



School Excellence Initiative

Teachers: the key to student success

A discussion paper for
ACT government schools

Teachers: the key to student success

“What teachers know, do, expect and value has a significant influence on the nature, extent and rate of student learning. The powerful phrase ‘teachers make the difference’ captures the key role that professional educators play in shaping the lives and futures of their students.”

(National Statement from the Teaching Profession on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism, May 2003)

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Communities of learners	3
Principles of learning	4
Implications for teaching.....	6
Learning Principle 1: Prior knowledge	8
Learning Principle 2: Deep knowledge and connectedness	9
Learning Principle 3: Metacognition	10
Learning Principle 4: Challenge	11
Learning Principle 5: Explicit expectations and feedback.....	12
Learning Principle 6: Individual differences	13
Learning Principle 7: Socio-cultural effects.....	14
Learning Principle 8: Collaborative learning.....	15
Turning from learning to teaching.....	16
Teachers' deep knowledge	18
Teacher Learning	20
Bibliography.....	22
Websites: Resources and further readings	24

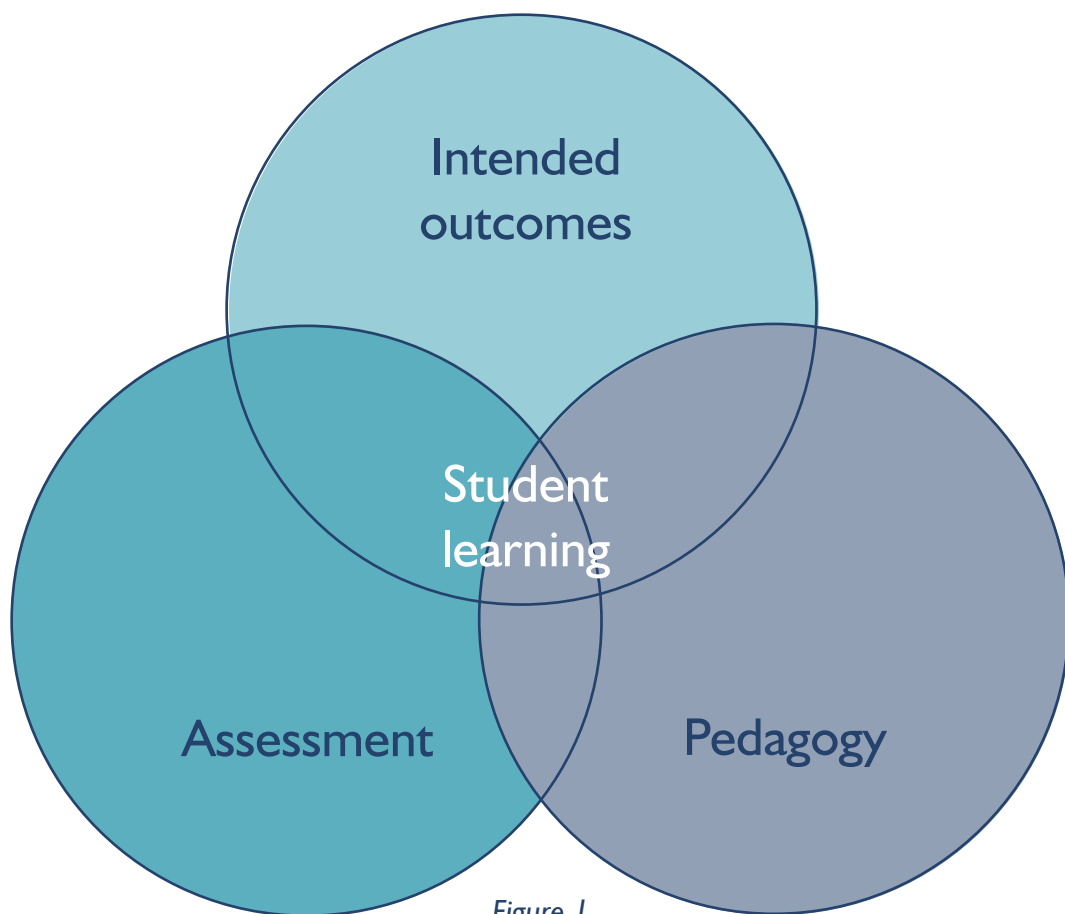


Figure 1



Introduction

The concept of school excellence has the fundamental assumption that effective teaching is critical to student learning and that the degree of teacher expertise impacts directly on student outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to promote professional dialogue and reflection about excellent teaching.

