



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

## **VATE Media Release – April 2017**

### **English teachers use engagement and imagination to improve secondary students' reading**

Amid international reports that Australian students' literacy results are plateauing, a community of English teachers has found a way to speak back to the consequences in the classroom of high-stakes testing initiatives such as the NAPLAN, and to place engagement and imagination back at the centre of improving secondary school students' reading skills.

The research project, now in its third year, was instigated by the convenors of the Professional Learning and Research Committee, Dr Amanda McGraw and Mary Mason at VATE (Victorian Association for the Teaching of English) and is funded by the Department of Education and Training. The project, known as 'Reading Communities of Practice', involves schools across Victoria working together to develop strategies for teaching reading.

When faced by an increased focus on high-stakes testing, many schools respond by drilling students and focusing on highly structured learning activities in the hope that students will improve their scores. Evidence collected during the course of this project suggests that this is leading students to disengage with reading and to regurgitating what they feel teachers want rather than making and valuing their own rich interpretations. Schools participating in the project are matched with experienced English educators who work as critical friends with teachers to trial teaching approaches which foster social interactions, deep thinking, and imagination.

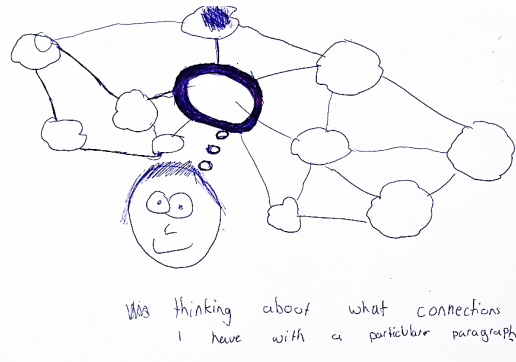
"Good teaching of reading is not just about comprehension questions and it's not just about isolated skill instruction," explains Emily Frawley, VATE's president. "If that's how reading is being experienced, the students aren't going to be engaged, and they're not going to learn and grow as readers."

Ida Sakkal, from Etham High School, is one teacher whose school has seen the benefits of the project. "It has changed our school's approach to reading," she explains. "In order for students to develop greater complexity in their ideas, use sophisticated language, and enhance their writing, we need to address how they read and what we can do to develop their understandings." Sakkal's school worked with a number of oral, visual and kinaesthetic strategies to encourage students to engage more actively with the texts they read.

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One activity, the 'personal atom' requires students to think of the most important things in their life and chart it on a mindmap before applying the same concept to the characters in the novel they read. They then discuss how their values compare and speculate as to the reasons behind similarities and differences.



For David Lee, a teacher at Rosehill Secondary College, one of the key benefits was teachers working actively with students to develop shared understandings about texts. "We explored the impact of embodied reading activities on students' engagement and thinking about texts; activities that involved the students moving. They role played significant moments and scenes, interviewed characters and made connections between the text and their own lives. After each activity we asked the students for feedback about what was working and what wasn't. It became a shared learning experience for students and teachers," he said.

Now in its third and final year, one of the project's leaders, Mary Mason, says that teachers are discovering that they have to do different activities so that students can make personalised meanings of texts. "This may involve sustained silent reading at the beginning of each lesson, role play, painting, modeling, conferencing, substantive conversations, where they do not simply regurgitate what the teacher says but enter into a relationship with the text for themselves." For Dr Amanda McGraw, another of the leaders, it is starting with the students and their experience of classroom reading that is crucially important. "We ask students to talk about and draw what happens in their heads when they read," she said. "We use what they say as the basis for teachers' inquiries."

The VATE Community of Practice is shared with English teachers through a range of Professional Learning opportunities. Teachers present their projects each year at the VATE state conference and will publish their findings in the VATE journal, *Idiom*, later this year.

Contact details for further comment

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