‘Students learn by taking the roles of teachers and examiners of others ...’ (Paul Black)

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This Issue:

During the last couple of months, I’ve been working steadily on the third Connect publication. This is an exciting and inspirational book, written by Lyn Loger with Stuart Robins, Damien Tinker and Andrew Skinner. It’s close to going to press as I put this issue of Connect together, and we’re aiming to launch it in early December.

You might remember previous articles in Connect about ‘Literacy Camps’ run by students in the Nathalia area in north-central Victoria. They were inspired by the principles of the US-based Foxfire oral-history publications and grew out of Lyn’s involvement with the student-produced book Times Have Changed. The Literacy Camps - retitled ‘Reaching High’ camps by the students - have now been organised for the last 14 years, and provide opportunities for students with learning differences to meet together, to hear from and work with adult role models (increasingly young adults who have been participants in the program themselves) who have or have had learning differences themselves, and to face and tackle their learning needs. A community organisation - Reaching High Inc., largely made up of past participants - has been set up to manage and support this process.

Connect is proud to be associated with this work and to enable its story to be told.

The book: Reaching High: A Program Promoting Positive Approaches to Learning Differences, will be available from Connect in December. If you would like to pre-order some copies, we’ll mail them off to you as soon as they arrive ... and that will help us with the capital costs. The usual generous discount for Connect subscribers is available here too. And if you’d like to order 10 or more copies, we’ll add a further discount (10%) to that ... 20% if you’d like 50 or more!

Values Education

We’re also associated with exciting developments in Melbourne in the local government areas of Darebin and Manningham. Recent issues of Connect have reported on the work of Student Action Teams in primary and secondary schools in Darebin around traffic safety and environment issues - and their work is the subject of the Connect book: Student Action Teams. (Leigh Black also writes in this issue about how such learning and teaching approaches are being extended across her school.) Recent issues of Connect have also outlined the work of Student Action Teams in six Catholic primary schools in the City of Manningham around Values Education.

Both of these clusters have now recently learnt that they are receiving further funding to develop these active student-participatory approaches to Values Education as part of the second round of grants to Values Education Good Practice Schools. What a positive endorsement of active participation of students in important school and community initiatives! Congratulations ... and we look forward to further exciting and practical accounts of their work in future issues of Connect.

Roger Holdsworth

NEXT ISSUE: #162: December 2006
Deadline for material: end of November 2006
Bell Primary School in Preston in Melbourne’s northern suburbs has had a strong environmental education focus for some time. However when I was originally asked to conduct some research on students’ learning preferences, I found that many of these students could not see the connection between these environmental studies and real-life environmental issues in and around their school community.

When the opportunity arose to implement Student Action Teams using the environment as the theme, I jumped at the opportunity. We are a small school and I had the only Grade 6, so we decided to only involve the students in my grade.

We began the year with a study of Civics and Citizenship: the role of people in Australia in decision making about issues that affect them. Through this study we also worked on developing good team dynamics within the grade. We then used several thinking tools to come up with a list of broad areas of the environment that affect us; Biodiversity, Waste Management, Water Quality, Water Usage, Sustainable Transport and Air Quality were the issues that students recognised and that they worried about the most.

All students were then asked to select one area of the environment in which they were interested and this formed some study groups. These groups were asked to conduct some research and data collection in their areas of environment. Students then planned some short and long term actions and began to implement them.

The introduction of these student action teams has been so successful at Bell Primary School that many staff now view them as a powerful tool to provide students with real and relevant learning. The influence of this teaching and learning approach is spreading through the school.

This year, we included Grades 3 and 4 and Grades 5 and 6 in the implementation of Student Action Teams. As a school we made a decision to select environmental topics and to arrange student groupings with a very large number of Grade 3 and 4 students. So we currently have seven Teams operating around Waste Minimisation, Sustainable Transport, the Impact of Human Habituation on the Darebin Creek, Water Usage, Energy Busters, Sustainable Living, and Biodiversity - the latter focusing on our Butterfly Garden.

