7. Do you set different homework tasks for students with differer interests or abilities? (Why or why not?)
8. How much input/help from parents regarding their chilc homework do you expect?
9. Do you have any problems regarding too much or not enough help or support from parents regarding their child's homework?
10. Any other comments.

APPENDIX 3.3: STUDENT HOMEWORK SURVEY

Grade level

1. How do you feel about homework?
2. Do you think children should have homework? Why?
3. What homework do you think is the most useful?
4. What homework do you like best?
5. If you could choose anything for homework what would you choose? Why?
6. How much do your parents help you with homework?
7. How much time each week should children have homework?
8. At what grade level should homework start?
9. Any other comments.

4

'I don't want to be here': Engaging reluctant students in learning

Meaghan Walsh with Marilyn Smith

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the experiences associated with supporting an action research project that was conducted during 1999 by Marilyn Smith, a Year 11 English teacher at Corio Community College. Corio is a senior secondary college (Years 11 and 12 only) in Geelong (Victoria's second largest city) and draws on a mainly low socio-economic population.

Marilyn aimed to adapt the Year 11 English Syllabus to the needs of a group of 20 male students, characterised as 'non-academic'. She hoped that tailoring the subject material and tasks to this particular group of students would help engage them in English, and ultimately assist them in succeeding in this compulsory school subject.

The main data collection was conducted by Meaghan through interviews with a sample of students from the class. The initial interviews were conducted early in the school year to obtain baseline information about the students' attitudes towards school, learning and English. A follow-up interview was carried out towards the end of

the year, to identify any significant shifts in the students' views and experience after the 'changed' teaching period.

RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Marilyn's first year at the school shocked her. The Year 11 boys just kept leaving school. She had not experienced this before and was astonished to find such a high degree of 'disengagement' from students. She was likewise surprised at the apparent acceptance of this exodus by the staff. For example, when Marilyn queried the large number of students in her class at the beginning of the year, she received amused assurances from staff that 'They won't be here for long'.

Marilyn describes how she saw the students and the school situation they were in:

The whole idea of school and academic learning was entirely alien and irrelevant to both their experience and their life goals. Successful men did not read books, had little use for written language in any form and did not take instruction from women, especially bloody know-all English teachers.

School was demoralising, and had no system of rewards that had any congruence with their values. For these boys (and lots of other 'boys' out there) it was 'cool to be a fool'—getting a good mark for English or being praised by a teacher, especially a middle-aged female middle-class English teacher, had all the appeal of being kissed by a moustached aunt!

If they could have any sort of job they would not be at school—the only reason to attend—as little as possible—was to get the piece of paper.

The curriculum was indisputably out of date and completely inappropriate for these students.

The texts and the syllabus would have been entirely appropriate for an academic high school in the eastern suburbs in the 1960s (which is where most of the teachers either went to school or received their training). The recent addition of

Sally Morgan's *My Place* was no doubt introduced with all the good intentions of anti-racist feminists, but was actually used as an instrument of oppression in precisely the way that gave political correctness a bad name. It actually made being racist the only option for these boys.

The prevailing teaching styles were passive, rote, authoritarian, punitive and focused on inevitable failure. The teachers were 'doing their best' but the 'kids here' were 'just not up to it'. Emphasis on welfare avoided scrutiny of the impoverished curriculum and hostile classroom environment. The kids had nowhere else to go but they sure didn't want to be here.

Few classrooms were interactive, experiential or rewarding and the poor literacy understandings of the staff were perpetuated in the students. There was a sense that someone, somewhere else, was to blame.

This is my memory of the school in my first year there. It was very different from the school I had come from about 4 kilometres away. Since then there have been some marked improvements, not the least was the setting up of a PEEL group with the appointment of the new Assistant Principal, Steve Boyle.

In that first year at the school, Marilyn found herself policing interminable chapter summaries of Sally Morgan's *My Place* and discovering that many boys made the decision (which seemed completely rational to them) that they would rather fail their VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education: the final two years of secondary schooling) than continue on to Chapter 24. When she discussed this problem at the faculty level, suggesting that this book was not an appropriate text for these boys, she was admonished with a response that 'if the boys couldn't cope with this sort of book then they don't "deserve" to get their VCE'.

