Connect
supporting student participation

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Another year - that’s 28 for Connect! Surely we’re growing up and thinking about leaving home now?!

The end of this year has been marked by a new federal government that has talked of an ‘education revolution’. While we’re excited by those possibilities, we’re concerned that there hasn’t been much talk about the roles that young people will play in that revolution. Can we have a ‘revolution’ that leaves young people voiceless, that doesn’t change the relationship of young people to decision-making and learning within schools and systems? We’ll be watching to see what this revolution means to the roles that young people will play.

These are both promising and positive times, with strong continuing interest in the active participation of young people (including policy papers), but also times when we face significant challenges. The year was marked by the demise of PASTA, on the one hand, but by significant funding support for the VicSRC on the other.

Time for a Culture Shift?

One of the challenges remains to ensure that the active participation of students in making and implementing decisions (including participation in purposeful and productive learning) is recognised and becomes a reality at all levels of education. As we work with students in classrooms and schools, in Student Councils, networks, clusters and state groups, we are aware that we can win small victories, but make little impact on the broad systems and the deeper attitudes that shape and constrain that work.

We are cautious about establishing specific student-led initiatives for fear that those students will meet antagonistic or uncaring responses. We are also wary of the effort involved in establishing individual initiatives, while leaving those broader attitudes and structures unchanged. We remain concerned about the systematic exclusion of students from decision-making roles; we remain worried by attitudes that blame young people, or that undermine trust. We remain distressed by the break-down in commitment, and the antagonism or lack of interest that marks many relationships between students, teachers and schools.

Do we need to work more strategically to influence those structures and attitudes directly? What would such a culture shift look like? How might we move towards that?

I’m part of a small group struggling with these questions. We wonder if it is time to bring together those who are thinking similarly. Do we need a more structured conversation - about what an education system would be like if it seriously included students as partners, about what a school would be like that fully respected all students as competent and actively engaged, about what a curriculum would be like that was purposeful and productive, and about what relationships in education would be like if students, teachers and others worked together as co-learners?

Do we need to talk about what actions we should take to make that cultural change - that education revolution - a reality?

Are you interested in taking part in that discussion? Would you be willing to commit to some structured conversations towards that end in 2008? Let me know and we’ll see where this might lead us.

Roger Holdsworth
Our primary school students are asking why some students are already disengaged from school – and what influences this. They’re spending time researching these questions, and then planning to initiate some changes to improve our schools. After all, they tell us, they have important knowledge on this. In many ways, they’re the experts!

These students are members of our Student Action Teams that are tackling disengagement issues in our two northern suburban Melbourne primary schools: Penders Grove (in Thornbury) and Preston South (obviously in Preston South!). The teams include a cross-section of students from grades 3, 4 and 5 – including some students who have, themselves, been disengaged from school.

The Student Initiatives in School Engagement project is our two schools’ response to the challenge and support from the CASS Foundation* for approaches that address primary school student disengagement. We are one of seven initiatives being taken in schools across Melbourne.

We want to tell you in this introductory article about some of the ways the students have been thinking about and researching engagement.

Opening Up Engagement
We held weekly planning meetings for the project throughout the start of 2007 with a support consultant from The University of Melbourne. These regular meetings provided significant professional development for all involved as well as an opportunity to reflect and gain insight into the directions of the project itself.

Initially all students in each of our schools were teased with posters around the schools, that invited them to think about engagement issues. They started with photos with blank thought bubbles, and then questions appeared, such as: “What switches me on and off at school?” This created a growing awareness of upcoming student forums on those issues, and questions concerning engagement formed an important point of discussion among students both in class and around the school.

The initial forums were held for all students from grades 4, 5 and 6 at each school – in separate schools, and in separate grade-level forums - in week 5 of Term 1. By this stage, discussions

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* The CASS Foundation is a small private foundation which provides grants for medical and scientific research and education projects. In 2004, the Foundation commissioned researchers at Monash University to conduct a review of current research and practice about student engagement. Their report, Student disengagement from primary schooling: a review of research and practice, led the Foundation to provide funding in 2007 for seven projects in Victorian primary schools designed to improve student engagement. For further information about the CASS Foundation, or to read or download a copy of the Monash report, Student disengagement from primary schooling... please visit the CASS website: www.cassfoundation.org

These teasers prompted discussions prior to the initial forum.
had led to the initial concept of a light switch as a descriptor for ‘engagement’ in student-friendly terminology, and so these forums were titled ‘Switched On/Switched Off’. The purpose of the forums was to introduce students to the concepts of student engagement and invite them to consider their participation in their schools’ Student Action Teams (SATs).

At each of the forums, the staff team led the students through a range of reflective experiences on engagement using drama, art and discussion. For example, working in small groups and talking about the issues, students drew large-scale body maps that they then annotated, inside and outside, with both observations and feelings that described a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ day at school. In a drama-based activity, groups of students prepared short role-plays around ‘hidden thoughts’ associated with some engagement scenarios: “Will I go to school today?” and so on.

**Forming the Student Action Teams**

At the conclusion of the forums, students were invited to nominate themselves as members of the SAT. Some otherwise or apparently disengaged students, who did not nominate themselves, were identified by school staff and approached and invited to participate in the SATs.
The final compositions of the SATs were decided in consultation with classroom teachers and included a mix of students who were both highly engaged and enthusiastic, and some who were ‘switched off’ from school, but still interested to take part in this project. A group of 10 to 12 students from grades 4, 5 and 6 (with a bias to grades 4 and 5 in order to encourage continuity into 2008-9) were accepted into each of the two SATs. These students reflected a range of abilities, backgrounds and levels of engagement. In particular it was felt that these students had ‘expertise’ and knowledge about disengagement that it was important to have represented within the teams. The make-up of the SATs has provided schools with an important insight into disengagement and engagement from a very personal perspective.

On With the Teams

Students initially met and explored their own reasons for wanting to be a part of the SISE Project. They participated in sharing and team building activities around defining what they understood engagement in school to be. Students attended these meetings, took part in discussion and activities, and then regularly returned to their own classrooms and shared their experiences with their peers. Sometimes they took part in informal discussions, or collected responses to surveys. Sometimes they ran lessons in their classrooms and contributed to a growing common understanding of what engagement is.