Late last year, a committee of teachers and parents successfully applied for an Artist in Residence Program and this also incorporates a Student Action Team approach. Three more Teams have been developed to work on this project.

Students meet together once a week for two hours. Sessions begin with a whole class focus. This is led by a student leader who has worked with the teachers to develop that focus. All students are required to keep a record of the work completed in that session. At the completion of the session, all students are invited back into a whole class group to evaluate the sessions.

The development of Thinking Skills has been an additional major component of this year’s program. We have incorporated such thinking skills into our evaluation sessions, which are again led by a student leader. One of the more successful evaluation thinking tool we have used has been to encourage students to think about ‘drivers’ and ‘blockers’.

From the experience of one teacher and one class, the ideas of Student Action Teams - where students research and take action on real community-based issues as part of their learning - have spread throughout the school and are now part of our everyday learning and teaching strategies.

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Active Student Participation Through Self and Peer Assessment

A secondary school teacher said to me recently: “By and large, education is something which is done to students.” So, when a group of student teachers (including myself) from the University of Melbourne discussed ideas for a project on assessment for a secondary college in Melbourne, we were attracted to the idea of giving students greater active participation in, and ownership of, their learning through self and peer assessment.

Self and peer assessment constitute meaningful forms of active student participation as they give students a say in their assessment and that of others’. Greater active participation and ownership also have the important added benefit of increasing students’ engagement with their learning – as they are challenged to think more deeply about subject content, task requirements and how they think and learn. They also become more reflective about their goals and whether they are achieving them.

Self and Peer Assessment: What do we mean by it and why is it important?

**Self Assessment**

On one level, self assessment is simply when students occupy “the teacher’s role as ‘critical assessors’.” The literature tells us that they then enjoy a greater feeling of control over their learning and over the assessment outcomes of their work. In addition, self assessment also involves students establishing clear goals about what they want to achieve in terms of their learning and performance.

Judith Arter writes that, through goal setting, students set the terms for their success, which results in “higher student intrinsic motivation.”

Self assessment also requires students to actively engage with the task requirements and with the assessment criteria if they are to critically evaluate their work successfully. Thus, students gain a clearer understanding of what they need to do to be successful and can apply their insights to further tasks.

Finally, self assessment fosters students’ intrapersonal development through the development of metacognition or ‘thinking about thinking’ – and this is currently being highlighted in most statements of Essential Learnings in education systems around Australia. By asking students to consciously reflect on their work and learning, they gain valuable insights into how they think and their approaches to tasks, which they can bring to further study. As Paul Black writes, “learners must be active in creating their own understandings - learning cannot be done for the pupil, it has to be done by the pupil.”

**Peer Assessment**

Peer assessment occurs when students act as critical assessors of each other’s work. By placing students in the role of critical assessors of others, peer assessment gives students the opportunity to be actively involved in their peers’ learning and development. Paul Black again writes that “students learn by taking the roles of teachers and examiners of others.” By giving students formal permission “to teach each other”, teachers can not only reduce their workload, but also engender a productive classroom environment where the learning and teaching is generated by, and occurs between, students. This also has the added advantage, as we know, that students are often more likely to listen to the opinions of their peers over those of their teachers.

Moreover, feedback from peers can have a greater impact since the dialogue “will be in a language that students themselves naturally use.” Thus, a central element of peer assessment is the ability to give appropriate feedback. By teaching students the skills involved in delivering constructive, critical feedback, teachers empower students and build their confidence to orally contribute in ways that are effective and powerful.

Finally, “by assessing others’ work, students often gain more insight into how to improve their own work than they do from receiving feedback from others.” This is not to discount the obvious value feedback has in improving learning, but rather to highlight the ability for students to make connections and deepen their understandings of ideas through actively engaging with others’ work.