From her point of view, this appeared to be sacrificing one group of students without doing anything to assist them with the task of achieving some level of competency in their literacy skills. Marilyn tried to find out something about their past experiences that might explain the attitudes they now held:

The students had been identified as unlikely to pass VCE, they had poorly developed English skills, and in all cases almost no confidence in their abilities. I asked them to write a case study each about something that had turned them off English in the past. All of them had had particularly miserable experiences in English classes particularly at the lower levels—experiences which included being publicly humiliated for their poor skills. They had all been frequently punished, usually for their refusal to carry out particular tasks that they found demeaning or excessive, their boisterous behaviour, or their socially unskilled behaviour. It seemed they been punished for the very things they had not learned or been taught.

For Marilyn, this was a starting point for a teaching approach, and subsequent project, that might address these concerns. The school had undergone a shift in philosophy, which established a more flexible approach toward catering for the needs of 'non-academic' students, and initiated strategies that would support wider definitions of success at the senior levels. This context, combined with an increasing confidence in the theories and strategies generated by PEEL and her involvement with Innovative Links and 'Boys' Education', convinced Marilyn that there was no reason why boys could not be assisted in succeeding in English at the VCE level.

She believed that it was possible to engage these students in learning English, and that raising their awareness of their learning styles and processes would assist this. By enabling the students to see and understand the barriers to their school success, she considered that she might be able to unlock their capacity to take what they needed from the curriculum for their own sense of literacy success and use.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

Marilyn's ultimate goal was to assist her 20 male students to succeed in the compulsory subject of English, and to improve their use of English in subjects such as Technology and Wood/Metalwork, which more closely represented their career aspirations and source of self-worth.

She began by establishing a 'boys only' group for Year 11 English, which would concentrate on completing one unit only for the year, rather than the prescribed two units (to gain their VCE, students in Victoria [Australia] need to pass three out of four units of English including Units 3 and 4). Marilyn realised that these students would probably experience greater success at this level if the curriculum was responsive to their interests and preoccupations.

I felt the problem was more to do with the curriculum than the students' apparent inability to learn English to a reasonable standard. Many people believe that the VCE curriculum is too academic, but also we have tended not to exploit its possibilities—we have a fixation with testing that the kids have read every page and completed endless comprehension tasks. The whole issue of assessment means that they don't have time to comfortably learn. My intention was get away from this and exploit the flexibility to see if we could get them to the point where they had met the work requirements of Unit 1.

HOW DID PAVOT CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROJECT?

Marilyn's concerns for her students and her workload made it very difficult for her to both address her concerns and research them simultaneously. PAVOT funds allowed me [Meaghan] to become Marilyn's research associate. I worked with Marilyn in the initial process of defining and operationalising the research aims and methodology. We decided that I would conduct the data collection in the form of one-to-one interviews with students, then qualitatively analyse the data for significant themes and issues and report the information to Marilyn to inform her practice.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS: WHAT DID WE DO?

Marilyn wanted some essential preliminary information about her students:

1. their current attitude towards school, their learning and perceived barriers to effective learning, their career aspirations, and specifically their attitude towards English; and
2. their awareness of good learning, and the effectiveness of their strategies for planning tasks, organising their workload to meet deadlines and revision.

She also wanted to identify any shifts in the students' attitude following her attempts to address these concerns in her teaching.

Over several meetings, Marilyn and I established that the research plan would involve:

- preliminary interviews with students;
- feedback of this data to Marilyn;
- a nine-month teaching intervention; and,
- follow-up student interviews.

Preliminary interview with students

Confidential one-to-one interviews were conducted with a sample of ten students from the class (50 per cent) who had volunteered for the task. These interviews were designed to explore these students' views on several aspects of their learning and future career plans including:

- perception of self as a learner (with particular focus on English);
- perception of English;
- level of awareness of the learning process (i.e. what it means to be a 'good learner');
- level of organisation (i.e. skills for completing assessment tasks/revision strategies);
- perceived social barriers to academic success (with particular focus on English);
- awareness of 'school' as an option in the context of alternative choices available; and,
- intended future direction: the role that school was expected to play in the student's career path.

With the students' permission, the interviews were audio-taped and a content analysis was conducted on the transcriptions to identify significant themes or issues raised by the sample.

Perception of self as a learner (with particular focus on English)
The students characterised themselves as generally being 'reasonably good' students. They did, however, tend to hold less esteem for themselves as English students. They explained this difference in terms of a difficulty in grasping the concepts in English, and also the skills that they were supposed to be developing in the subject. Only one student indicated that he had a good understanding of the material and tasks in English.

Perception of English
The majority of students felt that there was no aspect of English that they found enjoyable. Tasks associated with writing were considered by most students to be the least enjoyable aspect of English.

