Benchmarking and best practice:

Tools or trip wires for improving schools?

For those who work in schools, it is difficult to regard the term 'benchmarking' as anything other than the behaviour of a Year Nine class on Friday afternoons. After all, our business is stimulating hearts and minds to strive towards personal and social – and, for us, spiritual – good. The 'bottom line' is the quality of the thoughts and actions of young people under our care and guidance. If we fail to engage their thoughts or to influence their actions, what right have we to be in business? But what is the business of education, what is meant by 'best practice', and what is 'benchmarking'?

Benchmarking

It is thought that benchmarking first appeared in the late 1970s following a management review undertaken by the Xerox corporation which was experiencing considerable market pressures at that time. This was a protracted period of recession and unemployment that generated pressure for private and public institutions to become leaner and more focused on satisfying the needs and expectations of consumers. In the 1990s, little has changed.

Benchmarking is a strategy derived from the business and industrial world in which the drive for market advantage makes comparisons with competitors unavoidable. Industry and management practice has identified several different types of benchmarking:

- internal: comparisons made with other units in the same organisation
- process: analysis of best practice processes and functions regardless of industry
- competitive: analysis of strategies, processes and practices with organisations in the same functional area
- strategic: proactive analysis of emerging trends, options in markets, processes, technology and distribution that could affect direction and deployment[1]

The public sector did not escape the purge of recession and unemployment as governments at all levels throughout the industrialised world began to demand measures of quality assurance from its systems, processes and workers. Thus the 1990s is known as "the decade of demand", with relentless expectations of service from a leaner and more sacrificial workforce.

As events in Australia this year have shown, we live in the age of accountability and of work practice reform. It is presumed that improvement in processes achieved through benchmarking will lead to more effective and productive outcomes achieved by an organisation. The premise is that an organisation which can manage change will survive.

Best Practice

An influential study by Womack, Jones and Roos[2] from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, into Japanese production techniques in the motor industry, published as the 'The Machine that Changed the World', is a good example of substantial data collecting about so-called 'best practice'. It confirmed that the nature of work and the structure of international capital are being reshaped beyond the standardised mass production factory line.[3]

Work practice reform means lean production achieved through working with multiple tasks, 'just-in-time' delivery of components, fewer permanent workers, reduced levels of management and increased sharing of responsibility and rights, often under higher levels of stress.[4] As noted above, these ideas derive from Japanese factories which produce a car in half the time with half the space and workforce of a similar set-up in Australia.

Yet it has not been easy to apply the principles of best practice generally to industry. It has been even more difficult to judge performance and change in service industries where the core activities are more qualitative than quantitative. As Porter[5] argues, no single system is universally appropriate "notwithstanding the current fascination with Japanese management". While 'common interest strategies' claim they will produce a more humane as well as more efficient and competitive company – and well they could – there is a danger that a rapid implementation of best practice across private and public sectors in Australia will not sufficiently recognise significant contextual differences between a car factory and a hospital, court of law or school.[6]

Benchmarking and independent schools

It is important that educators do not become so captivated by the romanticism and mystique of teaching that we regard our work as unique and, therefore, resting in a vacuum free from

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external forces. We need to acknowledge that there is a great deal to be learned from other models of organisational change, including benchmarking and best practice.

However, our view is that it is necessary to find the appropriate mix of policies and practices so as to avoid the more mechanistic elements of reformed industrial practices. We need to undertake the complex work of determining which of these will be more, and which will be less, useful for schools.

In the late 1990s, the forces of competition and accountability are reshaping educational institutions at all levels and across all sectors. Yet everything that is measured is in some way affected by the means or process by which it is measured. Hence, we suggest that benchmarking in education is in danger of becoming so focused on accountability that measurement of performance is seen as an end in itself and not as a tool for improvement.

If this the case, should we consign benchmarking to the growing stockpile of discarded management fads? We do not think so; however, we do believe that a great deal of the work of schools dwells at the level of the intangible, thriving in the heart as much as in the head. We suggest that benchmarking must be regarded as a concomitant of this core activity rather than as an outcome in itself.

As we have demonstrated, benchmarking involves identifying measures which can be quantified and which allow comparisons if there is an appropriate context. In schools at present, there is a range of measures which may be used to compare one school with another, and even one subject or cohort with another. These include measures such as the performance on tertiary entrance tests, enrolment statistics, expenditure on certain activities, student attendance and retention rates, performance on standardised academic tests, literacy levels, staff absenteeism and parental and student satisfaction with the progress of their school.

It is possible to quantify qualitative constructs such as customer satisfaction, and the overlap between growth in business and growth in education is very apparent. Like businesses, schools are totally dependent on their staff. In the past, teaching has been a lonely profession conducted largely behind closed doors and within classroom walls. There are indications that the walls are breaking down, or at least becoming more transparent.

