



Khya Brooks suggests an approach to the HSC which can reduce everyone's anxiety...

On the day my first HSC classes' results were released, I was nervous and excited. However, I did not expect the reactions that I witnessed.

Many people turned to me and said "Congratulations. You did so well", as though I had just sat the tests myself. Meanwhile, some of my colleagues were sitting with their head in their hands saying "I didn't even get one band 6. What happened?" The rest of the day was spent listening to colleagues criticise their own practice and try to justify their classes' outcomes to themselves; "Oh, I should have focused more on this area in the syllabus..." and "If only I had thought to revise this case study more thoroughly".

What I learnt that day was to internalise the HSC results as though they were my own. I learned that my classes' success somehow translated into how valuable I was as a teacher. The day was not spent celebrating, it was spent critically reflecting. Sure, this is great practice for long-term improvement, but what I have found is that it has also increased the pressure experienced by teachers. I have noticed that this pressure is then often transferred onto students, resulting in unnecessarily increased anxiety throughout the school.

I argue that this approach is reflective of a growing individualistic and negative culture within society and therefore teaching; which positions individual teachers rather than school systems or society more widely as solely responsible for student outcomes. This anxiety is reinforced by constant questions from the school executive, such as "Did you differentiate enough?", "Are you providing enough scaffolds?", "How many band 6s will you get this year?"

There is often too much pressure on many of the adults and, subsequently, many of the children at school.

I thought school was supposed to be joyful!

What to do?

So, I decided to actively address this cultural shift. I wanted students to own their own learning, rather than assuming it was all my responsibility. I began to reshape my programs, assessments and my overall practice. The more confident and successful my students became with their skills, the more confident and successful I felt within my practice. Our collective anxiety melted away and school days became more positive.

I found this new approach enabled me to have a better range of measures to gauge my success as a teacher. Rather than relying on quantitative numbers at the end of the HSC, I established a clearer set of procedures that allowed me, and the students themselves, to better measure our progress.



Below are some practical strategies that have helped me in achieving this cultural shift in my classroom, with a view to empower learners and improve their confidence, and ultimately, their success. I will focus prominently on the strategies utilised with my Society and Culture classes, but they are strategies that are easily transferrable to other subjects.

Please note, I work in a partially-selective public school in South-West Sydney. This means I have a large range of students; from high to lower ability, from advantaged to disadvantaged backgrounds, and from the disengaged through to some 'over workers'. I have found that these strategies have assisted all of my students. For this reason, they should be applicable in almost any school context.

Strategies to develop a culture of student-driven learning

No summary, no marks

A strategy I have implemented is to withhold marks from students after they initially receive their assessments back. I encourage students to read through their feedback, and write a summary outlining what they need to work on, and how they intend to improve a particular skill in future assessments.

Once they do this, I provide them with their mark. This is a way to maximise student engagement with feedback. Also, students tend to keep these summaries and read over them before submitting future drafts.

Specific student-led feedback

I no longer accept copies of drafts from students seeking copious feedback. I found that quite often I would have read a draft several times before it came to marking it, and it was exhausting, time consuming and students generally still made similar mistakes in later assessments (indicating it was not as effective as I wanted it to be).

As a result, I developed a feedback matrix to use with my classes. The matrix outlines a three-step feedback system where I give specific feedback at set times and students are required to actively engage with it. The steps are outlined in Image 1 below.

Image 1 - Feedback Matrix

STEP 1	Question 1:		<p>FEEDBACK MATRIX</p> <p>1. Using the marking criteria, student identifies two questions to specifically have answered by the teacher (eg: Have I effectively applied concepts?)</p> <p>2. Teacher (only) reads through the draft. They answer the questions directly, and then write one 'strength' and one 'limitation' from the response.</p> <p>3. Student applies feedback from the questions and then, using two different coloured highlighters, highlights examples of the strength and examples of the limitation in their response that was identified by the teacher. The student then identifies a strategy for how they are going to actively improve this limitation</p>
	Response 1:		
	Question 2:		
	Response 2:		
STEP 2	Teacher Feedback: STRENGTH	Teacher Feedback: LIMITATION	
	STEP 3		
STEP 3	Self-identified Strategy: (what are you going to do to fix the limitations?)		

There can be many benefits to using the matrix. As students use the marking criteria to develop specific questions for their feedback, they self-identify areas they thought they were not as strong in. For teachers, this means no longer spending copious time fixing tiny issues. Instead, we are able to provide wider feedback that students then identify in their own work. Also, students can easily see if their 'limitation' was someone else's strength, and they can seek more help from one another.



Grouped feedback activities

Following the submission of a formal assessment task, I allocate each student a shape based on the marking criteria. Each shape is representative of a skill they should aim to actively improve. I then dedicate a lesson to improving those skills by grouping students by shape around the room, and each 'shape group' completes an activity dedicated to improving that skill. For example, I gave a student a triangle to indicate that they needed to better synthesise their research. I then had a triangle station, where all students that received the triangle worked on an activity where they 'blended' primary and secondary information together to identify conclusions. Students then practised writing these conclusions into paragraphs, to improve this skill further.

