

GOOD LISTENERS ARE LIKE TRAMPOLINES

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Abstract

In posing the question, “What does collaboration mean?” Greenstein (2012) explains, “It is more than just cooperation. It is about learning to plan and work together, to consider diverse perspectives, and to participate in discourse by contributing, listening, and supporting others” (p. 105).

The aim of this research project was to determine whether a group of seventeen 15 year-old boys could become better collaborators and effective team members by being trained in communication skills. More specifically, if these boys could be coached to become better listeners and more assertive in their communication style, then their understanding of each other could improve, and more respectful and meaningful communication opportunities could be created.

The research findings indicated that listening is indeed a powerful way of connecting with others. However, the perception that good listening occurs purely if one absorbs another's conversation, much like a sponge, needs to be refuted. Good listeners are those that connect intellectually by asking good, probing questions, bouncing thoughts around for further consideration and clarification, like a trampoline. Good listeners also differentiate themselves by being able to challenge, differ or disagree in a respectful, assertive manner; making suggestions in a helpful way and giving others a different option or strategy to consider. Zenger and Folkman (2016) posit that this kind of listening “lets you gain energy and height, just like someone jumping on a trampoline.”

Introduction

My research group belonged to Pitts House, one of 10 houses in our College. My relationship with the boys was extremely superficial, having taught only three of them prior to the research adventure. Given Reichert and Hawley (2010) state: “Boys are largely driven by relationship and trust” and “an engaged, positive, trusting relationship to a mentor must precede specific learning outcomes” (p. xxiii), I was thus concerned that this would hamper progress in “facilitating growth and positive adjustment” (Reichert and Hawley, 2010, p. xxiv). The boys had, however, been together as a House group for just over a year and I

hoped that they had built enough trust to be open with each other. From the outset, I knew that if I was seeking behavioural change, it was best to engage the boys as equals in the process. I was confident that the methodology of action research would allow them to become primary stakeholders, as my interaction with boys had taught me that they participate best when there is some kind of reward, and this methodology allowed them to be part of creating solutions to their own problems.

The development of student leadership and character education are intentionally incorporated into our College weekly schedule. Classic definitions of Leadership usually include how one develops interpersonal skills and collaboratively assists others towards a common goal. Therefore, during the busy last term of 2016 (mid-September to mid-November), our grade 9 group were collectively tasked to “Hack for Change.” They were to identify a problem, define a visionary goal, and use their problem solving and critical thinking skills, to come up with a possible, but most likely audacious and bold solution.

During an initial 40-minute session with the boys, A Rube Goldberg ¹ task was set in order to observe the natural collaborative interaction in my group. Just over half the group were actively engaged, interactive, offering suggestions and participatory, while the others were either standing back, as silent observers or off to the side playing cricket with one of the balls taken from the project, or furtively distracted on their cell-phones. Some were bossy and overbearing, too busy talking, not listening, not open to opposing views and being dismissive of other boys’ ideas. My role was purely that of an observer, and the boys were, as yet unaware, of our research journey.

Our “Hack for Change” Design Challenge was to redesign our Resource Centre to make it a more modern and inviting space. To make the task more manageable, the group was split into three sub-groups focussing on:

- IT
- Interior Design and Furnishings or
- Building and Structural Design.

The boys selected their placement.

Greenstein’s (2012) opinion that, “Essential 21st century collaborative skills include being

¹ A Rube Goldberg task is a complicated device that performs simple tasks in indirect convoluted ways.

able to balance listening and speaking, leading and following and to value the contributions and creativity of group members” (p.106) was shared with the group and some time was spent trying to get the boys to see that the presence of the problem they were experiencing lay in the absence of certain skills. Questions were posed as to whether the intentional teaching of active listening and assertive communication skills could result in different behaviours whilst engaged in group work, and how the results of the research might have positive impact on the broader school community by bringing about guided instructional change. These objectives were encapsulated in my research question *“How might communication skills in grade 9 boys be enhanced, through participation in a design challenge?”*

It was explained to the boys that tasks would be planned, task efficacy would be evaluated, and then new tasks would be created on demand, enabling a decision to be made whether the interventions had impacted their communication, and subsequently their collaborative skills along the way.

