offers lenses for addressing how far the leadership is focused on learning and its strategies informed by learning evidence. Tool 3.2 allows schools or networks to: refine important issues and rationales; identify what the evaluation will address and the best means to address this; and gather, analyse and interpret the evidence.

Learning leadership has occupied an important place within the *Innovative Learning Environments* (ILE) study, figuring prominently in the design and re-design processes of our framework covered in Chapter 2. Recognising its importance we brought together a separate report to *Innovative Learning Environments* in 2013, namely *Leadership for 21st Century Learning*.

We propose that such leadership should be closely informed by evidence of the learning taking place - hence evaluative thinking is also highly relevant. Lorna Earl's and Helen Timperley's OECD Working Paper on evaluative thinking and educational innovation followed later in 2015 and this chapter draws heavily on that analysis.

3.1 Leadership as integral to innovative, powerful learning environments

Learning leadership is critical and is one of the three dimensions in our “7+3” framework. It calls for visions and corresponding strategies intensely focused on learning. It calls for leadership as collaborative activity, in which the teachers, learners and the wider community are engaged.

The leadership should be richly informed about the learning taking place. Just as formative feedback should be integral to individual classes, so should the whole organisation use learning evidence to create strategies for learning and revise them depending on what that evidence shows. This implies strong processes of self-evaluation and the constant endeavour of sharing knowledge about learning. “Information richness” about learning strategies, students and outcomes quickly becomes overload, however, unless that information is converted into meaningful, actionable evaluative knowledge.

Teacher engagement and professional learning are key aspects of the design and implementation process. In many powerful learning organisations, students are also deeply involved in the design and implementation of their own learning – not as an alternative to teacher professionalism and leadership but as extensions of them.

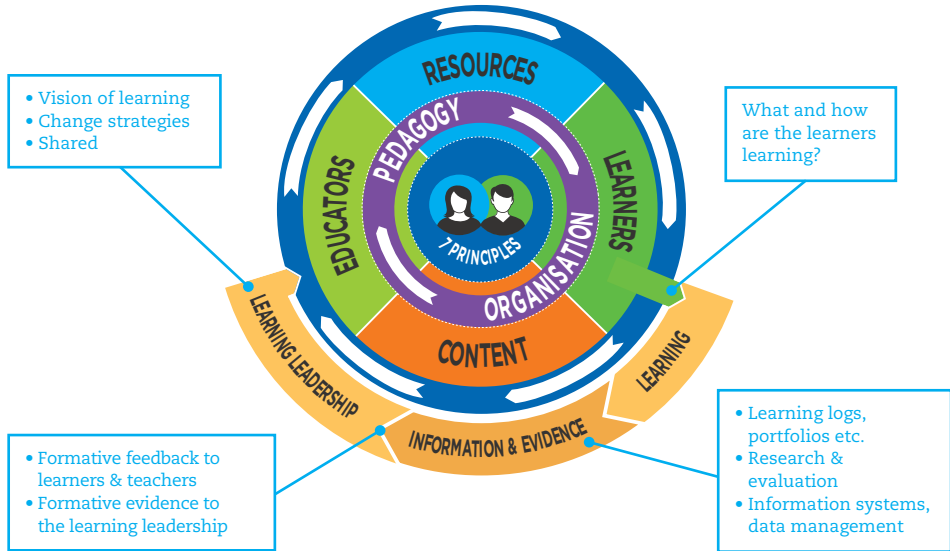
The “why” of learning leadership

A basic reason why learning leadership deserves such attention is because it is so influential of direction and outcomes, whether in schools, clusters or broader systems. And, as *learning is the core mission of education* then it is natural to focus especially on the leadership and decision-making that shapes this core mission.

The “what” of learning leadership

Learning leadership refers to the people and decisions that drive the design of learning environments to make them powerfully effective. It is exercised through relationships and at different levels and may extend to partners outside schools. Learning leadership should not be reduced to the qualities of individuals as it is essentially social and interactive, not a solo activity.

Figure 3.1. Learning leadership and the formative cycle



Source: Adapted from Figure 7.1 in OECD (2013), *Innovative Learning Environments*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264203488-en>.

Learning leadership is integrally bound up with the endeavour of innovation. It is needed at the different levels of any system, whether for the big picture design of structures, policies, curriculum, etc. or the detailed decisions to be made in leading teaching. Networks and communities of practice call for their own forms of leadership while contributing in turn to system leadership. And, there is leadership in the non-formal programmes outside schools that feature increasingly in the learning of young people.

