

Improving the instructional core at Mentone Grammar

Mal Cater



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Last year I had the good fortune of hearing Richard Elmore at Harvard University speak about the concept of “improving the instructional core”. Fundamentally, what he proposes is that overall improvement in academic performance within a school comes over time when there is an agreed instructional practice in place. This agreed practice is then observed and feedback provided to staff on their teaching practice. The evidence presented is convincing that if this process is implemented then, over time, enhanced performance by both teachers and their students will be experienced.

At Mentone Grammar this year, we have taken Elmore’s research and developed a model that empowers our curriculum leaders and their teams in developing “codes of instructional practice”. We have used his model as the foundation for establishing a practice which suits our school. Staff have been empowered to lead this initiative and this has been well received. It is clearly understood that this is a long-term strategy and, therefore, it can be effectively implemented in a staged manner.

First steps

The process commenced at the first professional development day of the year when the staff received a briefing from Anita Forsyth from the

Education Faculty at Monash University about contemporary practice in the classroom. She presented materials designed to stimulate thoughts about what leads to better teaching practice and enhanced learning. After this session, staff worked in learning teams to develop a code. Over the course of the first semester, these codes have been fine-tuned within learning teams and now the observation and feedback stage is commencing.

While Elmore’s model would see a code developed on a whole school basis we have taken the decision to develop this initially through learning teams. This has led to staff feeling a lot more comfortable with the concept and, therefore, more willing to engage. Over time staff will move out of their learning teams and cross-mentor one-another. This is where we will be at a whole school stage of this development.

Mentone Grammar is a K to Year 12 school and all staff are involved in this process. The concept is even being used within the administration staff so that it becomes fundamental to our operation. In all areas of school operation there is a developing concept of best practice. The codes are on display in classrooms and in the common rooms of the school as a means of ensuring that all parties involved, including the students, are

aware of what is being undertaken. The students had to be educated that staff would be visiting each other's classrooms as part of implementing this system. We did not want the students being suspicious of the program, rather, we wanted them to "buy into" the concept.

Classroom trialling

After the initial codes were developed they were trialling in the classrooms. The codes were then reviewed and, now that learning teams have a clear understanding of this, the observation rounds will commence. The process is not being rushed because this is a longer-term improvement strategy and I deem it important that the staff take genuine ownership of the program. In order to ensure staff are comfortable with the initial observation rounds they have been able to select a "buddy" and not only are the agreed codes being observed but the teacher being observed can also nominate any other areas of their teaching practice on which they wish to have feedback.

A highly experienced member of staff is assisting staff with the provision of feedback. In the first round of observations, the general rule is that the feedback will only highlight positives. This is also part of getting staff comfortable with the concept. The method of providing

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the feedback has been fine tuned to ensure it is succinct and appropriate to the development of enhanced teaching and learning.

For many years, classrooms have been a closed shop and, as our staff have acknowledged, the last time someone visited their class to provide feedback was when they undertook teaching rounds. Opening the classrooms up, as this system allows, will enable teachers to improve their practice, share strategies that work in a more constructive manner and assist each other in enhancing their performance.

Positive feedback

The feedback from teachers who have been observed and had feedback provided has been extremely positive. Not only do staff see this as supportive, they see it as a method for improving collegiality. While it will take some time to measure if this program is making a difference the early indications are extremely encouraging.

All staff are expected to spend one day a year (at least) observing and providing feedback to colleagues. We have built this into our professional learning budget for the year and will continue to do so in the years ahead. When

we analysed the PD spending figures from recent years it was not hard to rationalise this into the overall budget. As an ongoing learning program we see it as more beneficial than many other short-term projects.

While the easiest thing we could have done was read lots of research by Richard Elmore and implement, in the purest way, his findings, I feel that the development of a Mentone Model i.e. one that suits the culture of our school, framed around Elmore's research has been more effective. The school has a clear focus on this mentoring program and all of our professional learning is centred around it to maintain the focus and give the program every opportunity of succeeding.

Early indications are that this will have a major impact on teaching and learning at Mentone Grammar for many years to come.



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