

Term 4 2006 Newsletter

From the Executive Officer

"What makes a great middle years curriculum?" This was a question asked by James Beane in his presentation at the Middle Schooling Association of WA conference in May this year. Considering the diversity in our middle years classes – so often the students are more different than alike – I wondered about the enormity of the question. James then presented considerations such as significance, integration of knowledge, student voice, inquiry, reflection etc. The principles he provided as underpinning middle years curriculum were:

- personal and social significance
- lifelike and lively
- relevance and rigour and
- accessibility to all.

MYSA members would appreciate hearing about how you incorporate any of these aspects into your practice. We would therefore encourage you to share some of your insights and experiences in future publications.

Seven MYSA members headed to the USA on 25 October to participate in the Study Tour, culminating in the NMSA Conference in Nashville. Geoff Sippel (MYSA President), Eleanor Nicholson (Vice President) and I all presented papers. Many thanks go to Geoff for organising this opportunity for members.

The final regional conference for this year was held in Melbourne last term. The feedback indicated that the features were the quality and range of presenters, as well as the great ideas and practical, engaging strategies that were shared. Many thanks to the local committee for their energy and commitment to making this conference such a success.

Susan Hearfield



Planning for the Victorian Regional Conference

Adolescents - High on Emotion!

*You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.
Dr. Seuss (from Oh, The Places You'll Go!)*

Many years ago when I decided to become an educator, I also decided that working with adolescents would be one of the most challenging and yet rewarding areas to work. That time in my professional career was guided by interest in what motivates young people to learn and do the things they do. Now, some twenty years later, I have grown even more intrigued by the workings of the adolescent mind. Moreover, like many parents and teachers, I find the complex set of emotions displayed by all children as one of the most beguiling and challenging aspects of educating young minds. For those truly interested in enhancing the educational environments of middle years students, I would like to suggest that tapping into and working proactively with the emotional milieu surrounding adolescence offers a distinct advantage over those who continue to operate under an umbrella of learning focused on cognition that is devoid of any emotional foresight. Learning is a process whereby cognition and emotion are inextricably intertwined; contemporary neuro-scientific research has identified what many of us have intuitively known - thinking and feeling do not exist without each other.

In some ways, education has always offered various theoretical frameworks acknowledging the 'affective domain' of learning. All too often however, these positions have focused on motivation and behaviour modification as some measure of pre-cognitive activity; the mantra of 'do this and you will get that' still permeates much of our practice. In the 21st century, much of what we know about the human brain and the neurological changes that occur during adolescence suggests that there is indeed much to learn about emotion before we embark on designing positive and fruitful learning experiences. One of the most prolific findings in recent research focuses on making sense of the nexus between adolescent emotion and decision making. Two regions of the brain help us to understand why this is so important.

Regardless of age, the region of the brain responsible for basic survival needs (hunger, thirst fight-or-flight) is a structure, known as the hypothalamus. The hypothalamus is powerful, influential and ready to function right from birth. If not, then biologically speaking we wouldn't survive for long. One of the frustrations with adolescents is due to the fact that hormonal changes, relationships, the environment and learning make this survival region a 'hot area' in adolescent brains. In addition, the basic survival drives of the hypothalamus don't always

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agree with the social structure, morals and safety of society. For more 'civilized' behaviours we need to involve higher regions of the brain including the cerebral cortex and cerebrum, which can over-ride the hypothalamus.

The cerebrum consists of regions comprising the 'logical' parts of the brain. These areas are responsible for deciding when basic hypothalamus drives may not be in our best long-term interest. Perhaps the most important region in this area of the brain is the pre-frontal cortex which quickly sizes up a situation and makes a determination which then drives our behaviour. It is the pre-frontal cortex that tells us when to act on our anger, or curtail it, have a second helping of dessert or go without it, seek immediate gratification or hold off for the long term. Unfortunately, this area of the brain undergoes incredible restructuring during adolescence making it very difficult for young people to predict the outcomes of their decisions, act what we might describe as logically and make the types of decisions we would assume are easily made. The more primitive regions of their brains are strong and tend to drive behaviours while the immature region responsible for the logic of long-term benefits does not always supersede the impulsive, survival-oriented hypothalamus. Quite simply stated, the logical part of the brain will not completely mature until adulthood and appears to go 'missing in action' during adolescence.

If, however, there is a silver lining for the middle years in this adolescent cloud it lies in the fact that educators can enhance learning and motivate adolescents by ensuring that all learning experiences are developed along frameworks of relevancy and relationship building. A gold star, systemic ranking or some ambiguous notion of one's role in the future is not going to drive many adolescents, but learning experiences that genuinely value the learner and sincerely attempt to tap into their lifeworlds will. Genuine middle years learning attempts to do this and those that have developed safe, supportive and adolescent-centred environments with a great deal of experiential and active learning are seeing the results. Quite simply, the more relevant, intense and interesting a learning experience, the more likely it will be attended to and the greater the chance of it being embedded in memory.

