

# EngagEd – Professional learning conference

A conference intended to exemplify best practice around learning has recently been held at Aldenham School, Hertfordshire. Assistant Headteacher from Academy Trust school, Parmiter's, Hertfordshire, Nicola McEwan, and Aldenham School's Professional Learning Co-ordinator, Becky Kirsten, and Assistant Head (Learning), Luke Harding, reflect on proceedings and offer their top takeaways from the day.

Aldenham School was delighted to host EngagEd#1 at the end of September. As its name suggests, our aim with EngagEd was to facilitate interactive learning and allow colleagues to think deeply about their leadership. For this first conference, on the theme of professional learning, we were joined by a dozen colleagues from both the independent and maintained sectors.

The day started in small groups, sharing our schools' diverse approaches to professional learning and CPD. We then took part in a practical session

on developing colleagues through coaching, before coming together to discuss how best to judge the impact of professional learning. Finally, after finding out about an online platform that supports instructional coaching, we borrowed some materials from the Teacher Development Trust for a 'sensemaking' session.

The idea behind 'sensemaking' is to slow down and interrupt our usual modes of thinking. We each tried to clarify what we would take away from the day.

## Luke – Pillars and principles



"My favourite part of the day was hearing about our very different contexts.

Colleague A is valiantly trying to establish a foothold for professional learning through innovative voluntary programmes, whilst Colleague B could describe their school's comprehensive suite

of professional learning activities. One colleague is going it alone; another has a team of dedicated middle leaders. Whereas in one school professional learning is barely on the radar, it's a top priority somewhere else.

It made me reflect on where we are at Aldenham – somewhere in the middle. We have been

slowly building up our 'teaching consistencies' over the past several years. I've thought that, unless we could spend meaningful training time on an element of classroom practice, there's no point in even talking about it. However, I loved the confidence of schools that declare a wholesale approach to teaching. Of course you can only work on some aspects at any

one time, but having 'pillars' or 'principles' offers teachers a sense of corporate identity and direction for the future. It seems that Tharby and Allison's 'Making Every Lesson Count' is a common starting point.

My takeaway from EngagEd#1: To convene a team to work on codifying our 'Aldenham Approach' to teaching and learning."

## Nicola – The power of coaching



"How does Luke Skywalker become a Jedi Master? That was my key inquiry question

to illustrate a professional learning journey. Never has it been more important to focus on professional learning in schools, especially when the recruitment and retention crisis continues to dominate popular thinking about education. Ironically, might it be the lack of time and space to think within

education that could be the root cause? At a time when teachers are bombarded with emails, expected to be administrators, HR managers and be academic as well as pastoral experts all at the same time, it is no wonder there is little time left to consider what quality and impactful professional learning looks like for teachers beyond the early career framework. Yet, consciously creating a thinking environment', developing a coaching habit" and simply asking

the right questions could provide some solutions.

Educational researcher, John Hattie, would need a whole new chapter to cover the visible learning that took place in just 15 minutes during a group coaching session. It did not impact a single CPD budget and did not require endless planning of content or learning to deliver. Simply put, coaching creates reflection and deep learning, maybe more so and

more likely to result in action and have impact than heavily designed CPD. Imagine what power we have then to motivate, value and retain teachers, as well as engage staff in professional learning if we rethink the time we do have in 1-1 or group meetings.

My takeaway from EngagEd#1: Be more Yoda! Let's rethink line management, team meetings and develop effective training for line managers in how to coach."

## Becky – From sensemaking to strategy



"To me, the 'Sensemaking' session we hosted at the end of the day was the most

valuable because it gave the space and time to draw together the multitude of ideas and reflections we had heard through the day. We used the Teacher Development

Trust approach to sensemaking; slowing down our thinking, reflecting on the day and deciding our next steps.

I reflected that my next area of focus needs to be on developing a long-term strategy for Professional Learning at Aldenham. Hearing about other schools has helped

me refine this idea: one colleague shared that their school used to have a 6-year strategy, but this was unworkable; one colleague shared their annual cycle but reflected that shifting focus every half term is a little too quick. I am now looking at building a 2-year strategic plan; some of the inspiration for this will no doubt

come from the other schools present. If I get stuck, colleagues who experienced Nicola's group-coaching tool will be there to keep me on track.

My takeaway from EngagEd#1: Finding out how things are done in a range of contexts is a great starting point for leading change."

### References

\*Kline, N. (1999). *Time to think: Listening to ignite the human mind*. Cassell Orion.

Kline, N. (2020). *The promise that changes everything: I won't interrupt you*. Penguin.

\*\*Stanier, M. B. (2016). *The coaching habit: Say less, ask more & change the way you lead forever*. Box of Crayons Press.

The Teacher Development Trust is launching an NPQS (National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership) L tailored for the independent sector