

The Medium And The Message

Building an Online Learning Community to Implement
Curriculum Planning and Assessment in Primary Schools, New
South Wales, Australia

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Abstract. Teachers of primary students aged 5 – 12 years in government schools in New South Wales, Australia, are implementing curriculum planning and assessment frameworks which provide a model for the integration of the six subjects taught to primary students into one manageable teaching program. This paper discusses how 120 schools, supported by Australian Federal Government funding, are trialling the program, providing valuable feedback for their peers, developing deeper understanding of the curriculum, sharing their knowledge and gaining greater confidence in the consistency of their teacher judgement. They are achieving much of this through their participation in an online community of learners. This online community is supported through a variety of ICT tools such as the Internet, videoconferencing and online meeting software. The teachers are gaining skills and expertise not only in curriculum and content but also in the use of interactive technologies which will provide a positive collaborative learning experience for them and their peers no matter where they are located.

1 Background

For many years primary teachers of students aged 5 – 12 years in New South Wales, Australia, have worked with a curriculum they perceived as overcrowded. In 2002 the NSW Government commissioned a study to identify the demands created for teachers as a result of the introduction of a new way of assessment and reporting based on syllabus outcomes. Eltis [1]

The terms of reference included:

- assess the impact different approaches to recording and reporting have had on the workload of primary teachers;
- identify the features and characteristics of best practice models;

- provide advice about the nature of support required to promote best practice within the context of a manageable workload.

The recommendations included developing program frameworks into a 'total teaching program that is manageable and directed at promoting productive learning opportunities for all students' [1].

As part of the response to the Eltis report, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) developed *Curriculum planning and assessment frameworks*. The frameworks provide a total teaching program for primary students aged 5-12 years in the major learning areas of English and Mathematics and an integrated program for the four key learning areas; Creative arts, Human society and its environment, Personal development health and physical education and Science and Technology. Included are 30 complete units of work incorporating ideas and suggestions for planning, programming and assessing. Thus a common focus made connections between syllabus outcomes from different subject areas. This grouping of outcomes is called Connected Outcome Groups or COGs. [1]. As the Eltis report suggested: "It need not be mandatory for schools to implement the *Program Frameworks* but it can be confidently expected many will choose to do so, especially if the Frameworks are presented in such a way as not to be a strait-jacket for schools" [2] This paper focuses on the strategy adopted for the implementation of COGs in NSW DET primary schools.

2 Challenges

The role of the curriculum support area of the Department to promote the frameworks to teachers, to encourage them to implement them and provide support to assist them is made especially challenging because the frameworks are not mandatory. Financial support has been made available to NSW DET through the Australian Government's Quality Teacher Programme (AGQTP). AGQTP provides funding to all school sectors across Australia to support teacher professional development. In NSW the COGs project is one of the projects to receive funding over four years, 2006-2009. The project budget includes funding for a senior curriculum adviser and a senior project officer (the author)

3 The Project Begins

COGs became available for implementation in schools late in 2005. The AGQTP project began at about the same time. There are 1644 primary schools in NSW [3] ranging from large metropolitan schools (up to 1,000 students) to one-teacher schools (up to 25 students) in isolated rural areas across a total area of 800,628 sq kms. Obviously the AGQTP project could not target them all within available budget and human resources. Two of the many challenges for the project were: 1: how to best use the resources available to work with a critical mass of teachers across the state and 2: how to make the benefits and achievements of the project

available to all primary teachers who wanted support to implement COGs. The project brief was to provide professional learning opportunities to teachers and to target a number of primary schools covering the range of large, small, metropolitan, rural and to cater for students of all needs. From early discussions with teachers, focus areas were identified for the first phase of the project. A total of 115 schools participated in this first phase for two years.

4 Development of Project Networks

Early adopters made up the initial focus group. The early adopters were teachers from 5 schools who had participated in the writing of the COGs units. These teachers therefore had a good understanding of the framework and its content. Their role was to teach the units and collect work samples from their students which the teachers then assessed. These work samples and assessments were published on a web site which could be accessed by all teachers to assist them in their own assessments. The other teachers provided feedback on manageability, resources and suggestions for possible modifications and to modify COGs units for multi-stage classes. The units had been written for 'standard' classes and did not take into account the large number of small mainly rural schools which have multi-stage classes ranging from all students Kindergarten to Year 6 (K-6, ages 5-12) in one class to composite classes of two grades in the one class. Teachers requested that the COGs units be modified to provide for these needs. While the focus groups would work separately it was important that the results could be shared initially within the groups and later across the groups so that all teachers could benefit, firstly those in the project and ultimately all interested K-6 teachers. How could this be achieved effectively and efficiently within the available resources?

