

Teaching Excellence

Creating a Definition Through a School-based Process

• *Mary-Elizabeth Nash and Emory McLendon* •

Ms Mary-Elizabeth Nash is Year 8 Coordinator at Aquinas Catholic College and Dr. Emory McLendon is Head of the Department of Further Education and Training at the University of Southern Queensland. The authors gratefully acknowledge the patience, enthusiasm and professionalism of the staff at Aquinas Catholic College and guidance from The Leadership Research Institute at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, which led to this stimulating article.

Introduction

Aquinas Catholic College is a co-educational, secondary school in Ashmore City at the Gold Coast area of Queensland. It was established with a perceived need, in the Guardian Angels Parish Community, and developed with support from the Vincentian Fathers. Additionally, the dedicated service of the Christian Brothers of Aquinas College and the Sisters of Mercy, Star of the Sea College, facilitated the school's development. Aquinas Catholic College is managed under the auspices of the Guardian Angels Parish of Southport and Brisbane Catholic Education.

In keeping with the college motto, 'Pro Deo', Aquinas Catholic College strives to be a community of caring and faithful educators. There is a shared vision to foster and strengthen a Catholic community based on Gospel values, reflecting the richness of our Catholic tradition. Staff view themselves as a professional community of dedicated educators and carers.

The highest standards in teaching facilities are available at the College. Students with special needs are serviced through the Special Education Unit, the Learning Support Centre and the English as a Second Language Department. The College values and promotes cultural diversity and has a very successful cultural exchange and migrant student program.

The Renewal Process

At the end of 1997, the decision was made to begin a renewal process at Aquinas Catholic College. While to some extent the move was top driven by our Principal, a group of interested teachers grew to co-ordinate the project, fostering a sense of collective ownership.

The group, known as the Management Team, was composed of nine people, including the Principal, Subject Coordinators, Year Level Coordinators, several classroom teachers and the College counsellor.

From the outset, a visible feature of the project was the involvement of all staff. In January 1998, our professional development days were spent with Associate Professor Frank Crowther and Dr. Emory McLendon both with the University of Southern Queensland's, Leadership Research Institute.

Following the January workshop, The Management Team met to decide on the specific approach the renewal process should take. In making this decision, we considered the four phases of Educational Enhancement shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 — Process of Educational Enhancement at Aquinas

Phase One - Structural Foundations

- Is our educational vision clear?
- Do we exercise influence over staffing, curricula and budget?
- Does decision making focus on teaching and learning?

Phase Two - Cohesive Professional Community

- Do teachers direct processes of workplace and personal development?
- Do all parts of the community work together?
- Does the school community support and promote Aquinas' vision?

Phase Three - Infrastructure Design

- Does Aquinas' organisation complement its vision?
- Does Aquinas' organisation nurture teaching and learning?

Phase Four - Authentic Pedagogy

- Does Aquinas have agreed standards for student achievement that reflect the school's vision?
- Does Aquinas have standards for teaching that reflect goals for student achievement?

Copyright Agency limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and communication prohibited except on payment of fee per copy or communication and otherwise in accordance with the license from CAL to ACER. For more information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or info@copyright.com.au

It was agreed there was a need to focus on 'Infrastructural Design' with the clear aim of establishing a whole of staff consensus to (a) our classroom practice/management and (b) our curriculum delivery or 'how we teach'.

The first workshop with Frank Crowther and Emory McLendon focused on two areas. First, we shared stories of excellence at Aquinas Catholic College. The stories recounted were pervaded by a sense of affection, respect and loyalty to the College both past and present. Figure 2 briefly outlines some examples of these stories.

Figure 2 — Stories of Excellence at Aquinas

The wind beneath our wings ... helping rebuild the life of a young drop-out, helping rough diamonds become mature Year 12s, supporting special needs students and their families and the Senior Drama activities.

The magic of the world beyond the classroom ... the Rock Eisteddford, success of sports teams, drama festivals, theatre restaurants, multi-cultural leadership and learning about citizenship through school beautification works.

Imagination ... using simulation to inspire non-academic students, role-play to raise consciousness of personal and social issues, exploring the Catholic message, combining energy, ideas and expression in drama.

Synergy ... using the staff room to explore educational ideas, recognising our humanity, our strengths and our imperfections in all aspects of school decision making.

