



Feeding Back: Reflections on Mentoring



Alexandra Harris is a Head Teacher (Teaching and Learning) in Sydney. The story she tells here involves her work in the Schooling for a Fair Go project in which, as a targeted early career teacher, she was mentored in her own school around action research on her teaching practice. She then went on to mentor a HSIE teacher at another school to effect change in the motivation and engagement of students. Alexandra has been a sessional lecturer and tutor in History curriculum at Western Sydney University, a Curriculum Advisor and was a recipient the NSW Department of Education 'Significant Achievement in Classroom Teaching' award.

Me as mentee

In 2012 I was asked to take part in a project that became known as *Schooling for a Fair Go*. The premise was that I would work under a mentor teacher in my school through an action research project which would challenge and improve my practice. The project used the *MeE Framework*, a motivation and engagement framework developed in the early 2000s by a team led by Associate Professor Geoff Munns of Western Sydney University (WSU), and further developed from a collaboration between this team and Professor Andrew Martin (Munns & Martin, 2013)ⁱ Working in a low- SES South Western Sydney comprehensive high school as an early career History teacher, I knew that the opportunity to be mentored by a more experienced teacher would be an invaluable experience. Little did I know how much this project would change my practice and reinvigorate my passion for teaching and learning.

Being introduced to the *MeE Framework*, I was immediately drawn to the 'e'ngagement aspect of feedback (see article on the *MeE Framework* by Geoff Munns in this Special Edition) and knew I wanted to use feedback more effectively to further improve student engagement. I decided to focus on two classes, Year 9 and Year 12. Both of these groups had learning needs that would benefit from more explicit feedback as well as other elements of the *MeE Framework*. The cultural make-up of my school at the time, with many students coming from EAL/D backgrounds (97% in 2012), meant that many students relied heavily on direct teacher input and found more 'student-centred' learning challenging. Most of my students did not feel confident enough in their own ability to complete work independently, for example. This was something I wanted to change through more effective feedback. I wanted students to feel confident about their knowledge of assessment and course content through: analysing marking criteria, 'unlocking' feedback cues to take on criticism of their work, and implementing strategies to improve.

Year 9 were a particularly challenging group. Through teaching this group and engaging with the *MeE Framework* I learnt that student 'compliance' does not equal 'engagement'. To have 30 students appearing to be working away had always been a dream classroom for me, particularly as an early career teacher. However, I realised that half the group were not working to the best of their ability and the other half were taking my attention from others who truly needed my assistance. To address this, my main focus for the project was to use both verbal and written feedback to better develop a learning environment that strongly valued learning above any distractions.

When the WSU team and my mentor observed my lessons with this class, their feedback made me realise that whilst I was using a range of useful strategies in the classroom, they were not suitable for all students. Due to this, students did not feel like they had ownership over the learning and thus were not part of an 'insider classroom'. This left other students who appeared to be working well not being valued as individual learners. Using the *MeE Framework*, I researched adaptive motivation strategies I could apply



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to this class to engage them with class materials and stay 'on task'. Initially, I changed the seating of the class to be able to better monitor student progress and acknowledge and support individual encouragement of students to learn, solve problems and further develop their historical skills. In addition to this, I played around with pairs and groupings to maximise the support and extension offered in my classroom to better address student learning needs. I then created specific 'laptop learning' days, having our Thursday lessons be 'laptop free' and Friday lessons 'laptop specific', to continue developing their writing skills. This enabled students to showcase their individual talents and allowed those students who needed further writing assistance the time and place to develop those skills. I also modelled responses frequently in the classroom to support students with a base level of knowledge upon which to scaffold learning.

The effect of these small modifications created remarkable change in the classroom. Upon closely monitoring students in their new grouping configurations and asking questions from a range of students, rather than relying on the usual pattern of students who frequently answered, I was able to keep students 'on task' whilst allowing students one-on-one time with me and individual feedback on their knowledge and skills. I utilised targeted questioning to elicit responses from a range of students and noted the growth in knowledge acquisition over the course of the project. Over time, my use of metacognitive feedback generated student self-assessment and self-direction which led to a rise in engagement and work productivity, and I found students were actually 'in task' instead of simply 'on task'.