5 A Learning Community

Much has been written about learning communities – their roles, benefits and constraints but in general it is agreed that the primary aim is for the participants to learn with and from each other by developing intelligence and abilities beyond what is possible by any one individual [4] and, as Mitchell and Sackney suggested, to work with others in a spirit of experimentation and risk taking to improve the educational experience of all [5]. The research was outlining the needs of this project. Another desirable feature of learning communities is that participants can scaffold one another through sharing of information and experiences thus providing good learning opportunities [6]. Establishing a learning community to provide information, support, resources and models of implementation appeared to be the logical next step.

Mitchell and Sackney [5] also point out that the shared understandings that are built up in a learning community need to develop slowly through team building. However this project did not have the leisure to develop slowly but rather needed to

work quickly to provide the support teachers were asking for while still adhering to the aims of AGQTP; to provide professional development opportunities for teachers. Few researchers clarify just how a learning community is built and maintained [5] but the project officers appreciated the importance of establishing the networks so as to build a sense of community among and between the members.

6 Developing a Delivery Model

Budget and resource constraints meant that much of the development, support and sharing between the members of the learning community would need to be online. Face-to-face course costs of teacher relief, travel and accommodation are the largest items in any school education project. For example, one day's teacher relief costs approx A\$300 and if teachers have to travel several hours to a venue, overnight accommodation must be offered. Thus it can happen that for one teacher to attend one day's professional development, that teacher spends one day traveling to the venue, one day's attendance and one day traveling from the venue resulting in A\$900 for 3 day's relief, travel costs (intrastate airfare costs are very high) and accommodation. This does not include the costs incurred in development, presentation, venue costs, etc.

Appreciating teachers' preference for face-to-face professional development and based on the evidence from evaluations of similar projects, it was decided to provide a blended learning approach combining face-to-face and online. Ewing et al in their evaluation of *CTJ (Consistent teacher judgement) Online for Science and Technology K-6* (a previous AGQTP project managed by the author) found that 'the next most important factor was the opportunity for face-to-face meetings. This finding supports evidence from other research in on line programs that face-to-face support is essential [7]. Research also shows that the extent of the mix of face-to-face and the ICT tools and how the tools are applied can greatly impact the learning outcomes [8]. The face-to-face workshops making up the blended approach provide excellent opportunities for ICT skill development to counteract the hesitancy on the part of many teachers about their ability to be involved in online learning. The blended approach seems to offer the best of both worlds: face-to-face meetings for everyone to get to know each other thereby encouraging the feeling of communicating online with colleagues rather than strangers and to have hands-on practice in a supportive environment with the ICT tools to be used [9]

7 ICT Tools Used to Develop the Online Community

In order to maximise the opportunities which ICT could provide, it is important, where possible, to tailor the learning experiences to preferred learning styles to make the learning more effective for those teachers who are unconvinced of the potential of online learning [10]. The technologies selected were those which were already available in schools: the Internet for presentation, staying up-to-date, sharing

of information and resources; online discussion board which is collaborative and supports a learning style which includes solitary, verbal and reflexive modes; video conferencing which simulates face-to-face interaction and supports learning styles which are visual, social, verbal and active; interactive white boards which support whole group and small group work and suit learners who are active, kinesthetic, visual and social and online meetings using audio, video and shared computer screens to support learning and to share developments suiting learners who are visual, social, aural and active.

The project web site monitors the progress of the project as well as providing links to resources developed specifically to support the curriculum planning frameworks. Using video snapshots, the site showcases the achievements of schools, teachers and their students as they make their COGs journeys. School presentations and curriculum support presentations were filmed at conferences around the state during 2007. These were edited and published on the project web site. The videos are proving to be a successful way of 'spreading the word' and are being used to stimulate discussion in teacher meetings, both face-to-face and online. Teachers present a credible voice to their peers and provide a powerful support for the online learning community.

