



Fuelling bright ideas for teaching gifted students

Coming up with bright ideas to stir students' imaginations, spawn valuable new learning experiences and support curriculum is all in a day's work for teachers around Australia. In Tasmania, an online mentoring network is lending a helping hand.

Created to build teacher capacity to design, create and deliver high quality online learning, the network was developed by the Tasmanian Department of Education with help from Microsoft's Partners in Learning, a global initiative that will see Microsoft invest \$10 million in cash, curriculum and software access in Australian schools over five years.

Stellar performer – Ad Astra

The department's popular Ad Astra program was the starting point. Developed by Wendy Fletcher for Tasmania's Online Campus and launched in 2001, Ad Astra set out to transform the learning experience of high ability early childhood and primary school students through online communities. With rave reviews from students, the program had a waiting list.

Judy Travers, director of the department's Centre for Extended Learning Opportunities, says: "Ad Astra was so successful it generated a demand we didn't have a hope of meeting. Without Microsoft support it would have remained a niche program. Now we've been able to expand it statewide."

"Ad Astra was so successful it generated a demand we didn't have a hope of meeting. Without Microsoft support it would have remained a niche program. Now we've been able to expand it statewide."

Judy Travers, Tasmanian Department of Education

Engaging students, empowering teachers,
expanding horizons

To achieve this, Judy and colleague Angela Cooke set up a school-based mentor network to build local capacity to deliver the program. They designed professional development, including workshops and online resources, for the mentors to use in inspiring, upskilling and coaching their colleagues. It wasn't long before teachers all over Tasmania were switching on to Ad Astra as a way to engage, motivate and extend their more able students.

A galaxy of online learning communities

Spurred by this success, Judy and Angela applied the same principles to other online programs designed to extend students. They're now supporting 35 programs at various stages of development, with ten programs already offered statewide, such as Socrates Café, where primary school children engage in Socratic dialogue in support of curriculum. Other initiatives explore mathematics, science, writing, information literacy and the mathematical and ICT concepts underlying computer games.

Grassroots ideas get off the ground

Through demonstrating the possibilities of online approaches and supporting programs to become sustainable, the online learning initiative is helping great ideas from the grassroots get off the ground.

And there's no shortage of ideas. Judy says: "Teachers who come to us for professional learning bring with them a germ of an idea, something that will stimulate the skills, abilities and interests of those students. So we tie the learning into the passion of the teacher."

Equipped with professional development, teachers receive information and work samples to get them started. "Then we encourage them to take over the resourcing of the programs themselves, and to innovate," Angela says.



Invited to log on and learn, gifted students all over Tasmania responded with enthusiasm.

"We support them in the short term to get innovations up and running, and we work as hard as we can to guarantee success so new programs will continue and build."

Richer student experiences

Microsoft's Felicia Brown, who manages the Partners in Learning program in Australia, says: "Online learning approaches are very effective for developing ICT skills in teachers. And they're a wonderful way to create diverse, relevant and curriculum-focused learning experiences for students, particularly in small or remote schools. It's been fantastic to see Tasmania explore that potential."

And judging by the popularity of these programs, Tasmania's gifted students agree. For those who thrive on challenge, online learning communities multiply their opportunities to work with others with like mind – improving learning outcomes.

"We want student achievement and engagement – that's what we're aiming for," Angela says. "So it's always great when students ask at the end of the program: 'When is it starting again? And can I be part of it?' That feedback tells us we're on track."

Insights gained

"Online learning approaches are very effective for developing ICT skills in teachers. And they're a wonderful way to create diverse, relevant and curriculum-focused learning experiences for students, particularly in small or remote schools."

Felicia Brown, Microsoft