

Gold Class – thinking outside the square

Miro Martin describes how thinking outside the square can turn ‘unteachables’ into eager learners



Gold class students and staff members (John O'Brien, Debbie Huxley and Maryanne Wesener)

A few weeks ago, I was watching Malcolm Douglas' 'Great Outback Adventures' and saw a clip that gave me a sense of hope because of the simple educational pedagogy it demonstrated. But, simultaneously, it gave me a sense of utter frustration because, in the general school population, this pedagogy is hamstrung by ridiculous bureaucratic practice and mindless legislation.

Malcolm visited a small Aboriginal school (I think it was at a place called Pigeon Hole in the Kimberley region). He took a group of students out in his tinnie. I'm guessing there were no risk management forms filled out. I have no idea if Malcolm has a blue card. There were no life jackets – just a bunch of kids out fishing. They were hurling sharp barbed lures at the barra and having a fantastic time.

One of the students recorded the day on a digital camera and when they returned to school they cooked and ate the fish and then wrote accounts of the day to accompany the photos.

The principal commented that they had 100% attendance and he also highlighted the reading that was happening. They didn't need

commercial readers. They made their own and the children were reading because it was relevant and interesting to them.

Another example of thinking outside the square was highlighted on ABC TV in the recent series, 'The Unteachables'. A teacher who wasn't scared to be different took on a group of tough kids and engaged them in learning where the traditional teachers had failed.

Gold Class

At our school, we have a large number of students with special needs – ASD, ADHD, you name it, we have it. The Catholic Schools in Brisbane also have a category the state schools don't have – SE, Social Emotional. We have 18 SE students out of a total school population of 234. We have another 14 students with other needs. Some of our SE students have other acronyms as well.

Many of these students are extremely tough to teach in a typical traditional classroom setting. They don't attend and, when they do attend, they are non-compliant and disruptive, taking an inequitable amount of teacher time and also preventing other students from learning.

Two of our staff, John O'Brien and Debbie Huxley came to me with a clever proposal. Our special needs students attract a certain amount of hours (CTP – Commonwealth Targeted Programmes funding). This usually goes to pay for a teacher aide or specialist teacher time.

The proposal was that we would select nine or 10 of the most difficult students from Years five, six and seven – the ones that were always driving the teachers crazy – and put them altogether in one class which would be called Gold Class (mentioned in a previous article).

This is nothing new. I have come across special classes many times throughout my career. What was unique in this case was the carte blanche agreement with John and Debbie that they would experiment with different approaches and not be afraid of failure. It was education research at grass roots level.

Rather than trying to get the students to adapt to a set curriculum, they would design a learning programme that evolved from the students' needs, abilities and interests. The goals were that the students would gain a positive attitude towards school and learning; they would experience success; the successful learning and teaching practices would spill over to the other teachers and classes.

Pooled hours

As well as a full-time teacher (John and Debbie job-share), there is a full-time teacher aide, Maryanne Wesener. We can afford to do this because each of the students attracts enough funding to pay for it, with hours left over.

We pool all the hours together to allow for an intensive learning programme in the one setting, instead of each student receiving a few hours, here and there, in their separate classes.

The students still do English, maths and the other KLAs, but emphasis is on hands-on activities. They do a lot of craft and art activities. They do woodworking, gardening and cooking. They go shopping. A big emphasis is on field trips. They have been to the Indy Races at the Gold Coast, excursions to the beach, a bridge study in Brisbane, fishing, etc.

The teachers have tough boundaries for behaviour for these students, but they also have fantastic rewards and incentives such as the field trips and craft activities.

Two years' experience

We're now in our second year of Gold Class and, although we don't rely on standardised tests to determine progress, we have quite a bit of anecdotal evidence to suggest that Gold Class is a huge success.

The biggest commendation comes from the parents. They are amazed at the turnaround in attitude. Where once they had to drag the children to school, the parents are now being nagged by the children to get them to school. They hate missing days.

The students are regularly being sent to my office to show me their work and are proudly taking it home to show their parents. They can all read! At the start of last year some could barely open a book. They never get sent to my office for inappropriate behaviour. It's all sorted in class.

The students, themselves, love Gold Class. You just need to ask them. Having a full-time teacher and school officer (teacher aide) with the students is wonderful. The class has an adult to child ratio of 1 to 4.5.

High school transition

An implication we hadn't considered was transition to high school. Gold Class is integrated into the mainstream as often as possible and we are looking at increasing this integration because leaving the sheltered environment to enter high school is quite a culture shock. We have already discovered this with a couple of our students who have entered a local college. Unfortunately, the high schools don't have a structure in place to cater for these students. They are rooted in traditional practice and pedagogy and, I guess, too afraid to 'break the rules' and do something completely different.

Teaching outside the square

Apart from a willingness to step outside the square, a lot of Gold Class' success relies on the staff. You couldn't put just anyone into this class. In the 'Unteachables' the teacher chosen for the job was voted England's teacher of the year. Our staff have a unique bond and rapport with the children. For those of you old enough to remember, it's like Mr Kotter and the Sweathogs.

I believe that a Gold Class pedagogy would work for mainstream teachers and classes just as well. Unfortunately, teachers don't have the autonomy to do this and society is too rooted to the past and status quo to accept change.

Even in my own school some teachers feel uncomfortable doing fun things or things not in the curriculum at the expense of Reading and Maths. I believe it's all about quality of learning, not quantity. Who cares if they don't do all 20 algorithms on a page. As long as they show understanding, two or three algorithms may be enough. Twelve years of formal schooling is ridiculous. The only rationale for such a lengthy education is childminding. Both parents work these days and can't look after their kids!

Sameness and conformity

One of my favourite quotes comes from an article in a Parents and Friends publication I read while I was in New Zealand. "...*Sameness and Conformity* – The mayor of Christchurch, Vicki Buck asked, "Given that the industrial revolution has gone way by, why do we persist with the same system of education that was spawned by it?"

Sameness and Conformity. These were the watchwords of the first schools and they are still the watchwords for today's schools. Also, why should we accept the school concept that learning happens largely inside the classroom and that learning is not best done with fun, passion and joy?"

The parents are amazed at the turnaround in attitude

Many teachers are obsessed with outcomes, assessment and reporting. When students don't conform they are punished. Instead of making the shoe fit the foot, they try to squeeze the foot into the shoe, even if it causes pain and discomfort. When children find work difficult and are off task or don't complete the work they are kept in at lunch break and made to do more of the same frustrating work. The shoehorn is dug in even further. I really can't understand this repressive attitude and, sadly, I see it too often.

Fun, passion and joy

If I had some political clout, I would insist that all schools have gold classes and not just for the hard to teach children. Imagine how a group of gifted and talented students could flourish outside of the sausage machine classroom setting.

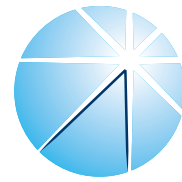
I would also instruct all teachers to attach a large heavy object to the syllabus documents with their outcomes and assessment and dump them over a deep, fast flowing river, together with the mindless barrage of legislative documents that suck the creative juice and productive time out of teaching.

I'd get teachers to sign contracts promising to be creative and to make learning fun. They would need to also promise to reject all efforts from external sources, such as politicians, to impose meaningless assessment and reporting practices, borrowed from overseas, unless they actually saw the merit in doing this.

I have a feeling that anyone who took me seriously and followed my advice would be crushed like a bug. In bureaucracy the fact that something works doesn't necessarily mean it should be done.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.



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