

Transforming Assessment, Transforming Professional Learning. (GROO 1053)

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This paper discusses the processes used by a large Independent Girls School to transform assessment and reporting practices. Formerly of a summative and convergent kind, the determination has been to change ways in which teachers and their students engage in authentic, formative assessment such that student learning is enhanced in all faculties within the school. Each faculty in the school has formed a Commission of Enquiry whose purpose has been to investigate: current assessment practices; from whence they came; the impediments they face when change is to be made; and some new directions and possibilities. The process culminated with each faculty undertaking an action learning project where change was planned, implemented, monitored and reflected upon. Finally, outcomes were presented and celebrated in a school-wide poster session. The paper is jointly presented by the researcher in residence, who is acting as a critical friend to the project, and the Director of Curriculum, who is managing the project.

The Context:

Independent Girls School has a five year history of developing evidence based practice. A number of papers and journal articles have outlined the work of the school and its orientation to school based research (among them: Groundwater-Smith & Hunter, 2000; Goodwin & Groundwater-Smith, 2000; Groundwater-Smith, 2000; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2001; Groundwater-Smith, 2001a; Groundwater-Smith, 2001b). As a result of the many studies undertaken at the school it was determined that a major thrust for 2001 would be a school wide investigation of assessment and reporting practices, conducted by the Heads of Department as Commissions of Enquiry under the guidance of the Director of Curriculum.

As a jointly written paper we encompass two intersecting narratives; one being, the professional learning of the Director of Curriculum, Mike, as he interacted with the Researcher in Residence, Susan, acting as Critical Friend encouraging ongoing reflection; the other the professional learning of the faculties as they moved through a process which challenged their prior practices and beliefs.

One on One Reflection:

In the first instance what has been captured is the pedagogical and professional reasonings adopted by the Mike as he worked with the Heads of Department over the year. Bennett (1993) argues that reflection requires a reconstruction, re-enactment or recapturing of events and accomplishments leading to a reconceptualisation of what is to be done – effectively a form of professional learning. To achieve this end the Director and Researcher in Residence met on a regular basis on eight occasions. Each meeting was taped and developed as a portrayal, which then formed the opening gambit for the next conversation.

The initial meeting was one where the notion of reflection itself was examined. In order to provide focus for the first conversation Susan extracted a series of words associated with reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action within professional practice, and in a public context. These were: Rewarding, uncertain, adult learning, transformative, values, problematic, imaginative, unsettling, subjective, collaborative, metacognitive. In turn, each selected a word that then became the topic of conversation.

Meta-cognitive: Mike's first selection was the phrase meta-cognitive. He felt that it gave a purchase to the notions of the processes involved in reflection. In terms of engaging with a critical friend the relationship permits him to think aloud through his ideas, thus making them accessible not only to another, but more explicit to himself. This will enable him to understand and refine the processes as he goes along.

Subjectivity: Susan selected as her first word 'subjectivity' because she believed that Mike's science background might orient him strongly to an objective conceptualisation of inquiry, research and knowledge. Teaching, as a social practice, requires an account to be taken of not only the objective conditions of the work, but also the subjectivities which teachers bring to it. Mike indicated that he does not necessarily see science as an exclusively objective enterprise, that we work within agreed paradigms for agreed purposes and that he feels quite comfortable with working within the subjectivities of a group.

Collaborative: Mike went on to select 'collaborative' because he saw working with someone means that there will be "two sets of eyes, two sets of ears" working through some of the problems and challenges facing the Commissions.

Adult-learning: Susan drew upon the experience of working with EdD students with regard to adult learning and the ways in which it is both different from, and the same as, younger people's learning. She believes that what is notable is that the power relations vary. Working with Mike she sees that there are no status issues which might act as impediments. That "power relations aren't a problem, they won't be there to interrupt learning for either of us". Mike added that he sees adult learning as more demand driven. Adults have a particular context in which they want to learn, they have an immediate need to "get something done, get something fixed". In some senses he was focussing on informal adult workplace learning, rather than the kind of learning required to obtain a credential. He believes that there is a "mandate" from the school to do some learning in terms of assessment and reporting practices and that will act as a powerful stimulant.

