***Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve students learning*** – Mike Schmoker; ASCD: 2011

Anne Doody’s reflections – this book may be read by some as rejecting many of what we currently hear about as being exemplary contemporary learning practices, but after reading the whole book, I do not think that this is actually the case.

The book does at times ask teachers to put aside technology, visual stimulations, activities and explorations, but only to emphasise the importance of basic quality pedagogy.

Mike argues throughout the book that students are not doing anywhere near enough basic reading, writing and discussing of information in all subject areas. He says that the ability to engage deeply with challenging texts, with appropriate guiding and modeling from teachers, is essential to prepare students for their long term futures in the modern world, whether they go to university or not.

The book is very strong on teachers needing to challenge published curriculum frameworks and make hard team decisions about what needs to be essential learning for their students. He advocates that usually about 50% of what is suggested in published curriculums can reasonable be covered in programs that intend to cover material in sufficient depth to ensure real learning.

Once these decisions are made, the book indicates that every subject area needs teachers to be following basic quality teaching tactics that include:

* Clear learning objectives
* Teaching/ modeling/ demonstrating
* Guided practice
* Frequent checks for understanding / formative assessment. p 53/ 54

Nothing new there – I hear you thinking. I agree, but Mike would argue that while teachers would generally agree with this being the formula for effective teaching, many environments fail to follow through with the formula on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the book suggests a need to return to frequent use of two basic teaching techniques:

* Interactive lecture & direct teaching, where the focus is on the teacher’s words and directions, but students take part in lots of pair-sharing, note taking, or quick writing
* Literacy-based lessons (read, talk, and write) with a focus on any text, which requires more lengthy treatment and would be used more often that the lecture template in most subjects.

The book is very specific, and revisits a number of times how each of these teaching techniques should best be delivered. It uses the ‘five-minute-limit’, indicating that teachers should never talk for more than five minutes at one time, with teacher talk being frequently interspersed with opportunities for students to process their learning through:

* Reviewing their notes and adding any new insights or connections
* Summarizing their learning in the last segment of the lecture, or
* Pairing up to compare or contrast notes, perceptions, and connections. (p72)

The literacy based lessons, in any subject area would include, according to Schmoker:

* Close reading/ underlining and annotation of text
* Discussion of the text
* Writing about the text informed by close reading, discussion or annotation

He is specific and definite about the need for every teacher to engage regularly in these activities with their students, and provides numerous examples of how this would be achieved in Language, Social Sciences, Science and Mathematics classes.

Provocatively, the variety of modern activities that are considered worthy of inclusion in class – such as students making websites, video / movies, clay or other figurines, wikis, soundtracks, posters (even science experiments) etc, are suggested to be merely diversions from the real work to be done. While really, the viewpoint put forward is that:

‘*We will never educate all students until we appreciate the value of time and stop preventing them from engaging in (by current standards) immense amounts of reading, discussion and writing.’* (p 75)

The book is not completely technophobic – it certainly encourages teachers to use the internet and other digital means to access appropriate texts for students to learn from, but the book suggests that teachers need to play a much stronger role in directing students to the most worthy of the texts available, and to provide much greater guidance in the reading, analyzing and responding to the texts.

The second half of the book specifically deals with the areas of Language Arts, Social Studies, Science and Mathematics separately, working through how the increased teacher directed lecture, and literature based lessons could look.

It may be a temptation to dismiss some of what is being proposed by focusing on the ‘Americanism’ of many of the examples – the challenge is to constantly consider our own contexts and transpose the examples to possible Australian resources as the book is read.

I found the book to be challenging and confronting to many theories of contemporary learning, yet there seemed to be a lot of logic that is hard to dismiss. It is interspersed with references to research and educators that we all know – Marzano, Mc Tighe & Stiggins to name a few. While the statistics within are also usually referring to the US, the ratios of improvement are impressive and make it difficult to completely discard.

*Some suggestions for the four different areas that may be either confronting or confirming, but be worthy of consideration:*

English Language Arts: For any year level K – 12

Reading:

* Good questions for use after any reading – *What inferences and conclusions can we draw about the people in these books based on their words, behavior, and interaction? Do we agree or disagree with the author’s message and its implications for our own lives or for the people or culture it describes?*
* *About 15 -20 books & plays, depending on length & lexical density*
* *Multiple poems & short stories (perhaps 5 -10 of each)*
* *20-40 newspaper / magazine / online articles*
* *Fiction ( about 40 -60 %) Non Fiction, including biographies, memoirs, true stories ( 40 -50 %)*

Rules for discussion:

* Always cite the / a text when making an argument
* When commenting on or disagreeing with another’s conclusions, argument, or solutions, briefly restate what they said, don’t interrupt, and be civil and respectful
* Be concise and stay on point
* Avoid distracting verbal tics (such as overuse of ‘like’ and ‘you know’ etc)

Writing:

* Provide at least one exemplar exemplar for every writing task
* Develop a common scoring guide / criteria sheet / rubric – with adaptions for specific writing assignments
* Several formal papers to be written by all students per year, about one per month, from grade 2 on – written in at least two drafts
* Papers should be approximately one and a half to three handwritten pages in length in the early grades, three to five typewritten pages in middle and high school + one long research paper (10 -15 pages) in senior year
* All of the writing should culminate in a presentation – one or two per semester – from just a few minutes in the early grades to 10 minutes in the later grades. ( Can incorporate Power Point, but must be based on students’ formally written papers)
* All students should be active, taking notes and evaluating the presentations.

