Port Augusta Secondary School

Layered Curriculum™

Summary
Students selected SACSA Outcomes and created projects with layered curriculum. They used SACSA Insites and teaching and assessing guides to get ideas when designing their projects. The teacher later taught at Augusta Park Primary School, so there are also some examples of primary program planning using layered curriculum and SACSA Outcomes.

Band
Middle Years—Junior Secondary

Context
One class, beginning in second semester year 8 and continuing into year 9. The class included a number of Aboriginal children, some of whom were not regular attendees.

Learning Area
English—but transferable to all Learning Areas

Timeline
2 week learning cycles, with a maximum of 2 cycles per term

School
Port Augusta Secondary School

Educators
Sarah Betts

The term 'Layered Curriculum' is a trademark. It was developed and is owned by Kathie F Nunley and can be accessed on www.help4teachers.com

The Vision
The teacher in this junior secondary classroom was aware that she needed to design a curriculum to meet an array of students with different learning styles. The class included students on negotiated education plans, students with English as a second language and a number of students who were not regular attenders. Social justice and equity had to be incorporated in learning tasks so that all students could be successful in their learning.

Having heard about Layered Curriculum™ through the Learning to Learn program, and having negotiated learning tasks with students at a previous school, the teacher was convinced that this program would accommodate the whole cohort as it included a range of learning tasks with increasing complexity. The challenge was to ensure that all students could achieve even the most complex learning tasks.

Layered Curriculum™ offered me a Eureka moment! It was amazing and I'm still excited about it. I love the effect it has on teachers. The key to successful and equitable programming is to ensure that you think about all the kids in your class.

Integrating the SACSA Framework with Layered Curriculum™ has offered the opportunity to incorporate a range of learning tasks which could be adapted to meet the whole cohort of students.

I place a lot of emphasis on why we are learning in this way. I highlight the learning Outcomes, but also the importance of not just doing 'busy work' for the teacher. Instead I stress that we are completing activities because they fit into a relevant,
bigger learning picture for the student. Oral defence is the key to this, with students and teachers having to converse about what the student is doing, how they are doing it and what they are discovering in relation to the overall learning outcome.

The Journey
The Port Augusta Secondary School teacher began introducing Layered Curriculum™ in a year 8 classroom. This was through a program which she had written, incorporating learning tasks of increasing complexity.

Layered Curriculum™ is a student negotiation tool created by American Professor Kathy Nunley and can be viewed at www.help4teachers.com. It offers differentiated learning across three increasingly complex layers. Layer C requires a basic understanding of facts, skills, vocabulary and technique. Layer B tasks require students to apply the knowledge and skills which they have developed through undertaking layer C. Finally, layer A includes the most challenging learning tasks, where students critically analyse a current issue in the real world related to their unit of study. A number of learning tasks are provided in each layer from which students may choose. Each task is awarded points and students must accrue a total point value within each layer. Critical to the success of the learning is ‘oral defence’, where students discuss and orally defend their work with their teacher.

Once students had completed a number of Layered Curriculum™ projects written by the teacher, they were eventually able to design their own Layered Curriculum™ learning tasks. They did so by selecting and focusing on English Outcomes.

I learned heaps from this whole process—in terms of the SACSA Framework, I realised how wordy some of the Outcomes were. I knew that I could understand them, but when I worked with the kids I thought that maybe some of them were a little bit difficult, but some were not and the kids were happy to leave them as they were and write them into their learning plans.

Furthermore, working with SACSA Outcomes presented a learning journey for the teacher, especially around programming, which she felt was sometimes made too complex.

Understanding what was useful for my kids rather than for me as a teacher was an eye opener for me—for example, bits of the program they went straight to and got their meaning from were not necessarily the ones I thought were really important!

The teacher also found that her understanding of the Outcomes increased significantly:

I had a much more intimate understanding of the Outcomes that we really pulled apart so that I felt I could understand at a deeper level what they really meant. Sometimes I really questioned myself: for example, what kind of spoken texts are we talking about that are really valid indicators of a kid's understanding of something? Kids would sometimes come and say they wanted to include something and it was completely valid. This resulted in some really powerful conversations with kids.