In this reflective and collaborative process, I aimed to examine my educational practice within the context of the learning environment to determine how to improve my teaching. Stringer (2014) states that: “Action research provides a flexible and practical set of procedures that are systematic, cyclical, solutions oriented, and participatory, providing the means to devise sustainable improvements in practice that enhance the lives and well-being of all participants.” (p. 5) As such, action research was the ideal methodology, as it allowed me to be a responsive “meddler in the middle” making deliberate changes as the need for iterative improvement was experienced.

Literature Review

While walking through our school grounds at break, one can see the boys chatting and interacting perfectly. Various reasonably unsuccessful attempts at group work, including the Rube Goldberg activity mentioned earlier, had left me supporting Greenstein (2012) who asserts that we need to bring exactly these observable competent social skills into the classroom to place them in the service of the curriculum and to build a culture of collaboration. In my readings, I found an abundance of references to the importance of intentional coaching of young adults in communication skills so as to develop strong social relationships, which are a solid basis for collaborative activity. Adam J. Cox (2006) maintains that in society today, there are fewer nonverbal, asocial lifestyle and vocational options. He

writes that socially challenged males are, unfortunately, destined to stick out or seem out of place if we don't act to reverse this trend. Listening actively, speaking up, receiving others' ideas respectfully and using communication persuasively in an assertive and neutral manner are advocated as foundation skills that are necessary for proficient collaboration and for working better in a team based environment (Harvey & Daniels, 2015, p. 57).

The notion that listening is an essential communication tool is also supported by Michelle Skeen (2016) who posits it is a skill that like anything else, will get better with practice. In his TED talk, *The Walk from No to Yes*, William Ury (2010), a researcher of successful negotiation skills, suggests that "successful negotiations can only occur when the parties are successful listeners." He further suggests, "Listening is the golden key that opens doors to all relationship." Based on this, it is my opinion that boys' relationships - with each other, their teachers and their sense of themselves - are what must be nurtured to enable boys to connect.

Additional readings led me to believe that the quality of our attention determines the quality of people's thinking. Attention, defined as "listening with palpable respect and genuine interest, and without interruption" (Timetothink.com, 2017), generates thinking. I was hopeful that if I could increase genuine active listening and encourage the boys to ask deeper questions that challenged their limited perspectives, this would add value to the quality of communication and richness of idea-sharing and creation when working in their groups.

The ability to build trusting interactions with others in the group was also a focus. Greenstein (2012) says that understanding the nature of assertiveness lays the foundation for effective and trusting communication. Furthermore, Skeen (2016) dedicates numerous pages to explaining that teenagers won't be able to assert themselves constructively, unless they have an understanding of the three primary styles of communicating: passive, aggressive, and assertive.

As evidenced in the initial task, boys are often unable to relate to opposing viewpoints and to respectfully receive others' opinions, criticisms and views. During any group task, there are often many opportunities for undesirable ridicule and put-down, and the learners do need to be taught strategies for giving constructive criticism and feedback for the purpose of learning rather than judgement. DeBono (2004) claims that people need to be taught the skills of how to use neutral language to differ, disagree and even agree with others' opinions so as to enhance constructive worthwhile conversation. By teaching the boys about assertiveness, I

hoped to encourage them to:

- adopt it as their primary communication style
- realise that they each have every right to be heard and that their individual input was valuable and needed to be considered
- realise that conflict in conversation was both healthy and necessary in the creative process, but how they engaged with the conflict, without becoming hostile or defensive, would affect the successful functioning of the team.

