

EP 03 - Leading Innovation, Finding and Activating School Leaders

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:10]:

Hello everyone, and welcome to OPC's Leadership Talks podcast. My name is Lawrence DeMaeyer, Professional Learning Advisor at the OPC

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:20]:

And my name is Susie Lee-Fernandes, OPC's Director of Professional Learning.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:23]:

As co-hosts, we will engage school and system leaders in authentic conversations to explore their passions, experiences and expertise in K-12 education. OPC is proud to highlight the amazing work that principals and vice principals are doing across this province.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:36]:

Work that principals and vice principals are.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:00:38]:

Doing across this province.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:40]:

We hope that leadership talks will not only provide you with inspiration, joy and valuable strategies that will inform your professional practice, but also enhance the learning and well being of those you serve. Enjoy.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:00:57]:

Welcome to Leadership Talks. My name is Susie and I'm here.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:00]:

With my co host, Lawrence.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:01:02]:

We are joined today by Jennifer Shortreed, an administrator with the Waterloo District School Board. Welcome, Jennifer. We're very happy to have you here.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:01:10]:

Well, it's my pleasure. I'm excited to have a chat with you today.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:01:14]:

Yes, welcome, Jennifer. We're really delighted to have you here today and we're really looking forward to the conversation. Before we dive into the topic for today, I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about yourself and your current role.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:01:28]:

Well, as you've already identified, my name is Jennifer Shortreed and I began my journey in education overall and I would say the groundwork for my inclusive leadership by attending a job fair at Queens when I first graduated from teachers College. And that took me overseas for five years, teaching an American school in Brazil and a Canadian school in Hong Kong. Then returning to Canada, I found sort of informal leadership as a classroom teacher of science back in my hometown of Waterloo. And out of boredom more than anything else, I took my principal's courses and I really enjoyed it and I thought, well, let's formalise this leadership thing. And I was successful in becoming a vice principal and subsequently a principal in the school board. And now I work centrally as a system principal. So that takes me through almost two decades and I can't believe it, but two decades as a school administrator and there's always been something new to learn, always been a way to influence education, the different spheres that I've travelled through, and always a new team to inspire me in every single educational environment that I've been fortunate to be a part of. So currently, in terms of the type of work I do at the system level, I'm leading mostly curriculum and assessment in the secondary panel, as well as being the board math lead in the Elearn principle and steering the ship on our MLL program as well.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:02:54]:

On a learning level, I continue, as many people listening do, to continue to challenge myself on ways to stretch my leadership on how to study systems and how they operate and how I can influence them. And then I stretch myself with little projects like conference proposals. I write a blog that has about twelve followers and now podcasts. Apparently I'm adding to my list.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:03:17]:

Well, that's a long list, Jennifer, so I'm glad that you found time to spend some time with us today. We know you'd like to talk about innovation and finding and activating school leaders,

and I think certainly in today's time, it's a very worthwhile endeavour and a timely topic for sure. So I'm going to turn it back to you to tell us about why this topic is important to you and how you've brought this to your workspace and leadership in the system.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:03:46]:

Well, thanks for that. I think that's exactly right. My passion over the last decade or so has really surrounded creative and innovative program pedagogy, and I have a real interest in iterative design thinking processes and most favourite would be human centred design. In my experience, true innovation and change in schools and systems is far more rare than we would want it to be. And in order to achieve it, we really need authentic collaborative teams in a smart and intentional way to lead a team through a process. And for me, where I live in Waterloo is the heart of tech innovation and tech Startups incubator and thought labs are kind of everyday chatter here. It's a key part of our local environment. And an article by Craig Haney.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:04:41]:

He's the head of corporate innovation at Communitech. And Communitech, if you don't know, is a business that helps other businesses figure out how to innovate in their business. And I read an article from him about the nimble hippo. And this idea really applies to me because I was already applying design thinking in my school leadership and this concept of a hippo, a big lumbering thing on land, but it's pretty fluid and movable and mobile in the water. And I think the image in the article actually was a big old hippo on tiptoes in a ballet tutu and ballet shoes. And it just really appealed to me about how you could make big bureaucratic things like education actually pretty flexible and fluid. And I think maybe people in the pandemic figured that out too. So that was sort of like where my head was at on leadership at the time.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:05:35]:

