

Chapter 21

Assessment and Learning Partnerships in an Online Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shows how the online environment is used to promote quality teaching within a research project conducted by the Assessment Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The project investigates how teacher teams use assessment data to inform teaching decisions and extensive efforts are made to check their learning through performance assessment procedures that monitor their discipline and pedagogy skills development. Teachers from the project are involved in a professional development course. The ways in which they adopt the knowledge, skills, and attitudes addressed by the course are tracked, along with assessment data from their students. The online environment is used to deliver the professional development course and to deliver online assessments for students and teachers. The authors are careful to ensure that the online experience for both teachers and students reinforces the ideas of the project. These include the notions of developmental approach rather than deficit, evidence rather than inferential decision making and collaboration rather than isolation.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher teams use assessment data as evidence to inform teaching intervention decisions. They undertake an online professional development pro-

gramme which encourages the idea of collaboration, challenge, evidence-based decision making, peer accountability, targeted and differentiated teaching directed at a developmental construct and an emphasis on skills rather than scores. The ways in which they adopt the knowledge, skills and attitudes addressed by the course are tracked,

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along with assessment data from their students. The online environment is used to deliver the professional development course and to deliver online assessments for students and teachers.

During the professional development programme, teachers engage in an online environment to develop their skills in the use of data to teach literacy, numeracy and problem solving. In doing so the programme attempts to help teachers shift from a deficit model to a developmental approach. The project objective is to enable teachers, through a 10 session online professional development programme, to use data within a developmental framework to improve performance of all students. The professional development programme shows teachers how to work in a culture where evidence is challenged and discussed, rather than one where there is merely mutual endorsement of shared teaching strategies.

Participants become increasingly skilled in the theory and application of assessment and the developmental construct they are teaching and better able to link evidence of student learning readiness to targeted intervention. This professional development provision constitutes part of a larger research project which seeks to identify how teacher factors influence student learning outcomes. This chapter outlines how diverse skills such as leadership, information dissemination and influencing attitudinal change are taught in an online environment.

BACKGROUND

The Assessment and Learning Partnerships (ALP) project has its origins in a project conducted by the University of Melbourne, the Assessment Research Centre and the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne. In 2004, trials of a range of reading tests were conducted in 20 schools to examine how the test data could be used to improve student reading comprehension. The pilot study was known as the Learning Assessment Project

(LAP) (Murray & Rintoul, 2008). Professional Learning Teams (PLT) were led by the schools' literacy coordinators, with classroom teachers as team members.

Team members engaged in collaborative discussions based on challenging peer evidence of learning and links between intervention and learning gains. Gains in student reading comprehension were compelling (Griffin, Murray, Care, Thomas, & Perri, 2010). Several hypotheses were formulated and a large research study supported by the Australian Research Council and linkage partners was established to examine and systematically test those hypotheses, in order to generalise and scale up the procedures across systems, year levels and subjects.

The programme conducted for the Catholic Education Office involved face-to-face teaching. Due to high demand, an online professional development programme was developed to provide the course to larger numbers of school-based participants. This online programme was called the Assessment and Learning Partnerships Online System. To date, more than 280 schools and 400 teachers have completed the course. To provide teachers undertaking the professional development programme with a valid source of criterion-referenced data, an online testing programme for students was also developed. Approximately 100,000 tests have been administered to more than 30,000 individual students during the 2011 school year. This source of student achievement data also serves as a dependent variable in the research project, which aims to examine the approach's effect on student learning achievement.

The premise of the project is that teachers who use a specific style of evidence-based teaching and operate within a developmental learning paradigm have an increased effect on student learning outcomes. The online programme facilitates the role of collaborative teaching teams in the use of data to enhance decision-making about teaching and learning strategies. Team-based models have been shown to be an effective form of professional

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