In the work of Susan Cain (2012), there is a caution that collaborative work often fails to consider those students who prefer to work on their own, and who could be drained by the constant interaction with others. She suggests settings should be created where students can shift from independent to interdependent workspaces. She also ascertains that “schools should teach students skills to work with others – cooperative (collaborative) learning can be effective when practiced well” (p. 94), but that students also need quiet and privacy in order to do their best work. I was hoping that if learners who preferred to work alone were taught the necessary communication skills when working in groups, the experience could be largely beneficial and not irreconcilable with their needs.

When summarised and reviewed, these readings led me to a plan of action which tried to combine a series of interventions, providing resources for the enhancement of active listening and assertive communication skills. Action research was to provide me with the means to “systematically investigate issues in diverse contexts and to discover effective and efficient applications of more generalized practices” (Stringer, 2014, p. 6).

Research Context

St Stithians Boys’ College is an independent Methodist day and boarding school situated in the heart of Randburg, northern Johannesburg, with an enrolment of approximately 770 boys. We strive for excellence in providing a relevant education, and for best practice in boys’ education.

The soul and ethos of our College is expressed in our Honour Code: *Honour God - Honour others - Honour self*. The majority of the boys come from affluent homes and are day scholars, while about 15 percent are boarders from South Africa and other Southern African countries. Our “Seven Pillars” support the life of every boy: academics, sport, culture, community engagement, leadership, outdoor education, and spirituality.

A letter was sent to each boy's parents asking for permission to have their son participate and be included in the research. One boy declined to be part of the research group. When recording responses each boy was assigned a letter, thus ensuring anonymity. At the conclusion of the research, the boys engaged in an interview session, which was recorded both digitally and by a critical friend, to ensure accuracy of the data.

