



Professional Learning
Research
Innovation

Learning in Practice

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About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

Editors

Dr Brad Merrick
Dr Greg Cunningham
Mrs Amanda Eastman

Editorial Assistant

Susan Layton

Creative

Glenn Quevedo

Printing

Barker Print Room

About the Author

Jeremy von Einem began teaching at Oxley College, Bowral as the foundation physics teacher. He became Head of Science at Barker College in 1997 and led the staff response to the building of the Foundation Science Building. After two years at Cranbrook School, he returned to Barker College as Director of Studies and remained in that role for 12 years before moving to the role of Director of Academic Performance. He is particularly interested in how educational theory is expressed as actual classroom practice and in improving ways students study and remember information.

Redefining the Senior School to Promote Independent Learning through eTime



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J R von Einem
Director of Academic Performance

Abstract

How should Barker College best prepare students for post-school education? Are the current structures within the Senior School appropriate to produce students who can be independent learners and thinkers, students with good skills in research, communication and collaboration, able to face the challenges and demands of tertiary study as well as be positive contributors to the global community? It is also clear that good executive functioning skills (ability to prioritise work, manage time, self-regulate, organise, set goals and plan) are essential to success in and beyond school. This paper investigates an approach to promote independent learning and improve executive functioning skills in Year 10 students using a program called eTime.

The Barker Senior School is designed (and advertised) as a 'bridge to university' and, as such, the pastoral care system exists where the Tutor is each of their student's 'critical friend' and guide through the latter years of their secondary schooling. In the same way, the relationship between teacher and student evolves as each student progresses through the school to be a less formal one and more of a facilitator of student learning rather than a more traditional didactic approach.

It is appropriate that our approach be re-examined from time to time. There were a considerable number of comments made by staff to the Education and Care domain working group of the 2014 Strategic Plan primarily requesting that the School investigate ways to make students more independent in, and responsible for, their own learning. Recent conversations between Senior staff and representatives from the tertiary sector have also supported developing an approach that leads to greater independence. Anecdotally, it is suggested that while independent schools appear to elicit much from their students in terms of results and hence improve their chances in securing university places, once at university, students revert to their own natural abilities with many struggling with the demands of higher education.

By building greater skills in working independently at secondary school, Barker can prepare its students for tertiary study better. Over 85% of Barker students progress to university. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the School to prepare its students for this transition.

eTime

Commencing in Year 10 in Term 1, 2015, non-practical core courses were taught as usual, but one period per fortnight was reserved for a tutorial system called eTime. Class teachers (or academic departments) set work to be completed by students in these tutorial periods. Students were randomly assigned to a tutorial group that was indicated on their timetable

for each of these subjects. Students were responsible for deciding what work was to be completed in each such session. The classroom teacher, initially on a fortnightly basis, would sign off on completed work.

Students were responsible for when they completed work and in what order. Students would access work through the School Portal (work would be placed in the learning management system at the start of each teaching cycle). A factor to consider at that time was the ability of the School's wireless internet system to cope with increased demands.

It is also important that the work set by individual teachers or departments was seen as *meaningful* work that helped to facilitate the understanding and development of the student. As students were the arbiters of which piece of work was completed and when, they decided the priority of each piece of work. It was hoped that over time, assessment work, homework and tutorial work would blur into just 'work', as tutorial work would be seen as instrumental to their understanding of course outcomes.

Practical classes already had a significant project-based approach and so these were excluded from this program. The program included all non-practical, core classes that had at least a 6 period per fortnight exposure.

The expected gain arising from this programme was a greater independence of students in managing their learning. Students had a greater say in how they completed work and therefore increased control in their learning. It was expected that some students would flourish under this approach, while others might require more initial support. Some students would fail at being able to plan and prioritise tasks and this is an important phase of their development. Students should be able to fail. On the other hand, some staff had difficulty coming to terms with slightly less control of the content and learning and teaching processes. Some staff and departments found that their work was not being completed as students appeared not to find it meaningful to their understanding of course work. There was an iterative process in the first year while departments adjusted to the nature and scope of their work in preparing students better.

