HOW TO BECOME AN ARCHITECT OF LEARNING

Design your own practice + maximise your impact
I have come to realise that [as educators] our job is no different than those tasks carried out by architects and builders. We design, plan and orchestrate learning like an architect designs, plans and orchestrates buildings or structures. We then put on the builder’s hardhat and try our best to construct the learning in a way our students will understand. While architects design and, in collaboration with builders, construct buildings, we construct the learning experience.’

Peter McKinnon, highly experienced curriculum leader and educator
Just like their students, teachers aren’t created on a production line. Each teacher comes with all the variables, talents and quirks that make us human – including different expertise, life experiences and personalities.

Of course every classroom is also unique, in part thanks due to each school’s culture, location and the students that make up each individual class.

So it’s something of a mystery as to why teacher professional development often takes a one-size-fits-all approach.

Such development frequently becomes a matter of compliance, or ‘ticking the box’, rather than giving any serious consideration of how to support the individual needs of teachers in the context they’re operating in. Or more importantly, the learning needs of their students.
Helping Teachers Find Their Own Way Of Teaching

Our body of work, Teachers as Architects of Learning, is based on the book of the same name by Gavin Grift and Clare Major. It’s designed to empower teachers by increasing their autonomy and giving them greater capacity to make decisions in the best interests of their students, while also taking into account their own strengths and talents.

While all teachers implicitly know that learning should take centre stage in schools and classrooms, time pressures mean they often feel forced to focus on teaching content, rather than how to create the best learning experiences.

This pressure can lead to confusion, anxiety and feelings of disengagement - in both students and their teachers.

Teachers as Architects of Learning helps educators to become architects of their own journey, by learning to pinpoint what is working in their teaching practice, and what could be developed further. Teachers learn to accurately self-assess their impact, and help colleagues do the same. Essentially, the program enables teachers to have the confidence and skills to become effective researchers of their practice.

As teachers apply evidence-based strategies in this program, they will also learn how to transform their entire school culture into one that truly prioritises teacher learning, and has maximum impact on students.
Teachers as Architects of Learning is a professional development program that helps educators, including system leaders, school leaders, and coaches, to reflect on their practices and increase success in learning.

Just as specialist architects are experts in the design elements of their chosen profession, we view teachers as experts in the design of learning - who strive to use the best knowledge and methods that will have maximum impact on their students.

Teachers as Architects of Learning helps answer the question: Why doesn’t school work for every child?

In order to be truly successful, we know that the education system needs to reduce ‘teacher lottery,’ and the only way to do this is by helping teachers to develop their skills in a way that honours their individual strengths, challenges and contexts.

Based on 12 theoretical constructs, and practical workshops and strategies, this program helps educators identify their own growth potential and take charge of their own journey, with support along the way.

Teachers will enhance their abilities to deliberately construct learning experiences for themselves and their students over time and measure their impact along the way through the collection of data.

They will also learn to use a ‘think, act, plan’ cycle that puts learning at the heart of every decision.

The result? Less stress, more time and better results for teachers and their students, leading to improved teacher engagement and sense of achievement.
There are five premises that sit behind the action-learning model that is Teachers as Architects of Learning.

We propose that every teacher is responsible for designing and implementing learning experiences that maximise learning.

To operate at their highest level, we believe successful teachers and educators must embrace the following premises:

1. **Learning is a process of construction**

   Learning is a dynamic process that involves designing, delivering, monitoring, reflecting and modifying. It is, in a sense, never complete but a continuous process of expansion and adaptation. It is not unilateral but rather a co-construction that considers what is going on in the learning moment, and the knowledge, skills and understanding of both the learners, the teacher and the environmental context.

2. **Learning is nested in levels of complexity**

   Teaching is complex, and we must realise that the context we’re operating in – such as the teaching environment, our own values and beliefs, and our own capabilities and our identities as teachers - should be taken into account.
3. **Declarative and procedural knowledge is critical to learning deeply**

To learn at a deeper level, we need to be able to access both declarative (static information stored in memory – for e.g. the twin towers terrorist attacks) and procedural knowledge (knowing ‘how’ to do something). The combination of procedural and declarative knowledge in our mental playground enables decisions to be made and insights to be gained.