The student teams soon suggested that engagement was not like a light being switched on or off but more like a meter that had a range of levels. Students worked on defining their understandings of the different levels of engagement by constructing different types of meters such as engage-o-meters and tri-o-meters! These engagement detectors were shared, the engagement levels defined and developed further in classrooms.

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Student Reflections:

Students were asked to share with others why they put their hands up to be a part of the SATs. Here are some of their responses:

“... I’m interested in why people are switched off at school.”
“... I want to survey and interview people.”
“... I want to meet students from other schools to find out what they’re doing and get ideas.”
“... lots has changed in my life and I need to make some important decisions.”
“... I want to think in different ways.”
“... I wanted to get out of class.”

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Students Action Team Members
Students developed descriptors of what low, medium and high levels of engagement looked and felt like.

After students worked on individual class engage-o-meters, they collaborated to compile their ideas into a single agreed switch-o-meter that described the various levels of engagement.

**Sharing Experiences:**

**The Second Student Forum (First Combined Forum)**

On 24 April, the two Student Action Teams met at Penders Grove Primary School to share their definitions and understandings of engagement. The teachers, school Principals and the facilitator, as well as Lyndall Jones of the CASS Foundation attended.

This Second Forum encouraged students from both schools to work together to enact a series of scenarios that would depict the agreed levels of engagement. The students had first to develop some ‘scenes’ from each school that showed how they worked with their classes around engagement issues. They then formed some mixed school groups, with each group allocated one point on the engagement scales. They had to provide a ‘freeze frame’ to show what they agreed this would look like.

The students here are showing how a group working at levels 0, 1 and 4 on the engage-o-meter would be collaborating.

This Second Forum was an important event that helped define and celebrate the work students had completed at each school. The forum generated further interest and ideas in researching engagement at the individual schools. A sense of collaboration on engagement was fostered and students left eager to renew their learning partnerships in the future.

Upon returning to their schools, students continued to reflect on defining the levels of engagement and building on what was discussed with the new information they had gained.

*Photos by Lyndall Jones, CASS Foundation*
Investigating Engagement Within Schools

Having completed the initial task of interpreting and reaching an agreed understanding of engagement, students embarked on researching engagement in their classes. The SATs defined the key research questions that provided focus for their research in the coming terms. These questions included:

- What are the situations that result in people being more engaged or less engaged in our classes?
- Where in the school and our classrooms do we find people who are most switched on?

Students have begun their research by taking the engagement ‘pulse’ of their classmates throughout the day. Every 15-30 minutes, all students in each class (all grades 3/4 to 5/6) stopped to complete individual readings of their current engagement levels (pulse). During the day, the SAT members also recorded the events of the day. They used the sheet (below) to record their results.

Teacher Reflection:

It was one of our first SAT meetings and I was trying to explain what engagement was all about. “Kids who are engaged have certain behaviours as do students who are disengaged,” I explained.

Julie sat at the desk with her head slumped into her arms and eyes buried. “Look at Julie,” I said pointing to her as I spoke. She didn’t move. “Right now she’s not really interested. She’s disengaged!” Her head thrust upward and she sat up straight. “I am so engaged!” she replied forcefully. “I’m just concentrating.”

A discussion followed demonstrating the difficulty in defining behaviours that reflect disengagement. Perhaps, as a teacher, I need to think before I jump to conclusions about student engagement! (Jeff Jackson)

These individual readings are now being compiled into class averages, separated by grade level and gender. These are being used to paint a broader picture of the engagement levels of the class throughout the day. The SAT is now beginning to identify the relationships between the nature of the events and the average levels of engagement.

On the next page is an example of one class that recorded their individual levels of engagement and then compiled the average. They will use this data to identify the relationship between events in the classroom and school and levels of engagement reported by students.
Analysing the Data and Developing Hypotheses and Plans

It is planned that the SATs will look for patterns in the data and then start formulating recommendations for the schools based on that data. Students have started this process and are already beginning to formulate tentative hypotheses: “this might be because the activities are book-based here...” Teachers are similarly starting to look at this data and develop hypotheses about the timing of types of activities within classrooms (more structured at the start of days) and what the impact is of this.

On an individual level, the SATs are also working on identifying students who might be considered to be disengaged using school attendance records. They are drafting key questions to ask individual students to help understand engagement behaviours in the school.

Action Taken by Schools

As a consequence of the research being undertaken by the students, and the initial analysis of results, the schools are already initiating some actions to address student needs. For example, at one school, the ‘pulse’ readings indicated that recess and lunchtime were periods of disengagement for a particular group of female students. The students also recognised this and linked it to issues of safety that had been identified in the official Student Attitudes Survey. The school has responded, as part of this project, by employing a support worker to develop and run positive play at these times. While the need for such a worker had been planned in general terms prior to the project, the students’ research and knowledge has focused and targeted the initiative.

Outcomes So Far

We can already see the following outcomes:

Definitions of Engagement

Students have developed their own definitions of engagement. Our definition has been reshaped numerous times in order to accommodate new understandings about the nature of engagement. Within the teams, there has been intensive discussion, and students are able to use the term ‘engagement’ seriously and meaningfully, and reflect on factors associated with it. This growing understanding of engagement has also occurred within the broader student population, though at a more general level. The student discussion has also had an unexpected impact in that it has begun to reshape teacher perceptions of engagement and disengagement (and its links with activities) in the classroom and in the school as a whole. Such developments will continue as the student data is analysed and discussed further.

Growing Ownership

Students have been surprised by their invitation to take control and lead the direction of the project. This devolution of power has also given students within the...
Teacher Reflection:
I chose Jill to be in the Student Action Team as she was always a shy member of the class and very apprehensive to share her thoughts and ideas. Since being part of the SAT I have watched Jill lead lessons in her classroom and talk in front of her peers with increasing ease and confidence. Jill still has a long road ahead of her in terms of public speaking but the Student Action Team has helped to develop Jill’s confidence and she has made better learning choices. This has been one of the exciting outcomes of the project already! (Michelle Smith)

SATs (and students generally through their input to the project) a voice and empowered them to consider their own actions and responsibilities concerning engagement.