Learning leadership calls for creative, strategic acts of design together with the ability to put those designs into practice. It needs resilience in the face of the messy realities of implementation. Management is thus an integral part of learning leadership. So, we would not contrast leadership with management per se but caution to avoid scenarios in which senior leaders are so preoccupied with institutional management that they neglect the core business of leading learning and teaching.

The “who” of learning leadership

There is no simple match between hierarchical position and learning leadership, and the increased organisational complexity of innovative learning environments brings more complex forms of leadership. Yet, that leadership should be shared rather than relying predominantly on the “heroic” top person. But, this does not mean to neglect the importance of *principals and other senior managers* and indeed, effective sharing often depends on the confidence and competence of the formal leader(s). In other words, it is just as inaccurate to assume that “position doesn’t matter” as it is to assume that “position defines everything”.

Teacher leadership, whether formal or informal, is generally exercised by influential teachers commanding professional authority. They choose to support their colleagues and believe strongly in the progress of the school and its students. Sharing leadership works in both directions: teachers helping to set broader direction but also senior managers having a say in what takes place in the classroom.

A learning community involves all its constituencies, including its *students*. The active participation of students in strategies to improve learning fosters motivation, engagement and responsibility. Far from this diminishing conventional leadership authority, it enhances it and calls for demanding professionalism.

The “where” (and “when”) of learning leadership

Combining different players, levels and locations adds up to a complex layering altering the “where” and the “when” as well as the “who” of learning leadership. It is exercised within schools and beyond, at different levels, and in the horizontal network connections between learning environments. As schools innovate they often draw on partners and sources of knowledge outside the traditional school boundaries. This may be described as “anywhere” learning leadership and it increasingly needs to be “anytime” as well.

Educational discussion tends to acknowledge how much learning increasingly takes place outside formal classrooms whether through projects, peers, media or the community. The specific discussion of leadership, however, still tends to be dominated by the more familiar world of schooling.

The “how” of learning leadership

Visions, changing organisational cultures and design

Vision offers a “road map” towards a more promising future. The vision should attract partners and followers, and provide them with the motivation, suggested methods and narratives to help them engage in innovative change.

Visions need to be translated into strategies of design, which in turn need to be put into practice (referred to by John MacBeath [2013] as the “challenge of enactment”). Instead of timidity, leadership should foster can-do cultures and the readiness to take risks. James Spillane (2013) emphasises leadership as diagnosis and design with the purpose of maintaining learning front and centre. A key part of the diagnostic work is to clarify how taken-for-granted routines in schools often block powerful learning, and then to figure out how these can be supplanted by more learning-focused routines.

Professional learning

Learning is necessary both to the design task of sharpening visions and to the operational tasks of realising transformation. Knowledge strategies in schools are fundamental to any significant innovation (Elmore, 2008). Dialogue is about learning and is the means through which leadership is made explicit: educators and others in

the learning community share ideas on the practices to be tried and collect evidence on their impact. The leadership is exercised through the process of inquiry (see also Tool 1.2 above).

Learning communities and networks

Creating community is an important means for visions and strategies to be shared and for developing expertise. Leadership develops and is sustained through collaborative professional learning. Networked professional communities bring together vision, collaborative learning and shared leadership. The leadership and benefits flow in both directions – from the wider community into the single learning environment and from the different sites outward to the learning system as a whole.

Orientations to guide learning leadership

These different dimensions of learning leadership imply (Istance and Stoll, 2013):

- Learning leadership is critical for reform and innovation.
- Learning leadership is about engaging in the design, implementation and sustainability of powerful innovative learning environments.
- Learning leadership puts creating the conditions for 21st century learning and teaching at the core of leadership practice.
- Learning leadership requires creativity and often courage.
- Learning leadership models and nurtures 21st century professionalism.
- Learning leadership is social and connected.
- The more learning environments innovate, the more learning leadership will come from diverse partners often viewed as “external” to education.
- Transformative learning leadership involves complex multi-level chemistry.
- Learning leadership is needed at the system level.

3.2 Evaluative thinking and educational innovation

Educational evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of the information needed to make decisions and identify the effects of educational initiatives. Evaluative thinking is necessary to successful innovation. Rather than being unstructured, disciplined innovation involves constant problem definition, horizon scanning, analysis and monitoring of progress, the creation of contingency plans and feedback of the evidence to the innovation process and to stakeholders. Evaluative thinking thus involves a lot more than measurement and quantification.