The School

The school is located in inner-suburban Melbourne and is co-educational and non-selective with an enrolment of about 800 students from years 7 to 12. The school describes itself as a “vibrant community of parents, students and teachers” who work together to play an active role in upholding the school’s values.
The school values innovation in teaching as well as active student participation in the life and curriculum of the school. Students engage with 'real life' situations through ‘problem based learning’ with the hope of cultivating “student connectedness, motivation, self-concept and resilience, goal-setting and reflection, and curriculum relevance.” However, despite its strengths and successes, the school’s recent Strategic Plan Development Report identified ‘student motivation to learn’ as relatively low within the school and of concern.

Our group wondered whether student engagement with learning might be enhanced through the implementation of more formalised self and peer assessment.

**Formal versus Informal Self and Peer Assessment**

While the advantages of self and peer assessment practices are multiple and widely supported in research and literature, we were curious to find out what actually happens in real classroom situations.

The first thing we noticed was that self and peer assessment usually occurs *informally* in classrooms, rather than in a planned and structured way, and often even occurs without the students or teachers having a conscious awareness of the practice. Self and peer assessment mainly occurs in subjects which often involve more creative work such as Art, Drama and English and is less likely to occur in subjects such as Maths, Science and Physical Education. Students in Art and Textiles casually reflect on their work if prompted by the teacher, or walk around the room observing other students’ work, asking questions such as “How are you going?” or commenting that they like another student’s work. Students in Drama watch each others’ performances and are often asked to comment on each others’ work; for instance, in Year 12, feedback from peers constitutes a critical part of the development process for the solo performances. An example of more formal self and peer assessment at the school involves Drama students using journal writing to reflect on their work and that of others.

Although informal self and peer assessment occurs naturally in these classrooms and has a valuable and legitimate role, the fact that there isn’t a more formalised process, and one that extended across the school (in years 7 to 10 at least), means that the full advantages of self and peer assessment are limited.

**Current Views**

What do teachers think about self and peer assessment? Are they conscious of using it informally, or think that it could be valuable to formalise it further? What do the students know or think about this process?

We conducted some surveys and discussions with both students and teachers about these issues. It was clear that the use of self and peer assessment practices at the school is inconsistent and varied. There is a significant split between those teachers who value self and peer assessment and those who are unsure of its value and are therefore reluctant to use it.

“Self assessment means that students develop a clearer understanding of what they need to do to succeed. They do more of the work around assessment which makes my job easier.”

“Students who lack confidence or ability may find peer assessment stressful and intimidating.”

“I find the idea a bit wanky and I can’t really see the benefit.”

Do the students understand, experience and enjoy self and peer assessment? While a large proportion of students surveyed believed they understood what was *meant* by self and peer assessment, their responses indicated that their understandings were often vague or incorrect. Moreover, while a slight majority of students thought that self and peer assessments are helpful or enjoyable, our data indicate that their attitudes towards self and peer assessment are otherwise inconsistent.

“I like peer assessment because your friends help you out.”

“Self or peer assessment is not really helpful. I already know what I need to be assessed on – the teacher can assess me.”

“I don’t like self or peer assessment because it’s more work.”

In these circumstances where self and peer assessment are not fully recognised, supported and validated by the school, it is then more likely that informal self and peer assessment processes will not be taken seriously by students: they will be viewed as tokenistic and not legitimate forms of assessment. We wondered what it would mean to implement more formal self and peer assessment practices – and build on (and build in) the claimed advantages for such approaches.

**What we came up with and why**

In light of our research findings and our objective of enhancing student engagement with their learning, we created some straightforward, structured and user-friendly *pro-formas* that could be used across all
KLAs and from years 7 to 10 at the school. Without wanting to unduly add to student and teacher workload, the pro-formas were specifically designed to challenge students to think deeply about their work and learning, yet not take up excessive amounts of time. We developed three different pro-formas for self assessment that emphasised different aspects of the learning process. These pro-formas would be used at the end of specific tasks and/or at the end of a longer unit of work.

At this preliminary stage, our intention is to trial all three of these pro-formas with a view to selecting one pro-forma to be used as the generic model across all KLAs at the school. Only one peer assessment pro-forma was developed – and this had to meet the criterion that it would be appropriate for assessing all types of work across the KLAs.

