

# Improving Teacher Clarity: Enacting Visible Learning Theory into action

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## BACKGROUND

Penrhos College's Visible Learning journey began in 2011, with an organisational restructure of the Secondary School. There was a desire to reduce the duplication of roles and introduced a new Teaching and Learning leadership team. This signalled a strong future focus on teacher practice, students' learning and the ongoing professional growth of the teaching staff.

One of the first objectives of the new leadership team was to introduce a culture of lesson observation and feedback to teachers on their classroom practice. Sharing practice and determining the characteristics of excellent teaching were the desired outcomes. Ongoing lesson observations over that year revealed that, while students were engaged in their learning activities, they were not able to articulate what it was that they were learning. They were also unable to say whether they had made any progress in their learning. It became apparent that a divide existed between the learning the teachers thought was occurring in their classes and what the students were able to describe. Communication around the feedback teachers were getting regarding their lesson observation needed to improve and the College engaged GROWTH Coaching International to provide middle and senior management with the appropriate coaching skills to be able to assist staff in their ongoing development. GROWTH Coaching training and professional reading from Knight, (2007) supported managers to work in partnership with staff toward our aspirations.

## OUR JOURNEY

In 2013, several key leaders attended the McMillan Professional Learning Australia run workshop, Visible Learning Plus – Foundation seminar. This PD was a catalyst for further research into Hattie's (2009) Visible Learning, which resonated well with many educators in the College. This initial investigation identified three elements that would have a positive effect on the student's learning. Hence, this led to a whole school focus on delivering a 'three-part' lesson. The three-part lesson set down the minimum expectations for teachers to, a) set clear learning objectives for the lesson, b) deliver the learning through some form of activity and c) conclude with a plenary to check for understanding.

During 2013, evidence gathered from lesson observations indicated that, for those staff using lesson objectives, the language used in them was not assisting the students' understanding of the learning. There was substantial evidence to suggest that we had not fully engaged the staff in the value of this practice. Thus the Teaching and Learning team decided that all teaching staff needed to be made aware of Hattie's research and McMillan Professional Learning Australia were contracted to deliver the Foundation seminar at the beginning of Term 1 2014, to the

120, K-12 staff. This powerful workshop challenged the staff's perception of what works in promoting learning. They left with a better understanding of the rationale of the three-part lesson and began to engage in the process of providing clarity to the learning for their students.

McMillan Professional Learning Australia delivered two additional workshops to the leadership team over 2014. The Evidence into Action Day 1, gathered middle and senior leaders together to gather, collect and examine evidence that would be used to help answer the focus questions for each of the Visible Learning Strands. As a part of the process a substantial amount of data was collected and evaluated. This included student interviews to determine the extent that they were demonstrating Visible Learner characteristics, determining effect sizes based on NAPLAN results for numeracy, student surveys to determine the level of inspiration and passion in their teachers, along with the quality of feedback given to them. In addition, teaching staff completed the Visible Learning School Matrix survey to gather baseline data about their perceptions of how Visible Learning was being enacted in the school. Prior to the second Evidence into Action day, this data was presented and reviewed by middle and senior leaders. The answers to these initial focus questions led to strategic guidelines for our Visible Learning journey at the College. During the second Evidence into Action day, senior leaders developed an aspirational statement for Visible Learning (see Figure 1) that focused on students and their learning. Using the evidence gathered, they then identified focus areas of development that would lead to the achievement of our aspiration. The focus areas addressed are in bold (see Figure 2) were our initial priorities.

### Our Aspiration for Visible Learning In Our School

Penrhos College students are visible learners. Each student will be able to articulate what they are learning, why they are learning it and where they will go next in their learning. They will be able to describe the strategies they can use to enhance their future learning.



Figure 1: Aspiration for Visible Learning  
(slide from Introduction to Visible Learning workshop delivered to teaching staff in 2015)

### Focus Areas for Penrhos College

- ▶ Shared definition of an effective learner at our school
- ▶ **Learning intentions and success criteria**
- ▶ **Student self-assessment and peer assessment and feedback**
- ▶ Understanding learning progressions
- ▶ **Instructional feedback (written, oral)**
- ▶ Professional development systems
- ▶ Student feedback to teachers and school leaders



Figure 2: Focus area  
(slide from Introduction to Visible Learning workshop delivered to teaching staff in 2015)

The initial timeline for addressing these aspects was, upon reflection, very ambitious. A coordinated whole College professional learning plan was developed. Three sessions were dedicated to whole staff Visible Learning workshops and the other six sessions were left to Heads of Department and Team Leaders to decide the strategic priorities they wished to progress. The plan was to introduce the concept of learning intentions over Term 1 2015, with staff embedding these into their practice immediately. Success criteria was introduced at the beginning of Term 2 and feedback was introduced at the beginning of Term 3. Each of these three foci was delivered to K-12 staff by the Teaching and Learning team. The workshops were structured to raise awareness of the theory and using illustrations of practice, show the practical application of the theory.