Within the Student Action Teams, students with low self-esteem or who have had difficulty learning in the classroom, have gained confidence and satisfaction in their expert status. This growing confidence has been a resource to draw upon back in the classroom, particularly as they have led discussions and become ‘teachers’.

This ownership has been enhanced with the collaborative work between Student Action Teams in both PSPS and PGPS. A number of the students spoke of the significance of sharing between schools and the relationships established as central to the enjoyment and learning of the project.

Wider Interest and Support
The work of the Student Action Teams has already had wider impact within the local community and amongst parents.

The local community has expressed their interest by contacting the Student Action Teams and inviting them to discuss and share their experiences in the local paper.

Looking Forward
In 2008, the Student Action Teams will continue in each school, supported by teacher time release and external facilitation/consultation. Staff and/or student teams will continue to meet weekly. The focus for the work of student teams will be to discuss, debate and decide on action that they or the schools can take to address their research findings.

Students will then be involved with implementing these actions and with monitoring the impact of them. This will necessarily involve them with further research, both on specific topics and on outcomes. So, for example, one team has already begun thinking about responses to bullying and name-calling, and how this links with engagement. They will need to look into existing knowledge about reasons for bullying, as well as their experience and understanding of this, as they consider possible responses. They will also need to ask and answer - with evidence - the question about whether they have made any differences, and how they know it is their intervention that has changed outcomes.

It’s been an exciting journey so far; we’re sure that it will continue to be so.

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Michelle Smith: smith.michelle.m2@edumail.vic.gov.au
Some Student Councils will return to school in 2008 and, on day one, will already have begun work. They will have plans for semester 1 that they have written before school finishes for 2007 - and the first day back, they will begin implementing them.

Most SRCs however, will barely exist until mid way through term 1. Schools make excuses about how ‘crazy’ term 1 is, about how the year 7s (or 8s) (who might be new to the school) need a chance to settle in before you can run elections and you can’t possibly begin without them. So perhaps your SRC elections don’t take place until week 4 of term 1! And this is where schools who elected their representatives in term 4 of the previous year have a significant advantage.

Jump Start is the name of an SRC conference hosted by Second Strike. It is designed as a fast paced intensive seminar to help SRCs plan for the following year. Here are some activities from it.

**Some of the things you can do today to be ready:**

- Hold elections in term 4 or late term 3.
- Host a planning and training day for your new representatives in term 4 or early term 1. Start planning it now.
- Set the date of your first meeting and let all SRC members know when it is now. Set all the dates of your meetings.
- Plan your calendar for at least semester 1 (see the example here). Book in major dates with the Daily Planner or Timetable coordinator at your school. Do this quickly, as every teacher in the school is starting to book dates for their excursions and other functions, so it will already be a challenge to get the date you want.
- Start thinking about ‘branding’ your SRC with a professional image. What will be the look of your advertising? Will it have a theme or specific colours throughout the year? Do you have a logo or mascot? Can you create one?
- Contact your parents’ association and introduce yourself.
- Make friends with the canteen staff, the office staff and anyone else who you might need as a supporter - rather than an adversary. It is essential to establish a good working relationship as early as possible.

- **Charities:** Either hand over responsibility for raising money for charity to another student group, or ensure that your SRC time is not consumed with charity work, by setting a maximum number of organisations you will support - maybe even select which ones. One per term? Can they be something relevant to the school as well as a good cause?
- Remember the end of semester and end of year parties. There should be other celebrations along the way too: everytime you achieve something. That doesn’t just mean the successful completion of a project - it might be celebrating that a really good poster was designed. The SRC should be fun as well as productive.

If you can get all this done, you’re well on your way to becoming a powerful Student Council for 2008. It looks like a lot and people ask how an SRC can be expected to achieve all this in one year. The fact is, some SRCs are achieving even more. They capitalise on the secret time, this time, before the year starts. By putting plans in place now you give your self a jump start on the next year and a lot more becomes possible as a result.

David Mould, Second Strike

www.second-strike.com

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**Sample 2008 Semester 1 SRC Calendar:**

**Week 1:** First meeting
**Week 2:** Year 7 SRC elections
**Week 3:** Swimming Carnival
**Week 4:** SRC Training Day
**Week 5:** Casual Clothes Day
**Week 6:** SRC Teacher goes to a Professional Development Seminar
**Week 7:** Run a survey
**Week 8:**
**Week 9:**
**Week 10:** SRC Open Forum

**School holidays**

**Week 1:** First SRC meeting
**Week 2:**
**Week 3:** Bring in a speaker/entertainer
**Week 4:**
**Week 5:** SRC Event: Comedy Debate? Talent quest?
**Week 6:**
**Week 7:** Meeting other SRCs in the area
**Week 8:** Casual Clothes day + student activity/forum
**Week 9:**
**Week 10:** Mid year SRC review and celebration
The VicSRC - the statewide organisation of secondary students in Victoria - will be working with students and schools to increase student voice in schools and the wider community, under a new two-year funding agreement with the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

The Department has also asked the VicSRC to identify, promote and support ways in which students can be involved in school governance and School Council decision-making processes. The VicSRC will be assisting students to organise and facilitate student forums, and will coordinate student feedback and advice on key educational issues. Some of these issues will be initiated and defined by students; in other instances, students will be responding to Department requests for student feedback on their initiatives and programs.

This support places the VicSRC in a strong position to carry out its aims of strengthening SRCs and being a representative body for Victorian secondary school students.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, and the formal agreement with the Department of Education is made with YACVic on behalf of the VicSRC. It will enable YACVic to continue employment of a project officer to support the work of the VicSRC and its student Executive.

Priorities for the VicSRC will be to support the establishment of cluster groups of SRCs, and to develop student forums and other events. The VicSRC is, through its website, newsletter and contributions to Connect, already identifying and promoting successful examples of student engagement and student participation strategies, and this will be extended.

Join the VicSRC!

