



Snapshot

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The ANSN Curriculum Planning Hub: An introduction from Gavin Grift

Editor: Keith Redman

Snapshots are occasional papers about areas of interest for Network members. The ANSN is committed to making available quality resources to help teachers and schools improve their work.

The ANSN Curriculum Planning Hub: An introduction from Gavin Grift

Gavin Grift is National Co-ordinator of the ANSN Curriculum Planning Hub and Director of the Association of Innovation in Education



Keith Redman, Editor of ANSN E-News, interviewed **Gavin Grift** for this ANSN Snapshot, which has been developed from that conversation, using a range of Hub documentation. The Snapshot also includes comment and insights from a draft paper by **Anne Clement**, a colleague of Gavin Grift's, who was involved in the development of the Curriculum Planning Hub

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

John Dewey

Introduction: What we did

In 2007, I worked with a number of colleagues to design and develop the inaugural Curriculum Planning Hub, as a partnership between the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) and the Mulberry Hill Cluster of schools in Victoria, where I was Cluster Educator at the time.

The Hub launched into five days of professional learning, seeking to address the following essential question.

How can we plan a curriculum that authentically meets the needs of our learners?

Out of the early discussions about our intent came a series of secondary or supporting questions for each member to think about, which were:

- What is my purpose for planning curriculum?
- How do I effectively use a “planning process” to develop curriculum?
- How can I measure the success of my plan? and
- What can help me?

We spent the first two days considering these questions in some detail, delving deeper and personalising our interpretations on the basis of our own experiences and circumstances as teachers.

We asked questions and we reflected. We looked at what learning meant to each of us, thinking about examples of things that we had learnt well and musing on why that had been the case. What had helped things fall into place for us on those particular occasions, more than in other situations with different settings, teaching or content? What did that say about how we learned best? And how did we know that to be true? If we were going to plan learning for others, on the basis of what we had learned from our own experiences, how should we go about that? What had it told us about effective pedagogy and what were the implications for us as teachers? What did we need to change in the ways that we had been doing things previously?

We moved to consideration of a model that involved pre-planning, clarification of purpose and a continuing focus on the key concepts and skills that we wanted our students to learn.

The model that we developed around this involved 6 steps, which were:

- 1 immersion, or what we thought of as “tuning in”, taking into account factors such as student backgrounds and interests in the area to be studied;
- 2 generating information and clarifying expectations;
- 3 processing and sorting out, exploring and using strategies to help build understanding;
- 4 applying and creating, asking what we were going to do with the learning;
- 5 evaluating, where we would work with the students to reflect on what we had learned, comparing where we were with where we had been; and
- 6 inspiring – where the enhanced learning would impact on future developments and directions, influencing both the teacher and the related educational leaders to think differently about what they do, and change how they do it.

With that model in mind, Hub members worked in teams to develop units of study that they would trial in their own school settings. These were designed in the knowledge that the units would have to fit the particular context and the learning needs of specific students. The results would also be subject to scrutiny, since members would bring back the results of their work for consideration by the whole Hub on Days 3 and 4 of the professional learning program, later in the year. Hub members would reflect on what learning had occurred and what impact it seemed to have had on the learners.

The Hub members were asked to maintain a Reflective Journal, thinking about the questions they had raised before, in relation to their own learning – in applying the new model and teaching the units of work ...

- What have I come to understand?
- How did I come to understand it?
- How do I know that I understand it?

As a start, they were asked to reflect on the first two days of professional learning, using the same three questions.

What were some of the responses to Days 1 and 2 of the Hub learning?

In answer to the first question, “What have I come to understand?”, the participant reflections included the following:

I have come to learn that I CAN plan curriculum – all I needed was the right tools and guidance to get me there

I understand the need to plan from the student’s viewpoint – questions that would challenge and engage each student – and that pre-planning and planning are both important and necessary

In answer to the second question, “How did I come to understand it?”, the participant reflections included the following:

I came to understand it through the modelling and demonstration of a colleague, as well as my own opportunity to manipulate and use it

I came to understand it by seeing the difference between my planning before my two days here and now

By doing it – it made more sense

In answer to the third question, How do I know that I understand it?, the participant reflections included the following:

I know it is up to me to provide a unit of work where students can really be engaged with their learning and take ownership of their learning at the same time.

I know I understand this because I can name the kids that I haven’t engaged and inspired to learn for life (like my son). This is my aim now.