The impact of teachers

In considering the variables that affect student achievement, research suggests that between 50% and 60% relates to what students bring to the learning environment (their experiences, abilities, needs, cultural and ethnic background, learning styles and intelligences). But within schools, teachers are by far the most profound influence. “We need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimised to have powerful and sensationally positive effects on the learner.” (Hattie, 2003:3)

Curriculum Renewal

Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. The ACT P-10 Curriculum Renewal Evaluation Report, *Every Chance to Learn*, puts forward an integrated model of curriculum (see *Figure 1*) which places student learning at the centre of intersecting circles representing the intended student outcomes (the planned curriculum), the assessment (and reporting) of these outcomes and the pedagogy that supports student learning and enables the intended outcomes to be achieved.

The development of a new P-10 Curriculum Framework will involve teachers in debates about learning and reflection on their practice. It is intended that this discussion paper will support professional dialogue about curriculum renewal and excellence in all schools across the ACT.

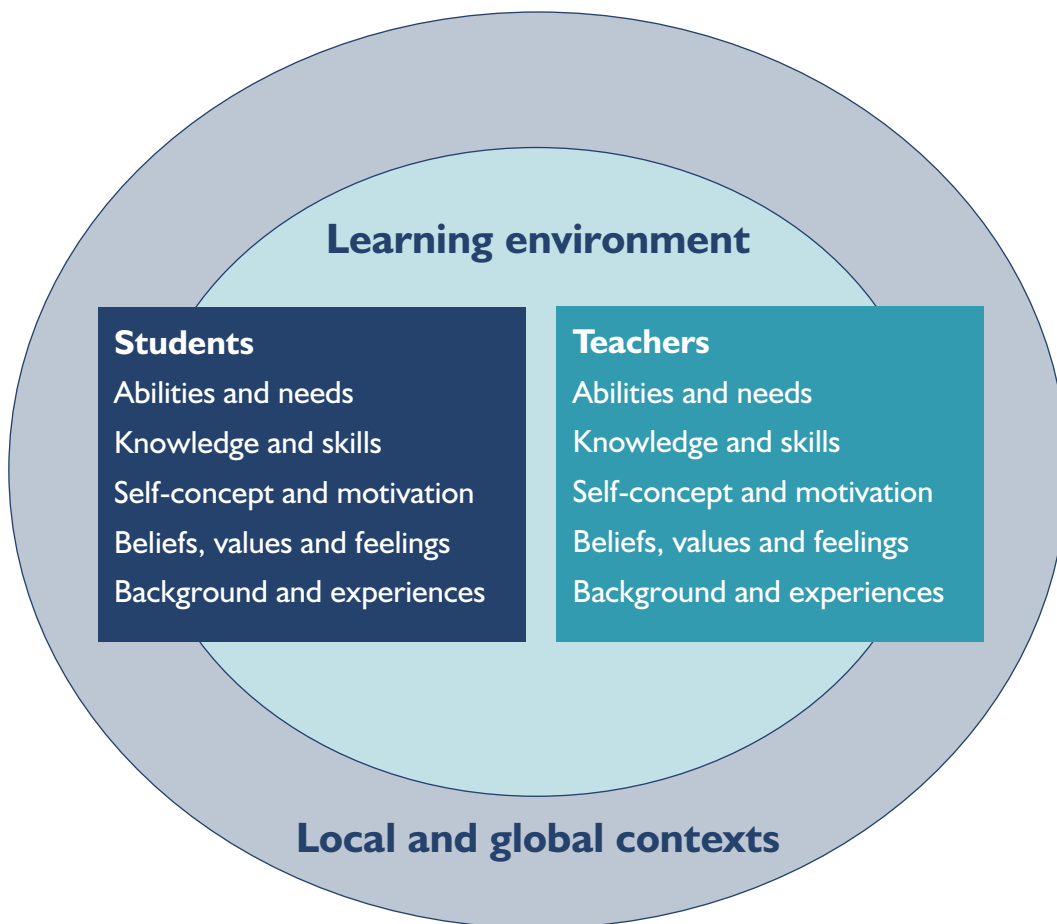


Figure 2



Communities of learners

The model opposite (*Figure 2*) illustrates the relationship between students, teachers and the learning environment. Teaching and learning is a dynamic process, affected by what both students and teachers bring with them to the learning environment and also by changing local and global contexts.

Ideally, each classroom or learning environment becomes a ‘community of learners’ set within the broader learning community of a school and an informed, participatory society.

For reflection

What is unique about your school and your school community?

How do you identify, value and use what students bring to your classroom?

What are the key local and global issues that impact on your teaching?

What barriers do you face in promoting a learning culture in your classroom and what steps are you taking to overcome them?



Principles of learning

“If teaching is conceived as constructing a bridge between the subject matter and the student, learner-centered teachers keep a constant eye on both ends of the bridge.”

(Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999)

Teachers know that learning cannot be reduced to a simple set of instructions or maxims. Yet research offers important insights into the nature of learning and the pedagogy that will make the most difference to student outcomes. The eight learning principles suggested below are based on research and were first articulated for use in ACT Year 11/12 Course Frameworks. Teachers can access the research supplement to this paper on the Schools Excellence website (<http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/qualTeach/pedagogy.htm>).

1. Learning builds on existing knowledge, understandings and skills.
(Prior knowledge)
