



# Cluster projects build middle phase success

SEVEN clusters across the state are participating in the Middle Phase of Learning Cluster project, developing and implementing action learning projects with a literacy and assessment focus.

The diverse projects recognise the changing nature of literacy and numeracy in the context of new technologies; the need to explore the literacy demands that students encounter in different learning contexts and disciplines; and the need

to incorporate these explicitly in assessment.

Academic input for the project has been provided by “critical friend” Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith, Research Professor from Griffith University’s Centre for Applied Language, Literacy and Communication Studies.

Professor Wyatt-Smith said the statewide project focused on aligning assessment, curriculum, teaching and learning.

“The structure of the project has given groups guidance in terms of key understandings, but allowed them to contextualise their learning at the local level,” she said.

The statewide project builds on last year’s DEST Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years project, in which 15 clusters of 10 schools each undertook projects that led to improvements in student outcome data.

Professor Wyatt-Smith said teacher

engagement was again very high this year, as teachers gained information and practical strategies to support improvements in middle phase engagement and achievement.

“We are demonstrating that we need standards of achievement to inform teaching and learning, and that these standards must take into account curriculum knowledge and literacy,” she said.

“We’re saying to teachers that they need to be clear about what they’re

assessing, engage kids in authentic quality learning, then evaluate tasks that reflect this in a coherent manner.

“Assessment is the most positive influence on teaching and learning because kids use criteria as an improvement tool,” she said.

More information about the cluster projects can be found on the MPL Professional Learning Community at <http://www.learningplace.com.au/ea/etrf/mpcp>



The Tara Western Alliance cluster project team met up with their “critical friend” Pat Hipwell at a recent forum for participants in the statewide Middle Phase of Learning cluster project.

## Rural schools explore ways to sustain skills and knowledge

ONE of the issues for remote and rural schools is staff turnover, with staff taking the skills gained in professional development with them when they leave.

Members of the Darling Downs cluster, the Tara Western Alliance, are currently participating in the statewide Middle Phase of Learning Cluster project to explore ways to sustain teachers’ skills and knowledge relating to literacies and assessment in a rural environment.

The project builds on outcomes from the cluster’s participation in the 2005 DEST Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years project.

Tara Shire State College Head of Department (Middle Phase of Learning) Tess Hennessey said the project was exploring ways to improve skill levels in literacy and assessment outcomes (for both students and teachers) despite staff changes across the cluster, and to maintain the momentum of Middle Phase of Learning reform.

“All our teachers are at different points in their knowledge and experience in curriculum literacies, writ-

ing and aligning quality assessment tasks, and creating explicit links between teaching strategies and assessment,” Ms Hennessey said.

This year the cluster developed a program of individualised professional development and brought in “critical friend” Pat Hipwell to conduct one-on-one training for teachers in each school involved in the project.

Ms Hennessey said this approach enabled each teacher to build on their existing skills and apply what they learned in the classroom.

“The results are extraordinary because teachers are now clearly identifying the curriculum knowledges and literacy demands in order to create very specific assessment tasks and criterion standards.

“We’re using modelling and scaffolding to show students what they need to do to achieve at each level, so that assessments are not a mystery any more to the students.”

The project has demonstrated the value of explicit teaching of curriculum literacies and will inform the cluster’s future professional devel-

opment programs and budgets.

“We can use the skills we’ve developed this year because we have people at all different stages who can network with each other across the cluster,” Ms Hennessey said.

The Tara Western Alliance has worked together on Middle Phase of Learning reform for the past three years, developing shared planning templates, assessment tasks, sharing professional development and developing a four-year curriculum plan for Years 1–7 across all schools.

Participant Janelle Moore from Glenmorgan State School said all teachers involved had been enthusiastic.

“Everyone has taken it on board. It’s made it clear that literacy is the core business of everybody, whether they’re teaching Year 4 or Year 10, or teaching art or mathematics,” she said.

“This project had also helped us prepare students who are going on to boarding schools, where they will need independent learning skills,” Ms Moore said.



Heatley Secondary College Middle Phase of Learning students leap into laptop learning, participating in a project that has also proven a learning experience for their teachers.

## Teachers target technology, texts and assessment

TEACHERS from the Alexandra Hills Learning Precinct have used their Middle Phase of Learning cluster project grant to build their understanding of youth texts, technology and assessment.

Alexandra Hills State High School Head of Department (Middle Schooling) Sam Pidgeon said the cluster project had exposed teachers to the texts that students use in their daily lives, including web-based resources such as personal blogs, chat rooms, and youth-oriented websites.

“We’ve learned a lot about the texts young people actually use, and we’ve looked at how we can inject those sorts of texts into the classroom and integrate them into assessment,” Ms Pidgeon said.

“For example, the Learning Place offers facilities for chat rooms and blogs.”

Participants have applied their learning to a wide range of classroom units.

For example, Ms Pidgeon said a Year 9 dance class had designed an online choreography game which they delivered to Year 7 students in a primary school in the cluster. The Year 7 students then provided feedback via the Learning Place.

“Another example was a Health and PE Studies class which took a tour of sexual health websites then designed a website to prepare kids for Schoolies Week,” Ms Pidgeon said.

To complement their research into youth texts and technology, the cluster worked with an assessment mentor to gain knowledge in designing and implementing quality assessment tasks.

Meanwhile, teachers from Townsville’s Mount Louisa cluster are experimenting with online teaching and learning in the classroom to change their roles from “all-knowing pedagogues” to learning facilitators.

So far, the results of their Middle Phase of Learning Cluster project are encouraging, according to Heatley Secondary College Middle Phase of Learning coordinator Carolyn Dawson.

Teachers in the cluster’s six schools have undertaken Blackboard training to learn how to set up courses online, and the project team are paving the way by offering units online to selected classes.

“The levels of engagement are very high,” Ms Dawson said.

“It has also freed me up to give one-on-one support to the students who need it,” she said.

Heatley Secondary College HOD-ICT Ken Theodore agrees that offering units online to the schools’ “laptop learning” classes has promoted cooperative learning.

“We’ve found that the students have knowledge of how to use computers, but not how to use them in learning,” he said. “This opens up a whole new world for them.”