Social Studies / Humanities subjects

* Close reading of selected textbook pages aligned with units and topics
* About 35 (or more) supplementary or primary source documents, including current magazine & news articles, (to be read and discussed about once per week.)
* Some prepared interactive lectures to reinforce or supplement the textbook
* Overarching / essential questions for each unit
* End of unit papers or essay for each unit
* Example task – ‘Write a paper three pages long evaluating the merits and impact of the humanism movement, be sure to cite its origins, key events, and major players. Be sure to share your thoughts and opinions freely, and make connections and comparisons to other historical periods, including your own.’ (pg 141)
* Students (Frequently work in) pairs and small groups to compare and share notes, underlinings and perceptions derived from their engagement with the art, readings and lectures.
* Frequent additions to add to tasks – 1. Make connections to past or previous periods and events already studied, 2. Make connections to current issues, people, or events; and 3. Do some independent research to supplement the common readings.
* Regular opportunities to mark up, annotate or highlight one-to- three page articles and documents

Specific to writing:

* In addressing the task, provide a certain number of reasons/ citations/ direct quotes for each major portion of your argument
* Provide clear, readable, logical explanations for each citation, linked clearly to the question/ argument/ learning target
* Address major objections to your arguments

Helpful questions:

* Do you agree/ disagree with the author?
* What inferences, interpretations, or connections can you make using the text?
* Do you approve or disapprove of this past or present policy, person or movement? What lessons can we learn from them?
* What problem(s) does the study of this person or policy help us solve?
* What can we infer from this text about this particular time, place or culture?

Science:

* Close reading of selected portions of science textbooks
* Regular reading and discussion of current science articles
* Interactive lectures
* Writing – from short, almost daily pieces to longer, more formal pieces
* A reasonable number of carefully designed science labs and experiments that reinforce the content being learned
* Supplementary texts – every week or so, students read and discuss articles about scientific discoveries and controversies (not necessarily connected to the unit currently being studied)
* Critical that science students write at least two longer papers each year – length increasing at each year level. By high school (our year 9?) these should be three to five typewritten pages – mostly in class, where we can monitor, guide, and check for understanding to ensure success.

‘Being science literate entails being able to read and understand a variety of science texts to form valid conclusions and participate in meaningful discussions about science.’ (Zmach et al., 2006/2007, p.62) quoted on p.169

A Netherlands process outlined:

1. Brief orientation (by teacher, 5 mins.)
2. Readings interwoven with explanations by the teacher & opportunities to discuss questions related to the reading
3. Students reading for 20 minutes, as they write in response to text-related questions
4. Whole class review of the questions, with the teacher then asking students to revisit and ‘elaborate’ on their initial written responses.

Sample unit questions / writing assignment (for study of cells):

* Explain and illustrate cellular structures and functions based on reading and lecture notes, with original or personal observations, insights, and connections. (The teacher will clarify and model ‘observations, insights, and connections’ multiple times during the unit.
* Read two opposing arguments on a past or present issue or problem related to cells/ cell research (eg. stem cells, pharmaceuticals) and annotate them. Take a position on this issue. Be sure to also refer to what you learned in this unit on cells.

Mathematics:

Deep, practical learning depends upon the reciprocal ‘interplay of numbers and words, especially on expressing quantitative relationships in meaningful sentences’ (Steen, 2007, p. 10) quoted on p.202

* All maths has two fundamental aspects – calculation and interpretation
* there is no reason they can’t be given excerpts or have 15- 20 opportunities per year to read current articles that let them see numbers in action. (always start with modeling and teaching how to read them)
* Every word and sentence is of great importance. Math procedures, explanations, and story problems must always be read slowly and repeatedly and never for mere ‘gist or general idea’.
* ‘mathematics is the most difficult content area material to read because there are more concepts per word, per sentence, and per paragraph than in any other subject; the mixture of words, numerals, letters, symbols, and graphics requires the reader to shift from one type of vocabulary to another.’ (Braselton & Decker , 1994, p.276 ) quoted on p. 209
* thus extreme importance of teacher ‘talking aloud’ their thought processes as they make sense of mathematical text
* Reeves (2007) – for selected multiple choice items, have students write explanations for why any one of the incorrect answers is wrong
* Adlai Stevenson High School – students can receive credit for incorrect answers on their tests if they explain, in writing, why their answer was wrong and why the correct answer is right.
* 5th graders write short essay on ‘What I Know About Fractions So Far’
* Burns (2004) framework for maths writing at any level –

I think that the answer is…

I think that because…

I figured this out by…

* High school in Colorado – students had to demonstrate in writing that they understood and could apply essential maths concepts – problem solving skills – for topics like – problems involving percents, ratios and proportions, simple and compound interest, maps and scale drawings; interpretations of bar, line and circle graphs; and interpretations and analyses of statistical data.