All teachers found the task of unpacking the content into the knowledge, understandings and skills required to address the learning, very challenging. For many departments the starting point was to rebadge syllabus statements or content descriptors as learning intentions. Other areas produced statements about the task and not the learning. Considerable debate surrounded the correct representation of learning intentions and several formats emerged, depending if the reference source was Hattie (2009), Marzano (2009) or Glasson (2009). To avoid confusion for the students, it was decided that all learning intentions should be framed using an active verb within them to describe the depth of knowledge, understanding or skill development required.

During Term 3 of 2015, it was evident that the majority of departments were not ready to address any aspects of feedback. It was decided at this time to reassess the timeline set and be more responsive to the rate of learning of the staff. Consequently, the rest of the professional learning time for 2015 was devoted to addressing learning intentions. As part of a yearly review of programmes of study, teachers were instructed to include learning intentions into these documents, by the end of 2015 in preparation for the 2016 school year. The purpose of this was to promote consistent use of the learning intentions across multiple classes of the same discipline, within the same year. Allowing more time to develop learning intentions and making staff accountable for them was pivotal in creating engagement and momentum.

The professional learning plan for 2016 was initially developed around new curriculum implementation, success criteria and feedback, but it became evident early in the year that addressing feedback was again, going to be too ambitious. In the secondary school, departments were at quite different points in their Visible Learning journey, so the nine professional learning sessions were left open to Heads of Department to decide and differentiate according to their own groups' progress with support from senior leaders.

Most departments adopted a differentiated approach to their success criteria statements, writing them in a 'must', 'should', 'could' format. The 'should' and 'could' criteria addressing higher levels of Blooms or SOLO taxonomy's. In some areas, this revealed a duplication of statements in both the learning intentions and success criteria, so many departments conducted a review of their learning intentions, reducing the number of intentions addressed and elevating them to bigger conceptual or procedural ideas.

We relaunched our feedback focus in 2017 using the work of Hattie & Timperley (2007), Brookhart (2008) and Wiliam, (2016). A consultant was contracted to deliver a workshop on

feedback at the beginning of Term 1. The four types of feedback, task, process, self-regulatory and praise were addressed and exemplars of plenaries and other feedback strategies provided. Department teams will use their professional learning sessions to place feedback strategies into the context of their subjects and another whole staff workshop is planned for Term 4 to address the self-regulatory behaviour we wish to develop in our students.

## OUR DATA

The student voice surveys of the 48 students, conducted in the initial data collection process, revealed some telling insights into what was occurring in classrooms and the way students learn. We decided to continue to conduct these surveys at the end of each year, as a way of evaluating the implementation process. In 2015, the survey was modified to capture more information on the student's perceptions of Visible Learning, this time using specific terminology e.g. learning intentions and success criteria, which had been masked in the original survey. The surveys involved videoing two groups of four students in each year group (7–12), each student randomly chosen from their form group to answer nine questions. There was opportunity to add additional comments about their learning at the end of the survey. From the students' responses, it was possible to determine the degree of uptake of the program by the teachers, as well as, the effect of making learning more visible for the students. The results of these surveys, including video footage and student quotes, were presented to the staff at the end of the 2015 school year. In addition to the student voice surveys, other source of evidence for evaluating the program were obtained from lesson observations, walk through's and a Teaching and Learning Class On-line Survey.

A similar collection of data was gathered at the end of 2016 with the results again reported back to the staff. The student voice surveys were modified to include questions about feedback and plenaries. However, the questions common to both surveys provided some comparative data on the success of the program. For example, the students responded positively to the usefulness of learning intentions, (Figure 3) citing reasons relating to preparation for assessments, learning in class and revision at home, as the significant uses of them.