An online discussion board provided the communication tool for the teachers providing student work samples which were in a variety of formats including word documents, graphics, sound and video files. As part of the process, the teachers were to engage professional dialogue around the assessment of their work samples. Using the blended technologies approach, a face-to-face meeting was held at the beginning of the project to introduce the teachers to each other, to provide an overview of the project and to explain the ICT tools to be used for the majority of the interaction. A further face-to-face meeting was held in the following school term to discuss progress, solve problems and provide further support in the use ICT. The discussion board would also be used to facilitate professional dialogue between teachers about the assessment and moderation of their student work. The author has been an online facilitator for a number of similar projects and is fully cognisant of the benefits and limitations of online discussions. In many discussions with teachers, they have reported that they find that, while the process of writing can assist in reflecting on their learning, this can be limited by an inhibition to express their thoughts for reading by their peers, which in turn leads to a hesitation at sharing the result of their teaching for critiquing by others. Therefore the need for protocols during the moderation process was emphasized so as to limit any possible feeling of intimidation. The example used was based on: Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: An Essential Toolkit [11].

8 Online Meetings

Over the last few years the NSW DET infrastructure has increased its broadband speeds and improved school computer networking which has greatly enhanced distance education using video conferencing. More recently the NSW Government announcement of the rollout of a videoconferencing unit, an interactive white board

(IWB) and a data projector to all schools has dramatically increased the potential for collaborative communication for all schools. Meeting online will save time, money and make it possible for teachers who would not otherwise have the opportunity to meet, to work together as peers. As schools provide access to these ICT tools, teachers will begin to appreciate their potential for teaching and learning for their students and for themselves.

The online meeting tools include videoconferencing and software such as *Bridgit* which enables computer screen sharing and communication by video (web cam) and audio (headphone/speaker/microphone). Meetings using *Bridgit* have provided opportunities for clarification of project issues, demonstration of products of the project such as work samples, modified units, and small group meetings. These opportunities have been embraced by many.

Even before the rollout, schools have purchased over 5,000 IWBs and are finding that the IWB acts as a central focus for group work and can provide a stimulating collaborative tool for learning. The IWB can be used as a standalone tool in the classroom but can also be used in conjunction with video conferencing and software such as *Bridgit*. This combination of tools enables project participants to join online meetings to access professional development while at school, collaborate with peers and be involved in professional dialogue around the implementation of COGs. The potential for ICT used in this way to support the sustainability of online communities is only just beginning to be explored.

9 Progress to Date

Evidence has been collected so far, based on exit evaluations from workshops, comments made in interviews and from conference presentations. This clearly shows that teachers in the project are very positive about the COGs units which are part of the curriculum planning and assessment frameworks and their implementation in schools. Through the project, they have developed a deeper knowledge and understanding of teaching practice, an enhanced appreciation of assessment and reporting and feel the framework facilitates whole school planning, evaluation and decision making. In addition the majority of teachers say their teaching has been re-energised. Many teachers are overcoming their apprehensions of online professional development and realising the power of working together as an online learning community to achieve better learning outcomes for their students. These outcomes could not have been realised without the use of ICT. The technology provided a new way to bring together a community of teachers in K-6 schools across NSW. The project will continue to increase the use of these tools over the next two years.

10 Sustainability of the Learning Community

The project has at the time of writing, completed two years of the scheduled four years. A growing body of work is now available to inform and support the adopters and the hesitant. New resources are being constantly added to the project web site. New student work samples and assessments will continue to be collected, edited and published. The project is currently in the early days of evaluation by an external evaluator.

In 2008 60 new schools will join the project to continue the work achieved 2006-2007. Several of the current project schools will act as mentors to new schools; each mentor school will support about 4 other schools. The mentor schools are already developing online networks with the schools they are supporting through videoconferencing and later through online meetings. Anecdotally those teachers who have never used videoconferencing before (a large majority) are agreeing that the experience is very positive and 'almost like being there'. Additional project schools from 2007 will collaborate online to assess and moderate their student work. Their results will provide additional student work samples for publication on the web.

The new schools will provide sustainability by their active participation in the project. The networks forming the online community will continue to develop and provide multiple pathways for teachers to engage in learning and networking activities, sharing their practice, learning with and from each other to extend their professional understanding of curriculum planning, assessment and reporting.

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Project Websites

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3. Work samples supporting COGs units http://www.qtp.nsw.edu.au/assessment_framework/index.asp