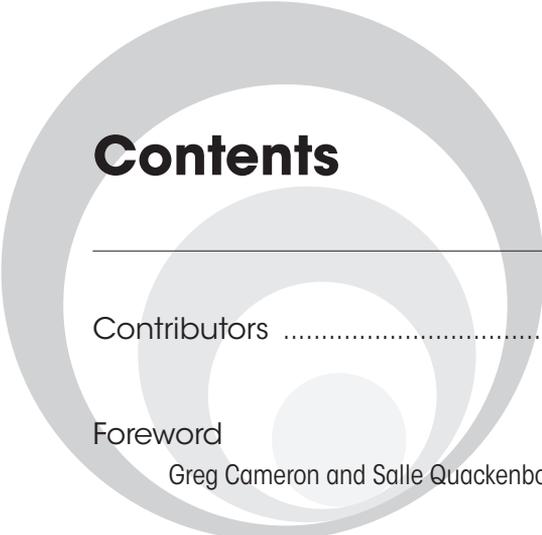# Dimensions ofLearningin Practice

in Australian Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education

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Foreword by Greg Cameron and Salle Quackenboss

Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION

Contents

Section one:
Dimensions of Learning at the classroom level

Dimension 1: Attitudes and Perceptions

Attitudes and perceptions affect a student's ability to learn. An essential element of effective instruction, then, is helping students establish positive attitudes and perceptions about the classroom and about learning. A key premise of Dimension 1 is that attitudes and perceptions are a type of thinking, thus they can be learned and changed. When addressing Dimension 1, educators must take into account both the classroom climate and classroom tasks. DoL provides insights and ideas for educators about how to be more intentional in addressing attitudes and perceptions.

Classroom climate

A common question students ask is, 'Am I accepted by my teachers and peers?' An intentional focus on classroom climate can address this question. Teachers can foster positive attitudes and perceptions through their own everyday behaviour and through specific activities. Students can also contribute to the classroom climate by learning how to take responsibility for establishing and maintaining their own positive attitudes and perceptions.

Classroom climate is also about a sense of comfort and order. Systematically using activities that involve physical movement, communicating classroom procedures, and establishing clear policies about the physical safety of students are some of the strategies suggested for helping students experience a sense of comfort and order.

Classroom tasks

Another common question students ask is, 'Can I do the work?' Attitudes and perceptions are influenced by the types of tasks students are asked to do in the classroom. Two of the strategies DoL recommends are letting students know what they will be learning (setting objectives) and providing timely feedback, which are among the strategies shown to have a significant positive correlation to student achievement. (Note: A detailed discussion of the research behind many of the strategies recommended in DoL can be found in McREL's 2004 publication, Classroom Instruction That Works, by Marzano, Pickering and Pollock.) Keep in mind that success in Dimension 1, however, should never be measured in terms of the strategies themselves but in the effect on attitudes.

Though many effective teachers address attitudes and perception, a key element of the DoL framework is the intentional planning for each dimension. DoL lessons and units identify goals and concerns related to student attitudes and perceptions, in general or related to a specific unit, and address what specifically will be done to address these goals or concerns.

Introduction

Jeanne Allen and Richard Smith

Why this book?

This book is about the pedagogical framework known as Dimensions of Learning (DoL). More specifically, it is about how DoL has been implemented in Australian primary, secondary and tertiary educational settings. The aim of this edited collection is to provide an understanding of the experiences of Australian educators who are conversant with the practice of the framework. While there is a broad range of both contributors and contributions, the thread that unites the book's chapters is the reflection and commentary on how DoL has been applied in educational practice.

The genesis of the book lies in an interest that the editors had in discovering more about the experiences of other educators in implementing and using DoL. Both editors are lecturers in the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) at Central Queensland University. Dimensions of Learning constitutes an integral component of the learning design within this undergraduate program and informs the teaching practice of all the staff involved in the BLM. While there have been some informative articles and appraisals written by practising educators about DoL (see, for example, Apthorp, 2000; Cooper et al., 1996; Thompson, 1999), these are few in number, particularly in relation to the Australian context, considering the wealth of anecdotal information that is circulated in the field. For example, one often hears of schools using DoL reporting improved teacher capability, better classroom organisation and climate, improved teacher pedagogy and, as a result, improved student outcomes, but there is very little in the literature to support this. This book is important because it demonstrates, for the first time, how DoL has been applied in primary, secondary and tertiary practice in Australia. Through the related experiences of its contributors, the book is to some degree a 'how to' account that will provide guidance and insights for practitioners involved in or interested in implementing the framework themselves.

Dimensions of Learning in Australia

Dimensions of Learning began featuring in Australian schools in the mid-1990s. Two of the first schools to introduce DoL, initially quite independently of one another, were Brisbane Grammar School and Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. Since then, DoL has continued to catch the interest of educators across a number of states, schooling systems and educational sectors, and the number of institutions adopting DoL continues to grow. While there are, as yet, no published figures to indicate the number of institutions using DoL in Australia, the demand for professional development and strong collegial interest expressed in educational quarters suggests that the new millennium has seen an increase in the uptake of the framework, particularly in schools.

In Queensland, for example, following training conducted in Brisbane by Jane Doty in late 2005, practitioners created a Dimensions of Learning Support Network as a means of continuing professional dialogue about the framework. More than one hundred educators from across metropolitan Brisbane and throughout the state are registered for the Network, and numbers continue to grow. The Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) provides regular professional development opportunities in DoL in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane; accredited trainers from the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) and Central Queensland University are engaged to conduct these training workshops. Hawker Brownlow Education has recently forged an agreement with McREL and ASCD – who publish DoL – to act as the Australian distributor for all DoL and associated material, and to provide supporting professional development.