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/. The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
She found the students responded favourably and enthusiastically to being assessed on one Outcome at a time, rather than meeting a multitude of integrated Outcomes.

*It became really evident to me in talking to the kids in oral defence that you can get evidence of learning from the kids and have a really powerful conversation if you are talking about only one Outcome. In programming we often make the mistake of having too much going on.*

### The Program

This teacher taught English to a cohort of students for two years during years 8 and 9. In year 8, students had already become familiar with the Layered Curriculum™ cycle, as they had completed projects on themes, such as the text 'Deadly Unna'.

### Unpacking the SACSA Framework

Knowing that she would continue to teach them in year 9, she introduced students to the SACSA Framework in term 3 of year 8. This was a class with a diverse cohort, including 7 Aboriginal students, some of whom were not regular attenders. However, the teacher had already established excellent relationships with her students.

She began by setting the task for each student to write their own learning map for teaching and learning, getting them to consider how their individual learning journeys might continue.

*I stressed to them that they had been at school for many years and that they brought to the school a wealth of knowledge about learning tasks without realising it—they were really impressed with the list they brainstormed.*

The class then looked at the SACSA Framework, making the connection between this learning map and their own. This exercise led into introducing and discussing the purpose and roles of Outcomes, Essential Learnings and Key Competencies.

*I think I made lots of mistakes in the way I tried to be explicit and teach them what the SACSA Framework was. It was really difficult because they had never thought from a teacher's perspective before!!*

She then showed the students the posters of SACSA Key Ideas and Outcomes (Band Overviews), relating these to the exercise they had just completed on their individual road maps for teaching and learning. However, realising that the charts were somewhat overwhelming, she decided to focus on a smaller part of the learning map. She photocopied the English Outcomes and gave each student a copy. The focus was then narrowed still further to the Outcomes from texts and contexts.

Although the SACSA Outcomes were all selected from texts and contexts, students were clear about the integrated nature of English Outcomes. The teacher had already contextualised their understanding by showing them firstly the SACSA Framework (Overview) charts, and then the range of English Outcomes across all three strands. Furthermore, the charts remained permanently on display as a contextual reminder to staff and students.

---

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through [http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/](http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/). The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
The class used brainstorming techniques to unpack the Outcomes, with students acting as scribes on the whiteboard, rewriting any Outcomes they had difficulty understanding.

*Some of SACSA is a bit difficult to understand but a lot of it isn't, because the kids can use it.*

The class determined that many Outcomes had two or more parts to them. When they unpacked them still further, incorporating the Essential Learnings and Key Competencies associated with each Outcome, they recognised that many were multi-faceted.

*I was really upfront with them that I was learning a lot of this with them. We have done the SACSA training as teachers but in terms of breaking down the SACSA Framework, I said that they might sometimes ask me a question which would need me to really think about it and take some time before I came up with the answer. I've always taught them like that anyway, but they found it different from the way they were taught in a lot of other classes.*

From the four English texts and contexts Outcomes, students were to focus their learning tasks around one selected Outcome for the following two weeks. Many students asked to work in pairs or small groups in choosing their Outcomes and working on their learning plans. This made it a less confronting experience.

A student comments:
*It took us about a week to really understand the layout of SACSA before we even started, which made it harder again because it was like a different language. We had to write the Outcomes on the board again in our own words, then the last part was choosing a learning Outcome. We needed to have good translation skills, to be able to read something and understand it, and I think creative skills when designing our learning plans.*

**Integrating the SACSA Framework and Layered Curriculum™**

Students now turned to applying their understanding of Layered Curriculum™ to their selected Outcomes in order to write their own learning tasks. Whilst students were required to cover the range of complexities within Layered Curriculum™, they were able to choose topics and design learning tasks which demonstrated their learning.

*Unpacking the SACSA Framework and having students write their learning tasks around selected Outcomes provided an exciting and rewarding challenge.*

Working as a learning community, the class brainstormed the kinds of learning activities

---

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through [http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/](http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/). The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
which would fit layers A, B and C and could also be linked to one or more of the four English texts and contexts Outcomes. The teacher frequently stressed the need for each student to provide evidence, or 'proof', to demonstrate their learning.