The VicSRC encourages all secondary student councils to become a member. There are enormous advantages - and the VicSRC needs YOU. Details on the VicSRC webpage at:

www.yacvic.org.au/vicsrc/membership

The VicSRC is based at the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and can be reached there on 03 9267 3744 or toll-free from outside Melbourne on 1300 727 176 or by e-mail: vicsrc@yacvic.org.au

Do you have an SRC Webpage?

Some SRCs have asked the VicSRC for information about individual SRC web sites or web pages. We would be interested to put a link to your SRC web page from the VicSRC web pages. (We would also be interested for you to include a link to the VicSRC site on your webpage.) Email the URL of your SRC web page to us:

vicsrc@yacvic.org.au

You could also tell us about any links to other sites you have found useful.
Setting Up and Supporting an SRC Cluster

Student Councils are meeting locally to share information and advice about their work and to provide support for each other. Such local SRC Clusters can also support a lot of other activities, such as training and common action.

However, forming and maintaining such clusters has often been difficult for students. Sometimes they meet with enthusiasm, then struggle to keep going. Some find it hard to identify the support that is needed. In particular, there are practical difficulties with keeping in contact, circulating minutes, calling effective meetings and so on.

And while there is encouragement at a statewide level for student clusters, there is a limit to what a single organisation can do. There must be local solutions, with local funding (if required).

Let’s look at one example, and see what this shows us. And we should stress that this is just one way of developing a supporter a cluster - there maybe many different ways to do this.

Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster

Students from five secondary schools in Melbourne’s south-east have recently been meeting to form the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster. They are still sorting out their journey, but are enthusiastic about the possibilities for working together.

They have identified the following issues as important stages in starting off their group:

1. Kicking off the cluster

The initiative to set up the first meeting was taken by the local coordinator of the School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) program; he sees such a network as meeting the program’s goals of supporting active student participation. The coordinator called the first meetings in contact with the VicSRC, and continues to play a key role in these early stages: reminding schools about meetings and facilitating the students’ discussions. The early meetings have focused on establishing clear understandings of why various people - the students, the schools, SFYS - want to set up a local student network.

As some of these schools are actively planning school amalgamations, they see the network as complementing and feeding into this.

2. Identifying the potential schools

There are about 12 secondary schools in the local area (defined by the School Focused Youth Services’s area of responsibility), within relatively easy travel distances. All of these are invited to meetings and a core group continues to be active. As the group develops, further consideration will be given to inviting other schools into more active participation.

3. Identifying a focus for discussions and action

Students initially discussed what a network or cluster could do, and decided on a focus around combatting bullying. They went back to their schools and did some research to find out about the issue, and about what schools were already doing. They shared their research at their next meeting, along with reports on the status of their SRCs. While they continue to plan student- led responses to bullying, they also then realised it was important that their SRCs are strong and effective - and hence able to act on these issues, so have decided to concentrate on building this competence at the start of 2008.

4. Identifying on-going support

The students recognised that it would be difficult for them to facilitate the inter-school meetings and to carry out the back-up secretarial work. Some of this can be done at a school level, with students hosting meetings and providing refreshments, and with teachers providing transport (and sometimes staying for meetings or, in other cases, dropping students off at the host school). But someone has to phone round with reminders and send minutes round. Also, until students become more experienced in chairing meetings, they decided that someone was needed to facilitate the actual meetings. SFYS can provide short-term support, but this is one of several local initiatives for them.

So the students have applied for local SFYS funding to support their network. If successful, they will use that money to pay for organisational and meeting work and expenses (including facilitation support), so that the students can direct their network without getting bogged down in its administration. They have identified an appropriate funding source and also possibilities for the part-time employment of someone to assist the group.

5. A formal arrangement

A formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been drawn up to specify the responsibilities and expectation of schools (through their SRC support teachers), students (as representatives of their SRCs) and School Focused Youth Services. With funding, this MOU will be extended to specify the role of the employed facilitator and support person.

6. Links with other students

The Cluster group has decided to see themselves as a local cluster of the statewide VicSRC, thus linking in with (and supporting) other students across the state. This also provides them with access to the knowledge and resources of the VicSRC.

The VicSRC is supporting many other local clusters or networks of student representatives to develop across Victoria. They are identifying key persons within each area who can take the initiative to call such clusters together, and then assist students to identify local funding sources that will enable them to continue a network - to support the improved operation of SRCs, and to address issues in common. The experiences of each of these clusters - such as the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster - adds to our knowledge of the different ways in which this can be done.

Roger Holdsworth
For more information about the Greater Dandenong SRC Cluster, contact the VicSRC, or Troy Macris at:
Troy.Macris@southernhealth.org.au
For a long time we have been negotiating the curriculum, now we are starting to negotiate the pedagogy. We are going beyond negotiating the what and why of what happens in the classroom, to negotiating how it all happens. This article explores what has been happening in one particular English class (9/10D) at Nanango SHS over years nine and ten, and the follow up in subsequent years. Nearly all quotations from students are from a reflection day at the end of their year ten year when we attempted to sum up what we had done and what the students (and I) had learned.

I believed that since what we were doing was not working, then there was certainly nothing to lose by listening to the students’ views. The workshop involved the students identifying moments when they really felt they had learned something and enjoyed doing so – moments or lessons when the classroom really came alive for them. From these individual experiences the students extracted the elements that became the basis for our classroom pedagogy (there were lots of pieces of butcher’s paper!).

They are listed below:

1: Common Elements of Good Learning for 9D

- Variety
- Group work
- Making things
- Agreed goals to work towards
- Hands on activities
- New and fresh ideas
- Choice
- Being treated as equals
- Acknowledging that everyone is different
- Relevance to society
- Everyone entitled to their own opinion
- Role plays
- Communication between students and staff
- Rewards
- Students have to take responsibility
- Respect

Two students then volunteered to develop a statement that encapsulated these ideas. Interestingly the language of the
statement is all their own. The class agreed that this summed up their view of good teaching and learning and it became the basis of all our work over the following eighteen months:

2: 9D Good Teaching and Learning

Good teaching and learning involves a variety of new and exciting ideas for classroom activities. Where possible, activities should be hands on, creative and set in different environments. At the beginning of a unit, students and teachers should set goals to be accomplished by the end of that unit. Where possible, students should be given choices because everyone has different interests and learning abilities. Students need to be respected and treated as equals.