There are a range of reasons why institutions adopt DoL, many of which are covered in the chapters of this book. One school leader, instrumental in implementing DoL into a secondary school in the mid-1990s (and a contributor to this book), gives an indication of the motivating forces at that time:

> *I argued . . . that we should concentrate on the core responsibility of schools – ensuring that students learnt well. At the time, the approach of the twenty-first century was fuelling discussions about the knowledge and skills essential for success in the new millennium, and topics like learning styles, multiple intelligences, and complex reasoning processes were current.*
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> (M. Haseloff, personal communication, May 07, 2006)

Brian Short, now Headmaster and, at the time, Director of Studies at Brisbane Grammar School, describes the background to the implementation of DoL in his school in the mid-1990s. A curriculum review in 1992, involving input from members from across the school community, resulted in the development of a tripartite model for the way forward in curriculum planning and development. The model comprised *Optimal Learning, Information Technology* and a *Thinking Curriculum*. The next step in the process was to find a framework that brought together the elements of the model, which was linear in structure. Dimensions of Learning was immediately identified as a 'neat fit' for the curriculum model already developed because it matched the core purposes of

the school and was seen to frame teaching and learning in a way that was appropriate for the contemporary child. The implementation of the framework began in 1995, with initial training provided by facilitators from McREL. Some twelve years later, DoL continues to feature strongly as a central organising framework in the Year Six to Twelve curriculum. The school is recognised as both the longest and most sustained user of DoL in Australia (B. Short, personal communication, June 21 & June 30, 2006).

The tertiary experience: Central Queensland University

The major reasons for adopting DoL in the Bachelor of Learning Management pre-service teacher education program are twofold. Firstly, the learning management concept recognises the need to develop a high level of pedagogical expertise in student teachers *before* they graduate. This imperative is captured in both the concept of 'learning management' and practically in the delivery mode of the program. Secondly, the learning management concept is as much focused on the teaching profession, understood widely as being an enterprise that is largely in schools but not exclusively so. An important intent of the learning management idea is to play a part in assisting the teaching profession to focus on and formulate a coherent knowledge and skill base that establishes a credential for the label 'profession'. These two elements are of course interdependent and we will now discuss them in more detail.

Pedagogical Expertise

There are elements of teaching practice that seem to be widely used. These include didactic sessions dominated by teachers in which attempts are made to transfer information to learners by verbal means. Another is the attempt to encourage students to learn particular things by the use of what might be called 'activities'. Educators everywhere like to ensure that students enjoy worthwhile learning, that they undertake activities around topics that enable the achievement of intended outcomes. Classrooms, at all levels, are replete with the fruits of activities: charts, pictures, models, maps and the like adorn the walls and hang from the ceilings.

A good deal of teacher education is intent on teaching student teachers how to plan for such teaching. 'Curriculum planning' and 'unit planning' dominate some parts of the pre-service curriculum, especially in the Key Learning Areas as one would anticipate. The assessment schedules of pre-service teaching degrees are bound to contain a good number of the 'Prepare a unit on…' type of assessment items. Indeed, it is often convenient to encourage students to do curriculum development such as 'unit' or 'project' planning on campus or at home as exercises, or even as assessment items, on the assumption that student teachers visit classrooms to 'learn the ropes' of curriculum planning and activity construction.

The BLM program offers a fundamental challenge to practices like these. There are reasons for the challenge that flow from the learning management approach to

the issue. On the one hand, the emphasis on 'curriculum planning' tends to postpone the moment of implementation so that the 'doing teaching' element of the curriculum-teaching translation process is left to the individual student teacher at a later date.

The problem with this is that the detail of what to do is absent, glossed, un-constructed and not pressing. The very core of 'teacher' expertise then is left as an unsaid, postponed event. Nevertheless, the 'later date' is when the lesson, unit, activity or whatever has to be implemented, based largely on the *pedagogical* skill of the student teacher. Moreover, where good mentoring is available and student teachers have multiple mentors in the course of their program, student teachers develop a multiplicity of approaches. The contention is that this approach to the design of student learning encourages the proliferation of teaching approaches in new teachers, and endorses the belief in diversity of approaches in mentor teachers, irrespective of their effectiveness. Experienced and novice alike fall back on what they think they know best.

On the other hand the practices described here, when they comprise a major part of new teacher preparation, divert the on-campus preparation elements from the importance of pedagogical principles and practices. Importantly, they have the potential to divert a teacher education pre-service program from the central role played by 'teachers' in comparison with such factors as 'school' and 'home background' in the achievement of curriculum outcomes by students. Rather than having faith that student teachers will 'pick up' the 'how to' or 'teaching' knowledge and skills during 'prac' sessions from practising teachers who, conventional wisdom has it, know 'how' to teach, the learning management imperative is that student teachers need to be prepared to operate as pedagogical experts.

A learning manager, then, is prepared in ways where the 'how to teach' bit becomes a shared, systematic professional endeavour with its own technical skill and knowledge base rather than subjective preference, a personalised poetic approach that is mystical in its components and made up on the spot. Without a shared, systematic professional technical skill and knowledge base, new teachers watch and emulate others that draw on a host of elements such as 'multiple intelligences', coloured hats, productive pedagogies and New Basics, 'whole language' approaches, 'integration' and that reinforce the idea that 'teaching' is a plethora of approaches without coherent criteria for judging what works best. To prepare new teachers with these practices completes the circuit for the reproduction of the old into the new, in spite of the frequent reminders by teacher educators that schools and school systems have to 'change'.

> *In short, the learning management view is that constructing unit plans and making up diverse activities can no longer be equated to the job of 'teaching' at any level. The teaching-learning world is now more complex and demanding as teachers are intent on, and responsible for, ensuring that learning outcomes are reached for each learner.*
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> *(Lynch & Smith, 2006).*