Problematic: Mike saw that his own role is shifting within the structure and management of the school and so, for him, there is a readjustment in undertaking the new roles expected of him. In the past initiatives such as assessment and reporting have come from the Heads of School and his role has been to ensure that various requirements, such as those of the Board of Studies, are fulfilled. Now he is "digging deeper" and driving the process through the Heads of Department, who at present are more focussed on the reporting side, than the assessment side. He sees the role as challenging as teachers have to go outside their

comfort zones to re-think assessment. Susan suggested that the stance of the teachers might give Mike some helpful leverage in that it is possible to work backwards from authentic reporting to authentic assessment. "If we want to give parents rich, well informed feedback about student X's learning, then we must have good assessment practices in place". How do we know, what evidence do we need, how do we get the evidence? The new HSC also presents an interesting challenge with its requirements to be more explicit regarding outcomes at Level 6.

Transformative: Susan found the notion of critical reflection as an opportunity to reach not only a kind of self understanding, but also to transform existing understandings as quite useful. She saw that both she and Mike would be developing and changing their ideas as a result of the process. Mike added that one of the appeals to him of the phrase 'transforming learning' was that it had a double barrelled meaning; one was that education, in general would have transforming consequences, the other that the pedagogy itself was being changed. Susan linked this to the current discussions regarding teacher professional learning within the supervision framework. "If the school is driving this way for the students, it must also be driving this way for the professional learning of the teachers."

Imaginative: Mike believed that to be transformative required some intellect and imagination. He wanted to ensure that things are done differently and that this will require some creativity on everyone's part.

Unsettling: Susan drew attention to the notion that when one is doing things differently and imaginatively there is an element of risk that can leave people quite unsettled. Clearly the discussion was moving now, towards the intention to change assessment and reporting practices, rather than focusing exclusively upon critical reflection itself. Susan cited the unsettling consequences of changing practices at school and the ways in which they may impact upon the ways in which students might negotiate at home, illustrating the fact that changes in one domain affect what goes on in another. "If you unsettle one bit, you can't expect everything to stay nice and orderly in another."

Values: Mike suggested that the notion of change had attached to it underpinning values, school values, personal values, community values. He believed that school values have grown up and developed over a long period of time. Susan agreed and added that such established values set up clear parameters and boundaries which themselves need to be challenged from time to time.

Uncertain: Susan drew upon the discussion regarding values to indicate her own uncertainty about "how far does one go?" While she had discussed critical reflection in many contexts and undertaken it within a group environment, this rather more intense role was new to her and produced for her some feelings of uncertainty.

Rewarding: Mike was left with no choice but to take the last keyword 'rewarding'. But both noted it as interesting that it was the last word and that neither of them had selected it immediately. They agreed that this was quite healthy.

Mike perceived that it would be necessary to trust the professionalism of the Heads of Department and their teachers to push through the processes:

"How do we get them unsettled enough to make changes, but not so unsettled that they throw their hands up and say 'well if you want it tell us what to do.' But if we are looking for lasting effects it has to come from them and from their professional development."

Susan suggested that a good place to start is to consider the nature of formative assessment and the kinds of strategies which can be used to bring those ideas forward. In concluding the discussion it was agreed that this might be the point at which the next meeting should begin.

This first session is reported in a relatively full fashion to give an insight into the direction that conversations took. The second meeting paid particular attention to the challenge of shifting focus from summative to formative assessment and is summed up by Mike indicating that his understanding was that formative assessment is:

based on knowing 'where a student is at' at a specific time, it depends mostly upon informal interactions with the students in the classroom, rather than through specific assessment tasks, or specific assessment moments. It tends to be based upon gut feelings and impression type things and they wouldn't be looking in a mark book to see where they are up to. Basically, the process is an impressionistic one. Its most important purpose is in providing a basis for knowing what to do next.

Susan then suggested to engage in the ongoing process of formative assessment it requires that teachers know their students well. She asked Mike what makes it hard to know the students well enough, what are the impediments, and then what are the strategies which go beyond the 'gut feelings' response and which provide sound, reliable, consistent evidence of progress which goes beyond "just happenstance", and finally how participative are the students in the processes themselves, "how well do they know themselves and their own learning?"

In reply to this series of points Mike emphasised that the aim is to identify with the students where it is that you want them to go. "If you have got the road map, then you've got a better chance of locating where the student is along that particular road."

Mike could not identify strong formative assessment strategies which were built into the management of student learning in the earlier years other than in Design and Technology:

There is a fair amount of engagement between teachers and the girls in terms of the design process, towards making a product at the end of it. They would be using conferencing with the students, getting them to reflect on what they have done and then planning what needs to happen next.