The Action and Methods of Data Collection

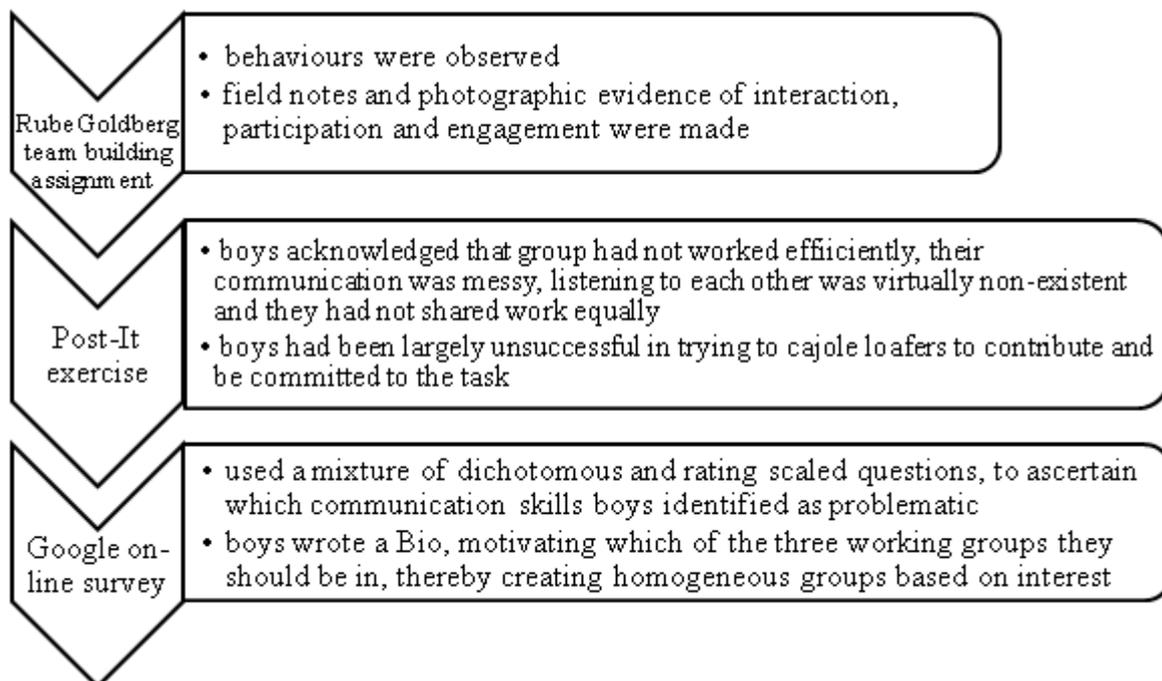


Figure 1: Data collection

Eileen Ferrence (2002) states that it is important that at least three methods of data collection (triangulation) be implemented so that the data can be organised in a useful way to identify trends and themes. Figure 1 above summarises how data were collected whilst my boys engaged in various tasks and activities. The data from the Post-it exercise were transferred to a Padlet App for analysis, which were then coded and used to inform next practice, as in action research, Stringer (2014) recommends that the first cycle of research should be qualitative in order to “seek to understand participant experiences in order to work towards a viable solution in which people invest their time and energies” (p. 65).

In order to assess if the boys had an understanding from the first Active Listening Exercise,

the lesson was concluded with an Exit Ticket. Quick and to the point, this exercise was ideal to see if they had “caught what was taught” and was also ideal for this research method, as it delivered simple, easy to process, qualitative data and allowed for planning for the next lesson by tweaking the instruction.

After a session which introduced assertive, passive and aggressive behaviours and desirable language, two sessions of group observation followed, once again using field notes, and the boys were given the chance to become immersed in the Design Challenge. Observation of whether they were stating clearly what they wanted or needed, if they respected other people’s opinions, as well as their preference for independent and interdependent work was made. During these sessions, a continuous PowerPoint presentation was run in the background, with relevant, informative vocabulary and phrases, as a subtle reminder of skills needing to be practiced. A Kahoot quiz was created to gather data. Individual interviews were conducted to evaluate the quality of the learning and if necessary, to refocus action.

The final session saw the synthesis of design ideas into a presentation and poster, together with multiple group and individual interviews. A videographer filmed all sessions and a neutral critical friend recorded the boys’ responses to ensure accurate recording.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

Analysis is the process of distilling large quantities of information to uncover significant features and elements that are embedded in the data (Stringer, 2014). By reading through survey responses, exit tickets, snap surveys, field notes and the transcripts of the individual interviews, focus groups and the videotaped sessions, my coding enabled the organisation and categorisation of my data. Four predominant themes emerged:

Good listeners are like trampolines

Responses to the initial Google Survey gave a positive start to the research. The majority of the boys agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed working in a group. All but one boy believed that when working in a group, group members do not respectfully listen to one another and all but two believed that they could benefit from learning the skill of how to listen actively while others speak. After discussion, we jointly decided that this would be one of the targeted interventions and my hope was that the boys connected to the need to learn to be attentive to and respectful of others ideas. The first Active Listening activity yielded

positive results with Boy A saying in the next lesson, “I am listening better; listening more to what other people are really saying. I am trying to make more eye contact and not be distracted.”

The interviews indicated that the boys were superficial in their understanding and felt that good listening meant mainly that one is not talking, or is not distracted when others are talking. Boy T said, “I am trying to show I am listening, and also trying to listen more and talk less.” Boy T, however, also revealed that by talking less, he found that he was cutting down on the necessary flow of questioning to keep the conversation moving in both directions. As a response to Boy T’s observation and an attempt to help the boys understand that questioning is a process for collaborative exploration of ideas, a further listening exercise was introduced to teach them how to ask probing, clarifying questions that would solicit more information as well as perhaps challenge other’s assumptions. This was connected to a lesson on being more assertive, whereby boys were encouraged to use “What if...,” “I hear what you have said, but can it also work if...,” and, “Can you tell me more about...,” type questions. The boys were taught to try and validate others’ input, while offering their own and were urged to identify the relationship between questions and their learning, and that remaining quiet, stifles creativity.

