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CPL Podcast: Assessing Learning Online: Remote Teaching Special Part II

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Rosemary Henzell

Carly Boreland: Welcome to the CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today I am speaking with Rosemary Henzell and we're talking about how you can assess what you're doing with learning and teaching in an online environment. This is the second in a three-part series to support teachers who are moving to online as we're in a stay home situation here in New South Wales. Rosemary, welcome.

Rosemary Henzell: Hi, how are you?

Carly Boreland: Thanks for joining us again. And this time we want to have a chat with you about your experiences of assessment, and I mean this in the broadest possible way. So what I'm thinking about is all of the things that we usually pay attention to in the classroom, and what happens to those things when we move to an online setting and the more I've been thinking about "online", and I've had myself some experience observing someone at home doing online delivery as well for quite a while in a, in a quite different setting overseas. One of the things that I've noticed is that you, you almost become a bit blind in a way to a lot of the things that you would usually include in your assessment in day-to-day teaching. So, I want to ask you about why assessment is still important in an online environment and what makes it unique. And then we can talk more about what else we can do and how to make it work well.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think this was one of my biggest takeaways from last year was yeah, that sense of kind of in a way of being blind. I think we underestimated how much data we get from just being in the classroom that we don't even realise we're taking in. I mean, we, we know theoretically, we know it's there, but being removed from it was, it was huge, I think. Those little conversations with students, just even the sound of the classroom, I can tell where my students are at just by the level of noise and when I'm sitting by myself in a room and I haven't got that anymore. Yeah, I think we've all had to be quite creative with the ways we have tried to fill in those gaps. And it's hard. I think that's the first thing we need to understand and remember, is this isn't easy and there's no perfect solution, but we can definitely try a couple of different things. So I definitely think, yeah, assessment in the broadest possible sense as you say, is crucially important right now, because it really is our only way of checking in with our students, seeing how they're going, seeing what they're up to and if we need to intervene and if we need to change direction with what we're doing with our teaching and learning practice.



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Carly Boreland: As I mentioned at the start, this is this is part two of a three parts series, and we've got another episode, which is about how to get yourself set up and organised. So, we want people to go and have a listen to that one as well, if they feel like there's more they can, can do for themselves to make life easier or the students. And we also have another episode, which is going to talk about the dynamics of the classroom and student wellbeing. So if teachers are wanting some more ideas around how they can get things happening then and notice those other really important issues, we're going to chat a bit more about that in our third episode, but here, I want to talk a lot about how you know what you're doing is reaching the students and how do you know that it's good enough? And I want to ask you where you start and then what are your tips for how to make it work for teachers in a manageable way so that the students can be learning as well?

Rosemary Henzell: Absolutely. I mean, I think the first thing is that we need to consider ourselves and our own wellbeing and workload in that we don't want to be collecting and having to mark in *inverted commas*, every single piece of work that every single student produces every day, it's completely unsustainable. And it's actually not very helpful. So I kind of, I worked from a position of, I know that there are some key outcomes, some key ideas that I want to check how my students are going in detail, and they will be the more polished pieces of work that I take in and I will build up to that. So, I will create activities and tasks for students to do that eventually build them up to submitting a polished piece of work, which I can go, right I know where you're at with, with those skills and this content, but along the way, I really try to have lots of little, really low stakes questions and tasks and activities where they share them with me, but they don't feel the pressure about is it, is it 'good enough'? Because I think that idea of 'good enough' is for them as well. I don't want them to not submit something because they're afraid that it's wrong. So an example of this was with my year nines they watched the "*Final Quarter*", the documentary, the "*Final Quarter* ", recently and they just watched that on their own at home with *ClickView*. And we create a little worksheet that they could just type in their impressions. And it was really interesting because it wasn't set up formally and there was no final kind of big task for them to do. And I had the best time reading their responses because they were really authentic. And they were really, they were emotional because they really loved the documentary and were really kind of shocked by the content of it and, and this whole topic. And I could, I could feel it, I could see where they were at and similarly where those students who kind of either hadn't submitted or their answers were really, really short. It's just that little bit of knowledge for me where I go, Okay, I'm not sure if you're really fully into this. I'm not sure you're fully with me yet. And I can then maybe spend a bit more time with those students or reach out to them. So, any of those, yeah, those little low stakes authentic in the moment grabs, I actually think a hugely beneficial at this, at this kind of time.

Carly Boreland: Yeah. That reminds me of one of the things I was thinking of the most when I thought about, okay, how would it be to be a teacher in this kind of setting and thinking about some of the things



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I used as strategies that I really relied on for my class. And one of them was that, for at least the junior classes, their passport out of the classroom, each lesson, I suppose, was my signature on their book where I had signed and dated and I had seen the work they had done that lesson and there's some skill involved in making sure you get every kid. And, you know, there's a lot that happens in that, but it's the eyes on the page and that sense of, I know what you've been doing. And then of course picking and choosing which ones you'll spend more time on each lesson and, and what you're looking for. But I think that idea of being able to see their live work uncensored and edited is so important to get a sense of what they're doing and, and how they feel about what they're doing as well. What else have we got there in terms of ways of converting to online? Because I can imagine that those kinds of check-ins, they change when you can't always see the page. So we've got documents that they can type into. Was that like one student types into their own individual document, and then you look at it or was it a group pile in kind of?

