

School Practices: Anglican Church Grammar School

*Michael Harding
Anglican Church Grammar School*

I must admit to feeling unusually anxious about this presentation. Quite apart from the fact that to a shy country boy, the building and grounds are intimidating here at the University, it is always a little off-putting speaking to an audience whom you suspect from the outset, probably know significantly more than you about a topic. Anyway, in true Middle School form, I would feel much more comfortable if you would feel free to interrupt and ask questions and keep me on track if I get carried away.

Some background information:

The Slade Campus of the Anglican Church Grammar School is located on a traditionally structured school site in the township of Warwick, some 160 kilometres South West of Brisbane. The campus includes basic teaching facilities and equipment, as well as accommodation and associated services for up to 140 students in two separate boarding houses, or residences as we insist on referring to them.

Please note that we consider our work at Slade a work in progress. We do not presume to have the answers and are constantly reviewing and replanning as we stumble across the less than cogent and around the dark corners. The Slade programs are built on the premise that the physical learning environment and the nature of residential experiences (particularly with regard to staff / student and student / student relationships) give us some significant advantages in achieving certain learning outcomes more easily than in traditional school contexts. In this presentation I will focus on what our program looks like, not on the underlying research support or theoretical background that I might, in another context, feel more comfortable focusing on. I have done this in the hope that the presentation might be of pragmatic use to you as you shape your schools and practice.

'Churchie' acquired the Slade Campus in 1999 in order to provide a residential enrichment program for the boys in its Year 7 – 9 Middle School. The Campus had been unoccupied for some two years and was in need of considerable repair and renovation.

Any of you who have renovated an old house will know of the fun we had in the early weeks, and months, associated with the ravages of time on unoccupied facilities. Perhaps symbolically, following the first major conference held in our dining room about five days after my arrival in Queensland, a main sewerage pipe (which services the toilets of the afore mentioned dining room) burst onto the lawn in front of the previous administration building! An inauspicious return to duty.

At the time, in 2000, 'Churchie' was moving quickly through a planned Middle School development phase at the East Brisbane Campus and felt that the opportunity that a residential experience might provide at Slade would complement and reinforce many of the teaching and learning principles that were occurring. This opportunity, in large part, resulted from a release

from the constraints of a timetable and other associated administrative necessities of a large school. (There are approximately 240 boys in each year group.)

In addition, research and experience in both Middle Schooling and, the perhaps more general, but nevertheless quite extensive work in experiential education, pointed to the very practical possibilities of a well structured extended residential experience. This was particularly so in terms of achieving changes in the way students think about their individual learning circumstances, including, but not limited to the key 'boy' issues of empowerment and self-esteem. Similarly, it was felt that the residences would allow students to benefit from immersion in coherent and consistent, student-centred, constructivist curriculum.

The original considerations of Slade also explicitly embraced the notion that relationships were at the core of effective learning environments, particularly in the middle years. The culture of valuing *specific types* of staff-student interactional behaviour, as well as structural embedding and valuing particular types of student-student relationships, was part of the original brief. This had tremendous appeal to me as I contemplated a move to the metropolis of Warwick and remains a core part of our planning focus and aspirations for the future. But more about that later.

While these characteristics of the Slade experience (as we call it) are probably not present in the average school environment, we have had some success in structuring learning experiences in ways that might be of interest to those of us in more mainstream learning environments.

The simplest way we explain to parents an overall aim of the Slade program is to describe it as Curriculum in Context. Learning on the Campus must connect with things that are real and tangible. Astronomy is undertaken in the context of the night sky, and Pythagoras' Theorem learned on a need to know basis when 'squaring up' a rectangular base for a bench seat by checking the diagonals. Most of the learning occurs as students make connections between their pre-existing knowledge and, in practical building and horticultural projects, the context of the Campus. Additionally, in a range of other curriculum undertakings, the context of the Warwick and surrounding communities forms the learning landscape in which the students immerse themselves. The focus of a community context is reinforced by the living arrangements at the Campus, and the collective power of a shared expectation of 'the right thing' that is slowly but surely built through each of the sequential residencies. The programs demand that students recognise and embrace the reality of choice and consequence, their control over their progress in the learning process and the positive power of the peer group. The structure of the learning groups explicitly focuses on, and stretches the boys in term of cooperative work and group outcomes. Fundamental to our work is a central belief that the personal skills and attitudes that underlie effective team work will enable much greater participation in both the world of work and the process of lifelong learning. The over-riding aim of the residential programs is a paradigm shift in the way that the students feel about their role in learning. There are high levels of choice and practical, foreseeable need drives much of the learning.