We identified several important factors for consideration in the development of the self and peer assessment pro-formas:

• The sheets have to be straightforward and user-friendly so as not to unduly add to student and teacher workload;
• The questions/prompts on the pro-formas have to be worded in such a way as to challenge students to think deeply about their work and learning and yet not take up excessive amounts of time;
• The pro-formas have to encourage students to reflect on their work from a positive perspective, thus the pro-formas ask them to acknowledge the strengths of their work before asking them to consider areas for improvement;
• The questions/prompts had to be kept ‘open’ so that they may be used in all KLAs to assess all types of work.

In trialing these pro-formas with staff and students, we’ll be consulting further with them about their value and specific usefulness within their learning and teaching. Students and teachers will then have input to the final details of the forms that will be presented to the school with a view to their adoption across all KLAs in years 7 to 10.

What’s the Advantage of Formal Pro-formas?

These pro-formas:

• would maintain a concrete record of students’ learning developments and achievements;
• help teachers to diagnose students’ understandings of the subject content;
• may enable quieter or less competent students to engage more fully with their learning developments and those of their peers;
• provide a dialogue between the student and the subject, and the student and the teacher;
• would be available to provide feedback to parents about their child’s learning during parent teacher interviews.

Teachers communicating with parents about their child’s learning progress should be “an effective partnership … [which] includes the sharing of information.”

This partner-ship should also include students, who are able to contribute valuable feedback and insights about their progress.

Potential Issues with Implementing the Pro-formas

There are some potential problems with self and peer assessment which may contribute towards some teachers’ reluctance towards adopting these practices. This attitude is articulated by one teacher at the school: “There is a lot of time to be wasted on this kind of thing.”

Implementation

In implementing self and peer assessment, it is particularly important that students have a clear understanding of the specific task requirements if they are to accurately assess their own and others’ work. To help students gain a solid understanding before commencing the task, teachers can show students models of work and involve the class in identifying and analysing these models’ strengths and weaknesses.

Some students may also find the concept of self and peer assessment intellectually challenging and difficult and may therefore resist participating in the process. In a study of peer assessment, Andrea Herrmann observes: “Some students were unable [or] unwilling ... to follow peer reactions in revising what they had written.” The concepts underpinning self and peer assessment practices may need to be carefully broken down so that they are easily understood by students.

Similarly students may resist self and peer assessment because they are primarily accustomed to operating within a traditional student/teacher
configuration where the teacher takes sole responsibility for determining assessment.

Finally, for self and peer assessment to be taken seriously as a legitimate form of assessment by students, teachers need to positively value it. Davies writes that “if students are to take peer assessment seriously, it should count for something.” 13

Feedback Skills

Peer assessment involves students’ ability to give and receive constructive critical feedback. Giving and receiving feedback can be a confronting and potentially negative experience for many students, especially those struggling to develop social and emotional maturity. As one maths teacher at the school observed: “Students who lack confidence or ability may find peer assessment stressful and intimidating.” Some students might favour the work of their friends, or feel pressured to positively assess the work of socially dominant class members. A student might use peer assessment as an opportunity to deliberately ridicule or denigrate others. This concern is highlighted in a Year 7 student’s comment that “Peer assessment is good because you get to bag people.”

Sensitivity to students’ feelings is paramount and teachers will need to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what constitutes appropriate, constructive feedback as opposed to merely criticising or ‘putting down’ other students’ work. This is essential for creating a productive learning environment where students feel comfortable to share their work and take risks. 14 Teachers can also teach students that giving and receiving negative feedback – when done sensitively and supportively - can result in a positive outcome and ultimately be a positive learning experience.