2. When learning is organised around major concepts, principles and significant real world issues, within and across disciplines, it helps students make connections and build knowledge structures.
(Deep knowledge and connectedness)
3. Learning is facilitated when students actively monitor their own learning and consciously develop ways of organising and applying knowledge within and across contexts.
(Metacognition)
4. Learning needs to take place in a context of high expectations and challenging goals.
(Challenge)
5. Learning is strengthened when learning outcomes and criteria for judging learning are made explicit and when students receive frequent feedback on their progress.
(Explicit expectations and feedback)
6. Learners learn in different ways and at different rates.
(Individual differences)

7. Different cultural environments, including the use of language, shape learners' understandings and the way they learn.
(*Socio-cultural effects*)
8. Learning is a social and collaborative function as well as an individual one.
(*Collaborative learning*)

For reflection

Do you agree that these Learning Principles capture the essential foundations for successful student learning?

What changes or additions might you suggest?

Going further

Bransford, Brown & Cocking, *How People Learn*:
<http://www.nap.edu/html/howpeople1/es.html>



Implications for teaching

“We each remember the great teachers who touched our lives, kindled our interest and pressed us to do our best. We hold powerful images of such teachers. They exhibited a deep caring and love for children. They conveyed a passion for the subjects they taught, captivating their students with that passion. They approached their work with creativity and imagination, striving constantly to improve.”

(US National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1989)

Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching. The Curriculum Renewal Evaluation Report, *Every Chance to Learn*, suggests that “the purpose of developing pedagogy is to improve student learning by selecting the most powerful teaching strategies for a specified learning outcome and to support different learners to achieve that outcome. The argument is not that one teaching strategy is always better than another, but rather that the strategies used need to be effective for the planned learning and for the learners. In a sense, it is about knowing how to choose the right tools for the job.” (ACT Government, 2003:49)

All Australian governments are committed to supporting quality teaching. Reports from inquiries such as *Quality Matters* (the 2001 NSW Review into teacher education), *The New Basics* (Education Queensland, 2000) and *Australia’s Teachers: Australia’s Future – Advancing Innovation, Science, Technology and Mathematics* (the 2003 Commonwealth Review into teaching and teacher education) have affirmed that effective teaching is more important than any other factor in raising student achievement. Australian Ministers have agreed to a *National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching* (2003) which builds on work on teacher standards by teacher professional associations in English, Mathematics and Science.

