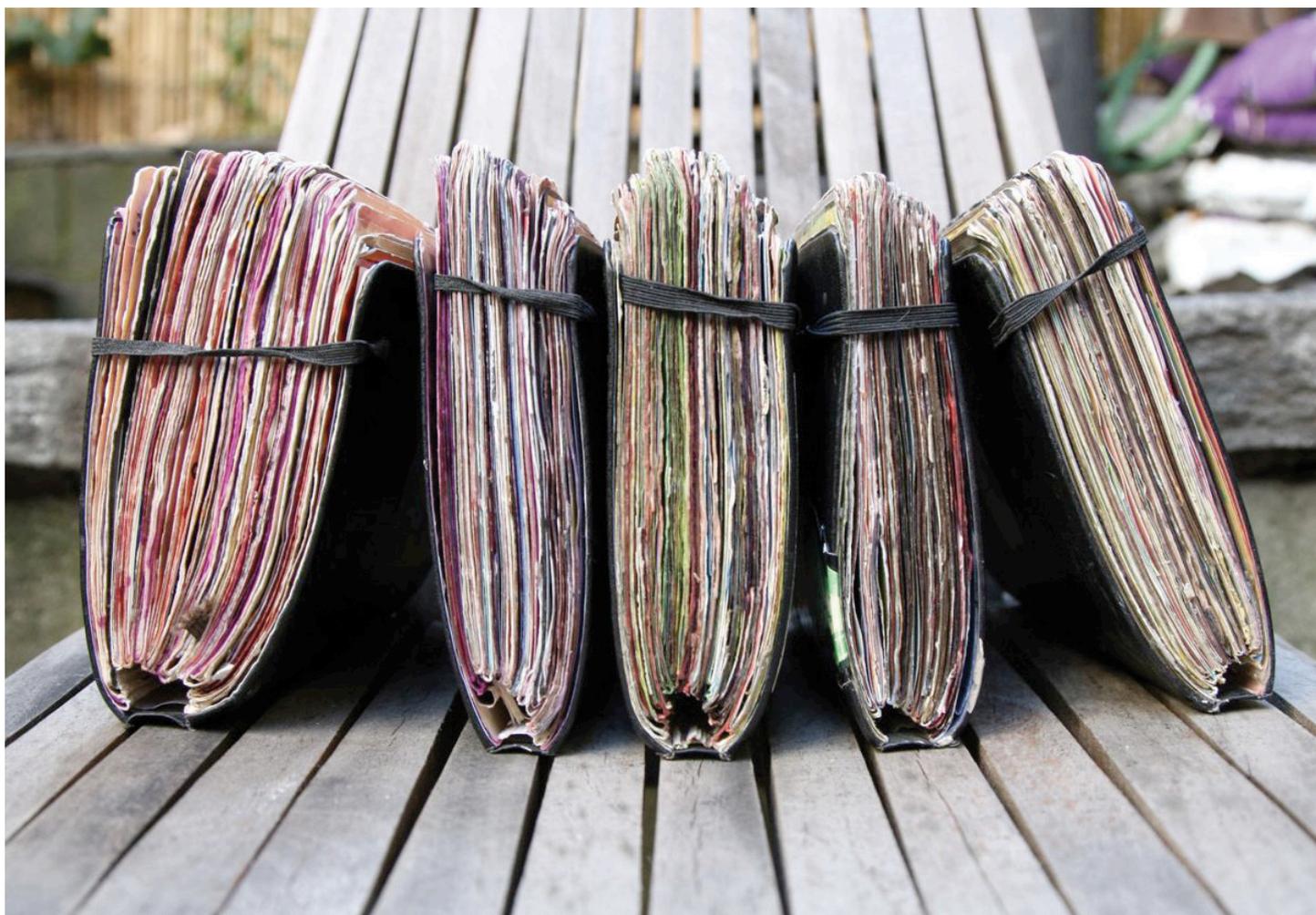


My VIT journey at Scoresby Secondary College

Graduate teacher **Emily Phibbs** explores the potential of reflective journaling to improve Year 7–10 literacy skills

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I opened the first page of my book on my teaching career at Scoresby Secondary College at the start of 2016. In common with most graduate teachers, my initial months were filled with excitement and dealing with ‘firsts’. The first time I answered a phone call from a parent. The first time I took my students out on an excursion. And the first time I wrote reports.

All provisionally registered teachers in Victoria are required to complete an inquiry project which addresses the learning of their students. The purpose is to ensure that new teachers meet the Australian Professional Standards at a *Proficient* level. This assignment spans over a six-week period and involves investigating the effectiveness of your classroom practice and is an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of specific areas of teaching and learning. The first step is to create an inquiry question which will form the basis of the project. The question must be specific, achievable, develop you as a teacher and provide scope to build upon your knowledge from professional reading.

Earlier in the year, the English Faculty at Scoresby SC introduced

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several initiatives designed to improve Years’ 7–10 literacy skills. The list included the introduction of reflective journals and the idea of ‘low stakes’ writing. Following research and discussions with my mentor, I decided this would provide a perfect opportunity to create an inquiry question for my project. How can self-reflective journaling improve student literacy performance and lead to positive student-teacher relationships? Reflective thinking was shaped by American philosopher John Dewey. In 1933, he published a revised edition of earlier work titled *How We Think*. In this edition, Dewey discusses the notion that thinking is a natural act and therefore it is impossible to teach someone to think. However, it is possible



to help develop someone's thinking, by helping develop a creative, curious and questioning mind.