4. **Learning should be challenging and/or feel uncomfortable**

Learning is by its nature challenging, otherwise it’s not actually learning – it’s just confirming what you already know. We need to be down there in the mud of the ‘learning pit’, grappling with new beliefs and understandings, skills and competencies before we reach an elevated level of knowledge.

5. **Our success is dependent on how we view ourselves and how we interact with others**

How we shift, move, grow and develop depends on how our identity as a teacher shifts too. Teachers who are not as willing to jump in the mud with their students – and are more concerned about the knowing, rather than the learning – may find it more difficult to shift their identity.
THE SIX PROPOSITIONS: What Sits Beneath

When it comes to this body of work, we propose the following six assertions:

1. **Successful teachers are never satisfied with what they know**

   Teachers face new challenges every day, week and year (or sometimes every minute). The best teachers have a thirst for new knowledge and want to learn and know more in the pursuit of helping their students.

2. **Highly effective teachers are first and foremost learners**

   This pursuit of learning involves gathering the knowledge, evidence, informed processes and strategies known to improve learning. Successful teachers embrace research from the field, and apply it to improve their own impact.

3. **They question what they do, how they do it and why they’ve used that approach**

   Great teachers constantly reflect on their own teaching practice, and refine it as they go.

   For example, if a student is struggling in learning how to read, good teachers will ask themselves: what is it that I’m teaching them, how am I doing it, why are they struggling with and what could I do differently?
4. Reflective development is critical to the development of expertise

High impact teachers are reflective, and they act upon those reflections. We liken it to someone baking a cake: if you use plain flour the first time and it doesn't work, would you use it again? Or would you try self-raising flour instead, with the aim of getting a better result?

5. Teachers who are learning architects commit to developing their expertise

Educators must not only embrace reflective practice, but also commit to a disciplined approach to improving elements of their practice.

6. Success is always based on the impact a teacher’s practice has had on learning

It’s not enough to assume your students loved a particular exercise. Did they actually learn anything?
THE MISSION: What Drives A Learning Architect?

Any educator striving to have a significant impact on learning should be undertaking the following three actions:

1. Activating student learning

What are you actually doing to help the students? For example, handing out a worksheet to do at home – without any guidance – is absolving responsibility. However, when using a flipped classroom model, a student might watch a video to tune them in to the topic and then generate their own questions for further exploration in class. This ensures the teacher has a direct role in assisting the student develop their understanding.

2. Being more conscious of how intentional teaching practices impact successful learning

Architects of learning should become more mindful of why – and how – they made a difference to students. Further, they should be aware of the dynamic learning process in the moment that it is occurring and be able to notice and adapt to both student responses and their own.

3. Learn through reflection – while teaching and afterwards

As you’re teaching, are you staying aware throughout the process of your impact? Are you analysing your own teaching, and looking for clues as to what is or isn’t working?

And just as importantly, are you reflecting back on your teaching after the lesson is finished?
THE 12 CONSTRUCTS: The Theories Behind Teachers As Architects Of Learning

As part of the Teachers as Architects of Learning model, a teacher’s decision making should be based on these 12 constructs.

These theories help educators find a way to better engage with students, in order to increase their impact.

1. Questioning

When used effectively, questions create the platform for ensuring teachers and students know where the learner is at in their understanding. They provide the catalyst for motivating students to further their learning, and contribute to a classroom culture that promotes curiosity, wonder and reciprocal respect – while safeguarding learning as the number one priority. Effective questions are also paramount in helping a teacher realise what they might need to do next to help their students.

2. Self-assessment: reflection and feedback

Involving the student, who is able to clearly articulate and monitor their own learning progression, is critical in building students’ self-efficacy. Opportunities for significant self-assessment that encompass structured, meaningful and targeted reflection and feedback become a powerful tool for the learner to monitor their efforts and plot their path for future learning success.

