



Accepting the challenge: How ATAR and the Humanities can reclaim their importance

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Recently, I was given the opportunity to present at an “ATAR Masterclass” for the Anglican Schools Commission Inc. The purpose was to share best practice and reveal aspects of what our Humanities and Social Sciences (HaSS) Department at Peter Moyes Anglican Community School (PMACS) has developed over the last few years to try to maximise the ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) achievement of students in our subjects.

Since 2016, and the introduction of the ATAR courses, we have experienced growth in the collective success of PMACS Year 12 Humanities students. Across four subjects, we have had six state subject recognitions. This means that 10% of students in our courses

feature in the top 15% of the state in those subjects. We could possibly have had more due to high raw exam averages; however, some courses have had fewer than ten students and are, therefore, not eligible. The line graph (See Figure 1) charts the standardised course combined score of PMACS HaSS ATAR subjects compared to the mean of 60%, when scores are applied to a state-wide common scale. It is also important to view these results within the context of our twenty-year-old co-educational school experiencing median ATARs either at or slightly below the state median ATAR. Only in 2019 have we featured in the top 50 ranked West Australian schools’ median ATARs.

Table 1: Core values and attributes of teachers, students and parents at PMACS

PMACS HaSS Teacher	PMACS HaSS Student	PMACS Parent
METICULOUS PLANNER	PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY	SUPPORTIVE
HIGH EXPECTATIONS	CHALLENGE-ORIENTED	HIGH EXPECTATIONS
CLARITY	ACTIVE LEARNER	ACTIVELY INVOLVED
EVIDENCE-BASED	INDEPENDENT	ACCOUNTABLE
GROWTH MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET

Figure 1: Standardised course combined score of Peter Moyes Anglican Community School (PMACS) Humanities and Social Sciences ATAR Subjects



I found it a daunting task to try to encapsulate everything we did into a brief presentation. Much of what our team has embedded relates to pedagogical process and practice; however, these practices are exponentially enhanced by the culture of learning that the PMACS Humanities team shares and inculcates in our students and their parents. Table 1 illustrates the core values and attributes that we pursue.

A healthy and functional partnership between these groups is essential for any child to experience growth in their learning. Consequently, our team is explicit about the attitudes, values, responsibilities, and behaviours that each group needs to demonstrate to forge a communal culture of learning to facilitate growth. Strong cultures do not develop through osmosis, but through deliberate actions and words consistently applied over a prolonged period. I will briefly summarise the tabled criteria to illustrate how the five targeted responsibilities of each group combine to achieve this.

The teacher

I have often used the mantra “if we do not plan for it, we will not do it” and a direct path can be traced to our course documentation. Our team agreed to create highly detailed programs which have been fundamental in improving course delivery over the last few years. Teaching teams experience increased consistency and collegiality knowing that the same objectives, success criteria, and curriculum priorities are being pursued to the same level of excellence in each class of the cohort.

High expectations are integral to the progression of students. Students are entitled to progress during each year of their schooling, and it would be impossible if the teacher set the bar low for every student under their care. Students aspire to a teacher’s high expectations if they are set appropriately, rather than descending despairingly to the low level the teacher estimates of them. Lessons are designed with differentiation at the forefront to effectively challenge students at the level of need so they can attain specific targets. Progress is tracked using formative and summative assessment reflections where students can review feedback, interrogate rubrics, and discuss with the teacher areas and strategies for improvement.

Clarity of purpose, clear instruction, scaffolded questioning, and insightful feedback are so important. We have co-created a simple two-sentence vision for the students regarding the Humanities, which is outlined below. It adorns the walls of each HaSS classroom and informs everything we do in our drive towards it.

*To develop **enthusiastic learners** with a **growth mindset** and skills relevant to the modern world. They will be **engaged, informed** and **active citizens** with a **worldview** relevant to the complex society of the future.*

We focus heavily on skills during lessons to enable students to move through the phases of SOLO (i.e., structure of observed learning outcomes) taxonomy. Competencies central to curriculum requirements and those of the 21st century knowledge economy are clearly articulated and sequenced in each learning experience.

Our most serious challenges to continued ATAR success are external in nature and centred on the gradual erosion of the esteem held towards the ATAR pathway.

In our drive for clarity, we are continually refining our questioning skills employing Bloom's Taxonomy as a basic framework for retrieval practice, class discussion, and assessment of/for learning questioning. Effective feedback is also essential. Within the team, we have run our own professional development sessions about the clarity of feedback using principles of task, process, self-regulatory, and self.

The use of school-derived data has played an extremely important part in our team's learning journey. It provides evidence for us to measure our effect and enable us to interrogate how and where to recalibrate our approach to improve student outcomes. We use it to differentiate our approach for students' needs, which learning gaps to address, and with whom. Essentially, we are taking a gauge in each lesson and assessing how effectively we are meeting the needs of the learners under our care. We also use surveys with staff, students, and parents to gather data on our approach to teaching and learning. In terms of ATAR performance, statistical documents and students' examination analyses are reviewed annually to inform adaptations of course design and delivery for the next academic year.

Changing the mindset of our team has probably been the most important part of our achievement. This is the willingness to: be self-reflective; be a team player; have a positive attitude; accept and act on feedback; be open-minded; be a seeker of challenge; and understand that failure is an essential part of the learning journey. I regularly have coaching conversations with staff members based on their needs. It is time-consuming but the investment in people has been worth it. If you look after people, the performance looks after itself. I truly believe that coaching and mentoring are the "multiplier effect" in increasing teachers' efficacy.