ACT programs and initiatives, including the P-10 Curriculum Renewal, Literacy and Numeracy, the High School Development Program, Student Pathways and Year 11/12 Curriculum and Assessment processes, all support a focus on excellent teaching.

The following pages provide a framework for reflection about the implications of each of the Learning Principles for teaching. They are couched in terms of what 'excellent teachers' do. However, these implications are (of necessity) general: they need to be considered by individual teachers in their own teaching contexts. Does this ring true? How might it work in practice? Are there barriers? How might barriers be overcome?

For reflection

What is your understanding of 'pedagogy'?

If you had to define three key characteristics of an excellent teacher, what would they be?

Going further

Schools Excellence: <http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/qualTeach/pedagogy.htm>

Learning Principle 1: Prior knowledge

“Humans are viewed as goal-directed agents who actively seek information. They come to formal education with a range of prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts that significantly influence what they notice about the environment and how they organize and interpret it. This, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason, solve problems, and acquire new knowledge.”

(Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999)

Excellent teachers

<i>Find out what students know and can do</i>	They create activities and conditions that enable students to reveal their existing knowledge and skills.
<i>Uncover misconceptions</i>	They use strategies that help recognise students’ preconceptions and misconceptions, so that these may be challenged.
<i>Provide ‘rungs for learning’</i>	They build on what students already know and can do. They provide the tools and knowledge for students to connect past and present learning and to generate new skills and understandings.
<i>Use assessment for learning</i>	They use frequent formative assessment to map progress and to build new learning.
<i>Promote collaboration and common purpose</i>	They create a classroom learning culture that is built on a common sense of purpose and enables students with differing interests and capacities to contribute.

For reflection

What aspects of ‘prior knowledge’ are most applicable to the stage of schooling you work in?

What recognised techniques or approaches (identified through departmental initiatives and/or your professional learning) work best to identify students’ existing understandings and misunderstandings and build new knowledge and skills?

Are there other specific strategies you use to connect students’ past and present knowledge and build their future understandings?

Going further

MyRead: scaffolding learning: <http://www.myread.org/scaffolding.htm>

Learning Principle 2: Deep knowledge and connectedness

“Superficial coverage of all topics in a subject area does not result in deep understanding. A better approach is to teach fewer topics in-depth. Learning is then focused on the understanding of key concepts in a subject or learning area. Key concepts need to be explored in a variety of ways over a period of time in order for students to carry ideas forward and develop formal, transferable understandings to new ideas and areas of study.”

(ACT Government, *Every Chance to Learn*, 2004)

Excellent teachers

<i>Structure learning around key concepts</i>	They structure learning around the ‘big ideas’ of their subject or learning area and reinforce key concepts in different contexts over time.
<i>Make connections</i>	They connect ideas across learning areas, to real world issues and to meaningful issues within students’ lives. This promotes deep understanding, innovation and creative problem-solving.
<i>Build knowledge schemas</i>	They develop students’ capacities to retrieve and apply knowledge. They help students understand facts and ideas within a conceptual framework and construct their own knowledge schemas.
<i>Promote higher order thinking</i>	They have students combine facts and ideas in ways that enable them to recognise relationships, interpret, reach conclusions and arrive at new understandings.
<i>Engage students in substantive conversations</i>	They build deep knowledge and connectedness through sustained classroom conversations that are exploratory, open to ideas and that build towards new understandings.
<i>Assess for deep learning</i>	They use assessment strategies that call for evidence of deep understanding, not superficial recall.