Defining the innovation

One of the first tasks in any evaluation is getting a detailed description of what is intended. Defining the innovation – its roots, goals and philosophy – will underpin a workable evaluation approach and contribute to decisions about the innovation and accountability requirements. The goals and assumed impact of the innovation will need to be routinely revisited, informed by the evaluative evidence.

Multiple stakeholders, different contexts

Engaging key stakeholders in the evaluative thinking can substantially enhance the credibility of the innovation. Rather than telling a simple black-and-white story, stakeholders should be involved in an iterative process that takes context, culture and different viewpoints into account.

Identifying the purpose(s) of evaluation

The questions to be addressed through the innovation/evaluation process need to be clear and when they will be addressed. Defining the purposes of evaluation needs to be done directly, transparently and often. Those behind the innovation may only want to go so far with the evaluation, however - ready to engage with it to inform decision-making but uneasy about evaluation outcomes for fear of disappointment.

Getting on with it

“Getting on with it” means to develop theories of action, identify specific evaluation questions and valid methods to answer them and make sense of the findings. Innovation is emergent and needs evaluation capable of looking iteratively forward and back. Looking forward means formulating evaluative questions and collaboratively planning the evidence to be collected; looking back means considering how the evidence has been most useful in tracking progress.

Framing evaluation questions

Evaluation questions ask “what do we need to know?” These questions shape the whole evaluation process so it is essential to spend time getting these right, returning to them regularly. Internal questions may be quite different from those posed by external accountability. Questions need to provide the most relevant information for the time and context, and they should balance stakeholder needs and the intended short-, medium- and long-term outcomes.

Collecting fit-for-purpose evidence

The systematic collection of evidence provides the platform for answering the evaluation questions. The evidence must be fit-for-purpose, give an accurate representation of what

is being evaluated and inform decisions. There are many ways to collect information in evaluating innovations. “Fit-for-purpose” means appropriate methods both for a valid evaluation to be made and for the practicalities of the particular case.

Organising and analysing the evidence

The next step is to decide how to organise and analyse evidence to answer the big questions. All too often analysis becomes a “fishing expedition”, based on routine analyses and stand-alone statistics, whereas data analysis should not be pointlessly formal. It should make an interesting claim; it should tell a story that an informed audience will care about and it should do so by intelligent interpretation of appropriate evidence.

Making sense of it all

Insights that arise from looking at evidence need to be converted into useful knowledge to inform stakeholders and influence the innovation. Too often, much attention is given to collecting evidence, and then the interpretation is hurried and superficial. What matters are the insights that come out of the evidence, when the people who care about the innovation make sense of the evaluative evidence.

Interpretation as building knowledge

When evaluation is part of the innovation, interpretation becomes part of a cycle of collaborative knowledge-building. Learning and change arise from this deep inquiry, iterative process.

Capturing and mobilising the new knowledge

Having worked through the interpretation and knowledge-building, what emerges should be made visible and accessible to others in some accessible and retrievable form (print, audio recording, video, translations, etc.). This is variably referred to as knowledge transfer, knowledge management, knowledge translation, knowledge mobilisation and knowledge animation.

TO FIND OUT MORE

Earl, L. and H. Timperley (2015), “Evaluative thinking for successful educational innovation”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 122, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrxtk1jtdwf-en>.

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LEARNING LEADERSHIP AND EVALUATIVE THINKING: THE TOOLS

Tool 3.1 *Towards shared and formative learning leadership*: This tool is designed to facilitate a sustained interrogation of the leadership strategies in the school/learning environment. It offers a set of lenses for addressing the extent to which leadership is focused on learning and its strategies are informed by evidence. Ideally, we envisage that it would take several sessions to work through each module.

Tool 3.2 *Evaluating educational innovation*: This tool is about evaluation as integral to educational innovation. It suggests repeatedly applying a series of evaluative processes: refining important issues and rationales; identifying the questions that the evaluation will address and the best means to answer them; and gathering, analysing and interpreting the evidence. We suggest that all the sections get considered at the beginning, though most attention will probably focus at this stage on issues of definition and method. The tool should be used again when the specifics of data analysis and interpretation are to the fore, and yet again when mobilisation and change are uppermost, and so on.