Level of awareness of the learning process (i.e. what it means to be a 'good learner')
The students generally believed that they had a solid conceptual grasp in a least one of their subjects; however, English was only referred to once in this manner. The practical or technical subjects were the areas where students felt they had a greater understanding of the main ideas, because the practical exercises offered an opportunity to apply and contextualise the theory. That is, the connection between topic and task was quite apparent to them. The general view was that the nature of English often made it difficult to identify how the task was meant to link in with the current topic:

> Sometimes it's hard in English, it's not clear cut like practical subjects.

Interestingly, a 'good learner' was typically characterised as someone in possession of one or more innate and static qualities that were perceived to be outside a student's control, such as:

They are just brainy.

Brighter than everyone.

They naturally understand what the teacher is saying.

Very few students referred to characteristics of a good student's work ethic or aspects of good organisation or purposeful learning. Those who did refer to such factors still believed that success only came if you were lucky enough to possess a combination of the 'good wiring' and a commitment to completing the necessary work.

Level of organisation (i.e. skills for completing assessment tasks/revision strategies)
In terms of planning for assignments and other assessment tasks, only a small minority of students applied a proactive approach to completing their work, with the majority indicating that they employed the 'last-minute' approach. None of the students could expand upon their method for completing such tasks beyond 'I just do it'.

The group also employed some fairly passive revision strategies for tests, with the majority indicating that they simply had a quick look over their notes the night before the test. Only one person engaged in active revision by doing some exercises in preparation for Maths tests.

Perceived social barriers to academic success (particular focus on English)
The majority of the students could not identify any external pressure from family or friends to leave school and work, with most indicating that their family was supportive of their progression to Year 11 and were encouraging them to continue with their study.

They did, however, describe a significant cultural barrier to academic success within their peer group at school. There was a clear social perception that a 'good student' was:

Nerdy.

Has no friends.

Just has school and that's it.

Sucks up to the teachers.

The students clearly indicated that this was not good for their image. They could not be seen as good learners or good students by their peers. One person actually said that he lied about his marks to avoid the 'good student' tag:

You just keep it to yourself when you get a good mark, tell people you got a C when you got an A, you have to fit in.

Awareness of 'school' as an option in the context of alternative choices available
All the students indicated that they had made a conscious decision to return to school and at least commence the VCE, stating that they took the option to continue study as it constituted a necessary step in their career.

Intended future direction: The role that school was expected to play in the students' career path
Every student appeared to have well-defined career goals, outlining a particular career path they intended to follow. They also demonstrated an awareness of the level of education required for their intended career and seemed to have factored the necessary amount of extra schooling into their plan. Half of the students aimed to complete the VCE as they needed passes in Year 12 to access certain apprenticeships or progress to some form of higher education.

Intervention phase: Nine-month teaching period

Marilyn used the feedback from the interview data to plan her teaching intervention. The three main components involved:

1. designing activities and selecting texts that she believed would be both challenging to the students and accessible in terms of their skill level;
2. negotiating a 'deal' with the class that if she could not convince the students that a particular activity had some value for them and their future aspirations, they would discontinue the task; and,
3. employing many PEEL teaching procedures, particularly those based on cultivating questioning (question dice) and encouraging reflection.

Marilyn focused on designing activities and selecting texts that she felt the students would find accessible, in terms of her perception of their skill level, and that would be challenging in both their ideas and their content. The texts she chose included *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (John Marsden), *Wake in Fright* and the film texts *In the Name of the Father* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. One interesting feature which affected student response to a text was whether or not it was a true story. For this reason, they liked *In the Name of the Father* much more than *The Shawshank Redemption*. Marilyn 'allowed them' to believe that *Wake in Fright* was based on a true story for that purpose.

Marilyn negotiated a deal with the class that, if she could not convince them that a particular activity had some value for them and their future aspirations, the group would stop doing the task—clearly a risky and unusual teaching approach.

Her activities were based on:

- football team results;
- local media issues and letters to the editor of the local paper;
- career path research;
- research on topics of particular interests; and,
- the use of computer technology, especially the Internet.

Marilyn describes how they used technology:

> We used technology a lot, especially the Internet. I got them to research a career they were interested in. This was hugely

successful because they were highly motivated, and I found it quite ironic to watch them in the careers room, studiously reading and sharing books without even realising what they were doing! They had to do a Powerpoint presentation on their career. We hyperlinked them all together and gave a class presentation to an invited audience.

> We did a lot of work on media. I had them writing to the *Geelong Advertiser* [their local newspaper] about Gary Ablett's [a famous local Australian Rules footballer, now retired] statue. They loved reading the local newspaper. It was real, it was a local paper and they could identify the issues as theirs.