For reflection

What ‘big ideas’ and ‘enduring understandings’ are the focus of your current unit of work?

How do you help students ‘store’ their learning in long-term memory and retrieve and apply their learning?

What strategies do you use to engage students in higher-order thinking?

What structures are in place in your classroom to facilitate substantive communication?

How do you make sure that assessment tasks require students to demonstrate deep learning?

Going further

From Now On, *A Questioning Toolkit*: <http://questioning.org/Q7/toolkit.html>

Learning Principle 3: Metacognition

“Strong learners can explain which strategies they used to solve a problem and why, while less competent students monitor their own thinking sporadically and ineffectively.”

(National Academy of Sciences, 2000)

Excellent teachers

<i>Help students understand their own learning</i>	They believe that all students are able to learn and help them understand how they learn most effectively.
<i>Let students into the secrets</i>	They share with students the keys to understanding and using the terminology, knowledge structures, processes and tools of particular subjects or learning areas.
<i>Help students set goals for their learning</i>	They give students techniques that help them recognise what is working, what is not working, and how their learning might be improved.
<i>Engage students in sustained reflection</i>	They make reflection an integral part of continuous improvement in learning for all students.
<i>Help students transfer knowledge and skills</i>	They consciously teach metacognitive strategies that support students’ application of knowledge and skills in new contexts.
<i>Use assessment to support metacognition</i>	They include self and peer assessment that help students understand their own and others’ learning.

For reflection

What strategies do you use to promote your students’ understanding of their own learning processes?

How do you help students set learning goals and monitor their own progress?

How do your students show that they are developing metacognitive skills and strategies?

Going further

Holistic Education Network, Metacognition:

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~rstack1/world/rss/files/metacognition.htm>

Learning Principle 4: Challenge

“A task is appropriately challenging when pupils are expected to risk and move into the unknown but they know how to get started and have support for reaching the new level of learning.”

(Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003)

Excellent teachers

<i>Have high expectations</i>	They have and articulate high expectations of all students and do not offer an impoverished curriculum to particular groups of students. They create a sense of there being no limit to possible achievement.
<i>Combine challenge and success</i>	They set challenging goals and use an array of teaching strategies to help students achieve these goals. They help students develop thinking and problem-solving strategies that enable them to experience success.
<i>Let students take risks</i>	They create a learning environment where students feel safe to take risks and learn through their mistakes.
<i>Foster independent learning</i>	They help students set challenging goals for themselves and support increasing independence in student learning.
<i>Use authentic assessment tasks</i>	They set demanding assessment tasks, some of which culminate in products or performances. These may be multi-faceted projects requiring group collaboration.
<i>Explore the unknown</i>	They show passion and pleasure in their subject and foster a sense of excitement and adventure in learning. They develop open-ended tasks that require ingenuity and creativity and allow for alternative perspectives and solutions.

For reflection

How do your students know that you have high expectations for their learning?

How do you plan units of work that will extend all students in your class?

Are you ‘playing safe’? How can you change your practice to introduce more open and creative challenges?

Going further

Websites for problem solving and creative thinking: Wanniasa Hills Primary School:
http://www.whps.act.edu.au/thinking_skills.htm

Learning Principle 5: Explicit expectations and feedback

“The most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement is feedback. The simplest prescription for improving education must be ‘dollops of feedback’.” (Hattie, 1992)

Excellent teachers

<i>Make learning goals and assessment criteria explicit</i>	They ensure that students understand the outcomes they are expected to achieve, why particular assessment tasks are used and what the basis for teacher judgement will be.
<i>Assess for intellectual quality</i>	They select assessment tasks that are both valid in terms of curriculum goals and that promote a high level of intellectual quality - tasks that draw out students’ capacities to interpret facts and ideas, demonstrate new understandings, make connections to real world issues and solve problems.
<i>Use assessment for learning</i>	They reduce the number of summative assessment tasks to the minimum required and increase formative assessment opportunities. They foster learning through allowing students to experiment and take risks. They analyse assessment and plan for future learning based on that knowledge.
<i>Provide regular and informative feedback</i>	They use informal feedback as an integral part of their practice. They target formal feedback so students understand their achievements and areas needing improvement.
<i>Use a variety of assessment strategies</i>	They use a range of assessment strategies so that students with different cultural backgrounds and learning styles have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. This includes peer assessment.
<i>Involve students in self-assessment</i>	They recognise that students’ understanding of their own learning processes and progress are integral to effective assessment practice.

