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Reimagining learning

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Challenge. Purpose. Courage. These three words have defined the 2020 school year for Kilbreda College, and indeed for educational communities around the world. This year will forever be remembered as one like no other, a year when we were forced to think on our feet and rely on our hearts in order to determine the way forward. The year in which plans were crushed and, paradoxically, the year in which visions were realised.

What part did ‘Challenge’, ‘Purpose’ and ‘Courage’ play in the first six months of 2020 and how will they speak into the months and years that follow? What defines these words and how did they breathe life into Kilbreda’s response to the global pandemic and the resulting school closures and re-openings?

Challenge

“The situation of being faced with something that needs great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person’s ability” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

The word ‘Challenge’ conjures up a myriad of thoughts, with visions of obstacle courses and seemingly impossible tasks to overcome. As with most challenges we face in our lives, we often experience more success when we have support and can rely on others to help us through. When teams come together in true collaboration there is

a real strength that surpasses the project they are working on and transcends into a deeper connection and sense of purpose for the journey that lies ahead. Support of each other through a process of intense change provides opportunities to build authentic relationships and the sense of a common vision. “It is during times of uncertainty and

change that great opportunities come about to build the foundations for something even better” (Munby, 2019, p. 117). Knowing that we were all in this together, supporting each other, brought comfort and a sense of calm to an intense situation.

The concept of challenge is not new for schools. Every day school leaders and educators face numerous demands on their time, their skills and their ability to solve complex problems. However, a global pandemic was an unexpected challenge, something that we did not have a plan for, indeed had never imagined that we would ever need to have a plan for. We were starting from scratch. The pace at which decisions were required to be made at the onset of this crisis could have been the impetus for confusion and chaos, but when time was given to research, sit, think, share and question we found ourselves in a much better position to meet the demands of the road we were about to travel.

The timing of the term break was an opportunity to consider how the college would meet the challenge that was before us and best cater for the needs of the community. An opportunity to rethink and reimagine how education might look when operating remotely. Discussions were lively, collegial and long! After much deliberation and consideration, we boldly concurred that as a college we were willing to unlock the traditional schooling structures and look at education through a new lens. We weren't afraid to imagine ourselves teaching, learning and leading differently. We were driven by a united and focused goal, 'to do what was best for our community'.

The challenge had been accepted, we were ready to begin our adventure into remote learning. Bringing together our research and varying skills we were able to build our capacity to reframe our immediate future and look forward to the opportunity to consider how our community might be influenced by this experience when we returned to a new normal. "By embodying trust, establishing a shared view of the future, focusing on the common good and cultivating a sense of belonging" (University of Minnesota, n.d.) we were supporting one another and setting our sights on building upon our current successes once the immediate crisis passed.

These were challenging, but inspiring times.

Purpose

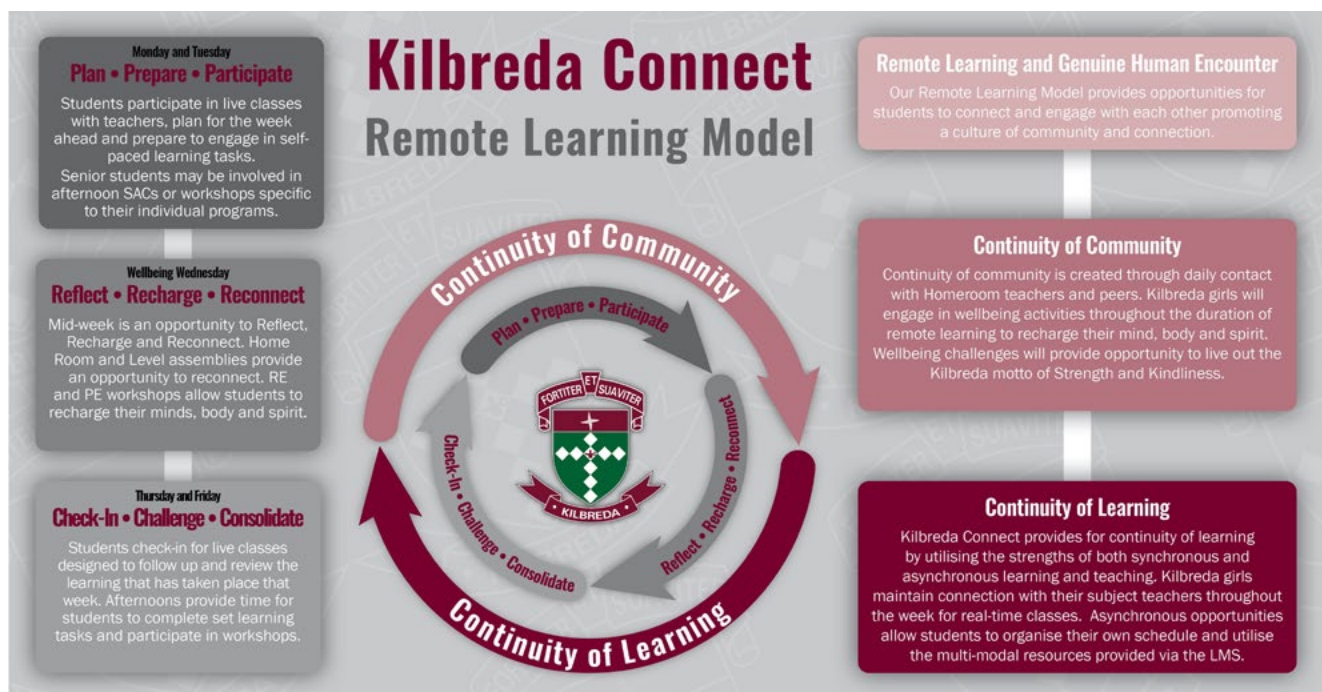
"Your life purpose consists of the central motivating aims of your life—the reasons you get up in the morning. Purpose can guide life decisions, influence behaviour,