Rosemary Henzell: So, it can be a range of things. One of the features on *Google Classroom* that I really like in the assignment feature is that you can create a document and create a copy for every student. And this is what I use for kind of more, I guess, more formal work or work that I really do want them to have a go at and polish it a little bit, that's really going to show me where they're at. And the magic of it is that I can see what their work is, even if they haven't submitted it. So, I'm using this with my Year 12's right now. They've got a practice essay. I gave them all a question and I can literally see when my whole class is at, so half of them have finished, they've submitted and I'm going through my feedback with them.

The other half, I can see there's a few who haven't typed anything into that page. Now they may have that on another word document, but I'm going to chase them up and say, "okay, where's your work? I need it". There are some where I can see they're halfway through and I can see their drafting. So, I might just kind of go it's okay, you've got a bit more time, but I'm going to need that. So that feature has been really helpful, I think for me because you can monitor almost live where they're at. Similarly, when I'm using digital booklets, I get them to share a copy with me if I'm not using the assignment so that I can go in and actually have a look and see where they're up to. And I can literally write comments onto the page for them and 'say, oh, this is really good. I really like this. Or could you reword this?', this is going to need a bit more. So, I think those opportunities that we have in the online environment with yeah, with interactive documents can be really helpful. And we also do it with group projects. So, for example, I did Year 11 war poetry, we're beginning Wilfred Owen, and then we got them to write poems. So we did a study, we did some activities with them, and then I opened up a class presentation and in groups they wrote poems and they found an image and we now have this lovely little class presentation that they can all access, they can all look at and I can judge the quality of their work.

Carly Boreland: It sounds like what you're saying is there's lots of little interactions and a big emphasis really on the written word still. It's just that you're writing it in shared documents and things like that



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rather than on a piece of paper, perhaps, and maybe a lot of people are doing that already anyway in their classroom practice. And still that idea of building up to something larger that might be submitted and really following up everything along the way, that kind of record-keeping not just letting the class drift because they're at home or thinking this won't last for very long, so, we just get through this next two weeks and then see what happens.

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. I think one of the, one of the ideas I've really learned in terms of some of those students who are just drifting and it's very easy to miss them. I find when you're in the *Zoom* call and you've got the list of participants there, I find that really hard to keep track of like, who is actually here and who is not here. And there can be kids who just you, without you realising it, either drop out of the call or don't show up, or really haven't been online for a little while, and I'm not chasing up every single one of those every single day, but I'm looking for those patterns and where I see that pattern, then I kind of intervene and I make contact and try to capture them because we know that obviously this is having an impact on our students and we do need them to keep in touch. And I think, yeah, like you said, that idea of having a couple of bigger things that we're working towards. I think that normalises the online environment for them. They have an expectation that we will work towards something and they will have to produce something. So I think if we can maintain that expectation in some way that is manageable and meaningful, we keep them on track, we keep them kind of on the page and we are also moving them you know, towards the outcomes that we are looking for.

Carly Boreland: And I'm going to ask you about this kind of sense of the temporary I guess, we're in a, we're in an interesting situation here. And having, having lived in Europe as well, where online learning is not so temporary, have you thought a bit about how, what you will be doing the longer term as you need to think about, how am I assessing these students over this period and, and how long can I let little things go for? And have you thought about what you would do if this continues for longer?

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah. Look, I think obviously when we came back this time, they told us four days and we weren't really sure what it would look like and we're now in that stage where we're really not sure again, so I didn't do what I did last year when we knew we were going to be in this for kind of a month or longer. Then I had prepped quite long chunks, so I'd created entire units in single digital booklets. So I'd mapped out the entire term of learning in a single document, particularly for my junior classes to try to, to try to help them know where we were going and be able to see the connections. I think if this were to go on for a longer time, I would move back to some of those practices with really thinking quite far ahead with my own teaching and backward mapping and stripping out and, and building in as much support as possible and I also think that I would move to more small group check-ins. So, at the moment when I use *Zoom*, the whole class gets on. If we're doing breakout room work, I divide them up, they go into their rooms and really, I'm checking in with the work they're doing. But I think that, yeah, I think I



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would, I would want to maybe include more opportunities just to have some small groups of particularly, I guess, targeted students or students I was concerned about getting them online, where I could talk to a few of them and they could share their work and we could go through some stuff because I think it's, it's that targeted intervention of the classroom that is very difficult to replicate. And we need to plan it, but I think if this, if this year is kind of going on longer, that is something I'd really want to begin to do more of.

Carly Boreland: Okay. And what about some resources then to make assessment of classwork, of understanding of, I guess the vibe of the thing, to use what I know is one of your favourite movies, what kind of resources could you recommend for teachers to focus on?