Schools are exceedingly well suited to the activity of observing best practice in other classrooms and other places, something that already happens on a regular basis both formally and informally. Yet we feel there remains a reluctance to look beyond our own classroom, schoolyard, office or system to observe other practices. This is strange given that teachers and lecturers are highly skilled at 'networking', yarning as we do about our students and workplaces, and finding ways for sharing resources.

What leaders in education need to do is encourage a willingness to embrace successful practices not only from colleagues but also from business and enterprise; but to do this in a way that does not leave teachers feeling compromised by economistic demands.

Unions have a strong role to play in this area. Those of us working in independent schools need to trust each other to contribute to the delivery of better outcomes, and trust our professionalism to ensure that the ethical and philosophical bases of education – built up over two thousand years – will not easily succumb to practices that contradict what good teachers already do.

The St Andrew's experience

St Andrew's Cathedral School occupies city office buildings in the heart of the Central Business District of Sydney. Its original purpose was to provide for the education of choristers who sing in St Andrew's Cathedral. Founded in 1885 by the same cleric who established

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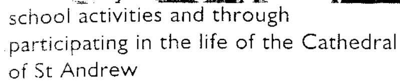
Shore School, St Andrew's school has a complicated history having occupied 11 different locations in and around the Cathedral over its 112 years.

The 1980s were good years for independent schools and St Andrew's was no exception. Enrolments rose to over 750 and the school took possession of comfortable space at the top of an office building behind the Cathedral with a second campus dedicated to the seniors and located in nearby Druitt Street. An Outdoor Education Centre was established in the Southern Highlands of NSW and the school appeared prosperous and ambitious.

Yet when the recession struck, its impact upon St Andrew's was profound. Enrolments declined and in 1995 the size of the School's staff had to be reduced to limit the financial damage of declining numbers. Central to the challenge St Andrew's faced was the necessity to provide a sense of vision and future for a boys' school set down in the heart of the city. Yet, in spite of the traumas, this period presented St Andrews with an opportunity to set new goals which would be used to manage the change that it would have to undergo. Those goals, set out in a document 'Whole Knowledge, Whole People', seek to:

- establish Christian principles within all



school activities and through participating in the life of the Cathedral of St Andrew
- integrate psychological, physical, academic and social needs with spiritual needs
- develop a co-curricular program to develop broadly based skills and interests
- encourage self-motivation, self-learning and self-expression
- provide effective pastoral care through all stages of personal development
- link the school to the corporate and civic life of the city of Sydney
- ensure students are technologically competent
- provide access to physical and intellectual development through an outdoor centre.

While it is too early to benchmark performance against these aims, the school has established several internal measures of performance in the area of curriculum and academic performance, literacy and numeracy, and parental satisfaction of school delivery.

Likewise, the setting of agreed benchmarks at the staff level has been challenging in the context of so much change within the school. Strategies to benchmark in a comprehensive Christian school include measuring the:
- rate of increasing enrolments and broadening the base of enrolments.
- morale of staff
- student/parent satisfaction, strength of P&F, School Foundation, canteen
- range and rate of academic, sporting, performing arts and other awards/achievements
- standard of staff and student appearance and state of school facilities.
- invitations to participate in educational, ecclesiastical and civic functions
- quality and quantity of inter-school functions and visits
- quantity and quality of media attention.

Many of the strategies are mechanistic and instrumental and they alone do not tell us we have examples of best practice. Measures less visible to the public eye are the contents of letters, email and phone calls to the principal, the nature of interactions between students in corridors and the lift between classes, the willingness of students to support school activities and contribute to its good name, and the commitments of staff – made time and time again without direct reward or recognition.

While wider interest in St Andrew's Cathedral School, and its programs, is taken to be one indicator of success, we would not suggest that St Andrew's has achieved best practice but that it is journeying towards making the school a better place in a changing world.

Reflections

It is perhaps inevitable that education in general, and schools in particular, become open to the possibilities of benchmarking for best practice. If this is the case, then every effort needs to be made to develop a climate of cooperation between schools and within schools. Teachers work naturally together and the notion of benchmarking should be used to enhance and facilitate these instincts rather than be presented as another instruction to be received from a 'top down' management system.

It is important to resource and support staff to become key components of a school's aspirations. Leaders, therefore, are as much supporters as they are managers. Yet for all of this, educational work is not conducted with equipment, systems and management practices. Our enterprise is far less definitive than the production line which some might hope schools one day become. Our "matter" is young hearts and minds which are so dynamic, volatile and marvelous that even when measured they can change on the same day! Such nebulous beauty in schools is its own benchmark.

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Readings

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