For reflection

How does assessment inform your planning?

How do you let students know what the expected outcomes of learning are in your unit of work and what criteria will be used to assess those outcomes?

What are some examples of assessment tasks you use to draw out higher levels of thinking, creativity and problem-solving?

What are some effective ways of involving students in assessment of their own learning and that of their peers?

Going further

Schools Excellence:

<http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/qualTeach/assessmentForLearning.htm>

ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies:

<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/bsss/TeachingAndLearning/TLResourcesOnAssessment.htm>

Learning Principle 6: Individual differences

“Inclusivity in education starts with the recognition of our diversity. It is treating students as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group. It is about involving all students in classroom practices by valuing their uniqueness and what they bring to the classroom. It is about valuing their interests, experiences, abilities, insights, needs, ... learning styles and intelligences.”

(ACT Department of Education, Youth and Family Services, 2002)

Excellent teachers

<i>Value students</i>	They respect students as individuals and value their experiences and background. They nurture positive classroom relationships based on a sense of common purpose.
<i>Use an array of teaching strategies</i>	They employ an array of teaching strategies to cater for student differences in background and learning style. These strategies include utilising new technologies for learning.
<i>Build on students’ strengths</i>	They take time to find out students’ particular gifts and strengths. They build on these strengths to help all students achieve curriculum goals.
<i>Negotiate elements of learning</i>	They give students a say in what they learn, how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning.
<i>Engage and motivate</i>	They recognise that students’ self-concept and motivation profoundly affect learning. They use strategies that engage students’ interests and build their confidence. They harness the emotional dimension in a positive way for learning.
<i>Use an array of assessment strategies</i>	They focus on gathering evidence of student achievement of curriculum goals, and do not privilege particular forms or modes of assessment. They use an array of strategies to assess what students know and can do.

For reflection

How do you find out what your students’ differing strengths and needs are? How does that information affect your planning?

What are some of the teaching strategies you have found most effective in meeting the needs of individual students within your class?

What elements of your current unit of work have been negotiated with your students? How successful has this been?

Is your assessment fair to all students? What sorts of tasks allow students with different learning styles demonstrate new knowledge and skills? How do you cater for students who need more time to demonstrate their learning?

Going further

Schools Excellence (multiple intelligences, learning styles):
<http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/qualTeach/pedagogy.htm>

Learning Principle 7: Socio-cultural effects

“The differentials of class, family culture, ethnicity and gender interlock to form a complex matrix that underpins learning and outcome in a number of ways, calling for sensitive and well-informed responses.”

(Scottish Council of Education, 1999)

Excellent teachers

<i>Value students’ ethnic and cultural background</i>	They value diversity in the classroom and seek opportunities to celebrate it.
<i>Are well-informed about their local community</i>	They take time to understand the complex socio-cultural mix that characterises their school community, including the particular cultural differences that affect students’ learning.
<i>Use students’ cultural background to support learning</i>	They find ways to use students’ background and experiences, including their use of language, to support learning. They help students achieve outcomes that will give them power over their future lives.
<i>Foster critical literacies</i>	They foster critical literacies so that all students can understand how meaning is constructed and influenced by its context and purpose. This encourages students (and teachers) to critically examine their own socio-cultural beliefs and assumptions.
<i>Form partnerships with parents and carers</i>	They are committed to partnerships with students’ parents and carers to support learning. They recognise that the nature of these partnerships changes as students mature and become increasingly independent.
<i>Provide learning opportunities with and within the local community</i>	They connect their teaching to the community through community-based projects, community audiences for student work, and involving people from the local community in classroom learning.

