
Dr William DeJean
Founder,
Unleash Learning

How to Lead Learning in the Era of Overwhelm

YEARS AGO, I PLANTED a tomato plant in a sunny spot in my backyard. I tilled the soil, used fertiliser and watered it as required. The plant began to grow. Over time, its long green stems expanded in all different directions. Some parts of the plant grew up to the sky, others to the side, and parts of it grew so large, its limbs leaned on the ground as if looking for more support.

I let it grow and grow. The plant flowered, which is the sign that tomatoes were on their way. One day the wind blew and many of those flowers and small green tomatoes that had begun to develop fell off the plant. Only a few tomatoes ended up growing, and it left me questioning if the efforts were worth such a small harvest.

THE ERA OF OVERWHELM

If you're reading these words, I'm guessing you're after a different kind of harvest. You want your leadership efforts to support the kind of teaching and learning across your school, network, or state that helps all students go on to live successful and productive lives, to transcend limits, and to use what they have learned to help our world in some way.

The harvest you're after can cause change for good. But if leading those efforts feels more challenging these days, it's not your imagination. It's because we're now in a new era. I call it the era of overwhelm.

In the era of overwhelm, you might find you're being overloaded with information while more and more is being asked of your school. You might also find your school constantly trying to 'keep up' with all the latest strategies,

initiatives, and frameworks. This era can cause you to feel like your team is pulled in many directions and to question the best teaching and learning approach. It can increase your school's stress as you try to keep up with it all and leave you questioning whether your leadership efforts are creating a positive impact that will last. You may have thought that if you and your team work hard enough, you'll be able to stay on top of things. Or that this era will eventually pass.

Or perhaps something different is needed.

ADVANCING TEACHING AND LEARNING SCHOOLWIDE, IN THE ERA OF OVERWHELM

In the delivery model of education, the goal is to 'deliver' information to students who are seen as empty vessels to be filled up. If you've ever sat through a webinar or a professional learning session where the presenter does most of the talking, you know the model.

In this model, the era of overwhelm can result in your team trying to keep up by learning new ways to 'deliver' information to students: perhaps through a mandated lesson format, or by focusing on this or that teaching strategy, by embedding a new technology, or by using a new assessment process.

Over the years, students who have experienced this model have told me they learned how to 'play the game of school' by focusing on getting through assignments, keeping their head down, and doing what the teacher wanted. These students told me they didn't feel like they remembered much or felt impacted by the class or school.



But you're after something different. You want to support the kind of teaching and learning across your entire school (not just a few teachers here and there) that leads to positive behavioural change, to transformational understandings (for all students), and to learning that stays with students and that they can use for the rest of their lives.

To make that happen, I'm inviting you to embed a system across your school that doesn't change, that helps your team stay focused and supports the kind of teaching that causes long-term learning that lasts. Even in the era of overwhelm.

EMBEDDING A TEACHING AND LEARNING MISSION

To create stability in this new era, I encourage you to choose to lead an ambitious teaching and learning mission that stays the same – even when curriculum and content changes. It's a mission that helps your team stay laser-focused on the teaching and learning goals that result in long-term learning outcomes. And that mission? To make learning stick for everyone.

Next, I invite you to embed a simple but compelling teaching and learning system that empowers teachers and school leaders to reach that mission and optimise everything they do. This system requires a shared, common language and a focus on the core activities needed to reach that mission. It includes a collective understanding of the plan teachers use for all their lessons, a deep knowledge of the kinds of student engagement that help make learning stick for everyone, ways to set up learning environments

that create the conditions to reach the mission, and an understanding of how both teacher and student wellbeing serve teaching and learning.

Your leadership team, new and experienced teachers, and instructional leaders might use the system in different ways. But with a clear teaching and learning mission and a system that supports learning embedded across your school, you can create schoolwide alignment and a shared understanding of high-quality teaching and learning that doesn't change. Even when things do.