Therefore, although adolescents appear to find a wall in front of them when it comes to using logic to make everyday types of decisions or to weigh up the consequences of their actions, educators can still influence and contribute to their learning in a beneficial way. The biology of the brain shows that adolescents still need strong adult guidance and help with decision making throughout their school years. We must constantly remind ourselves that the adolescent brain is in a state of transition and adolescents are not just a smaller version of adults. We must also always remember the following -

- Adolescents' frontal lobes are under construction and as a result they are short on forethought, planning, consideration, impulse control and more likely to engage in 'risky business'. Educators and parents alike would do well to act as the prefrontal lobes of the young people around them by tempering an adolescent need for independency with consistent boundaries and guidelines. Moreover, schools

Note to contributors: It is the right of the editor to make minor editorial amendments, without consultation.

should look to establish pro-social risk-taking activities to entice and invigorate their curricular and co-curricular programs.

- Adolescents need to be guided and motivated by their emotions. If you want them to learn, if you want to communicate with them, if you want to enhance their school experiences and simultaneously diminish behaviour problems, make sure what you say and teach is emotionally relevant to them. Do **your** homework and find out what makes your students tick.
- Never underestimate your influence. Adolescents may be stubborn and oppose those adults around them but they also need mentors around who they will often imitate and emulate. Boundaries and the guidelines adults can offer from experience will often act as a beacon for many adolescents. Perhaps the most influential determinant in building an adolescent's success in school and in life parallels the relationships that are built with the adults around them; positive relationships equal positive outcomes, empathy equals respect while recognising that adolescents are often 'high on emotion' equals better opportunities for educators and parents to be proactive and positive.

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Talking Point 2

What more can MYSA do for Regional Areas?

As a MYSA Management Committee member and the Rockhampton Regional Co-ordinator, I am particularly interested in how MYSA develops, promotes and supports regional areas – hence, my question.

It goes without saying that Regional Coordinators play a significant role in promoting the aims and objectives of our Association. Many have successfully done this across their areas in partnership with their Independent, Catholic and state school colleagues. This is one aspect of the Association that is really impressive – and important. MYSA continuously aims to foster cross-sector professional relationships and there is certainly tremendous commitment to keep up the momentum.

If you could take a minute or two to email me, I would be very interested in knowing your thoughts and ideas – however brief – about what we can do to help foster or build upon what is already being done to support regional areas.

Mark Twain was once quoted as saying *A crank is a man with a new idea – until it catches on.* So, to all you 'cranks' out there, I encourage you to take the opportunity to share what you think. Who knows, your idea just might be the one to 'catch on'!

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Nanette Murphy

MYSA Showcase

DESIGN TECHNOLOGY - BROWNS PLAINS STATE HIGH SCHOOL

Are we there yet!!

We started this year with 3 first year Design Technology teachers and a fourth who had teaching experience up to Year 10 level at a very small country school.



Our faculty vision is for a learner centred curriculum where engaged, enthusiastic students are working technologically, able to articulate what they know and demonstrate what they can do with what they know.

Even though the teachers were raw, my strategy was to engage them through their knowledge of contemporary curriculum and the Technology KLA syllabus and to value their university learning experiences.

My brief to the teachers was to be creative and innovative, to look to the future, to develop positive relationships with their students, to understand student needs and interests and to relate this to curriculum requirements. I also encouraged them to take risks but not to send the faculty broke (financially) and to incorporate cross-curricular links with other faculties, ensuring student understanding and relevance.

At times, I felt that the journey resembled a young person learning to ride a bike; full of confidence that they had skills but anxious that if the bike started to wobble it could crash. This created an environment where the teachers felt they were empowered and highly motivated. They could feel a sense of leadership. I would support and reassure the teachers, providing advice when required. This enthusiasm was infectious. Many of the students didn't want to leave at the end of the lessons. Our professionalism ensured that the students remained blissfully unaware of the occasional wobbly moment as they were having a ball.

This teaching environment has thrown up some very exciting learning contexts - luminescent stand, skateboards, wind chimes, marionette puppets, stomp rockets, clowning, trivet, offroad skateboard, slide guitar, materials testing technology, hovercrafts, trebuchet and magnetic induction electric motors.

We have taken time to reflect. When we broke down our teaching practice we identified that we were teaching students:

- To problem solve
- to communicate and articulate ideas
- to work cooperatively and collaboratively
- to plan more effectively and to incorporate Maths and English to successfully work through the Design process
- to be interested and motivated
- to develop a work ethic.