A summary of the program aims appears in Figure 1 and I will flesh out the detail of a few of these.

Middle School teams (of boys and their teachers at 'Churchie') attend the Campus for a total of 10 weeks total over the three years of our Middle School. They come in their learning teams (around which the Middle School at 'Churchie' functions) of around 85 boys. The Year 7 program is of a single week duration. The Year 8 program is three weeks in length, providing a significant away from home experience that tests the emotions of (many of our parents and) some of the boys! The Year 9 residency is a six-week experience.

We have a permanent teaching staff of four, with two additional locally based contract staff who work on all 'Churchie' programs. Each of the teaching staff is 'purpose selected'. We have a horticulturist / teacher, as well as a somewhat traditionally trained 'techie' (Manual Arts specialist) for reasons which will become clearer below. Similarly, both our contract teachers are recognisably, and quite parochially "rural". In addition to this, the key pastoral care teachers of the classes attend and participate in the residencies for periods of time during their students' stay. Team Leaders of the teams attend the residencies for the entire period and take the major pastoral and parent communication role at the Campus.

Figure 1: Program Opportunities and Aims

The sequential Slade Experiences provide opportunities for students to:

- live and learn together
- apply theory to practical situations
- work in teams to achieve outcomes
- test individual capacities through a range of challenging tasks
- meet and work with people from rural communities

In summary, the Slade experience aims to:

- promote an alternate view of learning in which programs are largely student directed
- foster an appreciation of and skills in obtaining information from primary sources
- increase students' sense of responsibility
- develop independence
- heighten acceptance of the diversity that exists among peers
- foster an appreciation of families
- foster an appreciation of the value in working closely with adults in learning and working environments
- help city-based students appreciate and understand some of the issues that shape the strivings of rural people, their families and wider communities
- help rural-based students (boarders within our School context) appreciate the value in *their* knowledge about rural life and agricultural undertakings
- promote self esteem

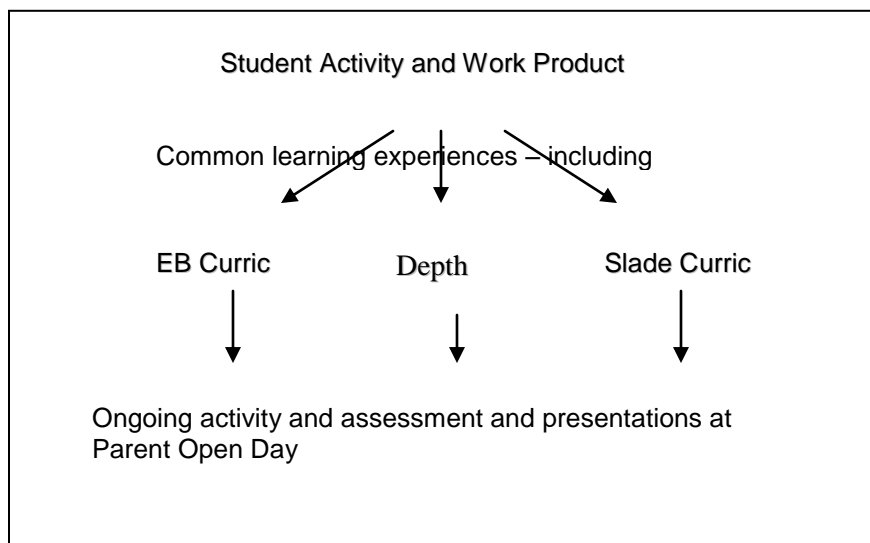
The staff/student ratios are higher than are evident at the East Brisbane Campus in order to support the practical nature of the curriculum and the '24/7', (at Years 8 and 9) nine-day teaching cycles. Despite this, the Campus runs on a quite tight financial basis with only slightly higher overall per/head per teaching day cost than the main Campus. The timetable that supports these cycles is an interesting beast in itself, with each class grouping of boys having 'down days' in which to organise themselves (including their own clothes washing, drying and ironing) and to have some well needed time off from the programs. One outcome of this structure is that there are no single days of a week in which there are not formal learning experiences, including Saturdays and Sundays! As a teacher, this is certainly an interesting way to work, but perhaps not particularly related to the topics under discussion today.