By 9D, Nanango SHS May 2003

The development of this statement was the first critical step in our journey, as, for the first time, these thirteen-year-old students were thinking about what teaching and learning is all about.

Further group and whole class discussion led to a statement of student responsibilities: if the ideas behind the classroom pedagogy were going to work in practice, the students had to acknowledge their own responsibilities. Surprisingly, (or perhaps not), this was the suggestion of one of the students. It proved critical over the two years of the project to return to this document to remind students of their responsibilities and to update it on one occasion.

3: Student responsibilities for 9D

In order for good teaching and learning students must:

• bring all necessary materials to class;
• co-operate;
• respect everyone else and listen;
• get involved;
• use common sense;
• be responsible;
• ask questions;
• follow class expectations;
• have fun.

We then identified a number of key words from the classroom pedagogy that needed further definition, to make sure we all agreed on what was meant by terms such as “different environments”, “new and exciting” and “hands on”. The students (in groups) brainstormed examples of these that were then collated by the core group of students. These documents then formed the basis of our planning of our work in English for semester two and the following year, as well as the learning experiences, and were referred to regularly and consistently over the time.

Finally, we came up with a process to plan our lessons. This became the method we employed in all subsequent negotiation – first getting a class consensus on the general direction and then meeting with smaller volunteer groups in lunch hours to plan in more detail, before taking these suggestions back to the whole class for ratification. The numbers in these volunteer groups varied but by the middle of year ten there would usually be eight to ten students at each meeting – nearly half the class. Interestingly, the students who came to those meetings tended to be the most able students and those who find school the most challenging. The students “in the middle” were less frequent attendees.

Later, some students summed up their reasons for coming to these lunch time meetings: “We come to planning meetings because we all like the independence and responsibility we get from these
meetings and that having a say in our learning is so new and revolutionary that we want to come to meetings because we like to.”

Critical to the whole process was the use of group discussion, followed by whole class discussion to reach consensus. The small group discussion gave the less confident students the opportunity to give their ideas in an unthreatening environment, and the whole class discussions allow for the development of consensus. This can often take quite some time, but is always worth it, and signals to the students that their ideas are valued and will be acted on.

**What if? - The fantasy unit: our first success:**

**Initial Planning:** Towards the end of semester one, Year 9, we worked together to plan the what of the next semester’s work – students individually and then in groups wrote down what they would like to do or study for the semester. These were collated. The most popular choices are a bit of a surprise (though perhaps not – they were drawing on their experiences of nine years of English classrooms and probably confined their thinking to what they had done before). By consensus they agreed:

In semester two, we want to learn about poetry, novels, films, spelling, and story writing through choice, role plays, discussions, writing, art work, and an excursion around fantasy films, and we began by developing goals for the unit and suggestions for films to watch. The Fellowship of the Ring was the inarguable first choice by all the students on the planning committee (the series was big in cinemas at the time).

This was the second truly pivotal moment in the evolution of the process and of the students’ growing understanding of teaching and learning. For the first time they were confronted with the question, “Why do you want to do this?” The students unanimously answered, “Because it will be fun!” I asked them to look beyond the idea of fun to articulate educational outcomes of watching this film – they came back with a half page manifesto of why they had to watch the film! Some real growth in understanding and the generation of new knowledge occurred here as they considered the goals of their own learning. After that, I never had to ask “why?” again – all their suggestions for class activities were accompanied by sound reasons for doing them.

They also suggested activities like role-playing a new ending to the film, questions for class discussions, ideas for descriptive writing based on the films, making models or maps, and developing parallel stories to the films.

**The unit:** After watching the film and reading some fantasy short stories, and determining the common elements of fantasy tales, the next step was to write their own fantasy short stories. Planning for this began with students drawing up character sheets, plot outlines, looking on web sites to find hobbit...
and elf names, exploring Tolkein web sites and drawing maps of their fantasy world.

At that stage a change of direction occurred: they had been planning their stories using worksheets but, in a planning meeting, one of the students said they were “really boring” and suggested creating their fantasy worlds and planning their stories as a web site, rather than on paper. This generated great enthusiasm and made the process of planning their short stories a much more interesting and attractive proposition than it had been – in general, year nines do not like to plan their stories! This took more time than expected – they had to plan their web sites. However, the results in terms of engagement in learning, learning outcomes and enjoyment on the part of the students made the divergence well worth it.

The fantasy web sites were presented to the parents of the students at a morning tea, where students took their parents through their web sites. Parents also looked at the work of other students, asked questions and had a thoroughly enjoyable hour with their children. The imagination, creativity and volume of the writing produced were remarkable. The fantasy stories produced were beyond my expectations, both in their complexity and their obvious understanding of the fantasy genre. Students who previously had resisted putting pen to paper were happily developing intriguing and well-plotted stories that were a pleasure to read. And they had a lot of fun doing the work – “our first run, world premier co-planned fantasy unit was heaps of fun.”

This indicates another of the strengths of the process – and one of the challenges. It is very helpful if the program is flexible enough to incorporate these serendipitous moments that come from the lateral thinking of individual students, but this can cause chaos with assessment timetables and deadlines. Nevertheless, some of the most successful learning experiences over the time with 9/10D came from these flashes of creativity from students and the program would be all the poorer for not incorporating them.

2004: Teaching 10D

The classroom pedagogy continued to be the basis for planning our learning in the Year 10D classroom. Increased student involvement in the lunchtime planning sessions and even greater enthusiasm for the process, developed two highly successful semester units of work, with a high level of student engagement in their own learning. New students to the class were initially wary but once they saw how the class operated they were very supportive and enthusiastic. One of the year ten units is briefly described below.

**Semester 1 – Clueless:**

**Planning:** After negotiation, the students opted for a unit based on mystery and crime, called “Clueless”. One of the lessons of the program has been the importance of letting the class choose the title for the units as a symbol of their ownership of the process.