A term later – Days 3 and 4 of the Hub professional learning

After a term of implementing and monitoring their units of work, the Hub members came together again and used the David Perkins *Teaching for Understanding* framework to reflect on what had happened. The framework is outlined in an appendix to this ANSN Snapshot.

In considering the general learnings that they had made, the 46 participants, from 20 schools, came up with some principles, which can be summarised as follows.

How do I learn best?

- *Experience*
- *When I'm interested in it*
- *When there is a need for it*
- *When I'm immersed in it*
- *When I have the opportunity to experiment*
- *When I have the opportunity to practise*
- *When I have the opportunity to research*
- *When I have the time to explore ideas*

How do I know I've learnt it?

- *When I have developed a level of confidence*
- *When I have evidence that the learning has made a difference*
- *Through feedback from others*
- *Through what I've actually achieved*
- *Through the acquisition of a skill*
- *Through my ability to teach someone else*

:

They also addressed two reflective questions:

- 1 What assists your students/ teachers/whole school in providing an environment where the above criteria can be supported?
- 2 What impinges on your students/ teachers/whole school in providing an environment where the above criteria can be supported?

Following their discussions and reflections, the Hub members went back to their schools, to refine what they had been working on and to put into practice what they had learnt together.

Another term later: Day 5

On Day 5, the Hub members presented accounts of their own journeys over the three-term process, describing what had happened, commenting on it, asking themselves the “So what?” question, and starting to look at how what they had learnt would transfer into new ways of operating – for them in their own schools, and hopefully for their teacher colleagues who had not yet been part of the journey.

The participants were asked to identify things that had worked particularly well and to comment on whether they had experienced an “Ah ha!” moment of understanding or insight at any stage, about something that had a significant impact.

In summary, the largest number of positive group responses had to do with learning the importance of a sense of ownership, of purpose, of team reflection and of student reflection. Many spoke of using organisers and authentic assessment more than they had previously.

As a team, drawing upon their various presentations, the Hub members produced an overall Curriculum Planning Reflection Chart. This organised their reflections under three headings:

- 1 What's working well – things that I'm proud of, what's going well and what can be built on
- 2 What's non-negotiable – what I don't like, what gets in the way and what I can't do much about
- 3 What must change – things that we don't like but **can** and **must** change

Without going into too much detail in the space available as a Snapshot, what were some of the things that they identified as having to change? They included, among many others, the need for.

- teachers to be more open to new ways of planning units of work, and to sharing;
- whole school embracement and working understanding of curriculum planning, and seeing curriculum development as part of the teacher's role;
- more flexible attitudes, and the identification and overcoming of "blockers"
- better evaluation procedures and professional learning opportunities;
- doing things instead of ... rather than as well as ...
- finding ways around constraints of time and funding;
- greater student orientation, involvement and engagement; and
- finishing and celebrating achievements.

Some of the implications and concluding remarks

Some of the reflections listed above involve **unlearning**, or what Brian Caldwell called "**strategic abandonment**" of outdated, ineffective or otherwise inappropriate practice. What then are some of the things that we have learnt that we need to do in this regard?

To address such issues requires reflection. And reflection requires time – time to think quietly and to think together; time to learn from what we've done; time to learn about what has worked and what hasn't worked, and to plan and make adjustments accordingly; and time to work out how to do things better on the basis of the evidence that has been gathered.

If as curriculum developers we want "depth" rather than "breadth", we need to invest in a process – and a process that works – rather than a pro forma. Based on feedback from Hub members, it is also important not to be over-prescriptive, not to try and handle too many activities, and not to under-estimate the students.

As teachers and curriculum developers we can design and deliver a coherent learning experience, rather than providing groups of unrelated activities. We can link such experience to the key concepts that we wish students to grasp, by setting goals for understanding and helping the students to develop the related knowledge and skills.

We need to look at learning in our classrooms as part of a longer term context, and plan accordingly.

If you are reading this Snapshot and have not been a member of the Hub, but would like to try some of the ideas, where could you start tomorrow? Here are a few questions you could ask, and continue to ask as you move along.

Initially

- What do I discuss with other members of my staff, to get things going?

- What are my personal assumptions about “good” curriculum design and do I have any bias in this area?
- If I am entering into some unit planning with my colleagues, as one of a team, what key concepts, knowledge and skills do our students need to have as a result of this planning?
- As an individual teacher, what key concepts, knowledge and skills do I need to have, in order to teach the proposed unit?