shape goals, offer a sense of direction, and create meaning." (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Kilbreda College has a solid reputation for providing wonderful and varied learning opportunities for girls that allow them to thrive and contribute to the growth of their faith and their sense of self, while developing a commitment to the values of the college. It is a place where the community is built on Brigidine traditions, where all are welcomed and people feel a strong sense of connection and belonging. It was important that these factors were at the heart of our remote learning model, Kilbreda Connect. We recognised that remote learning could not replicate the on-campus learning community and so we set about our task of designing, developing and implementing a model for remote learning that kept students at the core of all discussions and decisions.

Central to our planning was the wellbeing of students and staff, with the underpinning concepts of 'continuity of learning' and 'continuity of community'. We needed to get the combination right in order to best serve our students, families and teachers. Kilbreda Connect was designed to optimise student connectivity and participation during a period of isolation and physical disconnection.

The Kilbreda College remote learning model embraced the opportunity to reimagine learning and had at its core the considerations of student wellbeing and the provision for opportunities to continue learning in a sustainable manner. The model was based on research from around the world, taking into account information from schools that moved to online learning, due to COVID-19, long before Australia, and other accounts of remote learning



due to natural disasters or the provision of education in remote communities. “Evidence suggests that online/ distance education operates best as a system of dynamic, interrelated components...[The combination of]...these components foster a learning community that is driven by pedagogy and incorporates a range of activities, which enables flexible delivery” (AITSL, 2020).

Kilbreda Connect offered both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. Research indicated that the nature of remote learning was best suited to asynchronous learning, with short and regular bursts of synchronous learning facilitated by teachers. It was with this understanding that the Kilbreda Connect timetable provided for these learning and teaching methodologies and allowed opportunities for students to continue to connect with their teachers and their peers so that they could retain a sense of community and belonging in what was potentially a period of isolation and uncertainty.

This combination of learning and teaching strategies represented a massive shift in our education model, structure and mindset. It was important that in communicating this message to our community that we were able to articulate the rationale of the model and demonstrate how it complemented our core purpose as a college to cater for the academic, emotional, social, spiritual and physical needs of all community members.

The strength of the Kilbreda College community has been built over many years on strong enduring relationships. We were conscious of adopting routines and structures that promoted genuine human encounter during remote learning. Our purpose: to ensure that our

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students and staff didn’t feel a sense of isolation and dislocation during the period of school closures. As a college we demonstrated that we were prepared to walk in solidarity with students and staff as we continued our shared journey and discovered new ways of connecting. At a time when we were unable to be together physically, we were determined to do all that we could to remain connected.

The goal of cultivating wellbeing in the school community and creating supportive environments and resources to promote student and staff wellbeing, is a fundamental tenet of the Kilbreda College Strategic Plan and was a key determinant of the inclusion of purposeful wellbeing time and activities for students and staff. ‘Wellbeing Wednesdays’ at Kilbreda College were about student agency and autonomy. The day was created to

encourage our students and staff to reflect, recharge and reconnect. The program each week was designed to kindle curiosity and provide opportunities for students to explore the elements of their personal wellbeing and discover the science of positive psychology. Each Wednesday students had access to a wellbeing workbook that consisted of a series of self-directed learning tasks, focusing on building the strengths of the individual to develop resilience to overcome challenges and enhance personal wellbeing. Staff, meanwhile, had the opportunity to engage in small discussion groups designed to provide support and connection during a period of remote working.