In groups, we brainstormed possible concepts they wanted to study, classroom activities they wanted to learn from and the pedagogical principles behind the planning. The lists they produced follow (the ticks represented the number of groups that nominated each idea):

**What to learn about?**

- Persuasive speeches ✓✓
- Vocabulary ✓
- Shakespeare ✓✓✓
- Poetry ✓✓✓
- Book reviews ✓
- Movie reviews ✓✓
- Better writing ✓
- Drama ✓✓✓
- Novels ✓✓
- Writing stories ✓
- Write plays ✓
- Debating ✓✓
- Non-fiction ✓
- Cartoons ✓

**Pedagogy**

- Multiple Intelligences activities ✓✓✓
- Lessons outside ✓✓
- Excursions ✓✓✓✓✓
- Orals ✓
- Choice ✓✓✓✓
- Cross-curricular activities ✓
- Use computers ✓✓
- Hands-on ✓✓✓
- Rewards ✓
- Visual activities ✓
- Intra-personal activities ✓
- Independent work ✓✓✓✓
- Variety ✓✓✓
- Different levels ✓✓
- Links with previous work ✓
- Ownership ✓
- Fun ✓✓
- Challenges ✓
- Relevance ✓
Again, these show that the students had learned a great deal about teaching and learning in the time we had been working on negotiating the curriculum and pedagogy. Certainly, many students were very aware of the importance of concepts such as relevance, the need for work to be targeted at different levels of ability and the importance of variety and fun. These lists provided the stimulus for whole class discussion and the subsequent plan for the unit.

Before getting down to detailed planning the students wrote an overall aim for the unit: To become more critical writers, readers, speakers and viewers through developing an understanding of the mystery genre, looking at how to create suspense and mystery in writing and TV/film.

The unit: The unit developed around mystery stories and novels, TV drama and a crime scene activity that became the culminating activity for the semester. This was the brainchild of the students and involved heterogeneous groups of five students developing a murder scene, photographing it, drawing a plan of the murder scene, writing a brief forensic report and writing witness statements and other documents (including newspaper articles).

The photographs and documents were then posted on a forum on The Learning Place (an Education Queensland website) where all students could access them from school or at home. Each group had to jointly solve another crime by reading the documents and examining the other evidence, as well as interviewing witnesses and suspects. Finally they made an arrest and individually wrote a report outlining their investigations and the reasons for their decision.

Apart for the writing skills developed in different genres, the interview skills and the IT skills the students acquired, probably the greatest learning experience was the trials and tribulations of taking on such a major task in groups. This was a very important outcome and one commented on frequently by students in the evaluation of the unit – both the organisation needed and the tolerance that had to be developed figured prominently. And we did finally get to go on those excursions the students had been clamouring for since the very beginning.

Reflection on 9/10D

The process reinforced my belief that giving students choice is vital for their engagement with their learning. There was a marked improvement in classroom behaviour - this was obvious very early in the project: “Any behaviour issues we had before had well and truly vanished by the time we were doing our websites” - and a much greater level of engagement with learning by the students. Students were keen to come to English and get on with the work they had planned. As one of the less academically inclined students described it, “Well, in our class we know that we are going to have fun and not just sit there and do work off the board or the textbook. We all look forward to coming to English with Frase ... I think everyone likes English
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better than other classes. I do – in other classes I do no work, well, not much. In English I do as much as I can and try hard.”

This greater engagement could be seen with all students. The less able students found success and enjoyed what they did in the classroom and therefore their attitude to their work changed. There were improved academic results from almost all students. The more able students challenged themselves to do better and took on complex tasks and projects that required high level thinking skills and expanded their literacy and ITC skills.

Another advantage commented on by a member of Education Queensland’s district office who worked with the class was that they were very close–knit, “almost tribal in their loyalty to each other.” Or, as a group of students explained it, “We know each other and understand each other. It is relaxed, we feel comfortable. There is a lot of teamwork, we are with our friends and feel close to everyone ... there is a real feeling of teamwork among the class.”

The students also developed a much better understanding of teaching and learning, and of their own learning styles: “During this process, we have learned that everyone learns differently.” As one student wrote the following year: “Before we started I was oblivious to the elements of good teaching and learning and to tell you the truth, I really didn’t care, all that mattered was that I was learning. I now know that I had all the information to begin with; I just had to dig deep to find it.”

Respect was an essential element in the process – “We have respect for one another”, “We used to fight, now we are all respected” and “We are treated as adults, not as immature kids”. Being “treated as adults” was a constant theme in the students’ reflections. This respect led to greater commitment to their work by the students: “We were treated as adults and allowed to decide what we wanted to do. That’s why we put in so much effort – it was our choice.”

Students of all abilities were enthusiastic about the process: “I think it works for everyone because I am one of those kids that go to school and hate sitting in class listening to teachers go on and on – I hate it. When I go to English, I actually want to learn something. So I think it works for everyone.” Another two students responded, “All students benefit. Students who are less academic learn easier because they have a say in what they learn, and ‘cause they have different learning styles that can be incorporated.”

Some students made suggestions for improvements in the future: “It would also be good to try peer assessment so that students also have the ability to think deeply about what other students have written or said so that you can learn a lot from others’ work.” And others were critical of some aspects of the process: we “spend too long on one topic; need to get things done quicker so that the work doesn’t become boring”.

A final interesting benefit of the process was articulated by one student at the end of year ten: “I’ve realised there is a hell of a lot more work that the teacher has to do to prepare for lessons than I
first thought. For me, after realising just how much work a teacher has to do, you feel a lot more respect for the teacher knowing that they are actually working and not just making you work!”

So what have we learned from the project about how students learn?

- Students are very enthusiastic about exploring the ideas of what makes good teaching and learning
- Teacher belief in students as experts is very important
- Students like setting goals and having established timelines
- Students are keen to be involved in collaborative planning

Essentially, students on our reflection day argued that for teaching to be most successful, it had to:

- be structured and planned,
- be based on effective relationships,
- be based on student choice,
- cater for different learning styles, and
- be fun.

In subsequent years, I have continued the process with other classes at all high school year levels, though with greater curriculum restraints in the upper years (but we still have worked on the learning processes and assessment). The effect on teaching and learning, student behaviour and class culture has been similar, though with differences depending on the classes and the personalities involved. What has remained constant is that the students love the opportunity to be in charge of their own learning and to have a sense of ownership over what they do in the classroom.