The Language and Structure for Feedback in the Pro-forma

The language used in the self and peer assessment tools needs to be clear, specific and easily understood by students. The questions and/or prompts also need to be phrased in such a way as to encourage students to reflect usefully on one’s own work, and to respond positively to others’ work. The self and peer assessment model should be designed to elicit feedback from students as opposed to merely allocating a mark. Davies asserts that “feedback is unequivocally considered central to learning and plays an important role in a student’s educational development.” 15 Therefore, self and peer assessment questions need to be open rather than closed in order to encourage reflective feedback. Black et al write that “the giving of numerical scores or grades has a negative effect, in that students ignore comments when marks are also given.” 16 However, it is the comments that are ultimately of greater value to students since they can include “advice on what the student can do to improve the quality of the work.” 17 Thus, the content and language used in both self and peer assessment pro-formas play a key role in determining the effectiveness of assessment.

Summary and the Way Forward

Self and peer assessment involve active student participation in learning and can increase student ownership of outcomes.

The objective of our group was to create generic self and peer assessment pro-formas to support the existing processes in the school that promotes student ownership of learning and assessment. The pro-formas have also been developed with the aim of opening up the lines of communication between students, teachers and parents.

The development of three different, yet similar, self assessment pro-formas will allow us to see which pro-forma receives the most positive response from students and teachers, and which allows students to openly express their individual understandings of their learning developments most effectively.

Students will need to be supported in the implementation of these pro-formas to make sure that implementation is effective, and that students are conscious of the relevance and importance of the pro-formas in achieving ownership of their learning and assessment.

While introducing formal self and peer assessment might initially take up valuable classroom time, we believe it will be time well spent and should be looked at as an investment with the potential to significantly improve the quality of student work.

The Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (AAIA) argues that it is “necessary for teachers to believe that the time spent
upon allowing students to reflect and to improve their work is ... valuable.”

Thus, the development of formal self and peer assessment pro-formas for the school supports Lorna Earl’s conceptualisation of a “preferred future for assessment ... one that makes assessment an integral part of learning – guiding the process and stimulating further learning.”

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This article draws on the report: I Was Brilliant – You Were Crap by Georgie Hughes, Claire Murray, Parris Sloan and Stephanie Vukadin (submitted as PBL Task One: Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, 2006)

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Reaching High

The Reaching High Program is a student-participatory approach to literacy that caters to rural, secondary school students with learning differences. It was developed in 1992 at Nathalia High School in north central Victoria and has involved hundreds of students from many schools in that area for over 14 years.

The program is delivered as part of the curriculum in several schools during the school year, and culminates in an annual three-day regional camp using a literacy-in-action approach. The camp brings in adult role models who have, or have had, learning differences, to act as mentors for the students, showing them possible pathways into the future. The Program now uses past student participants as leaders, adult role models and assistants. This was formalised in 2003 with the formation of Reaching High Inc., which is predominantly made up of young people in the community with learning differences, working for students with learning differences.

For the first eleven years, Lyn Loger, as teacher/facilitator, delivered the program. For the past four years, the program has been successfully delivered by youth workers/facilitators from Cutting Edge-UnitingCare.

Lyn, in association with three of the past participants (who are now young adult role models) has documented the ways in which the Reaching High Program operates, how it has developed, and the issues and discussions behind its approach. Reaching High: A Program Promoting Positive Approaches to Learning Difference (by Lyn Loger, with Stuart Robins, Damien Tinker and Andrew Skinner) is currently being published by Connect. It will be available in early December this year.

Use the form on page 24 of this issue to pre-order your own copy of this valuable and exciting 120-page book. We’ll rush you copies as soon as they come off the press.
Launch of Connect’s Student Action Teams Publication

Students Shaping Their Communities

“When I saw these figures, I was first of all surprised, then angry, then determined to do something about them.”

This was the response from a primary school student in the Darebin area after examining information about traffic accidents in his community.

Over 200 students have been directly involved in Student Action Teams in primary and secondary schools in Melbourne’s northern suburbs in the past four years. They’ve also consulted with, taught and mobilised thousands of their peers to tackle community issues such as traffic safety and the environment. And they’ve done this within their classes or Student Councils – as part of their learning program.

The work of these students is documented in a book written by teachers, students, administrators, consultants, community workers and others. Student Action Teams: Implementing Productive Practices in Primary and Secondary School Classrooms provides extensive details and practical strategies around the work of 15 schools from 2003 to 2006.