TAKING ON NEW INFORMATION WITH EASE

A living system is a learning system (Wheatley, 2006). That is, a system must take on new information in order to evolve, adapt and thrive. But in the era of overwhelm, new learning can flood your team. That's because without a mission and system in place, it can be difficult for people to organise that new knowledge quickly and easily. That's why I'm inviting you to embed an open-sourced system, a system that's broad enough to bring together all that you do and open enough to help your team take on new information with ease.

This system I'm talking about will create a shared understanding of the teaching and learning keys that don't change, even when things do and of how to use those keys to reach your teaching and learning mission. For example, the system will inform core activities such as the setting up of the classroom, the kinds of student engagement that makes learning stick for everyone, what to know about students and how to link that knowledge to the content and more.

If a new wellbeing initiative comes to your school, with the right mission and system already in place, your team will quickly see where it fits into and enhances your teaching and learning objectives. Teachers might adjust their classroom set up based on their knowledge of student wellbeing, strengthen how they link content to the lives of their students, and use their deep understanding of engagement to enhance wellbeing for all their students.

With a schoolwide teaching and learning mission and

this open-system approach, everyone can use this new information to continue to advance teaching and learning.

Or, if you notice a part of your system needs more support, you can use staff meetings, or professional learning days to provide times for your teaching team to discuss with each other key aspects of the system. These sessions can help you keep the momentum going and to create a culture of continuous improvement.

GETTING TO EVERYONE'S THINKING

When you have a mission and system embedded across your school, you're helping to support systems thinking. Systems thinking can help your team take on new information with ease and see how everything they do fits together for a specific outcome.

For example, if you asked someone on your team: 'What caused you to have the tables and chairs in that position?' That person can explain by sharing:

- The school's teaching and learning mission.
- The actions they're taking based on the system.
- And how those actions help reach the mission.

This kind of systems thinking can lower your teaching team's stress, increase their effectiveness and help your entire school stay innovative and responsive in a disruptive and changing world.

TIME IN THE ERA OF OVERWHELM

If you've read this far, I commend you. In the era of overwhelm, time and attention are precious commodities. You probably have a million other items competing for your attention. You might even be skimming this article to quickly get through it so you can jump to the next thing. Time for new learning, thinking and reflecting have shrunk in this new era. Programs that are speedy, webinars that are short, social media snippets or quick fixes are the new normal.

That's why it's going to take courage to lead learning in this new era. Embedding a mission and system and creating a shared understanding of it takes time. Any resistance you might face at the start may not be because your team doesn't want to move from good to great teaching. It often comes

from people believing this new initiative will be just one more fad or they're simply protecting their mental load.

But the systems approach I'm talking about will take more than a half-day event to learn about and embed. It will take creative leadership to build in the time, space and long-term engagement needed. Yet, once in place, it can lower stress and create an impact that endures across your entire school. And create stability in the era of overwhelm. As one school leader told me, 'There's now a structure around us and we can easily see how things fit together.' I invite you and your team to be courageous.

A NEW WAY FORWARD

The following year I planted another tomato plant. This time I did something different. In addition to planting it in healthy soil, providing it with fertiliser and watering it as needed, I surrounded the plant with a larger stable trellis. The structure helped focus its growth on the mission at hand.

I also cut it back. I learned that it takes focused energy to yield tomatoes. Rather than let the plant expand in different directions, I pruned it back to help it stay focused. Over time, the plant grew strong and large tomatoes emerged. That year had a harvest with enough left over to share the bounty.

LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How might embedding a teaching and learning mission help advance teaching and learning across our school?
2. How might we use systems thinking rather than strategies thinking across our school?
3. What kind of system can we surround our school with that will create a shared language (rather than strategies) around high-quality teaching and learning? If we have one, how often do we discuss it?
4. What structures can we put into place to help our school take on new information without the overwhelm?
5. How much thinking time does our school have? How can we create more?

For a list of References, email qassp@qassp.org.au



About the Author

Dr William DeJean is host of the Unleash Learning podcast and YouTube channel. He has 25 years' experience as an educator, including as a university lecturer, and started his career as a high school teacher in San Diego. William is the author of *Make Learning Stick for Everyone* and *Unleash Learning*. He can be reached at www.unleash-learning.com or directly at william@unleash-learning.com