Susan suggested that the school's Independent Learning Centre (ILC) project within the Quality Teaching Program as directed by the Association of Independent Schools (AIS) was another example of the ways in which it is possible to work with students to analyse their learning; in this case they are identifying their information management skills within the context of Standard English and negotiating with their teachers ways in which these can be improved from both the learning and the teaching perspectives. This led Susan to ask Mike whether he thought that teachers saw formative assessment as both providing feedback to the students and to the teachers themselves.

Mike responded:

I think there is some indication of this and I think it may be coming as a result of top-down changes in the HSC where for the first time we are being asked to locate a student's ability on a continuum of increasing complexity and this means I have to ask myself – well what do I know and what does the student know in order to help move them on. (He suggested that one of the major

challenges faced by the school was to shake up teachers' mind sets about assessment). In the past it's been a matter of 'I've taught it, whether they've learned it or not is up to them.'

By second term the Commissions were well underway. Mike had requested that they investigate where they were and where they wanted to go. The commissions would continue to investigate the "where are we now?" questions, which, in turn, will give some impetus to thinking about future directions. In effect the teachers were seen to be engaged in what Shirley Grundy calls the "reconnaissance phase". They could identify both good practice, but also misplaced assumptions. Teachers were now having to articulate what their beliefs and practices were in relation to assessment and reporting.

The teachers' discussions were becoming more sophisticated and moving beyond thinking about assessment in terms of 'marks'. In their fourth meeting Susan again raised the issue of students' capacity to discuss their learning as a part of the assessment process. She suggested that an interesting development occurs when a student shifts from "explaining a subject, to explaining their learning about a subject". She proposed that when students start to analyse what sort of learning has occurred it is unavoidable that they will also start to discuss what has been learned and how it has been taught. Mike added that where teachers use assessment for evaluation purposes they are able to not only estimate "where the students are in their learning, but also where they need to go and what they (the teachers) are going to do about it". Susan added that also, if students are taking responsibility for their learning, they also need to consider what they (the students) are going to do about it.

It will be in the second narrative of this study that the detail of the changes will be outlined. Suffice here to say that change has occurred and that as it has occurred, it has inevitably had an impact in both expected and unexpected ways. For example there has been a developing interest in using portfolios as an assessment and reporting tool. Mike suggested that some thought needs to be given regarding the way in which the portfolio may be a developmental tool, while in other cases it may be used as evidence that specific learning has occurred. In another case, it may be that a faculty uses the portfolio as a showcase, where only the best examples are included. He believed that teachers need to consider carefully why they want to use portfolios and how they can best be managed. Clearly, there could be an overuse, leading to student resistance, even confusion, given these different purposes. Teachers will need to talk to each other more regularly across faculties to ensure that unnecessary duplication does not occur; it might even be the case that joint portfolios across disciplines could evolve.

Thinking more generally, Susan asked what difference had the commissions made to practice. Mike believes that people are now more focused and that they have developed a common language that enables them to have more profitable discussions about the ways in which assessment practices impact on what goes on in the classroom. Susan wondered whether the new standards framework of the HSC had impacted, not only upon the senior years but thinking in relation to other classes in the school. Mike believed that "having to do something and then seeing what it means has really pushed them (the teachers)."

Nonetheless he believes that generally innovations have been somewhat "patchy across departments"; some have had a more thoroughgoing review of practice than others. He sees that there will be real pay-off for those who have planned and scaffolded for learning using assessment as a driving tool. Others have only tinkered at the edges. Strengths can be found in History, TAS, and Social Science.

In their final discussion prior to the Poster Session Mike and Susan both identified the difficulties faced by teachers to thoughtfully engage in genuine reform when they were dealing with multi-dimensional, relentless change on every front. "In the end, they just want

to pack up for the year's journey and make sure they have their supplies and make it to the other side with least damage." In spite of such a turbulent environment to be found in all lively educational settings, it was seen that the Commissions had provided the Heads of Department and their staff with a space for their own professional learning, or what Raab (1997) calls " a container in which learning and exploration can take place; a container in which learners can assess their own knowledge as well as their resilience in the face of not knowing and feeling anxious (p.170).

Mike also explored some of his own challenges and the personal context for reflection provided to him by the conversations. He saw them as quite exhilarating and certainly meeting his early expectation of their having a metacognitive benefit. Too often people with the kinds of responsibilities which he carries are expected to find immediate solutions, rather than take the time to deeply consider processes (see Handy 1994). For both of us it has been a revelatory year.

