Master class

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Professional Learning

Teaching Australia describes its successful Master Class program, drawing on the experience of two ‘masters’ from independent schools.

Teaching Australia piloted its Master Class program in 2006. Drawing on the expertise of Principals and teachers recognised in the National Awards for Quality Schooling, the program has proved an important means to share ideas about successful teaching and school leadership.

In the words of Teaching Australia’s Chief Executive, Fran Hinton, the program aims to give teachers and Principals ‘a new view of possibilities, an appreciation of some processes that have worked well and a sense of excitement about creating change’.

Amanda Bell, Principal of Brisbane Girls Grammar School (BGGS), was highly commended for excellence as a Principal in the 2008 Australian Government National Awards for Quality Schooling. She conducted two master classes in the recent Teaching Australia program.

Bell stresses the importance of public forums so that the ideas, experience and knowledge developed in particular schools can be examined absorbed and adapted.

‘The more ideas that are out there, and the more people talk about hem, then the better the individual cultures of particular schools will actually develop,’ says Bell.

In the sessions she ran for colleagues in Victoria, Bell discussed the work done at BGGS’s Centre for Professional Practice, a project supported by three Brisbane universities that has equipped and encouraged women teachers, in particular, to take up the complex challenges of school leadership. (See article on page 27.)

‘I’m not saying what we do is best practice,’ Bell says, ‘but it is different – what we think of as next practice. When people think laterally about what they can and can’t do, and what may be applicable, then they can come up with something that’s a really great idea. That’s the value of the master classes – having professional discussions about creative ways of approaching professional concerns.’

Sarah Long, Coordinator of English Communication at All Saints Anglican School in Queensland, was highly commended for excellence by a teacher in the 2008 Australian Government National

Though grounded in theory, the thrust of master classes is practical. In her master classes, Long touched on theory and told how she’d had to adjust her own thinking in developing the English Communication program at All Saints. But, she says, the presentations were primarily ‘about practical strategies and ideas that would work at the coalface of teaching in the classroom, because that’s what teachers want to know – that’s what I would want to know if I was in a class’.

Reciprocity is an important element in the success of the master classes, and Long structured sessions for questions and group discussions where ideas and strategies could be shared.

‘I was very conscious of the fact that I didn’t want to lecture at my colleagues,’ says Long. ‘There was a lot of exchange going on, and it was great.’

The scope of the Master Class program is broad. Sessions have covered language teaching, school improvement, engaging students and parents, teacher and community partnerships, as well as literacy, primary school leadership and engaging students in science.

The Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, recognising that teachers and Principals see computer technology as a vital learning tool, has asked Teaching Australia to run a special series of master classes to address the need for more professional learning for teachers in ICT. A further focus of the series will be the role that Principals play in integrating ICT into teaching and learning.

Teaching Australia (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Ltd) was established and funded by the Australian Government to be the national body for the Australian teaching profession. Geoffrey Ryan, Principal of Westbourne Grammar School, Victoria and immediate past national Chair of AHISA, is a Director of Teaching Australia, representing AHISA.

For further information about Teaching Australia’s National Awards is Quality Schooling, its Master Class program and the forthcoming master class series in ICT, visit www.teachingaustralia.edu.au.