Rosemary Henzell: A really simple one when you are on *Zoom*, particularly if they don't have their cameras on and you can't really see them, I do a lot of thumbs up in the chat. So if I am having to give instructions or I'm delivering content, I will have the chat open and every now and then just to check they're there, I'll be like, okay guys, if that's okay, thumbs up in the chat, please. And I'll get lots of little emoticons coming up. I find that just that really immediate little check-in because I can't see their faces always. I think anything where we can share where they can work collaboratively is a really lovely thing. So, I mean, I know *Jamboard* is one thing that some teachers really like, it's not my favourite, but it does work well. Things like *Padlet* are another kind of online board system, anything where they can kind of share together is really good. I am a big fan actually of *Google* presentations where a group or a pair get a slide and that's theirs to work on, but everybody benefits from the resources. Yeah, I think that that sense of collaboration, even if it's on, even if it's online and in a document, it does still exist. Yeah and I like to said breakout rooms as well as simple one that I know, but I think if we harness that and we put them into their usual groups to normalise the environment we're in I've actually found, they quite enjoy that and they feel quite kind of safe to have a go and experiment and take some risks with their learning.

Carly Boreland: Okay. And I'm wondering too, as I'm listening to you talk in our first episode, we talked a lot about keeping things quite simple in terms of the number of platforms you use and the number of, of types of things that you're giving to students, because we don't want to overwhelm them and confuse them. Where's the space for novelty in all of this because in a classroom setting, mixing it up can be just as valuable as a way of finding out what the students know and sparking some interest in getting everybody back on track. How do you do that with online, without it becoming confusing and spending half an hour teaching them how to login to an app or something like that?

Rosemary Henzell: Yeah definitely, look, I think if you want to try to introduce new things, it's one thing at a time. You wouldn't try to do five new things in a week. You'd concentrate on doing one valuable



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new thing really well, again, videos of processes so that students can watch it over and figure it out really helpful. Any kind of resources where you can support them can be really fun. And I think also just going back to basics, things like you know, making a document and getting everyone to put a photo or, you know, that relates to the thing that you're doing can be quite cool. It can be a really lovely opportunity to share creative activities where you find a way for them to do something at home that they can then share. So it's, again, not just that focus on the written word or producing documents, they can produce artefacts and they can get a bit creative at home, to still connect them with the learning and show versions of understanding, but to feel a little bit more, a little bit more fun and joy within it, I think is really important.

Carly Boreland: I've seen some good examples of mathematics at home have that kind of thing where students might work out the answer to something together and then they have to creatively take a photograph of something that home that represents that answer. So if the answer is 17 or whatever, you have to take a photo of 17 somethings and then share that in the group to show that, you know what the answer is, just to bring everybody back together and have a bit of fun.

Rosemary Henzell: Absolutely. I think any opportunity where you can yet bring a bit of life to it is really nice because I think connection is a really important thing right now and I think it's something that, you know, we're all struggling with in some way or other and I think kids particularly are missing that interaction and that connection with the teachers and with their classmates. So if you can find ways to recreate that in yeah in fun, silly, playful ways, I think it's a great idea.

Carly Boreland: So when we're talking about assessment here, we are saying that we really want to be aware that this changing situation changes the information that's coming to us about our class and that by acknowledging that difference, we can try to find ways to overcome it. But perhaps when we go back to the classroom, we need to really embrace and hold in high esteem, the level of what we're doing every day and what we're understanding and processing about our students. And perhaps it gives us some clues as to why some of these large external forms of assessment are, are not quite fitting with our picture of our class, perhaps it is something to do with how separated the two things are. But what we thought we could do in an online setting is keep up the engagement of students and keep making sure that they're there and assessing at that level and reminding ourselves to check on everybody and, and find them and bring them back. Find ways to get small pieces of information of from students as they're working in progress, as well as larger things that they build towards. Really focusing on key pieces of information that we want to get and that might be around outcomes and ideas that we want to prioritise in any one lesson and also in any one week, and then finding ways to communicate with students that are going to be manageable for ourselves, but that allow us to see what they're doing and give some feedback along



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the way so that it's not all big tasks and it's not all everything being assessed by us at home late at night, and then finding some good ways to use “chats” to check in and, and thinking perhaps a little bit about longer-term strategies in case we need them. Is there anything else?

Rosemary Henzell: No, I think that's, I think that's pretty much it.

Carly Boreland: Okay. Thanks, Rosemary it was so good to get your insights into what you love and what you're missing about seeing your class and how much you looked forward to getting back to all of them and what we can do in between.

You've been listening to the CPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland, the Assistant Director of the CPL. I've been talking with Rosemary Henzell about assessing learning with online teaching and to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

Rosemary Henzell currently teaches English at Willoughby Girls High School. She completed her Master of Teaching in 2013, having spent seven years as an adult ESL teacher and TESOL trainer in Australia and Japan. Her MTeach Action Research Project investigated how to raise student confidence and agency in essay writing.

Rosemary is part of the Professional Learning Team, and has presented to both staff and students on Growth Mindset and Habits of Mind.