At the heart of what we do as passionate educators is our “moral purpose: a commitment to ensure that we improve the learning and the lives of the children and young people we serve. It is at the core of what drives us” (Munby, 2019, p. 55). While remote learning did not provide us with our normal opportunities to connect as a community, it did provide us with the time to contemplate the core values that are at the centre of our vision as a college, and challenged us to consider our purpose in shaping our remote learning model to ensure that these core values were reflected in all of our planning and decision making.

Courage

“Evolution and incremental change is important and we need it, but we’re desperate for real revolution that requires a different type of courage and creativity.” (Brown, 2012, p. 186)

As contemporary educators we often find ourselves imagining how things could be different, but lack the courage or the impetus to take the first step towards the change we want to see in the world, in our professions and in our communities.

The fear of being different and challenging the norm often holds us back and stops us from realising the true potential of our teams and our schools, and as a result, our students.

When faced with sudden and unexpected disruption to our lives, and the forced necessity to do things differently we realise that the fear is not that hard to overcome. It just takes a spark of an idea and a team of bold educators who can fan the flame and see it come to life. “Too often in education we don’t want to try something new until we see examples of other schools or teachers who have already done it. Advances in education don’t come from imitation; they come from innovation” (Guskey, 2017).

Kilbreda College has a proud history of leaders who have followed their hearts and implemented curriculum design and programs that have demonstrated innovation

and the desire to do what is right for their community. We found ourselves once again at that moment in time, when we were required to step up and to face the challenge that was before us.

When the need is great and our purpose, to make a positive difference in the lives of our students, is threatened, we possess the fortitude to change how we do what we do in order to continue to support our community. We made the massive shift to online learning in the space of a few weeks, and we did it well. We didn't simply change the way in which we 'delivered' our lessons, but we dared to reimagine the norms of the day to day, and created a purpose built remote learning program in order to provide for the changed circumstances in which students and teachers found themselves.

We have been encouraged by the support of our parents and community. They have blessed us with kind words, and messages of affirmation that brightened the day and lifted the spirits of tired educators. We have been motivated by the engagement of our students and their ability to adapt and accept their changed circumstances with strength and kindness. Our students have reached out to each other, to their teachers and to the wider community and demonstrated hope, courage and compassion.

We mustered the courage to challenge the way things have always been done. We provided time for students to take responsibility for their individual learning journeys and develop learning disposition that will serve them well into the future. "If we want learners who can thrive in turbulent, complex time, apply thinking to new situations and change the world, we must reimagine learning: what's important to be learned, how learning is fostered, where learning happens, and how we measure success. This means creating environments that challenge, provoke, stimulate, and celebrate learning" (Fullan, Quinn & McEachen, 2018, p. 13). As educators we need to create opportunities for students to 'uncover' and 'discover' the world around them. We have a responsibility to our community to create a school for tomorrow, today.

Do we possess the courage, as a college, as a community of educators to accept the challenge and work towards the creation of a new model of schooling that serves the needs of our students today and for the lives they will lead tomorrow? "Like the early pioneers of our school system a century or more ago, our role is to lead change within the context that we now find ourselves. To believe that things can be even better for children and then lead in such a way as to turn that vision into a reality" (Munby, 2019, p. 118).

As we move towards a new tomorrow and reimagine learning environments that cater for the diverse needs of students and provide opportunities that allow them to flourish and thrive, we need to consider ways to move

from our traditional and classical structures of schooling to an educational paradigm that is more contemporary and befitting of students living in a rapidly changing and global world. "Such a reimagining of education is something we desperately need [in order] to address the lives that today's learners are likely to live" (Perkins, 2014, p. 5).

By harnessing the lessons from our period of remote learning and the positive community response to our preparation, communication and implementation of Kilbreda Connect, we are well placed to take bold steps towards imagining how a Kilbreda education might look and feel different in the near future.

As we make our way back to the classrooms and students and teachers are once again together onsite, we need to ensure that we do not wipe our hands clean of this experience and put our remote learning models on a shelf to gather dust. We find ourselves on the cusp of great change and we need to see this "as an opportunity to shape something to be even better. This is our time to really make a difference" (Munby, 2019, p. 130). Just as our predecessors had courage to challenge the status quo now is the time to once again follow our hearts and design a school for tomorrow, where the needs of students are placed at the centre of all that we do. To take the time to look beyond the horizon and consider how our future might be different from our past. ▲

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