Student undertakings at the Campus originate from both the East Brisbane curriculum and from the Campus itself. Student activity and work product stems from three main sources, most easily recognisable at Years 8 and 9 levels. (See Figure 2.)

The first part of the curriculum (EB - Curric) extends in an integrated way from the subject areas and teachers at 'Churchie's' main East Brisbane campus. Faculties produce integrated units of work of about eight hours in length which are practical in nature and / or represent applications or extensions of learned concepts. The units lever off the context of the social, physical or environmental context of Slade and / or the township of Warwick. They are characteristically initially engaging to students (some are introduced in classes prior to departure) and must be able to be taught or facilitated by non-specialist staff.

The S.O.S.E. and Religious Education departments have, for example, developed a unit that focuses on the function of (and principles behind) the development and operations of National Parks. It further asks students to reflect on the spiritual nature of our (human) interactions with the idea of conservation. Work within the unit follows an excursion to the area and links to other undertakings at the Campus. At Year 8 level, another unit encourages students to focus on differences between City and Country living costs in order to highlight the different lifestyle advantages and disadvantages of rural life.

Figure 2: Student Activity



Most units heavily emphasise primary research techniques. Students interact with the community designing and gathering information from surveys and through interviews. This primary research focus extends significantly through all student undertakings at the Campus, reinforcing the aims related to increasing students' perceptions about their own control over the learning process and highlighting the importance of extending and reflecting on knowledge through practical application.

The second part of the curriculum is our Slade based curriculum. This engages the students in three strands of studies under the umbrella or curriculum organising theme of *The Murray-Darling Basin*. (See Figure 3.)

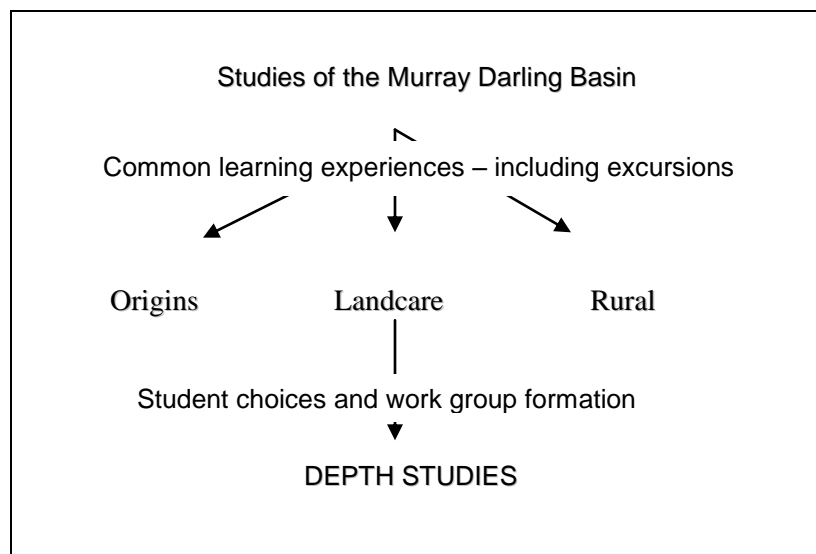
Student Activity and work product in the Slade Based Curriculum includes individual and group work. It extends from and relates to, for example, excursions and subsequent guided reflection on both the experiences and articles related to specific rural issues or formal *Landcare*

