Learning at St Mark's – A Review

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Abstract
St Mark's is a Catholic College in Stanhope Gardens, NSW. It opened in 2007 in temporary accommodation, before moving to a purpose built site in mid-2008. St Marks has a 1:1 laptop program, an interdisciplinary curriculum and flexible learning spaces. Currently, St Mark's has 270 students in years 7 – 9.

This report explores the unique features of learning at St Mark's, outlining the theoretical basis for this pedagogical model, and also the way that this model has been implemented both across the whole school at a planning level, and within the individual learning sessions. It concludes with some reflections on the learning, and areas for further research.

Theoretical Basis
From the outset, St Mark's was encouraged by the Executive Director of Parramatta, Greg Whitby, to implement some of the most forward thinking ideas in education. This meant that everything – from the design of the lessons to the construction of the buildings – was very different to the traditional approach. In the early stages, the Foundation Principal, Ms Robyn Meddows, explained that she had been inspired by the work of Yoram Harpaz, and his ideas about creating a 'community of thinking' and that this principle was to guide the development of the ethos at St Mark's.

Harpaz argued that schools needed to move beyond the traditional 'banker' model of learning, in which teachers are the owners of the knowledge, and students receive this knowledge. Clearly, this is an objectivist approach to the understanding of learning, and it emphasis very greatly the idea that learning is inextricably linked to having possession of content. Harpaz writes, '*In this "era of knowledge," we must not glorify knowledge and impart it as if it were "large rocks," but foster a favorable, critical and creative attitude towards it. An Educated Person is not one who knows, who has many "objects" in his head, but one who knows how to relate to knowledge. She is challenged by it and is at home with it. She treats knowledge critically – passes it through an "inner locus of evaluation. She tries to reinterpret it creatively, to view it from additional perspectives and to add to it.*'

To encourage this approach, Harpaz suggests what I understand to be a more constructivist approach to education; that is, students need to engage with knowledge, through the application of skills, and construct their own understanding. To do this, Harpaz proposes a three phase process. In the first phase, the fertile question is determined. In a beginning community of thinking, this fertile question is defined the the staff, but eventually, Harpaz envisions a community where students define the question for themselves. A fertile question has a number of traits; according to Harpaz, it is a question that is open, undermining, rich, practical, connected to the learners and charged with an ethical dimension.

The second phase for a thinking community is the research. Harpaz explains that the learning community, *'divides into small research teams that choose research questions – sub-questions of the fertile question. We recall that one of the traits of a fertile question is its richness – its ability to be broken up into (or spawn) many sub-questions. The research teams examine subquestions, which are aspects of the fertile question, together composing comprehensive research of it.'* Clearly, this aspect of Harpaz's model will require collaborative learning between students. However, one critique of Harpaz's model is that Harpaz is limited in explaining exactly how this might look in a classroom setting. For example, it appears that there is little time for In addition, and this is a more telling criticism, Harpaz himself explains that there is a requirement for some level of content knowledge before embarking on exploring a fertile question, yet, within a community of thinking, there is limited opportunity for imparting this knowledge. This, when coupled with the insistence of the NSW Board of Studies about the requirements of specific content knowledge, especially in Years 9 – 12, as well as the vast material required to be covered, in the limited time, immediately presented challenges for the St Mark's staff.

The final phase in Harpaz's model is the concluding performance. This phase, *'encourages the learners to do something with their knowledge: to "play" it, to operate it. The operation of knowledge – its creation, criticism, analysis, composition, application, reinterpretation, presentation – is not only a manifestation of its understanding, but also the means to understanding's construction.'* In many ways, this concluding performance allows a chance for students to both understand the work, and to understand their own understanding.

Of course, Harpaz is not the only educator suggesting such an approach – in many ways, Apple's Classroom of Tomorrow- Today course and their Challenge Based Learning has similar points – including a big picture and research questions. It too, has an emphasis on relevant questions and applications of technology to real world problems.

Harpaz's work has been very popular in a number of educational settings, and numerous schools are striving to implement a 'thinking community.' However, within the Australian education environment, there are other changes afoot, including the Digital Education Revolution announced by the Rudd Government, and the move towards standardized testing and a national curriculum across the whole of Australia. A school needs to incorporate all of these factors into establishing a clear vision and a meaningful pedagogical practice.

The IIAC Model

The challenge facing the St Mark's staff – and, indeed, still facing them today – was transforming this vision into a pedagogical reality. Furthermore, St Mark's was still required to be compliant with all Board of Studies and Catholic Education Office requirements, including mandated content and hours of study per subject. Immediately, there was a tension between Harpaz's approach, which encouraged a more negotiated approach to the curriculum, with eventually learners able to choose the fertile questions and therefore, the content that they would cover, and the requirements of the school certificate, which stipulated not only what students would

learn, but also how they would learn this content.

Therefore, the way forward would necessarily be an amalgam of these two opposite ideals. In addition, due to a limited amount of research on the matter, staff would need to investigate and experiment with ways of encouraging learning in large learning spaces. (At St Mark's, all students in Year 7 are in one large learning space, with 5 learning advisors, for much of their day. The room has a variety of furniture set out to encourage individual learning, group learning, discussion and tutorial groups.)

