

NSW SYLLABUS: A CELEBRATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

AMY PEACE AND LOUISE TURK

The recent introduction of a new syllabus spurred this English Faculty to build and embed trust, transparency, and collaboration as the drivers of a cohesive and effective staffroom. Amy Peace and Louise Turk take us through the processes...

HOW TO BUILD A HARMONIOUS AND PRODUCTIVE WORKPLACE CULTURE

The celebration of the new English Syllabus began with the formation of a circle of colleagues, at Woonona High School, a co-educational secondary school in the northern suburbs of the Illawarra, NSW, on Dharawal Country. Each member of the English Faculty introduced themselves and their favourite reading text to other teachers within the school, and to guests from the wider educational community.

The circle was a metaphor. It was a symbol of equality amongst those who made the formation and a powerful emblem for the potential of transforming student thinking through a dynamic educational framework. Most importantly, it was an authentic circle. Its geometric simplicity was underpinned by an edifice which had taken leadership direction and considerable time to develop.



Before the launch day in November 2023, during which the English Faculty shared its new programming and resolute forward vision with the school community, a purposeful and steady change in

work culture had been taking place. Faculty Head Teacher (acting), Ms Amy Peace, led a transformation to foster collaboration amongst Faculty members, and to develop their skills to respond to rapid change in the workplace. It involved providing opportunities for colleagues to build trust, innervating the sharing of ideas and knowledge and the desire to work together.

Building relational trust was the primary goal in equipping teachers to deal with the demands of preparing to introduce a new English Syllabus while, simultaneously, teaching the current syllabus (Hawkins, 2020). Peace, who is undertaking a Masters in Educational Leadership, understood the importance of creating a climate in which Faculty members could take necessary risks and experiment with innovation, and engage in robust professional dialogue (Barsade, 2002; Goleman, 1999; Lipscombe et.al. 2020). The English Faculty needed to become an environment of transparency and accountability and one in which there was shared responsibility. She set to work.

We relied on each other for logistical and emotional support. Having a collective approach to the syllabus implementation helped to reduce the cognitive load and stress of programming and helped to create more comprehensive and exciting learning opportunities as we used each other as soundboards to generate new learning experiences and projects.

- Mr Jack Stranger, English classroom teacher

Peace focused on managing the wellbeing of the staff and developing a strong sense of Faculty identity (Goleman, 1999). The design and creation of a Faculty logo, with the visual imagery of an open book sprouting knowledge through metaphorical flowers, helped to create a sense of cohesion and

foster a sense of pride amongst staff. The logo was proudly emblazoned on work shirts and was used as a watermark on digital resources. Its calming forest green palette became the thematic colour when the English classroom doors were repainted, transforming them from a less inspiring beige tint. Peace designed a Faculty flag, embedded with the logo, which was displayed at whole school meetings.

The physical environment of the staffroom was de-cluttered and purposefully organised, with all Faculty members sharing the responsibility for keeping the space clean and tidy. Ergonomic chairs were purchased. Fragrant reed diffusers, a coffee machine, a soda machine, and a hand-towel dispenser were added to the staffroom space. A display box in the English corridor featured professional photos of Faculty members. Small additions, one may ponder, but not insignificant when you are building a workplace culture of happiness and inclusion (Hawkins, 2020). Staff birthdays were celebrated with cake. The success of staff was celebrated weekly in school newsletters, bulletins, faculty meetings and with handmade cards, designed and crafted by the Woonona High School Principal, Ms Caroline David. David hand-wrote congratulatory messages inside the card and left the messages of acknowledgement on staff desks (across the school) with chocolate or home baked brownies. She frequently matched the photos or motifs around which she designed the cards to a personal connection with a staff member. David knew your favourite colour and which beach was closest to the coastal town where you grew up. It was the accumulation of these small but very deliberate and consistent affirmations towards staff that made coming to work a joyful process.

I love coming to work! My colleagues are the best and I really care about each one of them. I feel totally supported. I have never worked in a faculty that works so harmoniously together while also being honest and clear with each other - it is really refreshing. Amy (Peace) fosters this approach and is clear and kind to all of us in a calm and considered way.

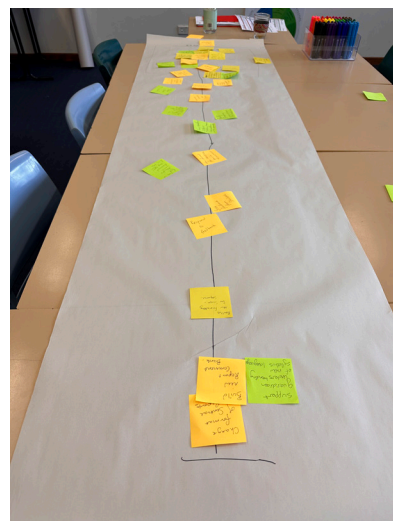
- Ms Louisa Smith, English Faculty, second in charge

The English Faculty culture at Woonona High School

is one that is built upon a steadfast foundation of a love for literature and the everlasting joys that come from this lifelong engagement. I believe that this bedrock is conducive to English as a subject being held in popular regard by students and staff within the school community, as the infectious nature of this mutually-held passion is an example in which students can, and do, follow. Further, the level of collegial support is unparalleled, both professionally and interpersonally. Genuine care and kindness are never absent, and again, it is this ethos, as set by the English staff at Woonona High School, that inspires students and staff alike to strive to be "Lifelong Learners".