“This approach strongly supports current thinking about education in the Middle Years of Schooling,” said Geoff Jones, Innovations and Excellence Coordinator for the Darebin Cluster. “It’s a practical way of addressing the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) and is totally consistent with the Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT) endorsed by the Department.”

Student Action Teams were firstly set up in 1999 in a statewide project supported by the Victorian Departments of Education and of Justice. Here, students in approximately 50 schools investigated community safety within their communities. They carried out research, and designed and implemented action to make their communities safer.

“If there’s a community issue to be tackled, our normal approach is now to set up a Student Action Team to deal with it,” said a teacher from one of those schools.

Roger Holdsworth, from the Australian Youth Research Centre (University of Melbourne) was an evaluator of that program for the Department of Education and Training. He described the powerful ideas behind the program: “Student Action Teams are about supporting young people to question, construct and develop the sorts of multiple communities in which they live and wish to live.”

Since then, the ideas behind this learning and teaching approach have been taken up, implemented and developed by individual schools and clusters across Australia. (In South Australia, for example, Student Action Team approaches have been endorsed for all secondary schools in the state.)

“We have made changes about the road safety around our school,” wrote students from Thornbury High School at the end of 2003. “We’ve put a lot of hard work and effort into our problem and it’s very rewarding to know that we will be getting signs put up, and that the speed limit will be lowered to 40 kph at selected times of the day. Next year our plan is to have the Peer Support Leaders work with the Year 7s on this project.”

Students at Preston South Primary School reported their research and action on the environment at the end of 2005. “We want to improve the air quality around the school and make a significant contribution towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. We want to promote realistic travel alternatives to the car: walking, cycling and using school buses and public transport. The aim of the Student Action Team is to increase the number of people who walk, ride or catch public transport to school by 10% by the end of 2006.”

October 2006
The Principal of Preston South Primary School, Thérèse West, summed up the outcomes for the students. “Best of all, the students had fun, felt powerful and realised that their efforts could produce benefits for everyone!”

The report of these exciting initiatives forms a 90-page book that has been produced by the Darebin cluster of schools. It provides background information about Student Action Teams, details of the implementation stages that the schools developed together, evidence of positive outcomes for students, schools and communities, and practical advice about community partnerships.

Leigh Black from Bell Primary School reflected on her school’s involvement. “Students put 100% effort into their projects and were as proud of their achievements as I was. The introduction of Student Action Teams has been very successful. Many staff now view this as a powerful tool to provide students with real and relevant learning and its influence as a teaching and learning approach is spreading through the school.”

Student Action Teams also documents the productive partnerships that have been formed between schools and community groups. “This partnership – in which primary and secondary school students took an active leadership role around environmental sustainability – was precisely what we are supporting through our approaches,” said Andrew Stocker from LaTrobe University’s Melbourne Wildlife Sanctuary.

Other strong partnerships involved students working closely with groups such as the Darebin City Council (the Community Health and Safety Coordinator, and also with the Environmental Strategy Plan), Victoria Police, VicRoads and the Merri Creek Management Committee.

Year 9 Advance students from Reservoir District Secondary College also played important roles in leading training activities for younger students. Tony Marcus, Advance Program Coordinator at the College, said: “We could build planning into our class time and see that leading in activities could also enable us to achieve our outcomes. The involvement of the Advance students in the Student Forums provided a strong student-run focus that has substantially changed and developed the work of the whole cluster.”

Geoff Jones summed up the work of these schools, as documented in this book. “A key principle is that students work closely with others to investigate and tackle a real issue that is relevant to their own community. Through participation in such partnerships, they are engaged in purposeful, productive and authentic learning experiences. The young people are recognised – and recognise themselves – as valued members of their communities.”

Launch

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

- at the Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre (corner Bell Street and St Georges Road, Preston in Melbourne);
- on Thursday 19th October at 2.00 pm.

Teachers, students and others from these schools will talk about their experiences and outcomes. Copies of the book will be available for purchase at the launch.

- For further information and RSVP, contact Geoff Jones on: 0417 351 607