



OPINION

# Learning progressions – a proven reform?

Dr Sandy Heldsinger questions the value of learning progressions

**A** little over a decade ago, the Western Australian educational community was in crisis. The planned introduction of outcomes and standards-based education at years 11 and 12 had sent the profession to the barricades and a virulent media campaign, led by the *West Australian*, fed the frenzy.

While the memories are still pretty raw, with the distance of a decade, I can now more clearly see that the battle lines were drawn between those educationalists who valued a curriculum that was developmental in nature and those

educationalists who were deeply frustrated by an assessment system that was cumbersome, time-consuming and did not allow them to distinguish between students of different ability. Frustrations were certainly exacerbated by the requirement that all subject areas conform with a bureaucratic template of levels, regardless of different forms which development in different learning areas might take.

Why raise this now?

Well, Gonski 2.0 advocated for learning progressions. ACARA has already published learning progressions. It

felt like WA was the only state to have encountered issues with outcomes-based education and no-one was listening to our warnings. Then I read an opinion piece in

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the *Sydney Morning Herald* that claimed learning progressions were a proven reform. A proven reform? I started

looking for evidence that this was true and that WA's experience had been an aberration. What surprised me was how short our corporate memory is!

My first question was whether the progressions and outcomes-based education are the same or similar things?

Although the Gonski report refers to a road-map of long term progress, continuous learning progress, learning gain, learning growth, and learning progressions, it does not define learning progressions. The opinion piece in the SMH, I mentioned earlier, explained, a learning progression is a sequence of stages of learning in a school subject, from ignorance to mastery.

Compare that with the introduction in The Western Australian Outcomes and Standards Framework,

*“These are continua of increasing student understanding and skill development across eight levels. The levels are neither age-related nor school year-related, so the rate of students’ achievement of outcomes will vary, given that individuals learn in different ways and at different rates.”*

And compare the description of learning progressions with the levels in the National Curriculum in England which were described as a sequence of points on a scale to be used in describing the progress of attainment.

Are the learning progressions and outcomes similar? The same, I think.

So then, what evidence is there that learning progressions are a proven reform?

Nationally and internationally, learning progressions have been attempted before. The 1980s and 1990s saw an international movement to try to identify and articulate development in learning. The idea was that the progressions would enable teachers to identify where students were in their learning and what they needed to learn next.

At the height of concern for Australia’s economic future, John Dawkins, the Education Commonwealth Minister in the late 80s, applied pressure on the States to construct a common national curriculum. That work saw the demarcating of eight key learning areas (English, Science, Studies of society and environment etc),

and further demarcating each learning into strands. Mathematics was, for example, was made-up of strands such as Number, Space and Measurement.

Importantly, profiles of learning were developed for each strand of learning.

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The profiles set out a hierarchy of learning outcomes. It was what we are now calling progressions. As is

often the case in our federation, each state and territory went on to develop their own versions of the profiles or learning progressions.

What happened?

Well, the profiles did not have longevity.

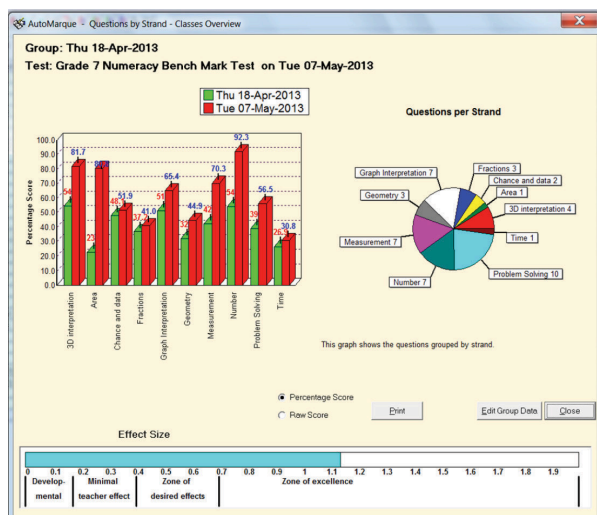
A NSW enquiry into adopting OBE recommended that the Board of Studies no longer be required to incorporate the National profiles directly into the NSW syllabus. In WA, the planned introduction of OBE into years 11 and 12 led to a



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Here is the evidence of progress in each strand of learning and the ‘effect size’ of the teaching

parliamentary review and the Premier taking control of the issue. In Tasmania, a similar debate about curriculum reform related to Essential Learnings, led to Minister Bartlett replacing Minister Wreidt as the education minister and a decision, announced in late August, 2006, to re-badge the curriculum as the Tasmanian Curriculum and to modify some of the more problematic aspects of the Essential Learnings curriculum as it was originally designed.