So what of the second narrative – the text of the doing, the action, the disappointments and joys, the small and large achievements?

Commissions of Enquiry – More than just a tool:

In 2000 the School decided to change its mode of whole school professional development. Prior to that time, the first day of each term was designated a pupil free day and staff were in-serviced on a topic often by an outside expert. The new method was called Commissions of Enquiry and in 2000 they involved groups of teachers working on topics of interest in an action research mode. The school day was shortened every Wednesday by 25 minutes. Staff were expected to work back every second Wednesday from 3pm to 4:30pm to participate on their Commission. Facilitators were trained in the SCOPE method of action research and the Commissions ran for three terms.

Results were disappointing. Some groups produced work that led to improvements in students learning while others did not. Some groups were too large to be manageable. Many of the facilitators did not have official leadership roles within the school and there was a lack of support for them in their role.

In 2001 it was decided that the method was worth using again, but that groups would be organised along departmental lines. The Head of Department would be responsible for conducting the enquiry in their discipline area. The Director of Curriculum would support the Heads of Department in monitoring and driving the process.

Assessment and reporting were set as the topic for the Commissions in 2001. This was expressed as a number of questions, which were to be answered by each department:

- What makes good assessment?
- What are our current assessment and reporting practices?
- How can we improve our current practice?
- What are the impediments to improving practice?
- How will you know if you have improved practice?
- How will you be able to show others that you have improved practice?

Recent changes to the New South Wales Higher School Certificate had moved assessment in year 12 from a norm-referenced procedure to a standards-reference framework. Teachers had had to change their assessment procedures to fit this new system. The mandatory nature of these changes had introduced those staff taking senior classes to the terminology

and practices of a more student centred system of assessment. This would prove useful in achieving change at other year levels.

Term 1 was used as a preparation period with the Heads of Department. Two of the regular Curriculum Committee meetings were used to workshop the introductory questions. Materials used in these workshops could be used by Heads of Department with their departments when the Commissions commenced.

The three terms of the Commissions were to have three phases:- reflection, action and evaluation. The reflection phase was aimed at achieving a common language of assessment and a common understanding of what were good assessment practices.

A number of checkpoints were placed into the process. These proved very useful for a variety of reasons. They provided opportunities for discussion among Heads of Department leading to cross fertilisation of ideas and positive reinforcement from colleagues. They allowed monitoring of the process by the Director of Curriculum. They provided milestones at which the Heads of Department had to accept responsibility for what they had achieved.

Checkpoints included reports back to the Curriculum Committee, a five minute talk to a whole staff meeting at the end of term 2, a one page progress report to the Director of Curriculum in term 3 and a whole school poster session towards the end of term 4.

The report to the whole staff was probably the least successful of the checkpoints. Fourteen reports were too many for a single session, especially for the Department which had to go fourteenth.

In the term 3 report a number of features of effective assessment that had been identified in the reflection phase were listed. These are shown below:

- Outcomes for a teaching unit are given to students before commencing the unit
- Teaching strategies are aimed at ensuring students meet outcomes
- Assessment task is aimed at testing outcome achievement
- Assessment is used to inform teaching practice
- Assessment provides meaningful feedback to students
- Reporting is clearly related to performance in assessment tasks

Heads of Department were asked to nominate which aspect of effective assessment they were addressing in their Commission. They were also asked to give a brief report on what they hoped to achieve during that term. Several Heads of Department reported that the progress report was a useful tool in focussing their ideas.

The final poster session was particularly important in generating substantial professional dialogue between staff members. Departments took a fairly liberal view of "poster". There were traditional posters, Power point presentations, performances by the Drama Department, displays of student work and practical demonstrations of technology use in assessment.

All departments reported that they had gained a shared understanding of the issues involved in transforming assessment practices. There were differences in how departments transferred that understanding into changes in their practice. Some of the outcomes are described below:

Science

The Science Department discussed what constituted valid assessment in terms of the new syllabi and Board of Studies requirements. They prepared some corporate tasks and justified these to each other. The result of this was common understandings of the language to be used in tasks and interpretation of questions. They then went on to develop tasks for senior classes with the aim of reviewing them for this year. As a separate line of action research they interviewed the top year 8 class about their understanding of the terms - assessment, valid, criteria. The students were organised to prepare several tasks in separate groups and justify them to the class. Several tasks were generated by the students. One particularly good task will be used with the next year 8 cohort.