- Mr Saxon Penn, English classroom teacher

The next step in creating a workplace culture ready for rapid change was to introduce processes that would reduce the cognitive load for teachers (Sweller, 1988). Clear and transparent processes were necessary to create an equitable teaching environment in which every individual understood their role and contribution. New templates were created for learning programs and scope and sequences. The role of year coordinators was clearly defined. The sharing of programs and resources on the Faculty Google Drive was refined to make the location of information more streamlined.



At the start of the implementation phase of the new syllabus in 2023, the Faculty designed a collaborative timeline for the next twelve months. This collaborative and critically reflective process allowed for a visualisation of the journey ahead (Jefferson, 2017).

Time in Faculty meetings was devoted to assessing how current programs could be modified to meet the requirements of the new syllabus.

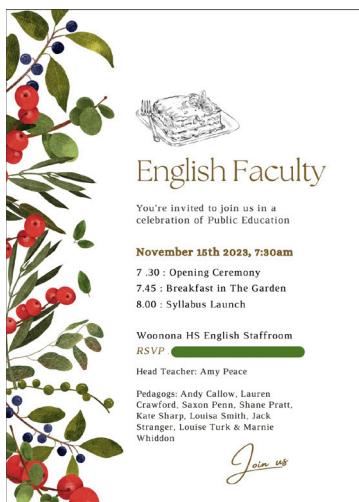
Collaboration within the Woonona High School English Faculty and collaboration between six schools in the Illawarra; Dapto, Illawarra Sports, Kiama, Lake Illawarra and Warrawong High Schools (known as the Curriculum Network Illawarra (CNI) Professional Learning Network) ensured the transition between syllabi was an efficient process. The slow and methodical systems and processes resulted in accuracy, agency and accountability.

The first step was to audit our programs to identify the gaps and opportunities in our current scope and sequence. I initially found myself quite confused and overwhelmed at how we would navigate this process and found that taking the initiative to collaboratively design processes was the best way to visualise where we were at and where we needed to go. By creating a syllabus outcomes checklist, we were able to evaluate our programs in a comprehensive and consistent way which made it easier to “respoke the wheel” as opposed to starting from scratch.

- Mr Jack Stranger, English classroom teacher

Time in Faculty meetings to discuss changes, State-wide professional learning and staff development days with a focus on new directions, new texts, and the wording of outcomes really helped to clarify my understanding of the new syllabus.

- Mrs Marnie Whiddon, English classroom teacher



The mood of the launch of the new English Syllabus last November can best be described as incandescent. Staff from across all Faculties at Woonona High School, the executive of the school, student representatives, and community representatives including the NSW Teachers Federation President, Mr Henry Rajendra and NSW Teachers' Federation Organiser, Mr Duncan McDonald, were united in an exciting vision for the future.



That vision includes creating an educational landscape in which student voice and agency are at the forefront of the English classroom. Was the plan to build relational capability within the English Faculty at Woonona High School a success and, ultimately, will it make a difference to the social and academic progress of students? The last word goes to classroom teacher, Mr Shane Pratt.

I feel confident moving forward and implementing changes. One of the largest reasons I feel this confidence is because I feel supported by my faculty and my head teacher. I feel empowered to try new ideas and implement my own flair to programming and don't feel restricted or inhibited to make the program my own.

If we have teachers feeling confident and empowered in the workplace, then this will only lead to increased positive outcomes for our students.

REFERENCES:

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] (2018). *National Literacy Learning Progression* (adapted for NSW Syllabuses). <https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/32837681-1ffc-49b3-8069-c756611ff054/national-literacy-learning-progression.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

Barsade, S. G. (2002). The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and its Influence on Group Behavior. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47(4), 644-675. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3094912>

Goleman, D. (1999) *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, England.

Hattie, J. (2011) *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximising Impact on Learning*. Taylor & Frances Ltd, England.

Hawkins, G. (2020) *Mentally At Work*, Mentally At Work, Melbourne, Australia.

Jefferson, M. & Anderson, M. (2017) *Transforming Schools: Creativity, Critical Reflection, Communication, Collaboration*. Bloomsbury, Australia

Lipscombe, K., Bennett, S., Kidson, P., Gardiner, P. & McIntyre, A. (2020). *Leadership for Learning Frameworks*. Sydney: NSW School Leadership Institute. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asshpapers/150>

NSW Education Standards Authority (2022) English K-10 Syllabus <https://curriculum.nsw.edu.au/learning-areas/english/english-k-10-2022/overview>

John Sweller (1988 April – June) Cognitive load during problem solving: Effects on learning *Cognitive Science* Vol 12 Issue 2 257 -285

– Cognitive Load Theory – an explanation:

- <https://wind4change.com/cognitive-load-theory-john-sweller-instructional-design/>
- <https://leadinglearnerdotme.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/3-cognitive-load-theory-sweller-via-cese.pdf>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Woonona High School English Faculty:

Louise Turk is a classroom teacher and 2iC in the English Faculty at Woonona High School. She is a Higher School Certificate marker in English Advanced and English Standard. This is her ninth year teaching English for the NSW Department of Education. Turk is a former Fairfax journalist.

Amy Peace is the Head Teacher (rel.) of English at Woonona High School. She has been championing Public Education for sixteen years in various roles, including Teachers' Federation Women's Contact, Curriculum Network Illawarra (CNI) Leader and Higher School Certificate marker. Her passions are improving equity in teaching and learning and driving systemic change to improve conditions for teachers and students.