For reflection

How do you learn more about the ethnic and cultural background of your school’s student/parent community?

What skills, knowledge, experiences and understandings do students (and parents) bring to the school and classroom?

How do you make connections to these experiences through your teaching ?

Going further

Racism No Way! <http://www.racismnoway.com.au/index.html>

Learning Principle 8: Collaborative learning

“Social interaction is important for the development of expertise, metacognitive skills and formation of the learner’s sense of self.”

(US National Academy of Sciences, 2002)

Excellent teachers

<i>Recognise the importance of the social dimensions of learning</i>	They respect the research evidence that social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognition and that the social processes of learning support or undermine students’ self-concept.
<i>Use strategies to support team work and collaborative learning</i>	They use a variety of teaching strategies that encourage students to work and learn together. They identify ways in which individual learning can be strengthened through group work.
<i>Connect student learning to the wider world</i>	They provide opportunities for collaborative learning within the local community, including vocational learning. They use the power of information and communication technologies to connect students with other learners around the world.
<i>Assess group products and performances</i>	Recognising that collaborative learning is important, they accept the challenge of assessing group work. They explore ways of doing so that are valid and fair and share these with their colleagues.
<i>Model collaborative learning</i>	They demonstrate the value of teamwork through collegial professional practice, including team teaching.

For reflection

What successful strategies have you used to facilitate and demonstrate cooperative student learning?

How do you help students recognise and overcome any difficulties they have working in groups?

How do you cater for students with special needs in a collaborative learning environment?

Going further

Schools Excellence (cooperative and collaborative learning):
<http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei/qualTeach/pedagogy.htm>



Turning from learning to teaching

“The quality of teaching is by far the most important influence on cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes of schooling, regardless of a student’s gender or background.”

(Australian Council for Educational Research media release, October 2003)

There are many factors driving a renewed focus on teachers and teaching. There is “a need to develop a knowledge-based or brain-powered economic and industrial system where prosperity will be determined not by what is found beneath the ground but by what is found between the ears.” (Ellyard, 2001:26). Higher levels of achievement, new knowledge and skills for individuals and groups, more self-management and the promotion of capacities for lifelong learning are needed. All students need these capacities to be successful learners, workers and citizens.

If teachers are the key to student success, there needs to be a strong focus on effective pedagogies. Pedagogy links theories and beliefs about teaching and learning to teaching practice in a consistent and coherent way. The knowledge that teachers have of learners, learning, teaching and assessment and the way they apply this knowledge to effective classroom practice is a complex interaction of theoretical understandings and practical skills.

Research into teacher excellence emphasises the importance of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’, which is defined as the application of general pedagogy to a particular subject or area of learning. Excellent teachers have a strong grasp of learning theory and general pedagogical principles but they demonstrate this in very practical ways, specific to their subject or learning area and appropriate for their group of students.

This research challenges a common assumption that ‘a good teacher can teach anything.’ A high level of pedagogical content knowledge enables teachers to draw on their deep knowledge, to improvise, to make connections to other disciplines and to current local and global issues and to constantly challenge and extend their students.

For teachers to maintain excellence they need to be reflective practitioners. They need to deepen and refresh their own knowledge base and engage in professional learning with their colleagues. The following pages provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own learning and to engage in discussions with colleagues about the most effective ways to strengthen their professional learning.

For reflection

Do you think that 'a good teacher can teach anything'? Why /why not?

What are some examples of student learning and achievement which give you the most pride and satisfaction?

Should the research on the importance of teachers and teaching be given more prominence? How might this happen?

Does a focus on teaching run a danger of reducing a focus on student learning? How should both be kept in balance?



Teachers' deep knowledge

“A major attribute of expert (teachers) is their deep representations about teaching and learning. Experts and experienced teachers do not (necessarily) differ in the amount of knowledge they have about curriculum matters or knowledge about teaching strategies. But experts do differ in how they organise and use this content knowledge.”