The capacity for teachers to build self-assessment into their practice also provides teachers with the critical information they may need from students to clarify each student’s thinking, address misconceptions or errors in their reasoning and find what assists their learning. This can only be done when we move the emphasis from feeding back to students, toward receiving feedback from students.
3. Observing and Listening

The role of sensory learning is ever-present in the teacher–learner relationship. A teacher who is able to observe how a student is coping or empathise with a student’s struggles may be able to more appropriately respond to their needs. When a teacher truly listens to what a student is saying, the student’s thinking processes can be illuminated, providing a window into their mind.

Moreover, if a teacher can create a climate where students recognise and apply the skills of deep listening and targeted observing, they too will move a step closer to developing learning dispositions that place them in good stead both within the school and beyond.

4. Explicit instruction

The enemy of explicit instruction is ambiguity. Teachers who utilise the key elements of this behaviourist approach to teaching ensure that learning for students is clear, understood, practised, reinforced and guided. Teachers who use explicit instruction don’t leave learning to chance – and, when used skilfully, can apply it to a range of learning contexts. Even within an inquiry learning unit of work, students may need the skills for research specifically taught, for example.

To teach instruction explicitly, the teacher relies upon their clear understanding of the intended understandings and the instructional processes required in order for students to demonstrate they have learnt and can apply this learning.

5. Modelling and Exemplars

It’s a genuine challenge to work toward something you haven’t seen, touched or experienced. Demonstrating, discussing and analysing exemplar models of products and/or processes - for example, the hamburger essay structure, Gaussian elimination process in maths or discipline specific inquiry processes - provides students with the mental models they need to apply successful approaches to the learning process.

Providing students with this opportunity can remove ‘secret service’ teaching, whereby students only know how successful they have been once they’ve been allocated their final grade or mark. Designed and implemented well, modelling and exemplars have the potential to foster creative and novel reasoning.

6. Safety and Support

Trust is fundamental to learning, and a safe and supportive environment is the platform for building relational trust. A student who feels connected, physically and psychologically safe, and supported within their classroom environment will be more willing to take risks in both their academic
and social and emotional learning. Within this construct lies the decisions a teacher makes about the physical environment they set up, the rules and procedures they implement and the methodology they apply to the building of relationships in their classroom.

If this construct is applied well, it will lead to an increase in creative engagement, as a result of higher levels of trust.

7. Time

We do not get more time; we can only work with the time we have in our schools and classrooms. This construct considers deeply, not the question around how much time we have, but rather how we use our time effectively when we teach and when we plan. This relies upon decisions made through planning, prioritising and maintaining focus. It is critical because of the simple fact that once the time has passed, you can’t get it back. Every minute matters in the learning process.

8. Expectations

You get what you expect, so what are you expecting? This construct is perceptual in that even when a teacher believes they have high expectations for learning and communicates their belief in a student’s ability to succeed, the student themselves might not see it this way. This is why it is both challenging but essential. Expectancy is the belief that with further effort the learner will improve and succeed. Expectancy is affected by factors such as the quality and level of support provided, available resources and the dispositions and skills of the learner.

9. Life-worlds

For both teachers and students, the learning experience is coloured by an array of factors, including past experiences, personal beliefs and dispositions, family and cultural influences, current life situation and future dreams. As the saying goes: ‘no man is an island’, and it is also true that, ‘no student or classroom is an island’. According to Hattie (2009) up to 60% of variance in student achievement can be attributed to what students bring to the learning experience themselves. This construct helps teachers to recognise these factors, so they can create a mindset to respect and connect to the student without diminishing expectations of what they can achieve.

10. Desire

Desire links to the motivation to learn. This construct links closely to ‘life-worlds’ and asks teachers to consider how they honour what a student brings to the learning in terms of their motivation to learn. There are times when little external thought needs to
being taught. But there are other times when it pays for a teacher to think about the strategies and techniques they can use to spark interest, curiosity and a desire to find out more in relation to the student’s world, interests and contexts.

11. Resources

This construct encourages teachers to consider the most appropriate, effective and powerful human and non-human resources that can foster learning success. It’s less about having resources and more about basing instructional decisions on how and when to best use the resources that we have. It requires a view that outside of the teacher and student themselves (who are both human resources to the learning), other resources may need to be utilised, including the power of online resources.