*Sometimes I was surprised at the learning journeys they devised—they dreamt up things I would never have thought of in terms of learning activities.*

**Writing learning plans**

Their task, working individually, in pairs or in groups, was to write a Layered Curriculum™ as if they were the teacher and which another student might pick up and work through as a project. They were to write the tasks, but not do all the tasks they had set themselves, as the essence of Layered Curriculum™ is to provide a range of tasks from which one can select.

A student comments:

*It wasn't very easy thinking like a teacher, because I've never thought like a teacher before.*

Students used the internet and found the SACSA Framework website invaluable in getting ideas for their learning tasks, looking particularly at InSites and the Teaching and Assessing Guides, which gave them some excellent starting points that they could adapt to their topics and tasks.

*They all oriented themselves around SACSA InSites on line and it gave us a chance to work as a real learning community, learning all about it together.*

Students worked through their learning plans over two weeks, during eight hourly sessions and homework. The teacher became somebody students could access for conferencing and guidance with timing, as well as assisting with resources such as materials, technology and people.

*The teacher cannot stand at the front of the room and be 'in charge' of everything when using this model and students usually feel very empowered.*

Students tackled a range of projects; for example Extreme Sports was a topic chosen by a group of three boys, who make the following comments:

*We got to decide on our tasks and points and choose what we wanted to make and write, as well as the techniques we wanted to use, such as the camera, computer and writing stories.*

*We spent a lot of time designing our project because we wanted other people to be interested in it so we thought of a wide range of tasks to choose from.*

One student was new to the school and unfamiliar with student negotiated learning. He commented:

*It spun me out, doing something I've never done before, like having to think like a teacher and choose my own assignments and assessment.*

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through [http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/](http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/). The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
Students complete a learning plan at the start of the cycle and are allowed to change their minds once or twice, but then have to make a commitment and start working on their tasks. Oral defence is the rigour point and makes students accountable for their learning: they are awarded points only for learning, not for 'doing' assignments. Students and the teacher converse about what the student is doing, how they are doing it and what they are discovering in relation to the overall learning outcome/topic.

*The oral defence gave us opportunities to look forward to, like to try and patch it up and make it better.*——Year 9 student

Oral defence also reinforces explicitness around providing evidence of learning, such as how many pages are required to demonstrate this. Sometimes the teacher and students disagreed on the points they had allocated to learning tasks. Oral defence offered the opportunity for students to present their justifications and, if the student felt passionately about the task and its point allocation, the teacher would not insist on changes.

The points allocation is fairly subjective, but needs to be appropriate to the task, the level of difficulty and the time taken. But it's also more about motivating kids—they like to know where they stand and they feel empowered when they know how much something is worth.

Another student chose to work alone, using youth arts as her topic. She says:

*I chose something I was interested in and understood why I was doing it. My project was on Youth Arts in Port Augusta.*

I worked on tasks from layers C and B. I thought at the start that I would have got through more of the tasks I set for myself than I actually did.

Because of the time limit imposed on students, they needed to learn time management skills in order to complete their projects within the two week timeframe. Some students had part time jobs and others had sporting commitments, so organising their time and taking responsibility was a large part of the learning journey. Students also knew that they would only complete their projects successfully if they did some work outside school hours. The teacher opened the classroom after school to allow students to work there if they chose and a number elected to utilise this option.
Two girls worked together around the topic of Croc Fest, which is a celebration through dance of healthy living, pride in community and self-pride, and provides opportunities for school students to showcase messages around these themes. One of them comments as follows:

*I did a learning plan on music because I was interested in it, gathering information on singers and dancing and making a report on what our Croc Fest dance was about. We choreographed and recorded a dance and made bandannas with primary students in the Croc Fest electives tent. We were assessed through English on our language skills and the learning Outcome was that we produced a range of spoken texts about topics, events and issues of personal, community and world interest and adjusted speaking for a wide range of contexts and audiences (Outcome 4.2).*

**Reflection**

An important element of the two week cycle is reflection and debriefing, which proves valuable both for the teacher and students. Inevitably, there was disappointment with some of the results and students needed to be able to articulate with the teacher and their peers on why they thought they had not got what they thought they would get.