A little way along the track

- How can I/we teach this unit, in terms of teaching and learning strategies, and are such strategies available to us in order to support student learning effectively? If the strategies are different from ones with which I am familiar, what support can I expect/organise from my colleagues, or must I look more widely?
- How do we broaden our repertoire of teaching strategies?
- How can we build in time for development, reflection and linking (by students and teachers alike)? Would 2-week blocks of learning time, for example, provide more flexibility than 1-week blocks?

And later

- What have we learnt, from the unit that we have taught, that will impact on our future curriculum planning? In other words, what worked in the specific areas of pedagogy, assessment and/or content, and how would we change things next time round, to do it better?
- How do we make sure that we keep things in balance – not becoming discouraged if things do not work out as well as we might have liked, but focusing on the positive changes that we are striving to achieve, consciously and strategically?

Some things we cannot change. We need to identify what those are, accept the limitations and move on ... or move around them. Some elements, such as timetabling, or the interruptions that seem to be an unavoidable part of school cultures, may assume a significance that seems insurmountable, although they would appear at first sight to be within our area of control. Do we value learning enough to overcome such school-based rigidities and cultural impediments?

School cultures are changing. In Victorian government schools, there is a dramatic shift under way, for example with strategies such as peer observation helping to facilitate sharing between teachers of perspectives, interpretations and expertise. Moderation of assessment between schools, as members of Clusters, is changing how teachers see their roles and interactions, as well as their assessment practice.

How we take on curriculum design and planning, in this changing context, has to do with our willingness to look at teaching and learning, and our part in it, in new ways. Teachers in the Curriculum Planning Hub often wrote in their feedback that the “Ah ha!” moment came for them when they saw the benefits for the students in their own classrooms, in terms of teaching and learning.

The Hub program helped them to take the first steps, to ask the hard questions, to try new things, to reflect on what works and what doesn't, what stays and what doesn't. Learning is about generating as many questions as answers and the nature of the Hub's work reinforced the idea that it is about an ongoing process, not a fixed endpoint – as well as emphasising the importance of having opportunities to ask those questions and explore some of the possible answers.

As Anne Clement commented in her unpublished draft paper about the work of the Hub,

There are many reasons why (these) teachers came together in one room to develop curriculum design and unit plans. The opportunity for teachers to talk to each other and share their planning appears to be a forgotten necessity, beyond meeting times in school, after a day of teaching. Teachers need to be actively involved in curriculum reform. ... The design of quality curriculum can be a complex, intellectual task. Teachers need the time, conceptual thinking and design ability. ... Teachers require support and opportunities to develop the critical skills to design curriculum.

It won't happen by osmosis.

Endnotes

Many teachers from the 2007 Curriculum Planning Hub continue to interact and receive peer support. The hub is operating again in 2008 and there are plans to continue in 2009.

For further details of the ANSN Curriculum Planning Hub, or to express interest in participating in the Hub's activities, contact Gavin Grift by mobile on 0409 110 050 or by email at gavin.grift@ansn.edu.au

This ANSN Snapshot was prepared and edited by Keith Redman, Editor of the ANSN E-News and Snapshot series.

Appendix

The Teaching for Understanding (TfU) Framework

Accessed at <http://learnweb.harvard.edu/ALPS/tfu/info3.cfm>, 11 September 2008

The Teaching for Understanding framework, developed in a research project at Project Zero during the early nineties, links what David Perkins has called "four cornerstones of pedagogy" with four elements of planning and instruction.

Four Central Questions About Teaching	TfU Element Addressing each Question
What shall we teach? What is worth understanding? How shall we teach for understanding? How can students and teacher know what students understand and how students can develop deeper understanding?	Generative Topics Understanding Goals Understanding Performances Ongoing Assessment

The TfU framework is not a recipe, but rather a set of general guidelines. To quote David Perkins, it provides "optimal ambiguity"—that is, both enough structure and enough flexibility to serve classroom teachers' needs.

Papers in this ANSN series include reports on practice from practitioners and/or the edited summaries of informal presentations or interviews. They are not designed as formal "publications", but rather as snapshots of practice and educational perspectives at a particular time. By giving a "voice" to practitioners, we also hope to raise wider awareness of practical issues in education and to generate informed debate.

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