

# Accommodating an Education Revolution:

How Victorian schools are  
reorganising for the  
21st century

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**THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S** *Building Futures* program is an opportunity to do far more than simply make school buildings nicer. Making the environment nicer is likely to temporarily raise student achievement but Victoria wants more. Several Victorian schools have therefore made the decision to go much further and create learning environments that are truly student-centred and geared to the needs of 21st century communities. To understand the new direction that the Victorian communities are taking, it will be useful to see why schools look the way they do today in order to recognise the imperative for transformational change.

The first large secondary schools married industrial-age concepts to a process that had existed in a far more informal way for centuries. They were built around bodies of knowledge, and assumed that transfer of knowledge occurred simply through telling. The secondary school became a conveyor-belt for pouring all the necessary bits of information into each student, a system also known as Paulo Freire's "Banking Concept"<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, teaching is an art, not a station on a conveyor belt. Learning is a far more complex concept than memorisation. Since the inception of formal schooling, teachers have refined their techniques, developed and practised new pedagogies and doggedly pursued excellence for each child. Constructivism, which views the student

at the heart of the learning process, is entirely different to the teacher-centred “mug and jug” theory that drove the design of the first classrooms.

Yet the structures of our schools haven’t changed much either in physical or managerial terms. The vast majority of this innovation has been attempted, successfully or not, within the boundaries determined in the Fordist era — a box-shaped room, or series thereof, each with 20-30 students, all the same age, with one teacher. Like a prison, the design of these schools is based on the desire to enforce control, rather than to enhance learning.

It was the Industrial Revolution that led to the architectural model of schools we know so well today. The revolutions of our current age are similarly enormous. Daniel Pink, in *A Whole New Mind*, clearly identifies the major global shifts affecting Western economies today: shifts that mean our most lucrative resources are innovation and creativity, not goods or services relying on recall and standardised processing of facts. We are also growing more accustomed to receiving the information we need on an issue “just in time”, critically analysing the many sources available to assist with our problems and using known and unknown physical and electronic networks to help us. Even the most conservative predictions about the future tell us that this is just the beginning of an accelerating process of change that will turn the world we know today upside-down. It’s time for our schools to at least wake up to if not fully mirror these revolutions.

There are several building blocks common to each of the new developments in Victoria. Here’s a small glossary outlining the new spatial and organisational features the new schools provide.

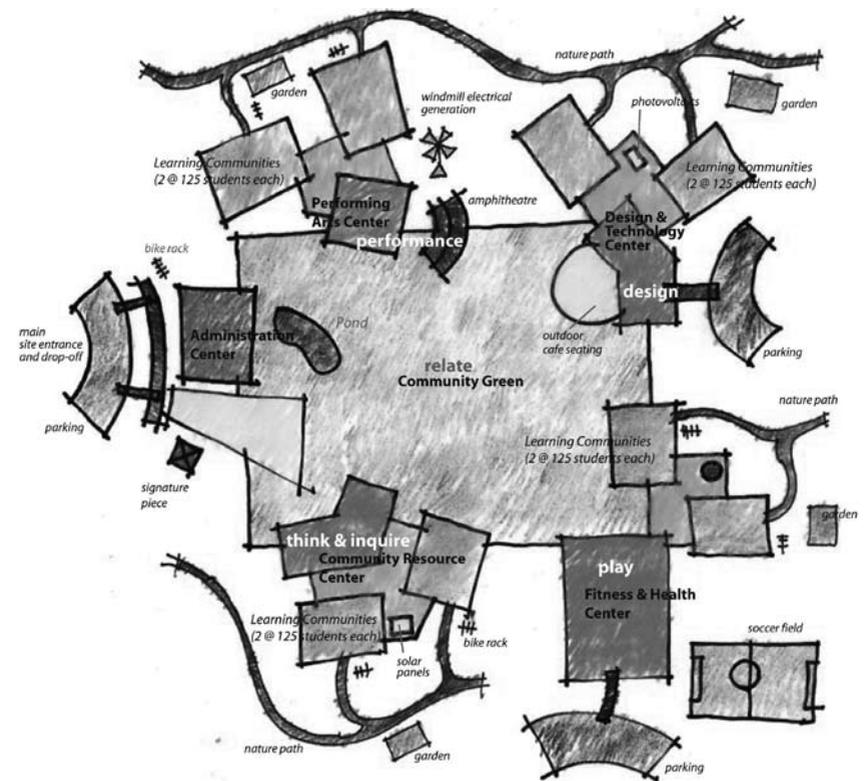
### SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The term “small learning community” has been in use around the world for several years and refers specifically to a “school within a school”. Because the community within the SLC is largely autonomous it is a solution to the problem of anonymity within large schools, but since SLCs are co-located on a campus they can share many facilities that haven’t traditionally been available to smaller schools. Each SLC is comprised of 80-150 students (optimally 125, maximum 150) with an allocation of interdisciplinary teaching and support staff. It’s up to the school to determine whether the SLCs are mixed-age or not, and how many year levels they encompass.

Because the number of students in each SLC is limited, the people for whom it is a principal learning/teaching space are socially accountable to each other. Under the SLC model, it is far more difficult for a student to slip through the cracks socially or academically, and the propensity for vandalism is minimised.

Some schools also allocate each of their specialist facilities to an SLC, thus extending the stewardship of space. In Bendigo, each of the secondary schools has eight SLCs, with a pair of SLCs forming a neighbourhood that identifies primarily with, and is co-located with, one of the school’s specialist facilities.

