

# **Australian Government Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (AGQTIP) and Higher Order Thinking Skills at Narrabri West Public School**

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## **Project Synopsis:**

Narrabri West was invited to participate in the Australian Government Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (AGQTIP) in 2006 as the representative of New England Education Region. 12 schools from across NSW were involved in the initial phase. This is a program aimed at supporting teachers of Aboriginal students. The target group for this program is schools with Aboriginal student populations of 10 - 20%. Narrabri West was invited to participate as our school falls into this target group and has successfully implemented new programs and strategies previously.

We are using this project to provide all students in the school with learning opportunities that will increase engagement and will utilise the particular skills and learning styles best suited to their abilities. This is particularly the case with our Aboriginal students, as we incorporate learning styles into our curriculum that are specifically designed to increase their engagement in learning. By providing local and specific, culturally significant aspects to units of study in the classroom and through learning styles that suit individual needs, this will be achieved.

The project team is engaging in cycles of action learning that have an inquiry based approach. The Quality Teaching Framework, with a particular emphasis on the dimension of significance (cultural knowledge) and higher order thinking is the basis of these professional learning activities. This approach is inclusive of all student groups and is aimed at improving student engagement and learning outcomes.

## **About our school:**

Narrabri West Public School currently has an enrolment of 276 students from Pre School to Year 6, of which 45 identify as being Aboriginal. We have a Department of Education and Training Pre School attached to our school which enables us to provide quality and comprehensive transition to Kindergarten programs for all students attending this facility.

Our teaching and support staff are committed to professional development and are keen to investigate innovative methods and programs that will improve their teaching and subsequently lead to enhanced student outcomes and engagement.

## **Project Rationale:**

The overall aim of the project is to improve student outcomes and engagement through implementing teaching strategies, based on the N.S.W Quality Teaching Framework, that incorporate higher order thinking skills and will enable students to learn more effectively.

## **Project Planning:**

The project is planned and implemented through a coordinated and carefully planned developmental and sequential approach.

We began by choosing Connected Outcome Groups (COGs) units of work. These are cross curricular units of work developed by the N.S.W Department of Education and Training (DET). The units of work provide cohesive learning experiences and cover outcomes at each stage of Human Society and its Environment, Science and Technology, Personal Development, Health, Physical Education and Creative Arts.

The curriculum and planning framework was then used to design a scope and sequence that will give students opportunities to learn the knowledge, skills and understandings described in the Foundation Statements. These units have been developed with a focus on quality teaching and student centred learning. They,

- List content related to each outcome;
- Link digital resources to learning content;
- Highlight how literacy and numeracy can be taught in context; and
- Contain assessment tasks that are planned and linked to learning experiences.

Separate English programming templates were developed to enable team planning of English units. They provide an overview of learning experiences organised around an English teaching focus and identify types of texts that students may be reading, writing and talking.

We isolated the Quality Teaching elements in the units we wished to utilise and then created Bloom's Taxonomy of Thinking Grids based on these units. A learning contract was then developed in conjunction with the Bloom's Grids specific to the actual unit.

We used Bloom's Grids as they are one of the most effective ways of differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of students. Bloom's has six levels of thinking (Creating, Evaluating, Analysing, Applying, Understanding, Remembering) and can provide a framework for planning units that incorporate low to high level thinking activities. By using Bloom's as a planning framework we can plan for student thinking at all levels and can provide activities that suit students of all ability levels. Students can then choose activities which are most suited to their style of learning.

### **Professional Development:**

In order for our project to be successful we needed to provide our teachers with the necessary professional development to enable them to modify their teaching in such a way as to achieve the goals of the project and to question and reflect upon their teaching.

A key component of our planning was a visit by renowned educator Ralph Pirozzo for a two day workshop. Ralph has worked with teachers for many years to develop a planning matrix drawing on current quality teaching frameworks and combining Bloom's Taxonomy of Thinking levels and Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory. This provides teachers with a planning tool that caters for both of these learning styles and also challenges thinking. Ralph presented a workshop to all staff on the first day entitled, *"Creating the most engaging and challenging thinking classroom where quality teaching principles will flourish!"*

On the second day Ralph worked with teachers in small groups from the four teaching stages within the school (Early Stage 1, Stage 1, Stage 2 and Stage 3). Ralph's workshops are designed to inspire all students by developing units and lessons that engage and have, as he describes, "depth and rigour." During the workshops, teachers integrated Bloom's Taxonomy and Multiple Intelligences into our planned units of work, resulting in engaging activities and learning contracts, whilst developing thinking skills.

The Pirozzo workshops developed our ability to motivate students to understand concepts and to deepen their learning through hands on activities. The response from all students to the units developed has been overwhelmingly positive. We are now using the skills we developed to plan and implement further units of study. This approach is coordinated across the school and means students in all grades are developing skills that they will utilise as they progress through their schooling at Narrabri West and beyond.

We have taken a coordinated approach to ensure that before implementing new teaching strategies into classrooms, professional development has been provided to ensure that all teachers have the skills, knowledge and resources to implement these changes. It is this aspect which will ensure the project's success and sustainability.

### **Evidence of success:**

Success is evident through the development of assessment tasks that address the focus outcomes. Students are choosing assessment tasks based on their individual learning style preferences. The anecdotal evidence of success is mainly in engagement areas. Students are willing to attempt tasks and be involved in their learning and complete activities when they have choice over how they do them.

Students are choosing how they want to work in the classroom. More ownership of lesson content has been given to the students. As well, there are elements of Aboriginal cultural awareness in all of these units.

We are already seeing improved results for our Aboriginal students; with our ATSI results for this focus group in the 2006 and 2007 Basic Skills Tests for Years 3 and 5 being above the state average in all areas and the same for NAPLAN in 2008. We are confident that this trend will continue as the skills our project is focusing on become embedded in our students.

#### **Teacher Comments:**

Teachers at our school have made these comments about their use of Bloom's Grids and their impact on their teaching and learning outcomes:

- The Bloom's and Multiple Intelligences tasks integrate well with outcomes and provide better quality assessment tasks and ideas for future planning.
- I am more aware of planning for individual needs and it has made my planning more relevant to class needs.
- The Bloom's Grids made planning more visual and up to date. By ticking each activity completed it was easier to see how many activities are still not done. Preparation became easier too.
- The Bloom's Grids make teaching simpler because you can see actual achievement.
- Encourages and allows me to provide higher order activities for those students who require extension.
- Bloom's Grids and the other thinking activities allow me to provide a larger range of learning activities which allows students more selection and ownership of their learning.
- The classroom seems more active and alive when students are involved in many of these activities.
- I see a lot more cooperation between students.
- Students are better able to respond to questioning at a higher level.
- The depth of their thinking is becoming more obvious the more these activities are used.

Not only are our teachers positive about the impacts of our project, our students are also expressing positive thoughts on the impact of the program on their learning, as evidenced by the following comments from Stage 3 students:

- It's exciting to learn using different activities that I can choose.
- It's more interesting learning in different ways.
- Helps us to learn by giving us more areas to think about.
- More enjoyable than being told what to do.
- There is more choice and I can choose activities I enjoy doing.
- Helps us to learn to work with other people.
- We have a better understanding because we choose activities we enjoy doing.
- We can think outside the box!

The implementation of these new learning styles in Narrabri West classrooms has changed their look and the teaching occurring in them. Our classrooms now are characterised by students regularly exhibiting higher order thinking, complex problem solving and open ended responses. Whereas thinking skills have always been taught, our focus on these now means they are explicitly taught in authentic and meaningful contexts.

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