Tutors were not responsible for following up on students who did not complete tutorial work. Departments needed to think why students had chosen not to complete their work. For example, was it a problem with the work not being meaningful enough to the student? Similarly, teachers should not have spent the next period of regular class time going through the work in great detail or re-teaching the work because they felt students had not sufficiently grasped the material. This would mean a net loss of teaching time from the overall program and this would be unsustainable. Again, this led to a rethink of the type of work given to students.

The program allowed for academic departments to set different types of tasks such as making use of the 'flipped classroom' through online preparatory lectures, inquiry-based learning opportunities and other imaginative uses of digital content. More traditional work such as practice work, drill and review work and making summaries also formed part of tutorial work.

It was hoped that another benefit was the way in which a student views the teaching staff. As teaching staff were involved in supervising tutorial groups, students sought assistance from these staff when completing work. This allowed staff to see what work is completed in other departments (and possibly better inform their own teaching) and this also enabled students to see staff not as holders of all knowledge, but people who helped explain instructions and suggest ideas without necessarily knowing or giving the answers. This can help the student-teacher relationship.

In 2015 this program was open to Year 10 only and the aim was to extend it to Years 11 and 12 in 2016. Students would be designated a tutorial room for each tutorial period (and be in almost randomly designated groups), but over time some students who had demonstrated an ability to work responsibly could be allowed to work in other areas of the School. On the other hand, students with less developed executive functioning skills could attend learning support during these times so they could be taught more explicitly. It was decided not to extend the program to Year 11 and 12 at this stage.

This would be 'the way that the Senior School operates at Barker'. The Senior School is not a bridge to university in name only, but also in how it functions.

Feedback and Reflection

Over the two-year period (2015 – 2016), much research went into what worked and what did not work with eTime. Students and staff were surveyed multiple times to determine what material seemed to work well as well as attitudes to the program.

The attitudes were mixed. Some students really appreciated the opportunity to decide which work they did and when. Occasionally, they used eTime periods to study for upcoming assessment tasks and did their eTime work at home. This was an excellent use of eTime. These were generally the students who already had good executive functioning skills.

However, many students did not have a positive attitude towards eTime. Students were concerned about the amount of work that was given to them in eTime. This was a fair criticism as we initially instructed staff to provide at least an hour's worth of work for the hour-long eTime period. On reflection, a student in a classroom with a more teacher-centred approach would be passive for most of the time and the amount of written work might be very small. This was being substituted by an hour of written work, which led to a negative attitude towards eTime. Students at schools such as Barker are used to very directed lessons where the teacher 'does most of the work' and students passively absorb the material without the responsibility for deciding what they have to do and when. They simply do what they are told. This can be a comforting arrangement for the lower to middle ability student. However, the higher ability student can find this approach limiting and frustrating. Students thought the 'best' eTime work was that which directly related to what was going on in class, and hence they saw its relevance.

Feedback from staff was also mixed. There were some staff who changed how they taught to fit the program. Many had concerns that work was simply not being completed. Teachers with a more traditional approach were sceptical about the ability of the student to learn anything without their direct guidance. Information about students' concerns was fed back to Heads of Department, particularly about the type and nature of work set.

At the end of 2016 it was decided to make some changes to eTime. This involved changing the two-week cycle of sending out and then returning work to a shorter timeframe. This allowed staff to link the eTime work better with what was occurring in class. Staff were encouraged not to call specific work 'eTime work', so that class, eTime and homework would all be things that could be considered as just 'work' and thus could be completed in eTime periods at the student's direction. Surveys in 2017 have suggested that this has made a positive impact on the attitude of students towards eTime. Preliminary data shows that our aims are beginning to be fulfilled.



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