

Working in the yellow learning area

Reproduced with permission of Bridgewater Primary School for use in DVD 'SA Teaching for Effective Learning Resource', Curriculum Services, DECS

Background

Bridgewater Primary is ten years into an exciting learning journey. Our focus is on supporting and challenging students to engage in rigorous, engaging and meaningful learning. Key to our approach is the partnership amongst members of the school community. The student is at the centre supported by teachers, parents and appropriate support staff. Supported by much of the recent research into the brain and learning we have recognised that choice and ownership of learning is a key motivating force for student engagement.

Imagine coming into our school any time after 8:50 in the morning. As you wander into the Yellow Learning Area you would see clusters of students ranging in age from 9 to 13 engaged in their learning. A snapshot might show you:

- Scattered around the room working individually are about ten students. Each is working on something different. One might be working on a cardboard model of a building, another is sketching a still life whilst several others are writing around their research into a relevant area of The Arts. Some are working on computers, others at a desk using pen & paper.
- Four girls on the floor clustered around an Apple Ibook, webcam, and small stage filled with clay figures, are discussing where to go next on their claymation of an aboriginal creation myth.
- Three boys clustered around a desktop computer are speaking and gesturing quietly as they view a Flash Animation which one of them has created, offering advice on possible changes.
- Just across from them a group of four students are working with an adult who is running a focus session on planning and setting deadlines for their current unit of work.
- Just across the passage in a small room two students are sitting around another computer. One has a keyboard plugged into the Emac and is playing a sequence, whilst the other is checking the input which is coming into Garageband.
- Down the passage is the Art and Technology Room. There is a buzz of positive energy with about ten students engaged in a range of activities including sculpture, painting, collage and model making. At one table surrounded by six students is an adult who is running a focus session on how to sketch the human figure.
- In the main hall is a group of eight students working with a parent, designing and developing a dance based around their research into Indonesian culture.
- Outside in various locations students can be found sketching & painting individually or in pairs. Some are developing their own style, whilst others are applying the skills & understandings gained in a workshop on the techniques and work of Piet Mondrian.

Students are working on their Personal Learning. This particular one has a focus around The Arts. At the end of the term there is to be an Open Night and Exhibition. Guided by clear and negotiated criteria for success students know what they are doing, are clear about expectations and have made clear choices around the learning which they are engaged in.

How does it all work?

Students engage in learning in a number of ways over the course of the year. The emphasis is on personal choice within the constraints and demands of the South Australian Curriculum Framework.

During the year students enter personal Learning through a range of ways. Each term students will complete two to three units. One of the units always has an agreed focus and over the last year have included, The Arts, Global Sustainability, The Media and Thinking and Working Scientifically. These units enable Learning Area adults to target particular aspects and areas of curriculum which might otherwise not be integrated into the learning.

Students and adults collaborate on setting the Criteria for Success for these units and these are sometimes published in the form of an assessment rubric prior to students undertaking the unit. A broad outline is provided to students by the Learning Area Adults which helps frame the context and identifies particular skills, applications and understandings which will be assessed. "Front Loading" opportunities are then provided for students to participate in prior to beginning the main part of their unit. In the recent Arts unit this included visits to museums and art galleries, workshops provided by experts on topics as diverse as "DJing", Web based animation, pottery and working with an artist. Students made choices about which activities to engage in related to the area of The Arts in which they wished to engage. The focus in the Sustainability unit was on bringing about local change within the context of the global issues. The "front loading" provided here was based around a three day camp on the Murray River. All children engaged in these activities.

The other Personal Learning units through which students engage in their learning are based around student choice. Students are able to choose topics, questions or big ideas which they wish to inquire into. Choices have to be negotiated with the Learning Area Adults and must satisfy a number of criteria which include:

- Why is this topic of real significance and/or importance to you?
- What is/are the new learning(s) that you hope to acquire through this unit?
- Where does this Personal Learning fit within the contexts of the curriculum and previous personal learnings?
- Can you access the expertise/information/help that you will require to successfully complete this PL?

Learning area adults/parents and other students help with the planning, setting of goals and outcomes as well as with setting realistic deadlines. Some students require considerable scaffolding to engage in learning successfully, whilst others are well on the way to being truly independent learners. Support and assessment structures have been created to ensure that students are tracked continuously and help and support through guidance and explicit teaching is provided in an appropriate and "in time" fashion.

Students are closely involved in the assessment cycle through a range of formative and summative assessment tools. Self assessment is encouraged through explicit focus sessions on skill development in this area as well as through weekly journals in which students reflect on their learning. Students are involved in round table assessment of their own and peers work in collaboration with parents, experts and Learning Area adults. Students write detailed mid-year and end of year reports on their learning which never cease to amaze us with their candour and insight.

Assessment is for learning not just assessment of learning. It is seen as part of a cycle.

Personal Learning is just a part of the learning opportunities offered during a week. All students from 8 years old have their own timetables and they meet each morning to arrange the day. Daily there are times set aside for specific English and Mathematics sessions which offer a constructivist approach to learning. Focus sessions are organized for small groups who are ready for specific, explicit learning in any aspect of core learning from SACSA.