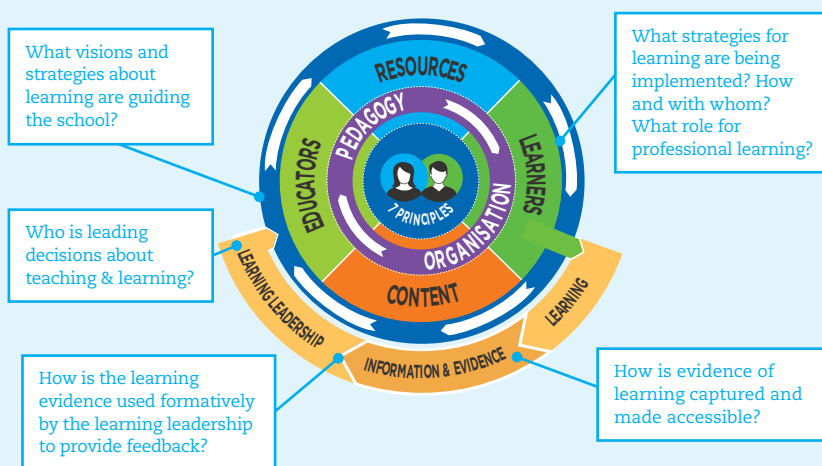
Tool 3.1 Towards shared and formative learning leadership

This tool is based on the formulation of leadership in the ILE framework together with insights from the report *Leadership for 21st Century Learning* (OECD, 2013). The purpose is to sharpen up the understanding of the leadership that is in the service of learning, and to help develop appropriate leadership strategies. Some schools will find it useful to apply this in-depth approach after having applied the more general tools from Chapters 1 or 2.

Tool 3.1 is in six modules corresponding to the diagram below plus an additional session intended to bring together the conclusions from the different modules to decide how to improve learning leadership. Review the questions in the diagram in preparation for each module, and in each there are more detailed questions about learning leadership.

It would be helpful to identify some concrete recent examples regarding strategies and the use of evidence on learning through which to ground your discussion in concrete examples. To broaden engagement of the learning leadership team it might be advisable to use different people to chair/facilitate each module. You will need to decide how far these should include the principal and other senior managers.

Figure 3.2. **The learning leadership formative cycle for schools and learning environments**



Source: Adapted from Figure 7.1 in OECD (2013), *Innovative Learning Environments*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264203488-en>.

Tool 3.1 Towards shared and formative learning leadership (continued)**The “who” of learning leadership**

Focusing strongly on the nature and organisation of learning means to widen the focus so as to include but also go beyond those at the top of the management hierarchy in the organisation. The increased organisational complexity of innovative learning environments brings more complex forms of leadership but this may make effective leadership even more dependent on the active engagement of the formal leaders such as school principals.

- How far are the principal and other senior managers directly involved in decision-making about teaching and learning in the classroom?
- How widely are teachers engaged in leadership decision-making about learning? Are there designated roles for teacher leaders?
- How and to what extent are the students involved in decision-making about teaching and learning?
- Are other partners (and which ones) involved in setting direction for the school as a learning environment?

Visions and strategies

Design is critical in guiding work and change and this means the visions for learning and how these are translated into organisational strategies.

- Is there a vision guiding learning change? If so, how long has it been in place and how adequate does it seem to have been?
- How is the vision shared among all those involved in the learning community? Is it shared widely enough?
- How well has the vision been translated into strategies for change?

Building organisational capacity and community

Professional learning is an essential part of sharpening the strategic visions and of realising transformation. How are the school's organisational routines changing and how firmly are these focused on learning and innovation? There needs to be a culture of dialogue and collaboration and the creation of learning community, within the school and through wider networks.

- What professional learning has there been around the vision and what strategies for those with leadership responsibilities?

Tool 3.1 Towards shared and formative learning leadership (continued)

- What particular changes have been undertaken in routines and infrastructure to put the visions and strategies in place? How well have they worked?
- Are dialogue, collaboration and inquiry commonplace? Can you be described as a “learning community” and have you set out to build greater community?

Evidence on learning

Information about learning may be collected through very diverse means: one risk is that insufficient information about student learning is available but the opposite risk is of being swamped by too much so that it cannot meaningfully inform decision-making.

- What are the main sources of evidence regarding the learning taking place?
- How is the evidence on learning compiled and how robust is it? Is this done systematically?

Feedback of learning evidence to learning leadership

For the organisation to become formative, the leadership in particular must access robust evidence on the learning taking place and use it to design and re-design itself.