It is interesting, but not surprising, that each class has produced a very similar list of elements of a good lesson to that of 9D, and lists I have seen from schools in England are also remarkably similar. It seems that students, no matter where they are, know what constitutes a good lesson and are in agreement about those elements.

Finally, some summative comments from students:

I have more control over my own learning - we get to choose what we want & we learn more because we want to know this stuff. I didn’t use to like English but I am much more interested now because I am learning what I want – personal choice.

I have learned to work with others, and the whole class works together now. I have also learned to control my temper much better.

I have learned from the process that anything is possible. I am able to write stories better, read better, punctuate and even tell stories. The class now talks to everyone with respect - when they have a problem with someone, they talk to them.

I think I take in more in class because it is fun and we can choose what we want to learn – I’ve never been to a school that lets us do that. Everyone participates in the activities.

A process like this does take time, and some teachers have voiced concerns about the time taken from the “core” curriculum but the rewards for teachers and students justify the effort. The enhancement of team building, class culture, thinking skills, problem solving, communication skills and social learning, on top of the academic outcomes are testimony enough.

Ian Fraser
Nanango State High School

Biographical Information: Ian Fraser is Head of Department, English, at Nanango State High School. He has taught at several other locations throughout Queensland - in Brisbane, Charleville, Toowoomba and Warwick - and has also participated in a teaching exchange to Cornwall in the United Kingdom. In 2007 he was awarded a Queensland government scholarship to investigate ‘student voice’ in English schools. He has a BA (Hons) and Diploma of Education from the University of Queensland. He can be contacted by e-mail on frase@dodo.com.au

An earlier version of this article was written for an i-Net on-line conference organised by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in 2004.

Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions

This report by Peter Kellock (of The Asquith Group) is of an action-research project developed by Victoria’s Youth Collaboration (a broad coalition of youth agencies). It was designed to show how feedback from young people could lead to an improved understanding of the experiences of young people in their transition from schooling to working.

As well as providing results of that research, the report is particularly useful in detailing the peer research model used. Nine young people, supported by a professional researcher, obtained the views of other young people within three communities about their experiences of transitions.

Copies of the report are available from the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACvic), level 2, 172 Flinders Street, Melbourne 3000. Contact YACvic on 03 9267 3799 or (toll-free) 1300 727 176 or by e-mail: info@yacvic.org.au

Further information at: www.yacvic.org.au
We arrived at the Uni, excitement competing with nerves! The room was small and stuffy, even with three small fans working overtime. We stood in a wonky line across the room and played an enthusiastic game of 11s while we waited for the student teachers to arrive.

They came in one by one, smiles covering their nervous faces and they stood, looking a little sheepish and misplaced.

They were invited to join the game and soon took to the competitive mood! Slowly we began to laugh together, and I noticed some interesting faces and was shocked at the different characters now surrounding me in the room, all waiting to pursue a teaching career.

“10!!” came the triumphant call from across the other side of the room, and an Eltham High student shuffled from the line and joined the ‘out’ pile.

“Okay,” called Miss Harper, “now we are going to play a game called Gang-greetings. We’re going to mingle around the space and when I clap my hands, you are going to get into a pair or a three and make up a secret hand shake!”

This was the game I was nervous about! If any game could make you feel more awkward with a complete stranger, it would be this. Okay, just act happy and fun and hopefully they will feel comfortable with me. Mingle... mingle... mingle.

I tried to read the many new faces around me, to see if I could find one that looked ‘unshy’. Clap, clap. I am jostled around many grabbing hands.

I saw a gap and took the chance and practically ran into a man! He had dark hair, glasses and an awesome sideburns! We introduced our selves; his name is David and he is going to be a Drama and English teacher. We soon made up a great handshake with the words: “Yo, kickin it!” You gotta love that!! For the rest of the game I found myself with wonderful people who I felt surprisingly comfortable around and my nerves melted away to pure excitement.

That game finished and immediately it was on with the next. Another mingle one. Mingle... mingle... clap, clap, clap!

This time I needed a group of four. Imogen and I soon found two teachers and we sat down to begin talking circles. It was great fun to give the teachers advice for once, and they listened intently to what we had to say and were thankful for the advice we gave!

Next was one of my favourites: ‘still frames’. I found a group with Emily and Catherine and two student teachers found us! We had to do three still frame shots of a student success! I immediately knew the greatest success for me: “Having a great friendship group!” I say strongly, and they all turned and nodded in agreement and I grinned with the success of making a good point.

The next game we played was my definite favourite, called ‘Hidden thoughts’. I found myself in a group with Niamh, Luke from my previous group and Nick, a guy with a cool hairstyle (even if it is only one strand of hair!). Niamh was the teacher and Nick was a playground bully. He did a great job but no-one could break Niamh; I always knew she’d be a great teacher! He he! Then the hidden thoughts stepped in and revealed that Nick had an aggressive father and was only trying to gain respect by bullying!

The final activity was giving a final piece of advice to the teachers to be.

I said: “Have fun and build a relationship with the students so that you can be their friend, not only their teacher!” Yeah, I think that’s important!!

Scribbling hands took notes of what we said and they nodded and “mmmm” in agreement and others told their advice!

“Listen both ways; listen to the student and they will listen to you,” said Hayden in a definite voice, and the look on the student teachers’ faces told me that was a definite mental note!

As I left the stuffy room, with final goodbyes and good lucks, I felt like I was leaving a whole lot of new friends, and as I reflected on the past hour or so with these new friends, I knew we’d left an impression. I just hope it was a good one!

As I walked down the now busy Grattan street of Melbourne city, the wind blowing in my hair and my great friends beside me, I thought what a fantastic day, and what a great thing for those student teachers, because after all, we, the students will be the ultimate judge of their teaching skills! I think they will all make excellent teachers!

Chloe Morriss, 7F, Eltham HS
Democracy & Education

Democracy & Education is a US-based quarterly journal celebrating, enhancing and reflecting upon the teaching and learning of democracy. It is a community colloquium bringing to light the successes and struggles of educators as they work to merge democratic teaching and principles with real-world practices. It is a forum for exploring salient topics, sharing ideas, highlighting research and digging deeper into the practice that binds democratic educators to their students, communities, each other and the world.