### Do you find learning intentions useful?

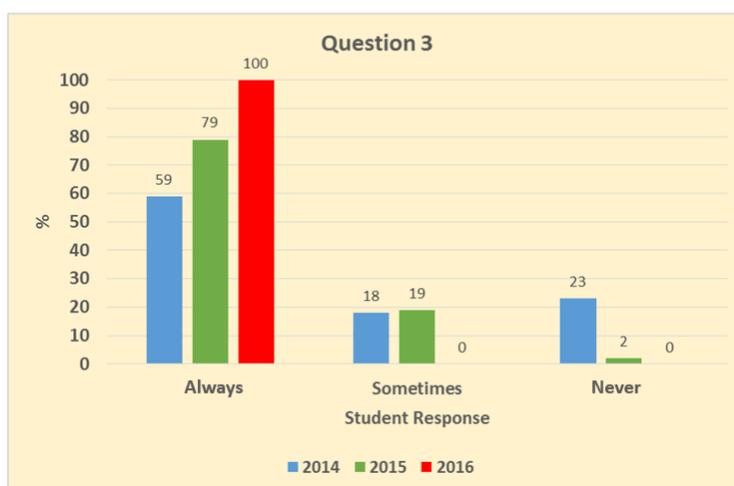


Figure 3: Graph show historical student perspective on learning intentions

Below is a selection of comments from Year 7 students on why they find learning intentions useful:

- “They help me to know and understand what we are doing in class and I don’t get confused.”
- “It gives me something to work on. It is a set of things to focus on and you don’t have to go to other sources to work out what you are learning.”
- “I find them useful for study and I go through them before a test.”

There is still considerable work to do in embedding success criteria into the daily routine of lesson delivery, with Languages and HASS the only departments who consistently deliver lessons containing learning intentions, success criteria and a plenary. While there has been a slight increase in the percentage of students reporting that teachers ‘sometimes’ discuss success criteria with them, a significant number of students are indicating that success criteria are not being discussed. The percentage of students who regularly have success criteria discussed with them is low.

### Do your teachers discuss with you the things you need to do in the lesson for the learning to be successful, i.e. the success criteria?

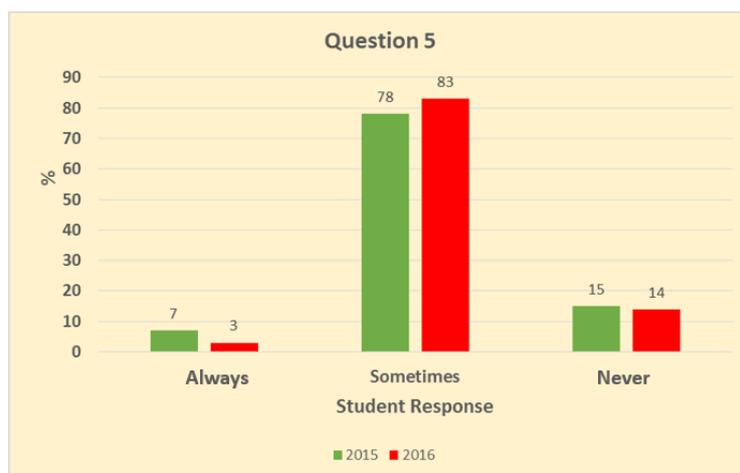


Figure 4: Graph show historical student perspective on success criteria

Below is a selection of comments from students related to question 5 (Figure 4) of the survey:

- “Definitely in French we have the learning intentions and success criteria – must, should and could, which helps us push ourselves to get the main one which is could, but you know you need to do the should one.”
- “In English we get a thorough explanation of what we should do and that is written on the board, which is good to refer to in case you go off track or miss something.”
- “In French every lesson. Some subjects use them without using that terminology.”

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst our journey is ongoing, we have learnt that listening to feedback is crucial and change cannot be rushed. Investment in time and resources is required for changes in pedagogical practice to occur. Once teachers have had their awareness raised by professional learning, they then need time and support to implement new ideas. This also involves coaching to develop and consolidate practice. This combination has facilitated the majority of our teachers to move toward becoming unconsciously competent (Joyce & Showers, 2002), in using learning intentions and success criteria as a natural part of their lesson delivery.

Although we don't have concrete data, it appears our Visible Learning program is (anecdotally) correlating positively with outstanding academic achievement, with the College ranking in the top ten schools in the state (median ATAR) for the past five years. Since the implementation of Visible Learning, our rankings have gone from 9<sup>th</sup> (2014), 6<sup>th</sup> (2015) and 3<sup>rd</sup> (2016). What makes this more impressive is our modelling for each of these cohorts over Year 11 and 12 did not indicate any significant difference in the students' ability across each of those years.

Our school improvement plan incorporated a deliberate range of strategies that have evolved over time to support the improvement in teacher quality and to foster better student learning outcomes. Visible Learning has been our key priority and will continue through our next planning cycle of 2018-2020. Our plan is to develop a greater focus on our community's understanding of the characteristics of a Penrhos Learner and how students are supported to develop these skills through their phases of development. 🇬🇧

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