When asked why it was important to ask more questions, Boy L said, “Because you are trying to teach us to react to what the person is saying, to ask more about the topic. If you get more information, that helps you develop a conversation and then you can ask new questions and can understand even more.” This was seen as valuable by Boy M, who said, “You can get better ideas from other people if you ask them more questions, and then you can combine your ideas with theirs.”

In our final video sessions, of the 11 boys interviewed, both in groups and individually, all confirmed that the easiest skills they had learned when actively listening, were focusing attention on the speaker, making better eye contact and being less distracted. The more difficult skill had been having patience to clarify what the other person was communicating and putting across their own perspective. There was full agreement that you are in a better position to communicate with another person and avoid arguments if you try to understand why they are doing or thinking something. In conclusion, Zenger and Folkman (2016) say it best: “Finally, we hope all will see that the highest and best form of listening comes in

playing the same role for the other person that a trampoline plays for a child.”

Listening builds empathy and relationships

A snap survey asked for the following to be given a scaled response:

- active listening can help me to understand others better;
- listening helps us to validate the worth of others;
- active listening can help me become a critical friend and can develop empathy between two people.

The answers to these questions, from the 13 boys who were present, were all either a 4 or 5, on a scale with 5 being “strongly agree.”

In our final focus group interviews, the majority of boys felt that while working on the task they had learnt how to communicate their needs and ideas better. Their actual understanding of each other had improved, but not to the extent that they could give constructive criticism.

Skeen (2016, p. 145) emphasizes that there are deepening levels of self-disclosure (see Figure 2).

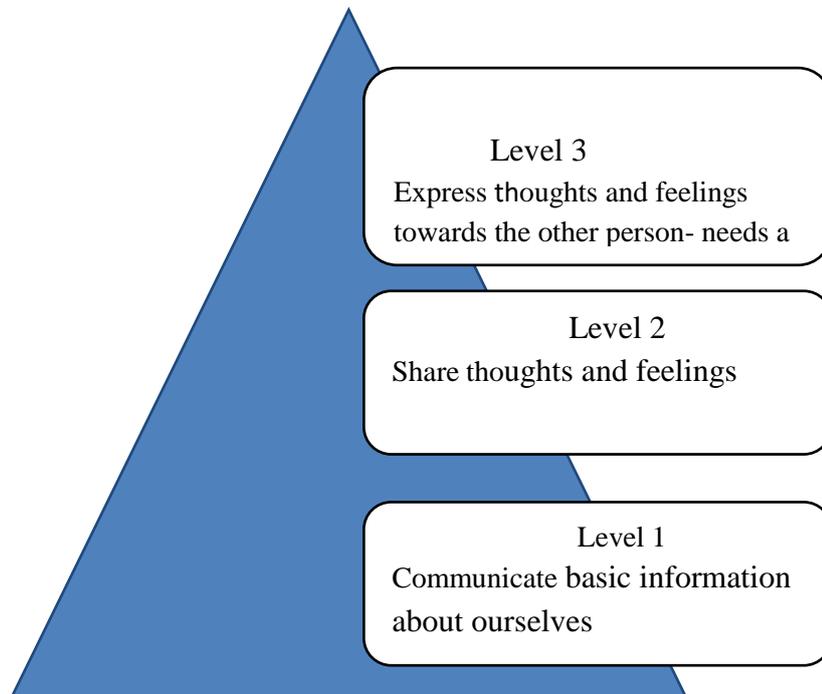


Figure 2. A summary of levels of self-disclosure. (Source: Skeen, 2016)

Boy J supported Skeen's notion entirely: "I know that asking questions can develop an understanding between us, and you become like, more comfortable, and after a while, then you could be in a situation to give them criticism. Not to badly break them down, but you can tell them when it's right to do a certain thing. But you have to build trust before you can say I think you are wrong, and they know you are not breaking them down but being supportive and building."