- How is the evidence on learning fed back to and used by the leadership? Are there any problems with ensuring effective feedback?
- How is the evidence translated into the strategic design for organising teaching and learning and how has this design been improved or innovated as a result?

Bringing it all together

- This is the session that brings everything together. It will serve as a reminder of the key points and then consider they add up to a coherent whole.
- Identify the stand-out conclusions from each module and reflect on the broad picture of how effective the learning leadership has been to date.
- If more could be done to improve learning leadership, what are the main lines of change to be put in place?
- Consider whether how effective the formative cycle works at present – from leadership decisions to strategies to evidence on learning and feedback into leadership and strategy design – and how it could be improved in the future.

Tool 3.2

Evaluating educational innovation

Evaluation should be a central part of educational innovation. Given that innovation by its nature evolves, evaluation needs to inform it along the way rather than be something that only happens at the end.

Earl and Timperley (2015) propose a sequence of evaluation questions, engaging stakeholders in the process and revisiting the questions in the light of the feedback received. This sequence covers: refining important issues; identifying the key questions that the evaluation will address and the best means to answer them; and gathering, analysing and interpreting the evidence.

This tool offers specific questions to help shape each of these stages. Even within a single school possibly unable to engage in an extensive evaluation exercise, these questions will usefully guide reflection on their innovative approaches.

WHAT? Defining the innovation

One of the first tasks in any evaluation is to get a comprehensive description of the innovation.

- Discuss and answer the following questions:
 - What do you expect from this change?
 - For whom and when?
 - What might it look like?
 - How does it work?
- Bring these answers together in a statement to describe the innovation and explain how it will bring about the desired changes (its theory of action).

WHY? The purpose of the evaluation

Defining purposes needs to be done clearly and transparently, and revisited as circumstances change. There needs to be clarity on what is to be addressed by the innovation/evaluation – “What do we need to know?” – and when the answers will be needed.

- What do we need to understand better? Who needs to know?

Tool 3.2 Evaluating educational innovation (continued)

- What evaluation activities have taken place up to now? What have we learnt from them and what more do we need to know?
- What do we need to know over the longer term? How will evaluation help to answer these questions?

WHO should be involved in the evaluation?

Many can be involved in the innovation, each with their own perspectives and possible biases. If the evaluation goes beyond self-review, you will need people with technical evaluation expertise, integrity and flexibility. There may well be others, and they can help (or hinder) the innovation along the way.

- Who has been implicated in the evaluation and doing what?
- How were the evaluators chosen?
- Have you made sure your evaluation is not just confirming the results that some want to find?

HOW? Approaches and methods

To gain independent review of how the innovation is unfolding means engaging a continuous cycle of generating hypotheses, collecting evidence and reflecting on where the innovation is up to. The platform of the evaluation is the systematic collection of evidence.

- What methods have you adopted for the different stages of the evaluation and are they “fit-for-purpose”?
- Are the adopted approaches the best ones for answering the most important questions you have? How do you intend to analyse the evidence?
- Are you sure that you have extracted enough from your information to address the key questions? What else do you need to know?

SO WHAT? What does the evaluation tell us?

Insights gained from evidence need to be converted into usable knowledge to inform others and guide the innovation. BEWARE: most attention in evaluations tends to be given to collecting evidence while interpreting it is often hurried and superficial.

- What does the evidence mean and what light does it shed on your initial questions?

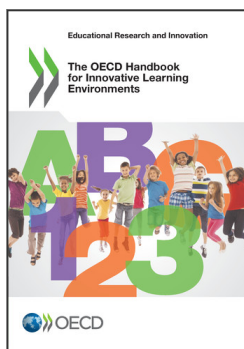
Tool 3.2 Evaluating educational innovation (continued)

- Does it confirm direction or suggest changes to be made?
- What does the evaluative evidence mean for your initial “theory of action”? Were any of your initial assumptions found to be inadequate?
- Who has been involved in discussing and interpreting the findings?

WHO ELSE SHOULD KNOW? Knowledge-building and mobilisation

Knowledge mobilisation in innovation is a deliberate process of acting on the following questions at various points: “What do we know that should be shared with others?” and “Who should we involve?”

- How ready are you to bring others into your reflections about your innovation and how ready are you to listen to their feedback?
- With whom do you intend to share the knowledge generated by your evaluation and how will you do that?
- How ready are you to influence others who share similar situations and ambitions?



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