The way forward required a creative solution – and meant that the staff departed from the traditional model of education and adopted a very different model. The research and a number of different approaches and their subsequent evaluations led to the development of the IIAC model, which is currently under review at St Mark's campus. The IIAC model is a twofold approach to learning, and it is a particular brand of pedagogy that meets the challenges faced by staff at St Mark's.

The model is, firstly, an approach to planning the interdisciplinary program of study; that is, it provides a structure for the learning progress over a term. In this case, there are four parts to the model. In the first phase, the initation, students engage with and develop, with the teacher's guidance, a fertile question for futher research. Of course, older students are generally more capable of creating fertile questions, due to having been through the process a number of times, so the younger students generally require more guidelines. This is where one of the first compromises between the two paradigms occurred; ideally, students should be able to explore almost anything from the starting point of the fertile question; however, in reality, the teacher must direct the fertile question so that he or she can ensure that all students have had the opportunity to cover the mandatory syllabus outcomes. Having said that, the process of negotiation is also a worthwhile one, and has the benefit of involving students in the research process.

Next comes the investigation phase. This is where students gain the initial knowledge to explore – and hence define the research questions that they must explore.

Thirdly, there is the analysis phase. This is where students complete the body of research, exploring the main topics related to the fertile question. Of course, there remains a lot of negotiation between teacher and student about the way this material is covered and presented.

Finally, there is the critique. In this phase, students present their learning, usually in the form of a concluding performance, and also evaluate their own learning. Again, there are inconsistencies between the requirements of the Board of Studies and the Community of Thinking. Ideally, according to Harpaz, a concluding performance should encourage some form of 'playing' with knowledge – and thereby understanding it.

In addition, it also provides a more microscopic approach to lesson planning; the IIAC model can be adapted to provide a framework for planning individual lessons. Firstly, students undertake an initiation phase, whereby they engage with the subject matter via a multi-sensory approach. Students also learn what they are going to learn to do, and learn about during the course of the lesson, why this is relevant to the

fertile question (and therefore their lives) and how they will know if they have succeeded. This last part is done quite simply, via All… Most… Some objectives for students, who, through consultation with learning advisors, are aware of their limitations.

Secondly, students engage in a period of direct instruction/ demonstration or dialogue. This is the investigation phase, and it is aimed at providing students with the initial resources and knowledge required to further pursue their research. In this case, it might allow group discussion, and the initial parts of constructing meaning.

Thirdly, students take part in the process of constructing meaning from further research. This phase, known as the analysis phase or activity phase, often allows students to explore different kinds of learning, as there is an element of choice about the nature of the work and the way it is presented. This work often forms part of the concluding performance.

Finally, students take part in the critique part of the phase; in this phase, students review their learning – and the learning of others – as well as considering whether they have answered the fertile question.

A sample lesson: Is the World Coming to an End?

Below is an exemplar lesson from a Program of Study called The Day After Tomorrow, an interdisciplinary unit of Science and Geography.

Objectives: Students learn about some of the main issues affecting the environment at the moment. (Obviously, this is one of the first sessions of a PoS.)

Success:
All students complete a podcast outlining some of the main issues affecting the environment, and the involvement of companies in sustainability.
Most students complete a podcast discussing some of the main issues affecting the environment and the involvement of companies in sustainability.
Some students complete a podcast evaluating some of the main issues affecting the environment, and the involvement of companies in sustainability.

Initiation: Students watch a film about climate change from the server. Students then contribute on twitter regarding how this applies to the fertile question, 'Is the world going to end?'

Investigation: Students are split into small groups for tutorials. Students attend tutorials on sustainability, renewable and limited resources, acid rain and pollution. (Students rotate through these groups in different lessons.)

Analysis: Students engage in a podcast working with 3 other students (teacher-defined learning partners), where each student takes on a specific role – a host, a representative of a company involved in sustainability, and a climate change scientist. Students need to complete research to establish a meaningful conversation.

Critique: Students tweet three things that they have learnt about or learnt to do during the course of the lesson. Students can also comment on other's learning. This is done via Twitter.

Analysis and Reflection

The IIAC model at St Mark's is still in its early stages; it has been in place for almost a year, so it is very early to comment on the efficacy of the model. Having said that, the stakeholders within the community are supportive of the model. Students appreciate both the direct tutorial sessions and also the collaborative learning, and I believe that we have managed to remain true to our ethos – preparing students for the future, whatever that may be – as well as ensure that they have the skills to succeed in the unfortunately traditional School and Higher School Certificate examinations. Although the model is not a true reflection of the 'community of thinking' as envisioned by Harpaz, I believe that it combines a hybrid version of Harpaz's model with some other elements of best practice, including assessment for learning, collaborative practice and mastery teaching.

Certainly the current IIAC model is an improvement on the old model, where the lessons seemed to lack both rigour and pace; this improvement is very definite, as students understand both what is required and how to complete it.

However, there are certain areas where further research is required; for example, it will be interesting to compare student evaluation pre and post the implementation of the IIAC model. Overall, then, the IIAC model has made a promising start to developing a meaningful forum for learning, and provided structure to organize learning that many staff required, when faced with the challenges of such an innovative learning style. Having said that, more research is required to determine the full educational benefit of the IIAC model.

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