12. Existing knowledge

This construct recognises and builds from the knowledge and skills a learner already possesses. It encourages teachers to consider how they will access and utilise the prior knowledge the student has to aid others in their learning, and to ensure the instruction is pitched to the relevant stage of developmental readiness. Accessing prior knowledge is also critical in acting as a filter for teachers as they determine the need for differentiating context.
Teachers as Architects of Learning helps educators ascertain what sits at their ‘growth edge’ – or the threshold of transformation where they feel a certain level of discomfort. As they inquire, they become researchers into their own practice.

At this point, we often know that we need to learn new skills or knowledge to build our teaching practice, but the level of discomfort means some people choose to ignore this and carry on as before, halting their growth.

It may also be the case that an individual has had uncomfortable experiences with this area, is not confident in the skills (perhaps you don’t consider yourself to be very ‘techy’ for instance), or just doesn’t value or believe in it enough to push themselves further.

In Teachers as Architects of Learning, we support educators to illuminate the blind spots in their teaching – and focus on deliberately practising those skills over time, which ultimately benefits student learning.

Rather than taking a scattergun approach, this deliberate practice is focused on one, or just a few specific areas where capacity can be built.

Such an approach avoids heaping pressure on teachers who are already overwhelmed with their day-to-day responsibilities, while also encouraging them to continue evolving over time. Feedback from students, toward receiving feedback from students.
In his book Creating the Schools our Children Need, Dylan Wiliam says it’s not enough to say a policy or program is ‘evidence based,’ unless you’re sure it’s likely to work in a particular district or area.

“This might seem obvious, but many educational innovations work in small-scale settings but when rolled out on a wider scale are much less effective,” writes the international researcher and prominent educational thinker.

Or, as he also notes: “Everything works somewhere; nothing works everywhere.”

Teachers as Architects of Learning is also built on the theory that no classroom, teacher or approach to professional development is unlikely student is the same — and thus a one-size-fits-all is unlikely to be effective either.

We know that all teachers love learning, and impacting the learning of students. Otherwise, why would anyone go into this career?

Through this program, our aim is to help teachers fall in love with learning again, by honouring the particular challenges that each teacher faces in his or her classroom.

Many teachers, perhaps because of the demands of the profession, teach content and hope that it sticks. But we believe learning architects also continue to develop their expertise on what constitutes learning itself.

In Teachers as Architects of Learning, teachers are supported to manage their own growth, by using different approaches and training to suit their unique needs, and those of individual students.

Teachers will design and apply their own learning experiences, which gives them a sense of purpose — and ultimately helps their students. By learning to evaluate and monitor their impact on students, the gap between a report card and the actual skills and abilities of a student also begins to close, and teachers start to understand what their students really need to flourish.

Those who go through this program also learn to build capacity in other teachers, through the use of tools such as conversation maps, conversation starters and knowledge on how to analyse data.

We take the mystery out of teaching and learning, providing educators with the tools and know-how to accurately measure their impact on students, tackle their own blind spots and continuously work to improve their practice.
At its core, Teachers as Architects of Learning argues that all teaching decisions should be based on the impact they will have on learning.

We help teachers to be the chief decision-makers in the development of their own practice, by learning to embrace the emerging research and thinking from our field and combine it with the contextual fabric of their professional lives.

We also support teachers to be researchers of their teaching identity – undertaking self-exploration of who they are as teachers, and not just what skills and strategies might be best for their students and themselves.

Our program reaches into the heart of what it takes to help students learn, by empowering teachers to constantly monitor, reflect and act upon what is working (for teachers and their students) and what isn’t.

We help participants find their clear path as a teacher in a way that is relevant and meaningful for them, and to embrace the messiness of learning in a structured, systematic way.

This results in more motivated, engaged teachers and students, who realise that one size never fits all when it comes to education.

As architects of their own teaching practice, educators who undertake this program walk away with the theory, know-how and confidence to design the ultimate learning experience for themselves and their students.
How does this differ to other models of instruction?

We refer to Teachers as Architects of Learning as a framework, or criteria for quality instruction. This differs to a model of instruction, which is usually a prescribed series of steps or strategies.

