

Redesigning Pedagogies in the North

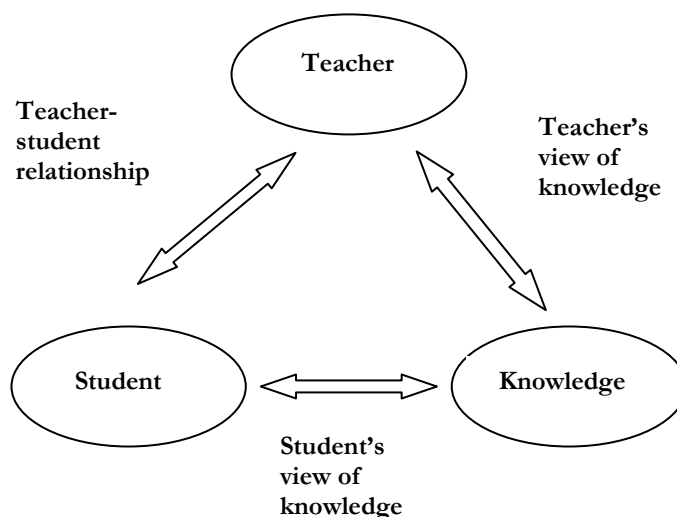
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The Pedagogical Challenge: Teaching in the Northern Adelaide State Secondary schools

The purpose of this paper is to begin a discussion within the RPiN Project about what constitutes 'good' pedagogy in the Northern Adelaide State Secondary schools. The term 'pedagogy' here refers to what teachers understand by terms such as 'methodology' or 'teaching and learning'. We want to use the term 'pedagogy' because it works against a tendency to see teaching (and learning) as a merely technical activities and instead aims to capture a sense of the complexity of the interaction between teacher, learner and the knowledge jointly produced. The term pedagogy brings together theory and practice, and also acknowledges the philosophical, political and historical nature of the educative endeavour. The following diagram attempts to capture the first of these aspects of pedagogy.



This paper was drafted as a collation of the teacher biographies submitted at the second Roundtable and the additional discussions conducted by the participating teachers. Obviously this is only one representation of that material and needs to be treated as a first draft. The paper aims to provide a snapshot of what teachers believe to be good pedagogy and we hope will provide a basis for our deliberations about redesigning pedagogy. This paper aims to describe the 'pedagogical challenge' that characterises the work of teachers in these schools.

The Pedagogical Challenge

It's about relationships!

Teachers describe the importance of building 'positive relationships' with their students as integral to the process of teaching and learning. All learning being dependent on the good-will developed between teachers and their students. Teachers report working hard to build relationships based on trust—'of really getting to know them'. Building positive teacher-student relationships for many teachers involves incorporating social skills development into their units of learning. Good teaching was also described in terms of being enthusiastic, energetic; even passionate about teaching and learning. Maintaining control of the class was seen as very important but in ways that avoid confrontation. Such a task demands, 'consistency and fairness', of being relaxed and using 'humour', and of being supportive, civil and reasonable. Teachers described how they establish protocols and 'bottom lines', and negotiate classroom expectation with students. As well, the importance of having structures and procedures in classrooms for maintaining order and positive relationships was described. Mutual respect between teachers and students is developed through listening to students, and being open minded about their lifeworlds and when

appropriate offering praise. Teachers reported on the need to be prepared to work with individual students and most importantly, of not giving up on any student, even though some students perform ‘extreme behaviours’ in class at times. Perhaps the idea of ‘teaching students and not the subject’ summarises the sensibility behind the commitment to student relationships.

But it's the 'educative relationship'?

But then the ‘educative relationship’ between teacher and student is much more than developing positive relationships. The educative relationship is driven by the imperative to promote learning. The key challenge for teachers in Northern Adelaide State Secondary schools is to sustain high expectations for student learning and positive relationships. The challenge is not to focus on the latter at the expense of learning.

Providing the necessary grounding for students to be successful in Year 12 is a very significant factor in the way teachers approach their curriculum work and the sorts of pedagogical approaches they use. And these expectations certainly have a profound impact on what happens in the middle years. Certain content needs to be covered and this is especially the case in subjects such as Mathematics. As well as concerns about content knowledge, teachers were also concerned about providing their students with the where-with-all to ‘think for themselves’, to develop analytical skills, and to develop as independent learners by the time they get to Year 11 and 12. There was a focus on the providing students with chances to learn how to be good learners. Teachers discussed the difficulty they experienced in maintaining high expectations in the light of the low expectations many students hold for completing ‘school work’. Whilst this wasn’t generalisable for all students, many students resist many of the demanding tasks set by teachers, such as, writing expository prose; a mandatory aspect of many subjects at the Year 11 and 12 level. Teachers reported that many students grapple with low levels of school literacy and this too interferes with sustaining high expectations.

This commitment to high expectations was also described in terms of ‘getting students fired up about learning’, and getting them to think outside of the square. This requires providing learning experiences that are both challenging and provide opportunities for success; ‘of being achievable’. One teacher argued for a practice that had ‘high expectations with flexible boundaries’.

How to describe an emergent alternative to traditional approaches?

In this context, traditional chalk and talk approaches just don’t work very well in these schools. Using pedagogies based on ‘imparting knowledge’ from teacher to student fails in most cases. But then, the traditional approaches to pedagogy were not being described by the participating teachers. Instead there was an attempt to articulate an emergent innovative alternative that is yet to be properly elaborated. The alternative is being described in terms such as student-centred, negotiated, constructivist, thematic.

In sustaining positive student-teacher relationships whilst working to provide challenging learning experiences, the teachers described their pedagogies in terms of being ‘student-centred’. This term invokes such practices as activity-based learning, problem-solving approaches, and using lots of opportunities to work in groups. The term also refers to the various ways that teachers are attempting to involve the students in negotiating what goes on in the classroom and in the curriculum. Many teachers referred to ‘building on their students’ prior experiences’ or ‘extending areas of interest’. The idea of using a ‘thematic approach’—choosing a curriculum theme that has some cross-curricula possibilities—as a basis for such negotiations was reported. Many teachers are grappling with designing ‘relevant’ learning opportunities. What this means is obviously difficult and requires talking/listening to the students. The term ‘constructivist’ was also used often; which we infer to mean ‘starting where the kids are at’. This term also infers greater sensitivity by teachers of the ways that students construct their own meanings. But then what was being described also had a strong sense of lots of ‘teaching’ going on: ‘explicit teaching’; ‘scaffolding’; modelling analysis; summarising, and lots of practical/activity-based tasks. There was also another take on ‘getting to know the students’. More than just for building relationships, ‘knowing the students’ enables teachers to design relevant curriculum that uses skilful pedagogies capable of providing intellectual challenge and success.