Strategies to develop specific skills

Writing

To improve student writing, I developed an acronym (shown in Image 2 below) focussed on sentence starters. Whilst there are many popular paragraph structures around, this approach focusses on the sentence level and students tend to find this more visible. Over the course, students begin using different sentence starters, eventually utilising the acronym as an editing checklist rather than a structure. It has been hugely successful across all stages and courses and has also been adopted by various other faculties and schools.

Image 2 - Writing Acronym

PBEIHT (People Believe Exercise Is Heaps Tough)

P= Point (What is your point)

B= This is because...

E= An example of this is...

I= The impact of this is...

H= However,...

T= Therefore...

Once this acronym is introduced, I often develop an activity where students read various responses and highlight the different elements using different colours. The responses are usually related to course content, so that students actively learn relevant information through the process. We then discuss which responses were better and why, and students rewrite one of the poorer examples using the structure themselves. Often, I will then have students 'highlight' one another's responses to begin to foster a peer marking culture.



I also use the highlighting activity as self-guided feedback through the course. Students learn to highlight their responses and identify whether they have used too much description, or if they need to embed more examples.

Applying concepts

In many subjects, applying concepts is integral. I scaffold this skill in a multitude of ways.

1. The concepts are colour coded in my classroom, and are all displayed on the wall.
2. Each lesson, I have students identify the various concepts that were discussed in class. Through this, students learn that a lesson can cover elements of a concept without the teacher explicitly stating it, and so they begin to look for opportunities to make these connections themselves.
3. I provide students with paragraphs from previous responses. Students identify two concepts that would enhance the paragraph, and rewrite the paragraphs with the concepts applied. They then peer mark one another's responses.
4. Randomly, I will pass each student three cards, one with a 'fundamental' concept, one with an 'additional' concept and one with a 'related' concept. Students are then given one minute to prepare, and then discuss a key point of the case study using all three concepts. It helps to revise content, and enhances students' ability to apply concepts appropriately.

Strategies to build a culture of success in the subject

One of my biggest successes has been developing a good rapport between cohorts. This has enhanced the mentorship my Year 11 students receive each year, and has also contributed to the growing profile and number of Stage 6 classes in my school.

Year 11 markers

Each year, one week before the Personal Interest Project (PIP) major work is due, I spend a day with my Year 11 students deconstructing exemplar PIPs and marking them collectively. This is a positive and voluntary experience, and the focus is about building up each other rather than putting pressure on Year 11 to produce Year 12 level work, or, of criticising older students.

Once students feel more confident in their understanding of the requirements of each section in the PIP, I then have them 'mark' draft Year 12 PIPs. This provides an array of advantages, such as my Year 12 students are provided with additional feedback, my Year 11 students have a better understanding of the skills required of them to achieve higher results, and I use the opportunity as a checkpoint to ensure all students have finalised their PIP at least a week prior to submission day.



Q&As

Each year I ask a number of my previous Year 12 students to come and speak to my new Year 12 students. The new group develop questions they want answered and my older group provide hints, tips and pieces of advice. Often, the older students offer to assist with PIP topics or research too.

Student developed questions

Lastly, following each topic, I have students map past HSC questions to the syllabus dot points and concepts. Students then develop a question for the topic, by mixing two dot points and adding a verb or integrating a concept. Finally, students add their question to a shared document and everyone selects three questions to respond to for practise.

This empowers students to develop their own resources for revision (I also get a bank of new question ideas). Often students will then show the question designer their response, and this suggests more collegiality between the students, as the class becomes more focussed on achieving great marks for everyone rather than personal or individual success alone.

Building up each other

It is important to note that I am very explicit with my students about the skills they learn, and how each of these strategies empowers them as learners. What I have noticed after integrating the strategies listed above is that students become less reliant on me to feed them information and are much more active about their own development. This allows each of them to feel confident and ultimately enables them to succeed as a class. It also makes it easier for me to measure how well they develop essential skills. It is this development that I value most in my teaching, knowing my students have come so far, and guiding them to continue to learn and grow more confident even when they are no longer in my classroom.

Khya Brooks currently teaches in Social Sciences at Elizabeth Macarthur High School. She has conducted workshops at the Australian Geography Annual Conference, worked in collaboration with local schools to develop higher-order-programs for the Australian Geography Curriculum, conducted research and had it published on behalf of the Western Sydney University EPIC (Educational Pathways in the 21st Century) program and contributed to educational podcasts. Khya's students have received awards from the Society and Culture Association for their outstanding accomplishments in examination and PIP components of the HSC course. She has also contributed to the sustained growth and success of Stage 6 classes in her school. Khya is currently refining her approach to higher-order-learning strategies, and is guiding a research cycle of inquiry within her school.