The student

Students need to understand that *they are responsible* for their learning journey, and this will be cultivated under the expert guidance of the professional educator. How receptive they are to this message is within their control. This is demonstrated through students' organisation and preparation for lessons, as well as decisions and actions to address learning blocks. It allows for students to grow by confronting challenges and coaching them to assume, and feel comfortable with, the responsibility of being in control of their learning journey. Students are rewarded with sense of achievement, efficacy and independence, rather than dependency, despondency, and helplessness.

Many students are passive learners and more than willing to come to school to watch the teacher work, as opposed to coming to school to work, and think, themselves. "Death by PowerPoint" is preferred by many students and some teachers are more than willing to provide it. During PMACS Humanities lessons, students do not have a choice. They are expected to be actively involved in all parts of the lesson and are made accountable for their involvement. "Memory is the residue of thought" (Willingham, 2009, p. 54) and many students are just not thinking, and learning, if they are being lectured at for most of the lesson or have a PowerPoint being read to them.

I tell our students "*If you still need us to help you learn after you leave school then we will feel that we have failed you.*" The aim is to develop independent learners who know how to learn effectively. Embedding such skills throughout their formative years has been important for ATAR achievement but will also be in high demand in a 21st century knowledge economy. A sense of independence and efficacy is so empowering for the student learner on their journey to mastery. The process also breeds a disciplined student who will be proactive in preparation for each class; they will be an active participant in lessons; they will be confident in asking questions about their learning blocks rather than the teacher divising them; their parents will be actively involved; and they will have a growth mindset.

Teachers endeavour to *know thy student* when I think we should also be teaching them strategies to eventually *know thyself* so they can work on developing a growth mindset. At the beginning of each school year, we revisit the attributes of a growth mindset, the positive behaviours and habits to support it, as well as the toxic behaviours that undermine it. We teach students to seek challenge, accept feedback, normalise failure, to not blame external factors, take control of their personal situation, and seek the answers within themselves regarding their progress. All with teacher guidance of course.

The parent / guardian

Much of what I have related already is applicable to our parent body, so the cultivation of a supportive relationship with them is fundamentally important. Without that bond, in the appropriate manner we need, we really struggle to improve outcomes for our students and their children. Parents and guardians are coached to acquire a growth mindset themselves in understanding the high expectations, the level of appropriate challenge we set, and our drive for the students to develop the habits of an independent learner. "Failure is an opportunity to grow" is a constant mantra we urge them to believe in. Our key initiative here is our Independent Student Program (ISP) where we encourage parents' and guardians' direct involvement in their child's learning. The program triggers the three-way partnership that is integral to a student's academic growth. Parents are just as accountable as teachers and students for their part in the learning journey of their children. The difficulties in juggling the demands of modern life are understandable; however, parents' understanding of this initiative is increasing, and it is gaining momentum.

Future challenges

Our most serious challenges to continued ATAR success are external in nature and centred on the gradual erosion of the esteem held towards the ATAR pathway. Enrolments in Humanities ATAR courses are diminishing throughout Western Australian schools. During 2020, the Commonwealth Government's 1.13% increase in cost for tertiary Humanities degrees, and the McGowan government's "Take Two STEM" campaign induced many students to ponder the usefulness of Humanities courses towards their future career.

Alternative pathway entry to university and the competitiveness amongst universities to offer early entry based on Year 11 results has seen many students choose not to realise their potential in ATAR courses. Cases are increasing where students opt to not challenge themselves to the best of their ability by taking other pathways, preferring to cruise through Year 11 and 12 knowing that they will still be able to undertake the university courses they desire. Many students, quite rightly and with sound school counselling, are correctly guided towards non-ATAR pathways for very valid reasons; however, an increasing number of promising and able students are

rejecting the opportunity to not even try to test themselves at the ATAR level. Numerous influences play a role in such cases - too many to debate here - but it is difficult to comprehend when able students, without an understandable reason, choose not to undertake the more difficult road that arguably leads to greater growth as a learner and a person.

A greater impact has been universities making early offers midway through Year 12. The student works out the Tertiary Entrance Aggregate needed to attain the requisite ATAR and lowers their application and effort accordingly. The pressure in qualifying for the next step may be relieved for student and university; however, it is incredibly frustrating for teachers, who have invested years of time and expertise, witnessing many students' motivation, attitude, effort and grades diminish to the level they need rather than what their ability promises. This is contrary to the high expectations of self and the idea of being the best you can be, which we try to instil in the students from Year 7.

The challenges, at times, appear insurmountable. Nevertheless, our deliberate actions are beginning to create, in greater numbers, a type of learner who can experience success in ATAR subjects, other learning pathways, and in life itself. Irrespective of how their journey continues when they leave school, if they can learn independently, maintain a growth mindset, be active citizens, and thrive in our complex society, then our Humanities team will have excelled in our aim.

References

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Keith Briggs has been the Head of Humanities and Social Sciences at Peter Moyes Anglican Community School in Western Australia for the last ten years. In 2018 he received an ACEL Award for Excellence as Teacher-Leader and he continues to strive every day to live up to that honour.