Dewey's theoretical framework moved away from the typical dominant school practice belief in which students passively received information that had been packaged and pre-digested by teachers and textbooks. Thus, Dewey developed the argument that teaching for understanding must go beyond simply presenting students with information. The educator must ensure that students accomplish three tasks:

- Retain important information
- Understand topics deeply
- Actively use the knowledge they gain.

He proposed that it is through reflective thinking that these goals can be achieved.

But what is reflective thinking? There are a plethora of definitions and therefore I believe it is necessary to develop one which can be consistent on a whole school level; my preference: "Reflective thinking or a reflective journal is something that provides students with an opportunity to participate in low-stakes writing in a non-threatening environment. The writing that takes place can be focused on either

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70,000

the process of learning and/or the content being covered. This type of formative assessment allows the student and teacher to engage in an informal and constructive conversation which facilitates the ongoing development of meta-cognitive skills." (Phibbs & Ridgway).

A key positive is that reflective journaling also addresses the Victorian *Critical and Creative Thinking* capability. It states that students require explicit support to develop the breadth and depth of their thinking and to take intellectual risks. This attention to thinking helps students to build self-awareness and their capabilities for reflection. Developing critical and creative thinking capability is an essential element of developing successful, confident and innovative members of the community.

During my research, I came across a statistic that a person has an average of 70,000

thoughts a day. 70,000. As adults we have built up our resilience and can generally cope with the demands of everyday life. However, it is very clear that many Victorian students are struggling to cope with the pressures of high school. The Victorian Government hopes that over the next 10 years, students reporting high resilience will grow by 20 per cent. I believe that reflective journals are a great pathway to achieving that goal.

At the beginning of Term 3, students in English from Years 7–10 were given a reflective journal. Speaking to other English teachers and based on my two classes, it was clear that most students were excited to receive their journal and were filled with anticipation in regards to how they were going to use it.

I have my English class four times a week, with one of the lessons devoted to literacy and comprehension activities. Generally I try to incorporate reflective journaling in two or three lessons. At the beginning or end of the lesson, students are given 10 minutes to respond to a prompt and to reflect and write about what they have learned and/or their thoughts and feelings.

As reflective journaling has only taken place



for six weeks at Scoresby SC it is too early to establish if this is improving literacy standards. However, I have already seen many positive effects and the students are responding favourably,

Some examples

Student A commented stated that “I like using the reflective journals because it’s fun to do and we can write anything as long as it is within the question.” Interestingly, he also said that journaling helps him to “free his mind by writing it down.”

Student B also offered an interesting insight which re-establishes the thought that students believe that learning is achieved by reading things from the textbook and answering relevant questions. When asked whether reflective journaling is helping his learning he responded with: “It isn’t helping with my learning because I haven’t gained a really big amount of information. Maybe it is helping me with my learning and I haven’t noticed it yet. “Some students still have that preconceived idea that learning only occurs when you obtain a large amount of information and regurgitate that through a test or essay. The beauty of journaling is that the student ended up reflecting on his own reflection.

Finally, Student C is quite weak at English and struggled during the first half of the year. However, he is beginning to show improvements, particularly in his work ethic. In one journal entry, he thanks me for

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providing him with positive feedback and states that the reflective journals help him to learn by helping him to reflect on the topic; we can never underestimate the timely and appropriate place of authentic feedback.

This leads to another encouraging outcome of reflective journals. Journaling can lead to a better student-teacher relationship through positive, engaged teacher responses and comments. Another benefit is that the writing is a self-paced activity. It therefore naturally assists us in differentiating the task. In the beginning of this term some students were writing a few sentences and were quite limited in their responses. However, the more they participated in low-stakes writing, the more prolific some became. The most powerful tool that both we as educators and students have is a pen, after all ‘the pen is mightier than the sword.’ With the increasing reliance on technology both in and outside school, we as teachers have to work hard to ensure the physical act of writing doesn’t fade away. Most adults can think back to high school or university where they had to write a paper. They may have experienced ‘writer’s block’ or they found writing scary. What is it about writing that students find scary? On the simple level writing is just an act. Putting pen to paper. But it is the fear of what lies behind it: expectation.

Students tend to think that writing is very formal and is something that should present concrete results such as a text response or lab report. Consequently students are showing resistance towards writing and this is having a significant impact on their literacy skills. This is demonstrated through the latest NAPLAN results in which there has been a decrease in writing results for Years 7 and 9 since 2011.

This project allowed me to not only develop an interesting inquiry question but also to enhance the effectiveness of my teaching and learning. Without this task perhaps I would not have been able to broaden my understanding of reflective thinking and how it can be incorporated within the classroom. Although the prescribed time frame of this project has concluded, I look forward to keeping a keen eye on the introduction of reflective journals and whether it improves student literacy performance and leads to better teacher-student relationships.

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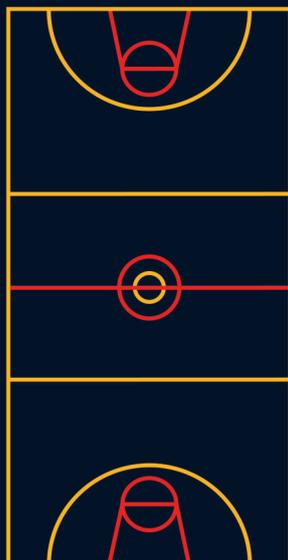
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