We are now in the process of producing a dynamic learner centred Design Technology curriculum program for Years 8 and 9. We are keen to include Years 6 and 7 students from our primary feeder schools at a later date when some of the logistics can be sorted.

Judging by the very strong subject selection demand, we seem to have hit an accord with our students. Based on this demand, we could require a further two Design Technology teachers to cater for the increased interest in our subject area.



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SOUTHSIDE EDUCATION

As a presenter for the MYSA Showcase, I spoke of the need to take collective responsibility so that all young people are included in our schools' systems. We need to *redefine the mainstream* and provide personal support for all students, especially those without family support and those facing adverse life experiences. If we do not place stronger support networks in our schools, too many students will continue to *drop out of education or be excluded from schools*.

I feel that all schools need counsellors as well as a Career Advisor and Youth Workers available to assist young people in crisis. For many young people the school remains the most important social structure in their lives. The school has a crucial role in building a more just society where all young people are given a *fair go* so that each of them is able to feel valued and find his/her place in our community.

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BUILDING BRIDGES TO BUNA OUR SECOND MISSION TRIP TO PNG, JUNE, 2006

In an earlier edition of the Australian Journal of Middle Schooling, a report outlined the 2005 Mission Trip. This is the follow-up report.

Following our successful inaugural Flinders Christian Community College - PNG Mission trip in September, 2005, we could not wait to return to the beautiful coastal village of Buna in the Oro Province for another ten days of bridge building based on faith, friendships and fun between our two school communities.

All the planning meetings, prayers, fund raising and faxing reached a triumphant climax on the afternoon of Thursday, 15 June when we arrived at the village after a stopover in Port Moresby at the Mapang Missionary Home in Boroko. Our prayers for safe flights and passage through customs were answered as our many "excess free" boxes and bags of donated exercise books, pens and pencils, as well as clothes and school equipment, were stacked on the back of the "Ute" which was waiting for us at Popondetta Airport. Little did we know we were in for a slippery, bog-riddled ride through flooded roads and tracks leading to Buna. It was to be a baptism of mud, as we arrived at the village in high spirits to the sounds of the customary kundu drums and "Oro Kiava!, Oro Kiava!"

Our party of nine consisted of Year 8 students Ashleigh Field, Sherelle Perry, Year 9's Corey Ignace, Teale Nicholls with her dad Peter, teachers Mrs Jodie Williamson (accompanied by her husband Andy, both of whom attended last year), Mr Julian van Tienen and me. Each of us was billeted with a family who took us in as if we had known them all our lives, such is the measure of their unconditional generosity, hospitality and care. We shared their lives completely, eating with them, sharing their home life and joining them in their daily activities around the village and school.

We walked around the coast with our families through thick mangroves to the historic village of Sanananda, where many bloody battles took place against the Japanese invaders in 1942, for a wonderful display of Oro culture, Gospel sharing and Christian missionary activity. The long and winding road to Kokoda to see the War Memorial, Museum and the Kokoda District Hospital also taught us much about the legacy left by the war, especially the Kokoda campaign. Our appreciation of the role played by the "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels" was further reinforced by what we saw. We were glad we made the effort. Our visit to the Bomana War Cemetery in Port Moresby had a similar effect.

Whether we were swimming together at the beautiful black sand tropical beach, reading and writing letters together in answer to the hundreds of letters we had brought up to distribute or clapping together to the sounds of "Matthew-one, one - Luke, Luke - three, three - seven"...etc, we were as one. Whether we were sharing meals together with our billeting families or occasionally all together in the shelters, snorkelling together at the nearby reefs or paddling together in their dug-out canoes, we were as one. Whether we were dancing together to the beat of the kundu dressed in traditional tapa cloth, praying together at the Church services held during the

week (at which we were invited to read and preach the Word!), or singing together at the Fellowship evenings to the sounds of the guitars and their own magnificently tuneful and powerful voices, we were as one. Whether we were playing together with cards, toys, balloons, frisbees, vortexes, soccer balls, rugby, volleyballs, tennis balls inside stockings, washing up together after the meals or crying together when it was time to say farewell, we were as Christ made us - as one.

All of these experiences collectively and individually enabled us to build bridges of love and mutual respect, Christian fellowship and faith between our two communities. But none of this would have been possible without the courage and commitment of the students and teachers (and one brave dad) to take on the many challenges involved. None of this would have been possible without the generosity of so many Flinders College families and teachers who supported us with donations of materials and money. To them a thousand thanks. But greatest thanks be to God, for without His calling us to this enterprise, and without his strength to equip us for this undertaking, we could not have done it on our own. Of this we are absolutely certain.

Amen.