This publication is committed to things we all care about: creating and sustaining democratic learning environments, capturing the good practices of the worldwide teaching community, empowering the young to play articulate roles in the public space and supporting diverse perspectives.

The forthcoming issue will be on the topic of Indigenous Ways of Knowing. This will be an issue focusing on the learning and knowledge collected at a recent Indigenous Ways of Knowing conference and other research and writing from indigenous communities. Questions that are addressed include:

- What part does democracy play in indigenous learning environments? How are or how can the foundations of democracy be best included in native classrooms?
- What are the foundations of Indigenous learning and knowledge?
- How are these manifested through education in indigenous communities? (And where does this education take place - in schools, family groups, among peers?)
- What is authentic about learning and knowledge in indigenous communities? What are consistencies among communities and where are there differences?
- How should native educators be trained in a way that is sensitive to the priorities of Native American (and other Indigenous) communities, both urban and rural?
- What are some fundamentals that non-native educators should know in order to be conscientious of native learning environments and native learners?
- How many education programs include curriculum and instruction that embraces indigenous students?

Democracy & Education is edited by Associate Dean Nancy Nagel, The Graduate School of Education and Counseling, Lewis and Clark College, 0615 SW Palatine Hill Road, MSC 93, Portland, OR 97219, USA. For more information, visit Democracy & Education on the web at:

http://www.lclark.edu/org/journal/
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Reaching High:
A Program Promoting Positive Approaches to Learning Differences

Reaching High tells the story of 14 years’ work around literacy in north central Victoria. Student participatory approaches are central to a program that caters for students with learning differences, with an annual student-run three-day regional camp as the culmination of that program. This camp brings in adult role models who have, or have had, learning differences, to act as mentors for students. Past student participants now also act as leaders, adult role models and assistants.

This inspiring and exciting 120-page book documents the development and operation of the Reaching High Program. It outlines the theory and community links behind the program, and how it is built on the active and strength-based participation of students. Includes a DVD of practical ideas.

First published by Connect in December 2006:
ISBN: 978-0-9803133-0-7
Order now: $33 each ($27.50 for Connect subscribers)
Civic Engagement and Young People
A Report Commissioned by the City of Melbourne

This report examines recent national and international literature on young people's civic engagement, citizenship and participation, and explores practices in several Victorian local government areas. It acknowledges the importance of these issues for all young people and for the City of Melbourne (which commissioned this report), and the endorsement of such approaches by State, National and international policy directions.

An extensive literature has emerged through the last fifteen years in particular, around youth participation, civic engagement and citizenship. The report summarises major trends in that literature, pointing firstly to the importance of understanding various interpretations of these terms and the reasons why institutions (including governments) support initiatives in these areas.

The literature overview also examines documented practices with local government that support participation and civic engagement. Various models and initiatives are identified and discussed. These reflect differing needs and intentions of local governments: consultation, advice, personal development of young people, community capacity building and so on.

This study then examines civic engagement practices in eight local government areas in Victoria (and briefly looks at reported practices in two other capital cities). In each area, the study reports on statements of intentions, the structures in place, the power that young people have, reported outcomes, responses to diversity and inclusion, and resourcing implications.

The Report concludes that there is no one way in which to address issues of youth participation and youth civic engagement. Complex reasons for the disengagement of young people require complex and multi-faceted initiatives and structures to address the barriers.

Student Action Teams:
Implementing Productive Practices in Primary and Secondary School Classrooms

Student Action Teams - teams of students who, as part of their school curriculum, adopt a community issue that they care passionately about, research it, decide what needs to be changed or improved and take action to achieve that.

In this book (April 2006) primary and secondary schools in Melbourne’s northern suburbs tell how to establish and implement Student Action Teams. They describe their students’ work researching and acting around traffic safety and the environment and reflect on what they have learnt: the basic principles of Student Action Teams, their practical operation, and the stories of successful approaches and outcomes in two projects. The principles and approaches outlined here can be used to guide developments in any school - acting alone or in a cluster. Includes sample worksheets and pro formas.

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Local and Overseas Publications Received

Connect receives many publications directly or indirectly relevant to youth and student participation. We can’t lend or sell these, but if you want to look at or use them, contact us on: (03) 9489 9052 or (03) 8344 9637

Australian:

Civic Engagement and Young People (Australian Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne, Vic) Research Report 28; November 2007

Code of Ethical Practice - A First Step for the Victorian Youth Sector (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, Vic) 2007

Education Times (Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Vic) Vol 15 Nos 17; October 2007

Research eLert (Office of Learning and Teacher, Victorian Department of Education, Vic) No 11; April 2007

TLN Journal (Teacher Learning Network, Abbotsford, Vic) Vol 14 No 3; Spring 2007


YAPRap (Youth Action and Policy Association, Surry Hills, NSW) Vol 17 Nos 10; November 2007

Youth Voice: Peer Research into Youth Transitions (Peter Kellock for The Youth Collaboration, C/o Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Melbourne, Vic) December 2007

International:

Democracy and Education (Lewis and Clark College, Portland, OR, USA) Vol 16 Nos 2-4; Vol 17 No 1; March 2006 - September 2007

Education Revolution (AERA, New York, USA) Vol 19 No 3 Fall 2007

Life Learning (Toronto, Canada) September/October, November/December 2007

Documents

The documents listed in this column may be of general background interest. A photocopy is available for research purposes. The length and cost (to cover copying and postage) is listed. Please order by code number.

A full, computerised index of these documents is now available from Connect for $3; this can be accessed and printed by topic, key-word etc or simply sequentially.

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599    Research eLert: Student Voice (Office of Learning and Teaching, Vic Department of Education) Issue No 11, April 2007; plus Further Reading List (16 pp; $1.60)

Connect has a website: http://www.geocities.com/rogermhold/Connect

Slowly growing with information about subscribing, some back issue contents and summaries of Student Councils and Beyond and Student Action Teams.

Check in occasionally!

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The first Connect publication (from 2005) supports effective and relevant participation of students in decision-making in primary and secondary schools.

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