And then I do have sort of a specific example, if you want to hear about it, about a problem we were trying to solve. And how we applied those principles.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:05:43]:

Yeah, I think that would be great. Jennifer.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:05:46]:

Okay, so the story that sort of ties into that human design thinking, I think that's most applicable here, is working in a larger secondary school, about 1650 kids, and the problem we were trying to solve at the time, and all design thinking starts with a problem that has been a bit resistant to being solved. Students were behind on credits, and they would get assigned to student success for a variety of reasons. You can imagine. Their attendance has dropped off, their academic

performance has required it. Something about it has forced them out of the regular classroom into the student success environment. And then once credit recovery has occurred, the question is, what are we working on now? And for new credits, they were relying on the ILC process, which was, on paper at the time, cumbersome, uninteresting material and uninspired. In the end, with a high degree of frequency, the cycle would get worse for the student. No credits would be earned after they came out of the regular classroom.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:06:45]:

They would get poorer and poorer attendance, and eventually the recommendation would be to send them to an alternative education environment. Many cases in our region that requires multiple buses for the student to get on and go to those environments for that alternate learning environment. So ultimately, these students, who we knew well, who we cared deeply about, were beginning what was a pretty familiar downward spiral. And the question became, how do you stop that? And it sounds like a simple thing in some ways, but if it was simple, people would have fixed it. It wouldn't be still around a decade after student success had been introduced. So this is where the intentionality of a process comes in for me as a school leader. So I took a team of all the right people, some early adopters, lateral thinkers, a practical sceptic or two that are critical to the process, throw them together, feed them, give them release days. And we proceeded through a human centred design process to tackle that problem.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:07:45]:

And just to be clear about that, for me, human centred design is a mindset that overlays layers and overlaps the stages and steps to design thinking. So for design thinking, I tend to use a variation of the D. Stanford School model, and I encourage people to look that up. And the human centred design is ideo or ideo model. And you sort of combine those steps and stages, and you add a constant focus, reflection and feedback cycle with the person that's affected by your problem solving at the center.—in this case, of course, the student. So the steps you go through are you empathise with what the problem is, you try to really deeply understand it without assumption, which is critical, and then you define what that problem is. Further, you create ideas or ideate around it.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:08:37]:

You prototype your solutions and then you test them. And for us, what we came up with, I think, really came down to a notion that was articulated by a teacher in the project. And she said, why can't they get a credit in student success for all the things that are making school impossible: relationships, mental health, addiction, they need to study those things. Those are the things that are really blocking them. Why can't they get a credit in studying those things? And we came up with this idea, and we called it builder credit after build a bear, where kids

could sort of pick from different modules of high interest, high impact, high engagement topics in online modules, and they could complete those online modules, learning about themselves and their life to earn an interdisciplinary credit. So the idea was, how could you get student agency? How could you get students to have a say in what they want to learn and why they want to learn it when they're in this environment that's nontraditional anyways. So how can you combine the human, the student success teacher and the student with a pathway chosen by the student and the right technology tools to make it happen, to have students sort of engineer, if you like, their own learning for a credit? Ultimately, what we hope in this program is that students discover knowledge that will be truly useful for the rest of their life and for getting them back on track in their education goals. And you know what? It actually works.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:10:09]:

Students helped us at every stage of the development, and that's the human centred piece again. Some students even earned peer mentoring credits by assessing and evaluating our early module prototypes. We did exit and entry interviews. Student success teachers developed the modules alongside students and with the advice and empathy for the student needs and the student barriers in mind. So we came up with lists of ways to make the material engaging, a specific set of things that every module should have to make sure they had the highest impact possible. So overall, I would say we had steps forwards, backwards, but comparatively, the credit earning was through the roof and the news spread. And that's how, you know an innovation has taken off when you have a different outcome than that of the years before. And so over one semester, every school wanted in on the program.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:11:05]:

So again, you got to kind of work things in your leadership, your sphere of influence. I helped by...I created a proposal with another administrator of the senior team. We got some sections to support it. And in the first year, boardwide, across all of our 16 student success centres, we earned over 400 credits that year. New credits in student success. And one teacher kind of coined it that rather than a downwards spiral, instead, students were experiencing a burst of success, and often that led to more success, additional credits. We've got even more innovations now as a result in our new credit options and student success.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:11:44]:

And for many students coming out of a traditional classroom and into the environment, they're able, through these opportunities, to re-engage in a regular timetable. So that's my example of what human centred learning and design can do. I've used it in a lot of different ways since, but that experience really solidified its power for me.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:12:07]:

Thanks, Jennifer. It really sounds like this is an impactful kind of process. And as you mentioned, it sounds like there's some structure to this process, this design thinking. So it sounds like you've used this process or are using it in different spaces and places in your school community or with your staff. How did you introduce them to the concept and build their capacity to kind of use this process?

Jennifer Shortreed [00:11:43]:

Well, the great thing about it is there's some really engaging visuals that you can find online from D Stanford in particular, and lots of free information on how to walk through those steps of defining the problem ideate prototype and testing it. And in the case of human centred design, having this overlay of empathy, including like sheets for how to do an interview, an empathy interview, different scaffolded templates and so forth. So for us primarily, it was just at each meeting, knowing which step or stage we were in and what we're a little bit looser. I've used templates since in other environments, but at that time we were a little bit looser and said, we're just going to ideate right now. We're not going to solution, we're just going to get the ideas on the board and we're going to test those ideas before we come back. So really staying within the zone of the particular stage we were at, I would say is very important. And then being very particular about the testing stage as well. And having, as a leader, I made sure I was going to have student interviews.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:13:45]:

Some of them were going to be on camera, just putting in some requirements for that stage of the process that the staff could kind of follow along with. So they knew my expectation and that kind of kept us on track, I would say.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:13:44]:

So there's a few things you've said, Jennifer, that really stand out for me, and I think you've hit the nail on the head with some of the challenges and truths. Maybe in education you talked about authentic change being rare, and it's hard work to really make a difference that isn't, I guess, what we've always done. And I loved what you said about reflection and feedback from the student and our attitudes and mindsets and how that team, how that school team operates. So if you were to leave our listeners with a key message from the examples and stories that you've shared on human centred systems and design thinking, what would you want them to go away with?

Jennifer Shortreed [00:14:41]:

I think the imperative for innovation and creativity being necessary. We're in an era of transformative change, and so viewing our leadership in a facilitating kind of way is more important and more needed than ever. We don't actually know the future our youth are walking into. So the challenges and the needs that they will face and that they come equipped with from their educational background are under a massive transformation. And so we have to transform how we do business as well. So just the imperative of that type of work, you have to be that nimble Hippo and you have to have inclusive and effective outcomes. So putting the human into the equation will help you from making assumptions. You don't have to know it all.

Jennifer Shortreed [00:15:35]:

I think when it comes to innovation, creativity and new solutions to problems, you just have to coordinate it around the right people, the right problem, and the right structures, and I guarantee you'll be on the cusp of a new solution. So I think the imperative to think about our work and our leadership differently and to make that transformational kind of shift happen in a new way.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:16:06]:

Thank you so much, Jennifer, for taking some time to spend with us today. You've really highlighted, I think, and provided us with a great framework or process that sounds very practical, powerful and human centred. A way to really authentically engage staff in innovative change processes. So we really thank you for sharing your expertise and your story with us today. It's much appreciated. You did mention some resources. Maybe we'll get those from you later and we'll share those in the episode notes. There's certainly lots there for our listeners to consider in their own leadership and their own work in their schools.

Susie Lee-Fernandes [00:14:39]:

We hope that you have enjoyed this episode of the Leadership Talks podcast where we engage in authentic conversations with school leaders. Please share with your friends and colleagues and we hope you will join us again.

Lawrence DeMaeyer [00:17:00]:

If you have a passion or story to share as an educational leader or would like to find out more about the other amazing professional learning opportunities offered by the OPC, please visit our website by clicking on the link in the show notes.