A number of education activists and academics criticised Australia's adoption of outcomes-based education on the basis that OBE did not represent 'world's best' curriculum and that it failed to successfully support teachers in their work.

Bruce Wilson, who was CEO of Curriculum Corporation admitted in 2002, that Australia's adoption of OBE represented an *unsatisfactory political and intellectual compromise*.

Efforts to introduce outcomes-based education in Canada, the US and South Africa were all canned.

In the UK, a review of levels and attainment targets, concluded that their OBE initiative had a profoundly negative impact on teaching and learning. The commission found that the pressure generated by the use of levels in the UK accountability system had led to a curriculum driven by attainment targets, levels, sub-levels. Teachers had become focussed on getting students to the next level instead of ensuring their learning was secure. Teachers interpreted the levels differently so it was hard to tell what students really knew. Parents and pupils did not really understand what it meant to be at a particular level but nonetheless used the levels to draw comparisons. The review could easily have been a reflection of WA's experience.

So, the learning progressions are a proven reform. They have been proven **not to work!**

So where does that leave us?

We know that learning is developmental. We have a strong sense that understanding and articulating development

will lead to more effective teaching. But we need to understand why previous iterations of progressions did not work.

Have said all that – this may come as a surprise. Australia is actually well-placed to make a good fist at learning progressions. I will briefly share our work.

Dr Stephen Humphry and I have researched and developed a two-stage assessment process to support teachers and school leaders in collecting valid and reliable assessment data. In the first stage we calibrate student work performances to develop assessment scales. The second stage involves teachers comparing their students' work to the calibrated exemplars to arrive at scaled scores of the performances.

We have developed software, called *Brightpath*, to make the assessment process readily accessible to teachers.

So, what's the point of difference between our work and the previous attempts at learning progressions?

- 1 We have used high-end psychometric analyses to empirically determine learning progressions. Previously, the learning progressions were devised through committee consultation.
- 2 We provide teachers with a set of calibrated exemplars against which to compare their students' work. Previously teachers had to try to interpret and reach a common understanding of descriptions of learning outcomes. Teachers had unwittingly been set up to fail. Words always slide around in meaning and words will never provide the level of precision that we need, to validly and reliably assess student learning.
- 3 We provide a calibrated scale which can be used to monitor growth in learning. Previously we provided labels such as Level 1 and Level 2. These covered broad descriptions of performance and we treated the labels as if they were measurements on a scale rather than for what they were – simply category labels.

Is our work a viable way forward?

Brightpath has been adopted as the state testing program in Western Australia and 75% of WA primary schools have

opted to use Brightpath. There is considerable excitement in WA about Brightpath with many school leaders saying that it provides 'in the moment professional learning'.

Brightpath has been extensively trialled in South Australian Department for Education schools. A small-scale trial of Brightpath is about to begin in the Northern Territory. Brightpath is being used in a diverse range of schools across Australia ranging from high fee paying independent schools in Sydney to small rural and remote government schools.

More teachers are using Brightpath, more often. Teachers have completed over 330,000 assessments in the platform.

We are not the only Australian organisation doing exciting work in empirically determining learning progressions. Surely the way forward is to harness this work, unify things for schools, and provide teachers with empirical information about progress in learning. Rather this, then putting schools through a reform that we know will not work.

## References

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**Dr Sandy Heldsinger** is leading the introduction of the Brightpath assessment and reporting software in schools across Australia. Brightpath is an innovation approach to assessment and reporting, and is the result of over a decade of research at UWA to find a way of obtaining reliable teacher judgements. Sandy co-ordinated the WA system-level assessments, has taught masters level course in educational assessment for a number of years and has led the development of a wide range of resources, including reporting software, to support schools in using assessment to improve student performance. Sandy was recently acknowledged as WA's pre-eminent educational leader by the Australian Council of Educational Leaders.