Communication is a two-way process and expressing is as important as hearing

The lesson on assertive communication started with the notion that the smartest person in the group was never as smart as all the people combined in the group and hence group efficacy could be positively impacted if assertive communication techniques could be adopted. The theory lesson encouraged the boys to express their feelings honestly, but respectfully; to be forthright and frank in putting their views across, to compliment others for their ideas and actions, to accept and try to reconcile differences, and to use neutral language to disagree (De Bono, 2004). Boy E explained to Boy G who was absent for the theory lesson that "if some people are difficult, don't get into conflict; rather use better words so that you can appreciate what they've said."

During interviews, members of the first sub-group reported that there was not much arguing, dissing, major dissention or need for the assertive techniques. Boy B put this down to the fact that they had chosen to be in that group and were equally interested in the task. They seemed to collaborate quite easily as they perceived themselves as being alike. They agreed that after the training, they had, however, been more confident to offer each other alternatives and were inclined to speak more firmly. They had negotiated quite a bit and felt that they had appreciated each other's ideas without being bullies. They felt that their ideas had been heard and their input had been considered and responded to.

By contrast, Boy E, working in the second sub-group, felt that his group had been dysfunctional and that he had done a lot of the work. This is the "social loafing" that Susan Cain (2012 p. 89) refers to. Boy E had tried to be more assertive in order to get freeloaders to take more accountability, but felt that mutual respect and joint responsibility had not been reached. He felt that if they had each been assigned a more specific role that might have sorted out the workload. As the researcher, I felt that frequent absenteeism in this group had

contributed to the fact that many were off task and not invested, and, when given the opportunity to collaborate, the discussion was slow and quite uninteresting with few real exchanges or challenges of ideas. Most of the workload was carried by few members.

Boy A, working in the third group, felt that the reason why the group had not worked optimally during the Rube Goldberg task was because, “People take control and don’t give others a chance to speak. Some people are too nervous to speak, and many good ideas can be lost like that.” It was pleasing to note that, after the intervention and skills exercises, he said that he had managed to find his voice, had more confidence to speak his opinion, and the assertive training had “taught him how not to straight up disagree but to rather suggest something else.” He felt that the point was to be able to disagree without hurting somebody else’s feelings and that they were meant to be more encouraging of each other so that they could share ideas. Pleasingly, he also felt that there had been more input into his thinking.

Effective collaboration requires a shifting kaleidoscope of independent and interdependent interactions

The data supported the fact that the manner in which the boys like to work together in groups is very complex. In the baseline survey, Boy V, said “I do not like working in groups.” In an individual interview, he further stated, “I like to work in my own space as I get distracted by others, and sometimes things move a bit too quickly for me.” His weekly routine was observed and it was noted that although he liked to work alone, he also liked to come back to the group to “check in, see if I could add to them or they add to me.” He acknowledged that this could only be effective if he had the skills to communicate his ideas when regrouping and to listen effectively so as to combine ideas, create a better strategy, or confirm that his own strategy was actually quite a good one.

Interestingly, in the completed Design Challenge of the Resource Centre, sound-proofed individual work pods were included, together with small group stations, which adapted into whole class learning areas. In her book, Susan Cain (2012) suggests exactly these kinds of flexible open floor plans where people have both places to work alone and places to work with others as they choose. She talks about “settings in which people are free to circulate in a shifting kaleidoscope of interactions, and to disappear into their private workspaces when they want to focus or simply be alone” (p. 94). The boys acknowledged that there was a need to cater for a combination of learning and work styles so as to meet their individual learning

needs. Boy V demonstrated that he knew how and when to do this and for me this was an important skill.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

A review of the literature widely suggests that groups can achieve high levels of cooperation and collaboration, but that people do not instinctively know how to interact effectively in a group setting. Although the group had achieved an acceptable level of new skill acquisition through the intervention, (which did contribute to the successful collaborative goal of the Design Challenge), the boys had not quite developed the desirable deeper understanding of, or caring for, each other I had hoped for. The boys were more able to express their thoughts, but were not able to settle disagreement promptly without hurting each other's feelings or without judgement. This was perhaps due to the fact that not enough time was allowed for the individuals in the group to figure each other out and to build trust before launching into the Challenge. Lessons on active listening should have incorporated more activities allowing them to "check in" with each other so that they were more comfortable with being open and having their ideas exposed. Unfortunately, making the desired deep, trusting connections, takes more time than we had available.