*For the kids it was an amazing moment when they reached the realisation that they couldn't blame anyone else except themselves. Accountability provided a real learning journey and often they would take this away and do substantially better the second time.*

Stumbling blocks became learning opportunities and students commented at this point on the following:

*I did two tasks out of layer C and three tasks out of layer B and got a fair score out of it. But reflecting back now, I think I spent a bit too much time researching the videos and, if I'd spent more effort writing my story and the letter task, I would have done better.*

*My stumbling blocks were not being able to access the EMAC computer and learn the video editing quickly enough.*

*I thought I'd finish more of the tasks in my learning plan than I actually did. I spent too long rehearsing the dance before recording it with the video. Next time I'd take out the dance tasks.*

**Engagement**

Layered Curriculum™ offers opportunities for flexibility, which is really important when engaging students at risk. Because of its strong element of constructivism, it

---

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through [http://www.saesa.sa.edu.au/](http://www.saesa.sa.edu.au/). The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
also means that each student's prior knowledge and the uniqueness they can bring to the classroom is valued. Setting students up as the expert makes an enormous difference to their self-esteem and the teacher found a marked difference in the levels of engagement of students once Layered Curriculum™ had been introduced.

*It was great to see some of the Aboriginal boys, who possessed low levels of literacy and were so quiet they hardly ever spoke, choosing Outcomes around oral literacy. It meant that they could be successful without it being so threatening for them.*

The flexibility also catered well for students who were not regular attenders, as students could pick up their learning plans and know what they had to do, as well as being able to make progress even if their partner was away.

*The Aboriginal kids had none of that apprehension of going into a room and not knowing what was going to happen—it was their plan and they knew where it was kept, so they could just grab their plan, tell me what they needed and get on with it.*

The students interviewed for this project are now in year 10 and have all reflected back on their experience with Layered Curriculum™, comparing it to the teaching styles they are experiencing now. They make the following comments:

*Just saying 'do this' or 'do that' gets boring and you don't want to put as much effort into it. When you have more choice, you put more effort into it if you enjoy it.*

*We could make our own choices and we planned what we wanted to do. In some ways I wish I could do this again, because it was a lot easier in the way that I could do what I wanted instead of teachers just handing a task to us and saying 'do that'.*

*You don't get to choose what you learn, within the subjects in year 10.*

However, the student unfamiliar with student negotiated learning took some time to adjust to this learning style:

*I like having choice, but not that much choice. I like a project to say how you (the teacher) want it to look.*

**Keys to success**

The teacher engages in explicit teaching of skills which students might require prior to undertaking the two week learning cycle. This also allows her to find out what students already know and what they want to know.

She has also spent some time talking to them about preferred learning styles and the importance of demonstrating that all learning styles are represented in their learning plans. She also stresses that favouring one learning style does not make them deficit when using unfavoured learning styles; in fact, she encourages students to find opportunities to engage with learning styles which may present a challenge to them.

**Involving parents**

In order to involve parents more in the negotiated learning aspect of these projects, the teacher awarded additional points if students took their learning plans home and got

---

This material forms part of the Working with Outcomes website, which can be accessed through [http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/](http://www.sacsa.sa.edu.au/). The material is provided with permission of Port Augusta Secondary School.
them signed. The teacher also talked to as many parents as possible, outlining Layered Curriculum™, indicating that homework would look a little different and explaining the accountability aspect. The latter was particularly important for parents of students who might be struggling.

**Layered Curriculum™ in the primary school**

The teacher is now acting as teaching and learning coordinator at Augusta Park Primary School and has introduced Layered Curriculum™ to staff there, some of whom are now using it in their classes. On the website, learning plans can be viewed for maths, society and environment and English.

The teacher ran a session on Layered Curriculum™ for her peers during a pupil free day and a number of teachers expressed interest. Teachers then worked on integrating Layered Curriculum™ with their programs, where they could assess against identified SACSA Outcomes. Currently the school is working at opening up the process to include more linking of the SACSA Framework to explicit teaching.

The teacher recommends the website [www.help4teachers.com](http://www.help4teachers.com), particularly the bulletin board onto which teachers have posted examples of Layered Curriculum™ learning cycles.