Second, staff shared their aspirations for the future of Aquinas Catholic College. Most of these dreams focused on identifying our vision as a school, reaching excellence in our teaching and establishing harmony within the school community.

At the end of the day it was established that, 'As a faculty, we are undertaking a project to enhance a holistic curriculum with a vocational and academic focus'. With this determined, we were able to begin consistently channelling our renewal efforts into providing excellence in our teaching.

Following the January workshop, the Management Team held a series of meetings to coordinate the focus we had collectively established. Our first action was to name the project. *Making Aquinas The Finest* was chosen as the school slogan. Next, we drafted survey instruments for students, parents, staff and the parish. To judge the aspirations of the students, parents and parish for the College, three questions were used.

- 1) In your experience, what is great about Aquinas?
- 2) Describe an outstanding contribution by a teacher.
- 3) If there were something you could change about Aquinas, what would it be?

We took advantage of parent information nights for different Year levels to distribute the parent survey. Students completed their survey during Year level pastoral care time within one week. Parish surveys were distributed at Sunday Mass with the assistance of the Parish priest, Fr Brian O'Sullivan.

Teaching staff completed a different survey, asking reflective questions about their 'best teaching'. Questions included:

- 1) What was the best lesson I taught this week?
- 2) How did I teach that was so successful?
- 3) How did my students respond to the way I taught?
- 4) What evidence do I have that my students learnt something successfully?

After parent, student and parish surveys were collected they were divided up amongst the Management Team. From the surveys, the Team identified key ideas and themes that were collated at our next meeting. Frank Crowther and Emory McLendon both noted it was encouraging to have so many positive responses, as it is not uncommon for open-ended surveys to be used as an opportunity to air grievances. A summary of the responses was published in the College newsletter.

Following collection of the teacher surveys it was decided, as a staff, to use a workshop in April to analyse the responses. Our purpose was to reach agreement on what teaching excellence was, using both responses from the surveys and reflection activities on the day. We had a strong base of strengths which had been highlighted in the surveys.

Following the April workshop, the Management Team composed a first draft of our statement on 'Excellence in Teaching', requiring several drafts and considerable effort. It appeared there were staff who felt threatened by the statement and were concerned about publishing the final draft. During this period, we met with Frank Crowther to confirm the statement was educationally sound.

The final draft of our 'Excellence in Teaching' statement, shown in Figure 3, was distributed to all staff for comment and it was decided to publish the statement in our term newsletter.

Figure 3 — Excellence in Teaching: Our Definition

We, the Aquinas Catholic College teachers, believe that Excellence in Teaching at Aquinas Catholic College has a specific and distinctive definition. It is a three-dimensional definition which encompasses each subject that Aquinas Catholic College offers, applies at each year level and recognises the full range of capabilities and needs of our students. It is evident in the instructional strategies that we employ, the learning processes in which our students engage, our assessment procedures and our school-community relationships.

Thus: We recognise the essential importance of carefully planned and structured learning experiences; of demonstrating relevance to real-life situations; of measuring the development of students fairly and consistently; and fostering enthusiasm and a positive climate in our school and in our individual classrooms.

We strive to ensure that our students experience a range of learning alternatives; are challenged to achieve their individual capabilities; engage in inquiry processes; and develop higher-order thinking skills.

We regard the pastoral care of our students as integral to our teaching responsibilities.

We conduct our communications within the school and the broader school community, openly and effectively.

Defined this way, excellence in teaching is consistent with significant learning theories, with the ethics of the teaching profession and with the expressed aspirations of our students and community. Implemented with conviction across the school, it will ensure that Aquinas Catholic College offers education that is of the highest quality.

The next step towards implementing ideas from our 'Excellence in Teaching' statement requires Subject Coordinators to examine the implications of the statement for their individual departments. Each subject area provides opportunities for excellence in teaching in varied and individual ways.

Once we have taken this step, we will enter a trial period during which time we can analyse ways in which we are and are not providing excellence in teaching. This will highlight any necessary changes to be made to our teaching and is an essential step in making our statement an educational reality. Importantly, this will need an evaluation plan, ongoing professional development and a mentoring system within the school.

Outcomes to Date

As a result of the nearly eight months spent on this project to date, there is one very clear outcome. We have produced a statement of what we believe, as a staff, constitutes 'Excellence in Teaching' at Aquinas Catholic College.