Reflecting on the ways I gave feedback, and being supported by my mentor and the WSU team gave me valuable insight into my classroom practice and the effects of my teaching on my students. Working closely with my mentor gave me a great opportunity to reflect with, and learn openly from, an experienced educator who was enthusiastic about pedagogy. This meant I was able to explore and appreciate the role that research could play in my development as a new educator. Investigating different pedagogies and applying them to my classroom through this project reignited my passion for teaching and the joy in the victories for both students and myself along the way.

Me as mentor

Part of my involvement in the project was to be involved in the next phase as a mentor myself. Through links with my previous mentor, I was able to form a connection with a local high school with a diverse cohort of students. I approached an early career HSIE teacher at the school to become involved in the project. This teacher's classes were mixed ability, coming from many backgrounds and with many learning needs. The teacher selected one class in particular to work with, a Year 9 Geography class she had been battling to keep on task for most of the first term. She was coming up against several roadblocks to learning in this classroom: not having specifically studied Geography at university herself; the school's timetable, which meant only seeing the class a couple of times a fortnight; high absenteeism in the class; and a history of these students themselves not valuing learning. This combination of factors meant that most students were disengaged.

We decided that the emphasis of the project in this iteration was for the teacher to use specific language to identify her students as learners, moving away from a focus on negative behaviour and towards motivation in the classroom. The teacher was concerned that the class were falling behind and was seeking ways to better structure their learning to enhance engagement. On my initial observation of the Year 9 Geography class I could see that some students were desperate to learn but lacked confidence in



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their ability. Others were hindered by the nature of some classmates who were trying everything to seek attention from their peers and the teacher.

Over the course of a few months I spent time observing and unpacking lessons, creating further ways to implement the *MeE Framework* in this class and discussing changes in student behaviour. The teacher worked to improve the confidence of her class by drawing attention to the positive learning experiences students were having instead of focusing on negative behaviour. Eventually, students began to engage with the classwork further. Phone usage, which was officially banned by the school but actually prevalent in this class, began to decline. The peak of this action research project culminated in the final topic, *Darwin: A Community*. I raised the idea of using *Minecraft* in the teacher's class to engage the students and, not being familiar with the program, she fully committed herself to learning how to use it. Observing students engaging with *Minecraft* and then working together to create a model of the city of Darwin in the program was a positive experience. The teacher implemented reflection activities into her class in which students themselves noted that the class's behaviour had changed and that they were 'learners', working together and co-operating within the classroom. In my final observation of the class, all students were fully immersed in the activity at hand. Students were collaborating and the teacher was able to spend time with individual students, focusing on their learning rather than reprimanding them on their behaviour.

This project in this class was a positive learning experience, enabling me to work with WSU academic staff and challenged my own teaching methods to help support another teacher. Seeing the progressive changes in students' learning and the teacher's own teaching style proved to be a great success, with the *MeE Framework* underpinning the changes that occurred. By the end of the cycle, most students were engaged and monitoring their own behaviour rather than giving in to other distractions. Overall, this was an extremely worthwhile exercise which produced real changes for all that were involved.

Now a lot further into my career, I can see the importance of action learning in shaping my teaching today and the need for continuous professional learning and reflection. I am an educator who thrives when working with both students and staff to improve learning outcomes for all. It is opportunities to be involved in projects that support my profession, like the *Fair Go Program*, that encourage me to stay engaged and committed to the profession and our students.



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References:

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ⁱ The complete *MeE Framework* was first developed for the *Motivation and Engagement of Boys* project (Munns et al, 2006). Andrew Martin's work is well-known through his 'Student Motivation and Engagement Wheel' (see Martin, 2007).