concerns. The *Origins* strand encourages students to consider the human, environmental and agricultural heritage of the region in general and the township of Warwick in particular. Students experience *Landcare* activities in two ways. Firstly, they are introduced through observation exercises on the banks of (and in the water of) the Condamine River, that flows past the Campus to make its contribution to the Murray – Darling system. They then participate in ‘hands-on’ activities in formal *Landcare* projects, and / or informal River-based revegetation work in the local district. Students are also able to work on continuing the development of the student built plant nursery on the Campus which will continue to be a major focus of generations of students through the programs.

The *Rural Issues* strand of the program aims, in practical ways, to bring city-based students into direct contact with rural activities, people and agriculture. Small groups visit, for example, dairies, feedlots, farms and historical sites to extend their understanding. The fact is that we have many city based young people with really very little idea of what goes on outside the metropolitan areas. Indeed we have had at least a small number of students who, at age 13, have lived all their lives in high-rise apartments. At Slade we take the view that it is important for all young people who pass through our care to have an appreciation of the lives of non-urban Australians.

As a boarding School, around 15% of our boys have homes in rural areas. A further opportunity arises through this strand at Slade for these boys who quite often discount the knowledge that they have and skills they have developed as they have grown BB (before Brisbane). We routinely ask these boys to be leaders in the field, helping them to raise their self-esteem, value their knowledge in the area, and to let some of their peers glimpse the richness of their (rural) lives. We do, for example, ask boarders to ‘herd groups of day kids’ around the Sale-Yards as they decipher the gibberish of the cattle and sheep sales. Worksheets about the sales process are completed by the groups and highlight, among other things, the necessity for sharp arithmetic skills for successful purchasing!

Figure 3: Example of Student Activity



The final component of the Slade curriculum is probably of most interest in the context of today's session. We have what we call a *Challenge Unit - Depth Study progression* across Years 7, 8 and 9. At Year 9 these depth studies look suspiciously like Education Queensland's *rich-tasks* and share many of the characteristics of these. Indeed the three strands of the Slade curriculum relate closely to the *Curriculum Organisers* in the *New Basics* curriculum framework. The progression through the Challenge Unit – Depth Study program is at the core of what the students do and get most involved and engaged in during their time at the Campus. (See Figure 4.)

The Challenge Units and Depth Studies are undertaken in groups of seven, following common learning experiences that introduce aspects of the three strands early in each program. Students identify and select topics, focusing on and defining problems to be solved, or theses to be tested, before developing action plans for investigation. Part of Slade's overt learning experiences we aim to enmesh in the boys' experiences of the Depth Studies relates to the nature of individuals' positive and negative impacts on the effectiveness of group work and cooperative behaviour. Additionally, it's important to help students understand and use productive frameworks for formal project management.

The time nominally allocated to completion of these pieces of work progresses from about eight hours at Year 8 through to around 30 hours of program time in Year 9. The progression from Year 8 to 9 also encompasses a change in focus from the very earthy and practical, to the more outward and, for want of a better word, cerebral.

At Year 8 level, for example, one group posed a problem for investigation around their curiosity about a set of old silky oak benches they found in some of the rooms at the School. Their pursuit of this investigation, loosely extending from the Origins strand, not only involved the boys undertaking a series of interviews with past staff members of the school but also searching out and reviewing archival photos of the benches in action. The boys investigated the timbers used and construction processes employed as they learned about furniture restoration through the kind and generous assistance of a retired 'French Polisher' with whom they connected during their journey. The final presentation for this group included, not only the historical detail surrounding the purchase and use of the benches, but also the presentation of a restored piece of furniture to the Head of Campus!