Marilyn also used many PEEL strategies, especially those based on cultivating questions (question dice) and encouraging reflection (see Baird and Northfield, 1992). Marilyn hoped that, by raising the students' awareness of *how* successful learning took place in English and *why* this might be valuable, she might be able to increase their level of engagement in the material and tasks:

> They needed tasks they could complete and they needed instant feedback. For example, with the novel *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, I didn't make them do the normal written text response. I negotiated with them that if they read the book they could use the question dice. These are a set of two die: one has the words who, what, where, when, how and why on it, and the other has would, could, might, did and should. Students throw the dice and use the resulting stem to begin a question, for example, 'What might . . .?' They found these entertaining and quite difficult—they very rarely got up into 'How might . . .?', for example. However, they worked in groups and got feedback from each other and myself, and I used the opportunity to unpack the idea that asking questions is an important aspect of learning.

She also modified a version of the L Files booklets (see Chapter 9) and, following a suggestion from one of the other PAVOT teachers, set the boys the task of writing case studies about their experiences of

learning in primary and junior secondary school. She noted that the L Files 'Fell apart completely. One of the peer leaders said, "No. I don't want to do this." That killed it.'

This incident raises the issue of the major problem Marilyn faced in implementing this program:

This was supposed to be a small group of carefully chosen boys who would do unit one English for the whole year. It wasn't meant to be a group of the worst boys in the level, it was the boys that you felt you could help. A major problem was that this criterion wasn't adhered to.

One cause was that government policy changed and we had returnees trickling back to school—they had to attend school to get government benefits—the dole (unemployment benefits). Many of these students ended up in the class without necessarily meeting the criteria we'd set. We had kids who were illiterate right through to kids who were competent but who just did not want to be at school.

Having students trickle in completely ruined the dynamic of the class. I had set out to establish trust, but having to frequently incorporate new students made this impossible. A lot of the 'selected' boys were quite threatened by some of the newcomers, some of whom were 19 and 20 years old, and a couple of them were quite frightening characters.

For first term we had to just mark time. The boys were constantly trying to regroup—they would establish the pecking order and then they'd have to change it.

I had running battles with the school administration, but they didn't have many choices either. All of these things are done within such a political context. My group was supposed to be small, for educational reasons; however, that meant that all the other English classes were bigger, and this caused some resentment as well. When new students came in, the 'obvious' place to put them was in the smallest class.

For this reason, in particular, Marilyn was unable to implement her stated aim of developing the boys' awareness of, and control over,

their own learning to the extent that she had hoped. The L Files were meant to be the catalyst for leading them into discussions about learning, and ultimately into becoming more independent and purposeful learners. At the end of Term 1, another arrangement was made for the forced returnees and more progress was possible.

Follow-up student interviews

A second round of one-to-one interviews was conducted with ten volunteer students from the class (six from the original interview sample), to reassess their views on the same constructs and therefore ascertain whether there had been any shifts in their attitudes over the teaching intervention period.

The second interview results suggested that the students had made a number of perceptual and attitudinal shifts over the teaching intervention period. Each significant area of change is outlined below.

General rise in confidence and feelings of control regarding English
The vast majority of students interviewed indicated that they had greater feelings of confidence with regard to English. They primarily described an ability to understand the main concepts covered in the curriculum and also the fact that they were completing the assessment tasks and submitting them on time (or even before the deadline in some cases).

Increased enjoyment of English tasks
This time students were able to quickly identify at least one enjoyable aspect of their English subject. They often raised the fact that having some ownership over the decisions made about the tasks they were to complete made the subject, on the whole, more enjoyable. The tasks involving technology, such as developing a Powerpoint presentation around a particular career, were identified as the most enjoyable specific aspect for most of the students. Some of the students also found the class discussions (about a novel's content) to be very enjoyable.

Greater understanding of the purpose of English tasks
All of the students indicated that, in most cases, they understood why they were doing the set tasks in English. That is, they saw some relevance to their future as job seekers, tertiary students and eventually employees.

This response was certainly in accord with Marilyn's own perception of the way her boys were working. She felt that the students began to accept tasks as both relevant and achievable and that they appeared to really enjoy some of the assessment activities.

View of the school as caring and supportive
The students generally characterised the differences between their involvement in this secondary college and their previous school experience in terms of the fact that teaching staff were more respectful of students. Marilyn's classroom experiences similarly supported this response. The students' case studies about their experience of learning in primary and junior secondary school illustrated that these boys had developed feelings of humiliation and unfair treatment in the past that had created a sense of 'lack of respect'.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ISSUES: SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH OF THIS NATURE IN FUTURE

It was unfortunate, but part of schooling, that only six of the ten original interview participants were available for a follow-up interview nine months later. There were also a number of other interesting methodological issues or challenges associated with supporting a research project of this kind.