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Leader of the 2006 Mission trip to Buna, PNG**

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3-WAY REPORTING TRIAL AT GIN GIN STATE SCHOOL 2006

As young Michael approached the door, I could see the look of nervous apprehension on his face. Accompanied by his mother, he gingerly sat down on a chair and waited to speak.

No, this was not a student entering the Principal's office for inappropriate behaviour. This was our first student involved in our three-way reporting trial at Gin Gin State School!

Whilst apprehensive at first, as with anything new, Michael soon relaxed and began to discuss his reflections in earnest. As a powerful link for all stakeholders, three-way reporting allows the student, the teacher and the parent to sit together and discuss issues in a realistic and meaningful way. No longer is the student waiting at home or outside the classroom to hear what has been discussed, now they are directing the conversations around their learning.

Three-way reporting will:

- provide progress information to students and parents
- enable students to monitor their own learning and establish goals in collaboration with parents and teacher
- encourage parents to take an active role in, and responsibility for, their child/children's learning and
- enable the class teacher to gain greater insight into students' strengths, needs and attitudes.

We believe that student progress is maximized when they are part of the teaching/learning progress. As parent/caregivers are an integral part of students achieving success, it is imperative that they are involved and informed of student progress.

In order to address these issues, our teaching team propose to conduct a combination of face to face reporting with parents and students twice yearly as well as written reporting twice yearly.

As a means of valuing parental and student contributions, face-to-face interviews are to be conducted during first term, with written reports distributed at the completion of Semester One. In order to reestablish goals, parents and students are invited to continue face-to-face reporting during Term 3 with a final written report completed at the end of the school year

We believe that parents/caregivers, teachers and students need to stay in regular contact and advocate an "open door" policy where face-to-face reporting can occur, on request, throughout the year.

Whilst our trial has only just begun, feedback from teachers, students and parents have been extremely positive.

Teachers have commented:

"I feel I'm getting to know the student in a more rounded way, other than the usual assessment pieces."

"We have established a strong working relationship between students and parents early in the year".

Students have commented:

"I like being able to discuss the things that are important to me."

"I feel like I know why we do certain things at school. I like having goals for myself".

Parents have commented:

"I feel part of his learning and he explains more in the interview than at home. I see him taking responsibility".

"It's great to feel an important part of my child's schooling."

Three-way reporting is not new. For our school, however, it's an exciting and major step forward in promoting strong relationships between all stakeholders, particularly in the middle years. Currently, our trial involves two classes who are being taught in a team teaching situation (Years 4/5 & 5). During our review process towards the end of 2006, we hope to see continued success through the year, with reviews and refinements for further implementation in 2007.

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Mackay - Regional Conference Report

Michael Nagel and Michael Pohl were the guest presenters at the recent Mackay Regional Conference for Middle Years Educators.

Teachers from across all education sectors enjoyed the mix of up-to-date theory and research and very practical classroom strategies. Michael Nagel's keynote and workshop were very well received as teachers appreciated the many small strategies involving both the physical and emotional environment of middle years classrooms. Much of the conversation of teachers after Michael Nagel's presentations revolved around, "Now I know why ..."

Michael Pohl shared his work on explicitly teaching thinking strategies and the link with Intellectual Quality and Supportive Classroom Environment, aspects of Productive Pedagogies, was very evident. Many teachers found the strategies he explained and demonstrated a worthwhile refresher on higher-order thinking. Michael emphasised the importance of developing strategies that become the students' tools as well as those of the classroom teachers' and made the most of the opportunity to purchase Michael's very practical reference books.

The Mackay MYSA Committee is grateful for the assistance of Susan Hearfield, Executive Officer for MYSA, who supported the day with her presence as well as her organisation of registrations. We would also like to acknowledge the support of Education Queensland's Mackay and Whitsunday Region, Catholic Education Mackay Region, and Whitsunday Anglican School Mackay for their support and Sky Function Rooms, Magpies, for their organisation and marvellous catering.

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Each year, our Year 9 students participate in a culminating activity for their SUPERCART Integrated Task. This task bridges Maths, Science, Technology & Design, Art and English over two terms.

Groups of eight students are given the task of designing and constructing a SUPERCART, to be 'raced' on race day. The task includes designing a team logo, printing shirts, writing to acquire sponsors, keeping financial statements, designing and constructing a SUPERCART, hosting sponsors on the day and providing hospitality in a 'tent'.

It's a fantastic task that we began last year following a successful grant submission. We now do this from scratch without financial backing. The kids love the task and the parents and sponsors are very enthusiastic about it.

The SUPERCART task is one that really engages the students and helps them connect the theory of many key learning areas into a practical task that is meaningful and relevant - the essence of what teaching in the middle years is about!

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SUPERCART




The 5th International Conference of the
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Building Our Future
 17-19 May 2007
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