Figure 4: Challenge Unit – Depth Study Progression

Challenge Units and Depth Studies:

- represent significant student-directed and centred learning experiences
- provide a group based sequential opportunity for students to learn about project management
- incorporate relationships with staff as facilitators as opposed to teachers
- focus on connecting and developing relationships with members of the Warwick and district community in order to

extend understanding of issues

- focus on solutions to problems, or investigation of these, defined or identified as part of the selection process
- are worked through to completion over sessions during programs varying between two-four weeks
- culminate with students making formal presentations outlining their journeys on the final day
- have presentations form an important part of the reflection and self-evaluation process
- embrace a genuine deadline for completion and closure of the project
- are evaluated by students, staff, parents and guests and provide a working group for learning about, and reflecting on the impact of self on others, and issues related to group dynamics in the Middle School's wider Social and Emotional Development plan for boys

At Year 9 level, the Depth Studies tend to be more outward looking and complex. A recent study focused on the part that the Darling Downs in general, and Warwick in particular, played in the Second World War. The group was, largely through a series of interviews, able to unearth a quite remarkable set of observations, recollections and supporting factual material which enabled them to accurately develop a meaningful picture of wartime life in the immediate surrounds of the Campus. Their journey was an exceptional example of (my understanding of) constructivist learning. It was not only highly engaging and of intellectual worth in and of itself, it generated a genuinely high academic tone and a palpable energy and vitality within the group. Plans were made and implemented at each investigative step. Reflection was structured and meaningful and, in turn, guided subsequent action.

As a teacher, facilitating the Depth Study program is probably about equally rewarding and difficult. We do have process pro-formas to help with guiding the project management aspects of the work. This can be as simple as, for example, at Year 7, leading boys through an action learning cycle: 'Understand, Plan, Act and Reflect'. These frameworks grow in detail, however, through Year 8 and 9 and provide useful organisers in what increasingly becomes a very tricky (from a class management point of view) learning environment.

The pro-formas make it relatively easy to sequentially work through the problem identification and initial action planning phases of the Depth Studies at Year 9. Similarly, session reflection sheets help to focus students and groups regularly during the sessions. Once the groups get up and running, however, things generally get a little hectic. The facilitator works hard to try to help groups organise and prepare for their learning experiences as well as appropriately supervise off campus components, and to help with connecting people from the community and the research groups in time and space. This involves considerable skill often including negotiation with other staff and groups to ensure good use of (human) resources. As a result of this, we aim to provide a 1:14 staff to student ratio for the Depth Study sessions.

The Challenge Unit – Depth Study program has been the source of considerable joy and achievement, as well as a measure of pain since beginning at Slade in 2000. It remains at the centre of both our curriculum strivings and our ‘connectedness’ with the community here at the Campus.

As part of the overall Slade experience, we also structure opportunities for students to complete some basic, hands on ‘boy friendly’ practical woodwork or outdoor building projects. Quite apart from being good fun and an opportunity for boys to do instead of watch, the projects increase the sense of ownership that is developing about the Campus as the programs progress.

An additional large and important part of the Slade program extends from the developmental needs and characteristics of boys at this particular stage of their lives. This is particularly so with regards to the ways we go about structuring and working within the residential community at the Campus. Time prevents me from engaging in too much detail here but I can not let this opportunity pass without highlighting the importance we place on being determined to help, particularly boys, develop confidence and competence in the ways that they relate with their peers. Issues relating closely to what has been described relatively recently as Emotional Intelligence are being increasingly recognised as central to adult life ‘success’. Large amounts of time at Slade are spent working with boys exploring and reflecting on social and emotional aspects of the environment that living communally (as well as working towards challenging group goals) brings to the surface. At ‘Churchie’ we are very lucky to be in close working communication with Rollo Brown from the University of Newcastle very consciously charting a learning course for our boys in this area.

Overall, Slade represents to us at ‘Churchie’ a way of enriching our boys’ lives as learners during the Middle Years. The programs are structured on the foundations of what we know from Middle School research best suits their needs, in a context not constrained by a 9-3, five day per week education model.

Biographical Details

Michael Harding is the Head of Residential Campuses at Anglican Church Grammar School, Queensland.