Music

Over the past two years the Music Department have been developing a web-based system, called Track IT, for tracking student completion of course outcomes using a negotiated project based teaching program. They used their Commission of Enquiry to add student self assessment and staff assessment to the data base. Explanation of course outcomes and levels of achievement have become a necessary part of training students to use the Track IT system. Students are taken through a paper version of the assessment system before being introduced to the computerised system. Student interviews have revealed a greater understanding and acceptance of the Track IT system.

TAS

The Technological and Applies Studies Department looked at improving their communication of assessment task requirements and their feedback procedures. The faculty, through group discussion and survey responses recognised an inconsistency in reporting and assessment.

The department developed a pro forma for the issuing of senior assessment tasks. They also procured a marking guideline feedback sheet, which could form the foundation for most set tasks. This marking guideline also linked reports outcomes to the individual components of the assessment task.

In the junior years, a common marking profile was developed for teachers of the same subject level. This profile reduced the compilation of results at report time, and allowed for a student's progress to be monitored by the different teachers.

Drama

The Drama Department explored a number of areas. Criteria based marking was used to make outcomes correlate logically to areas of achievement. Assessment was integrated into co-curricular activities where students could demonstrate outcome achievement and be accredited for it. The department also promoted assessment negotiation whereby students could negotiate tasks based on outcomes and their areas of interest.

A short questionnaire was given to staff to complete during the final poster session. The following questions were asked:

- What surprised you?
- What did you learn?
- What can you use in your own department?
- What would you like to know more about?
- Which department could you work with to enhance greater integration?

Eighty-six staff returned the questionnaire. Responses to the first two questions were similar. The most common responses referred to the diversity or variety of approaches that were used and to the thought, effort and expertise that was exhibited by their colleagues.

Four areas were identified by staff as being able to be used in their department. These were the peer evaluation process used in History, the computer generated and marked test used in PDHPE, the use of spreadsheets to map outcome achievement used in Computing and the Track IT program developed by Music.

The fourth question also elicited answers that focussed on technology. Nearly half the respondents stated that they would like to know more about the Track IT system. The use of spreadsheets and using technology in the assessment process received the next highest number of responses.

The final question generated a matrix which indicated some areas for future work between departments. There was an interesting correlation where in some cases departments nominated each other to work with, for example, Science and PE.

Several departments have indicated that there are aspects of assessment and reporting that they would like to continue working on. They see this year's Commissions as a good start for developing effective assessment practice. The challenge in a busy school will be to support the professional learning of the teachers and to widen the scope of the developments that have occurred as a result of this year's work.

The School Management Committee has decided that the focus for next year's Commissions of Enquiry will be the use of technology to promote learning. As the allocated professional development time will be used for this purpose, further changes to assessment practice will need to occur within the 'normal' working hours of the departments.

Many departments have made an encouraging start to changing their assessment practice. They have trialled new methods with a limited group of students. In their reporting they have indicated that the new methods are seen as a success by both staff and students. This should provide a sound basis for spreading the changes to all year levels.

Most departments focussed on changing their assessment practices. Some have tried to make the connection between assessment and reporting explicit to students. One of the challenges still to be faced by the School is in communicating these changes to parents and to make the links between outcomes, learning experiences, assessment and reporting clear to them.

The successful techniques used to drive the Commissions this year should be used again with next year's Commissions. Basing the Commissions on departments allowed teachers to develop and test ideas within the framework of their normal teaching and with their most immediate colleagues. This model should be retained next year. Taking time to work with Heads of Department before the Commissions started and giving them tools to use with their departments was another technique that should be used again. The use of check points throughout the year should also be used. Finally if, at the end of next year's Commissions, a poster session can generate the same buzz of professional dialogue between our staff that occurred this year then they will have been a success.

My task in driving the Heads of Department towards effective change in their practice was greatly helped by the interaction with our Researcher-in-Residence. The opportunity that was provided for personal reflection on professional practice and my role within the School gave me some valued insights into what I was seeking to do in promoting change within the

School. Having a Critical Friend who could also make excellent practical suggestions greatly assisted me in the process.

Conclusion:

Transforming student learning through authentic assessment practices has been the underlying goal of this year's work at Independent Girls' School. It has been understood that this can best occur when teachers, across the school, working in collegial groups transform their own professional learning. The processes which were adopted required that they consider carefully their current practices before identifying what it is that needs to be changed. We do not claim that these processes are complete, but that the challenge of change has been met, head on, and that new directions are being taken and will continue to be pursued.

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