Instead, we engage participants in an inquiry process based on their own unique circumstances, classroom context, skills, understanding and professional expertise.

Participants are encouraged to assess their own strengths and challenges, rather than being assessed by others. This allows them to identify their growth edge and take ownership of their own development.

TAAL helps educators with the structure needed to self-direct their development in a professional manner, including collecting data and reflecting on their teaching practices.

The theory underpinning this framework also ensures that student learning is at the heart of any decisions around teacher development.

Ultimately, teachers become the architects of developing their own model of instruction in partnership with other professionals and with support. This is important because:

“when teams are invested in the outcomes of their inquiry and have the professional freedom to monitor their individual and collective impact on student learning, they are more likely to alter their teaching practices and get the results they desire”. (Sloper & Grift, 2020, p. 160).

Why 12 constructs?

The 12 constructs are based on decades of research, experience and training, and countless interviews with other educators. This includes research conducted as part of the Curriculum Planning Hub, a project carried out through the Australian National Schools Network (Curriculum Planning Hub 2008). The project explored what it takes for students to deeply understand a topic – and how teachers can plan learning experiences to encourage this.
We also looked at various theories of learning, and extrapolated all of the strategies and processes inherent within each. When we started classifying these, it became evident there were common prominent approaches and strategies inherent across many different learning theories.

We believe these 12 constructs, or pieces of the puzzle, are integral to any learning experience, and are vital for anyone designing that learning experience.

• Is it ethical to treat our students as a scientific experiment?

There is sometimes criticism of research that measures the effectiveness of teaching practices in classrooms and schools, because it may appear as if the students are being treated as the participants in a scientific experiment of learning, rather than the live learners they are at that moment in time.

But the reality is that because of the complex nature of learning, good teachers are always observing their students and assessing their learning - gathering data they can use for their next stage of planning.

This constant observation, data gathering and experimentation with new methods of teaching is vital in the messy process of teaching and learning. It facilitates evidence-based practice that is personalised and dynamic, based on what learners need.

In Teachers as Architects of Learning, our aim is to simply deepen educators’ capacities, so they can take their teaching practices to a higher level.

While researching their own practice, our participants sharpen their capacity to:

• Create safe classrooms
• Prioritise and facilitate student learning
• Monitor, evaluate and document student learning
• Improve their practice
• Protect the confidentiality and anonymity of students.

So while it may sometimes seem as though the students are experimental participants in this equation, that’s just part of the nature of learning.

Great educators are constantly exploring what works and what doesn’t, in the pursuit of the highest possible levels of learning for their students.
What Past Participants Have Said

‘There were lots of “ping” moments. I have been working for many years and this has really helped me pinpoint ways I can develop the impact I have on the learners I work with. Has relevance from kindy to secondary. Best PD (professional development) I have done in ages.’

‘Very inspiring professional learning - thanks so much. Would love to run this with whole staff…’

‘The self-assessment tools! An uncomfortable journey in some ways but I feel utterly inspired with much more clarity. I loved that I have something concrete out of the program. I have a new exciting focus and a plan of action.’

‘Teachers as Architects has given me strategies, I can use to improve the areas I believe I need to. I particularly liked the way there was no judgement/wrong or right way.’

‘Thanks so much for helping me to push out to my growth edge.’

REFERENCES


Sloper, C. & Grift, G. (2020) Collaborative teams that work: The definitive guide to cycles of learning in a PLC. Hawker Brownlow Education


http://tutorbright.com/tips-for-writing-an-a-english-essay-the-hamburger-model/

https://www.dummies.com/education/math/calculus/how-to-use-gaussian-

FURTHER INFORMATION
Website
https://www.grifteducation.com/teachers-as-architects-of-learning

Publications

Blog
https://www.grifteducation.com/learning-architects/

Contact
Gavin Grift - gavin@grifteducation.com
Clare Major - clare@clinpsyc.com
Janelle McGann - jmcgann@outlook.com.au

White Paper Contributors
Gavin Grift
Clare Major
Janelle McGann
Larissa Ham

Copyright © 2021 by Grift Education. All rights reserved. Materials may not be reproduced without written permission.