The data suggest that my methods had definitely improved the boys' communication skills whilst involved in the challenge. However, the results of the research have led me to believe that the skill of active listening cannot effectively be taught in so few lessons. In addition, assertive training needs plenty of practise in order to refine a person's aptitude to work in a group. The time constraint also meant that not enough feedback was given to those individuals who were disengaged and having a negative impact on group morale and efficacy, nor was there enough time to look at the collective moments of success and celebrate what was working well. It was also difficult to keep focus on the process of collaboration and acquisition of communication skills, and not on the end product of the Design Challenge.

The results of my research were not surprising. Being able to listen properly and assert oneself effectively are behaviours with which most adults really battle. The expectation to master these skills in the short time available was ambitious.

This year, all our current grade 9s have completed a hearing test. They have also done an Emotional Intelligence survey and developed a brain brief profile. Thirty-five of the 117

candidates have their greatest weakness in Relationship Quality² and only six have Relationship Quality as their greatest asset.

The implications of this survey, together with the outcomes of my action research, are that a module will be developed for next term to incorporate role play sessions and experiential opportunities for using both assertive communication and active listening to enhance relationship quality. A workshop was also presented to all staff at an “Unconference” so that teachers can encourage these communication skills in all grades and subjects across the curriculum.

It behoves us as educators to address the dearth of communication skills as early and often as possible so that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. The challenge that lies ahead is, as Greenstein (2012) asserts, “Altering a perception that 21st century skills are an add-on into a belief that they must be fully integrated into teaching and learning, will take collective resolve” (p. 47). Dr Willard Dagget (in Covey, 2008) is quoted in *The Leader in Me* as saying, “What students need to succeed in the twenty first century is an education that is both academically rigorous and ‘real-world’ relevant. This objective of rigor and relevance is not just for some students, it is for all students” (p. 37).

Reflection statement

During this research process, I became acutely aware of how much I was expecting from the boys in a time period that was really unrealistic. I was ever mindful of the boys’ maturity level, and the fact that there was discernible improvement in many of their interpersonal interactions and social sensitivity, as a result of the research strategy, was heartening. The final PowerPoint presentation and a poster of the new Resource Centre validated that the group achieved an acceptable level of collaboration where they fulfilled a function as a group towards the common goal. Boy E summed it up well, “I really enjoyed working in my group. I learnt from others thinking and I think how we worked together was helpful. We could not have done the task on our own.”

From my own perspective, I was fortunate to have the invaluable support of our EdTech coach³. Being largely reliant on dysfunctional IT was a challenge and I was literally picked

² Relationship quality refers to whether the individual’s brain style facilitates their way of connecting with others usefully.

³ Pam McMillan has been employed to drive our Mobile E-Learning and Technology programme.

up on numerous occasions after IT failure had threatened to sabotage the research. On a weekly basis, through collaboration with her, I realised that I had developed new skills that have had vast implications on me as a practitioner and in turn will influence my management team of Heads of Department with whom I closely engage.

Justin Reich (2017), executive director of the MIT Teaching Systems Lab, states that “if schools try to innovate and take a traditional top-down approach – initiatives putter along and change is sporadic or modest. In education and beyond, innovation is usually the result of iteration. In schools that succeed in implementing real instructional improvements, teachers figure out how to improve teaching and learning by journeying through multiple passes of a cycle of experiment, reflection and adjustment” (2017, para. 2).

While not having achieved all that I set out to, I am certain that action research placed me exactly in the middle of the kind of iterative, experimental and reflective best practice that will result in positive and desirable change to our teaching and learning at St Stithians Boys’ College.

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