(Hattie, 2003)

Excellent teachers

<i>Draw on deep knowledge</i>	They have a more integrated knowledge base and can relate their subject knowledge to wider issues, including knowledge in other disciplines. Teachers who demonstrate deep levels of pedagogical content knowledge (the combination of knowledge of their subject area and how best to teach it) make the most difference to the learning of their students. They ask questions about what does/does not work, analyse formal structures and relationships to optimise student learning.
<i>Make key concepts relevant to students</i>	They understand the key concepts and ‘big ideas’ of their learning domain and can make connections between these concepts and significant issues for students.
<i>Are adaptable and creative</i>	They recognise that they are working in an environment that is diverse, multifaceted, demanding and subject to rapid change. They work flexibly within system requirements in response to the contexts in which they work and are keen to try innovative approaches, seeing renewal and a sense of adventure as integral to the teaching and learning process.
<i>Solve problems</i>	They seek new information about their subject area and actively try to understand problems that arise in their teaching or in the learning of individual students. They use appropriate technologies to support and enhance learning.

For reflection

How do you deepen your own knowledge base and keep up to date with the latest strategies for effective teaching in your curriculum area(s)?

How do you make effective connections between your area of expertise, other areas of the curriculum and issues of significance to students?

What new technologies do you use to support learning? How do you incorporate these technologies effectively into your teaching?

What barriers can you identify that limit your ability to be innovative and creative? How do you plan to overcome these barriers?

Going further

National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching:
http://www.mceetya.edu.au/pdf/national_framework.pdf



Teacher Learning

“Professional learning is more likely to improve student learning outcomes if it increases teachers’ understanding of the content they teach, how students learn that content and how to represent and convey that content in meaningful ways.”

(Ingvarson, Meiers & Beavis, 2003)

Effective teacher learning is:

<i>Related to learning goals and student achievement</i>	Effective programs are driven by differences between goals and student performance. Collaborative examination of student work with reference to external criteria and standards is a particularly effective form of teacher learning.
<i>Responsive to teacher needs</i>	Effective programs involve teachers in identifying their learning needs, in structuring their own learning and in monitoring the results.
<i>Grounded in specific learning contexts</i>	Effective programs focus on improvements to pedagogical content knowledge, the most potent influence on student learning outcomes. They also take account of the broad context in which teachers are working.
<i>Collegial</i>	Effective programs are usually school or cluster based and linked to ongoing school operations. They involve collaborative problem-solving. It builds a professional language which allows teachers to engage in substantive conversations about their practice.
<i>Promote reflective practice</i>	Effective programs draw teachers into active reflection on their practice, help them identify specific areas they need to develop and provide opportunities to try out new approaches.
<i>Involve follow-up and ongoing feedback</i>	Effective programs include monitoring the implementation of new learning and ongoing feedback from mentors and/or colleagues.

For reflection

Are there particular learning needs of students in your classrooms that should drive your professional learning this year?

How do you identify your professional development needs and priorities and plan your professional learning?

How could teacher learning be strengthened in your school? What opportunities are there for you to work and learn with your colleagues?

How do you build in time for reflection?

Going further

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Invitations and Inspirations: Pathways to successful teaching, Curriculum Corporation, 2003

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US National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 1989, *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* www.nbpts.org/pdf/coreprops.pdf

Websites: Resources and further reading

Schools Excellence Initiative: <http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/sei>

ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies:
<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/bsss/welcome.htm>

ACTivatED: <http://activated.decs.act.gov.au/>

From Now On: <http://questioning.org>

Holistic Education Network: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~rstackl/>

MyRead: <http://www.myread.org>

Racism No Way! <http://www.racismnoway.com.au/>

Wanniassa Hills Primary School: http://www.whps.act.edu.au/thinking_skills.htm

Note that hyperlinks were accurate at the date of publication.