In addition, we have witnessed a real, unwavering commitment and inspiration from the Management Team. They have given freely of their time, for the sole purpose of *Making Aquinas The Finest*.

A particular challenge in the process is a resistance or perhaps hesitancy to contribute and support the initiative. There are staff who feel we've done it all before; a few who seem uncomfortable with change; some who wish to ignore the process; and others who simply feel there are more pressing concerns.

At a recent meeting of coordinators, those present were given the opportunity to stop the project and prevent wider publication of our achievements. Although there was no objection to the project continuing, there were concerns voiced. The main concern was that other issues affecting the College might hinder or even prevent success. It was also felt that once we published our 'Excellence in Teaching' statement, we were open to criticism. General discussion diminished these concerns and the coordinators agreed to continue supporting the project.

Perhaps the single greatest concern is the risk of losing the good we have already achieved from the project. Aquinas College has a considerable investment in the project and the thought of losing this investment is both frustrating and disappointing to those who have devoted so much time and energy to the project. No doubt, students and parents would also be disappointed.

And Now?

We need to ask ourselves, have we really created ownership of the project? The Management Team honestly believe we went about the project in the 'right

way'. Despite this, however, we seem to have been less than successful in generating the full and visible commitment of all the staff. It is also interesting that middle management at the college has been cautious in offering their fullest support.

At different stages of the project we have heard from those staff who seemed threatened by the project or were cynical about the implementation strategies. It is certainly not unexpected, in a project of this nature, to encounter a degree of skepticism. In fact, it would have been naive to believe that everyone would be fully supportive throughout the project.

Specific causes of staff concern include:

- The Aquinas definition of pedagogy intimidated some people as they felt it could never be achieved and as a result were unsure of the consequences of failure.
- Some staff resented the implicit assumption that their work would lose its intimacy by being made a public commodity.
- Certain subject department areas felt the change in pedagogy they were being asked to undertake was undesirable and that the definition did not fit their disciplines very well.

Throughout the renewal process, a concerted effort has been made to keep staff involved and informed at every step of the process. A summary of the January workshop was distributed to staff, input was collected in workshops, staff meetings and through survey and reports were issued following each Management Team

meeting. Regular updates on the project were provided to staff in the attempt to keep everyone informed and A4 posters of *Making Aquinas The Finest*, were distributed for classroom display. In short, we believe we have made a 'good faith' effort to foster staff ownership in the project.

It is useful to note that we always considered the Aquinas initiative as somewhat unique. It is a conscious and focused attempt at generating school improvement by bringing together two processes that are often dealt with independently. The first process is organisational reculturing and the second is classroom improvement. To date, we know of no school development model, which successfully blends these two processes. Typically, each process has its own agenda and usually has little to do with complementing or supporting the other process. This is seen in the separation of leadership development from classroom practice development. The Aquinas project attempts to integrate these processes and is evidenced in the creation of the Aquinas 'Excellence in Teaching' definition. We see significance in the Aquinas initiative, which extends beyond the grounds of our school. Our experience highlights some of the problems that are likely to be encountered in any attempt at managing the two processes together.

Yes, there is more work to be done and the Management Team has every intention of informing and involving staff in that work. And yes, we continue to believe that a united and committed effort from those who insist on *Making Aquinas The Finest* will succeed.



Vertical Curriculum Update

An Experiment in a Country School: 12 Months onwards

• Kerin Glennen •

Kerin Glennen wrote in the October 1998 issue of *Catholic School Studies* about the introduction of Vertical Curriculum in Trinity College, Colac. He has provided impressions of the first year of operation of the scheme and may be contacted for further information at PO Box 23, Colac, 3250 (fax 035332 1447).

Preamble

Trinity College in Colac is now in its third Semester of the Vertical Curriculum having seen its introduction and the creation of the Middle School in 1998. Although the notion of educating students at their own level is not revolutionary, the ideal of achieving this in a school setting is a little novel. The College has drawn

on its 1995 Mission Statement which advocated 'developing programs which will cater to the individual differences within the classroom, paying particular attention to the gifted and talented and those with special needs'. We set about being proactive with students education. Parents, students and staff have embraced the concept and the ideology behind the educational soundness of the idea. This being the case,