Every teacher knows that “upping the ante” in a confrontation with a student is unwise. School design that attempts to control students is an important and not-so-subtle message that the “ante is upped”! It sends the message that “you need to be



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“Schools within schools”: Small Learning Communities as part of the plan for Bendigo 7-10 schools.

controlled”, and that learning only happens in lessons, in classrooms and under the direct and continuous control of an adult. SLCs, on the other hand, are designed to invite self-directed learning, rather than act as a holding pen for students.

Each SLC has a number of features that make it able to support one community. This includes several connections to the outdoors, dedicated bathroom spaces, staff office space, a storage area for personal belongings of every student in the community, full access to a dedicated set of electronic and print resources, and of course a wide variety of furniture and spaces, each supporting at least one learning modality: space designed explicitly for messy work, for lecture, seminar, small group work and individual study. The space it is most similar to, architecturally and atmospherically, is a public library.

Western Heights College has developed a pilot SLC in preparation for its new campus, converting six classrooms to one SLC for its Year 7 students. This has enabled a core group of teachers to develop new operational practices that capitalise on an interdisciplinary team, a team-built timetable and a variety of spaces. The results here have been exemplary (2006, 2007 Attitudes to School surveys). Some other Victorian schools using the SLC model already are Karingal Park Secondary College, and Wooranna Park Primary School.



The structure of team-taught small learning communities at Wooranna Park Primary School enables this teacher to focus fully on work with these three students without also having to actively supervise another 20.

### ADVISORIES

Advisories are an evolution of the traditional home group unit. Some schools will adopt the term "Advisory", and in others the term "home group" will continue to be used, albeit to refer to an evolution of the concept. An advisory is a group of students with a pastoral/mentoring relationship with one of the SLC's adults. This adult is someone they meet every day, with whom they work on setting goals and assessing achievements, perhaps formalised through the use of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs). The advisor's relationship with a student is such that they are ideally placed to coordinate the monitoring and assessment of a student's performance on the VELs interdisciplinary and physical, personal and social learning strands. Students within advisories will also, typically, form strong bonds with each other and thus make the experience of schooling more enjoyable, creative and secure.

### PERSONAL LEARNING PLANS

Approximately weekly, or perhaps more often for students requiring additional support, each student has a meeting with his/her advisor to share reflections on the learning accomplished during the week, and goals for the weeks ahead. The formal record of this comprises a student's Personal Learning Plan (PLP), which helps to form a crucial record, along with portfolios, of a student's progress.

Because the PLP is a record attributed to each student, rather than each class, and is grounded in the state curriculum, it is able to value the passions and talents, and acknowledge the weaknesses, of its owner.

### TEAM TEACHING

In the SLC, a team of teachers with a variety of expertise (ideally complemented by non-teaching community members) are responsible for determining the formal program of the SLC.

Here there is great scope to plan for interdisciplinary and discipline-based learning. It's also unlikely that teachers will hear the usual lament, "Oh, but we have science *and* English *and* art assignments *all* due on that day!" since the SLC teaching team is supported to work in close collaboration.

Because the architecture of the SLC allows for constant passive supervision, such as that in a library, the time that students spend working on projects can be maximised. Direct instruction can be organised to occur in spaces that most effectively support it, for instance, in a lecture theatre, seminar room or storytelling space. This can then be augmented with space in which students can pursue projects of all types, and which is available to them all day. In the secondary context, this means that instead of spending discrete units of time working on isolated subjects, they are able to allocate their time more flexibly, according to their most pressing goals, and they don't need to be continually uprooting themselves from each classroom.

### A DESIGN FOR RELATIONSHIP

What this design does is privilege relationship. There is significant research showing that positive student-teacher and student-student relationships are among the most significant factors contributing to student success. Keddie and Churchill (2005)<sup>2</sup> take this a step further and identify three components of learning communities with positive teacher-student relationships:

- A democratic environment
- An environment of mutual respect and dignity
- Building networks of connection, support and understanding.

They identify each of these components as necessitating a shift in the perceived power structure within a school. Instead of first working on controlling students and then teaching them — an approach that implies that education is something that is done to students — learning opportunities need to be built according to the needs and interests of individual students. This was the approach taken, expertly, at High School for the Recording Arts in Minneapolis, USA, where disengaged students from minority, low income backgrounds work effectively together in a community that respects their talents and interests, and partners them to achieve their personal learning goals.



High School for the Recording Arts, Minneapolis, USA: A respectful learning environment

The design of the new schools allows teachers to work with different sized groups of students, including one-to-one tutorials and conferencing, small group tutorials, workshop-sized groups and lectures, as well as in passive supervisory roles. This is a vital feature of the new schools, not only for the immediately obvious benefit of groups sized appropriately for the specific context of different learning activities, but also because the hidden curriculum of an environment in which learning opportunities are ubiquitous, is: “We think you are a powerful learner” — not “Learning is something you hate and have to be made to do. Oh, and you have to do it in this box.”

The opportunity to create an environment that explicitly reflects the learning aspirations of its community is too good to pass up. Victorian schools aren’t waiting — here, the education revolution is well underway.

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. According to Wikipedia, “Paulo Freire is best-known for his attack on what he called the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the student was viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher.”
2. Keddie, A and Churchill, R (2005), *Teacher-Student Relationships*, in Pendergast, D and Bahr, N (eds) *Teaching Middle Years: rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, pp 211-225