The interview process

I found that eliciting thoughtful responses from students in the interviews was challenging. As per my previous experience with interviewing Year 10–11 students, most of the boys were not immediately

forthcoming with responses during our discussion. There are a variety of possible reasons for this, including the age of the participants, gender difference (female interviewer), talking to a stranger, and also the fact that it is unlikely that they had ever been directly asked to explore many of the issues that were raised during the interview.

In order to draw out as much information from the participants as possible, I employed several strategies such as prompting and probing, switching to simpler questions about the student's interests, discussion of light topics such as hobbies, using humour, and sharing personal stories about my school experiences. As such, extra time was occasionally required to complete the interview protocol with a student.

Ethical challenge to preserve the participants' identity in reporting the interview outcomes

As the interview sample consisted of ten students who were known to Marilyn, careful consideration was required in planning the interviews in order to preserve their ethical right of confidentiality. In the initial interview, it was decided that no individual would be identified in the reporting of the outcomes, and that any anecdotal material (i.e. pithy quotes to illustrate or encapsulate a particular point) would not contain any information that would personally identify that individual to Marilyn.

This issue was of even greater significance in the follow-up interview phase, when it was decided that Marilyn would take responsibility for the analysis of the interview transcripts to ascertain what kinds of perceptual and experiential shifts had taken place. A compromise was reached in order to preserve the anonymity of the sample, in that I processed the interview transcripts to such a degree that individuals could not be identified in the commentary, but the data were still preserved in a somewhat 'raw' state. Marilyn could then analyse the content for significant themes or issues and identify any shifts, with minimal risk of recognising one of her students.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD MARILYN OFFER TO TEACHERS TRYING TO DO A SIMILAR THING IN THE FUTURE?

There must be some up-front discussion with these students about what the point and value of the subject is for them. I genuinely believe that for many students, the purpose of many English tasks is not obvious and is not rational. They are not just being provocative when they ask 'Why do we have to do this?' and I believe they are entitled to an answer. The value of this ongoing dialogue as a tool for discussing metacognitive and learning processes, and the purposes of learning, is very significant. I believe that this sort of dialogue actually defines the relationship the teacher has with the class; the role that the teacher takes in this discussion demonstrates whether the students can respect and trust the teacher.

Good learning behaviours needs to be an ongoing theme. A system which constantly identifies and rewards good learning seems to me to be really fundamental. The rewards must be rewards that the students recognise, not necessarily the teacher. (In my class this was not handled successfully because in the initial stages of the class there was a constant stream of newcomers, many transient, which was very unsettling. This prevented me from establishing the atmosphere of trust between me and the boys, and among the boys at that crucial setting-the-scene stage. Later on, the introduction of these ideas was not seen as a fundamental of the class.

There has to be room for interactive and active learning. Competitions, movement around the room, group activities, rolling dice, making products—anthologies, Powerpoint presentations—the opportunities to show off and be funny, daring and risqué are all, it seems to me, entirely legitimate learning methods.

Resources such as newspapers, magazines, Internet and factual written material, manuals, biography and some film and television material are much more profitable learning resources than novels or textbooks (although these obviously have a place if well chosen).

Connecting what they are doing in school with their future lives as men, citizens, workers, fathers, husbands, sportsmen, travellers, adventurers, etc. is a fundamental way of engaging them. Activities such as researching a career, writing letters to newspapers about issues that concern them (such as where should Gary Ablett's statue be placed?) are essential.

Above all, we need to acknowledge that the school system has probably let them down at some stage and persuade them that the things they have not been able to successfully learn so far are not irretrievable and probably not their own fault.

OUTCOMES OF THE RESEARCH

To what extent were the project aims achieved?

Marilyn felt that she achieved a number of her goals, primarily in contributing to the students' success in Year 11 English, and therefore keeping them at school with some options for wider success. She also felt that her research project supported the notion that the VCE structure can be adapted to the needs of different student groups, as she was able to significantly engage her students' attention and interest by tailoring tasks to their particular interests and aspirations.

She was, however, ambivalent about the viability of focusing on metacognitive processes in any overt way. She felt that the careful selection of topics, activities and texts was much more important in engaging her students than any attempt to raise their awareness of their own learning. Marilyn also found that the PEEL strategies were invaluable as the underpinning of her efforts to promote active and purposeful learning.

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