

Editorial

What does it take to develop and sustain innovative approaches to supporting students' learning? This is a theme linking several of the articles in this issue of *set: Research Information for Teachers*, each illustrating some of the challenges and opportunities of stepping beyond conventional teaching and learning practices and seeking to do things differently.

There are many different ways to “do things differently”, some that are more boundary-pushing than others. Rosemary Hipkins' editorial in the last issue of *set* (No. 1, 2011) discussed the notion of a continuum of possibilities for interactions between young people and adults who support their learning. At one end she places *improvement* approaches, where teachers and schools develop and implement new practices to enhance student learning while still remaining within a reasonably traditional framing of what teachers and students are expected to do (and what counts as good learning). At the other end are *transformative* approaches that challenge conventional understandings about teachers' and learners' roles, the nature of curriculum and even what kinds of learning matter. The articles in this edition of *set* seem to span this continuum. However, whether they are about improvement or transformation, they demonstrate that taking on new approaches in order to do better for our students isn't necessarily easy.

Two articles focus on innovations aimed at improving literacy learning success for groups of students who are struggling with underachievement. Paul and Cathy Wright's article describes an initiative to counter the “summer reading drop” at a New Zealand primary school, while Trevor McDonald and colleagues write about an approach to support literacy learning for struggling secondary students in the south-west of the United States. Both articles show that making a difference requires teachers and schools to be committed and persistent with new approaches, and that it can take several years—and continual reflection on what is working and what needs to be modified—to see the impacts on literacy achievement.

Sue McDowall's article on multimodal texts and Helen Dixon's article on peer assessment also follow the literacy theme, though in both cases the focus extends beyond reading and writing print texts. The innovative approaches in these classrooms have a more transformative flavour, challenging conventional ideas about students' and teachers' roles in teaching and learning. In these examples, students have opportunities to co-construct their learning, not only with their teachers, but also with their peers, as they collaborate to create their own multimodal texts. Both innovations challenge everyday ideas about the nature of literacy and what kinds of knowledge, experiences and skills students need in order to be sense makers and creators of texts that span a range of modalities. Teachers and students in classrooms such as these may find themselves working in unfamiliar ways, and learning how to operate differently can take time. Helen's article discusses the need to build a climate of trust and mutual respect to support learners to become good at appraising and giving constructive feedback on their peers' work. The teachers in her study needed to adjust their own roles too,

knowing when to step back when individuals were having difficulties so that other students could offer suggestions and support for their peers. The teachers believed that sustained experiences of assessing peers' work had the potential to inform students' future writing attempts, and engineered their classroom teaching and learning in ways that afforded these opportunities, scaffolding students' abilities to question, discuss and debate ideas about their work with each other.

This raises another question: What kinds of deep disciplinary understandings may be necessary to support teachers to operate at the "transformative" end of the innovation continuum? Sue's article in particular highlights how important it is for teachers to have deep subject knowledge in order to be successful at pushing everyday boundaries and expectations about teaching and learning in those disciplines. She points out that such deep subject or disciplinary knowledge is not acquired quickly; it is obtained through extended study (for example, by completing tertiary-level qualifications) and by participating and contributing in "real-world" discourse communities (for example, in the case of the teachers she worked with, belonging to book clubs, writing, making films, art or blogging). Deep disciplinary understandings helped them to plan innovative teaching and learning approaches that still had clearly focused learning outcomes. Sue suggests that teachers less experienced than those in her study may have been captured by the *technology* rather than the *learning* focus of the e-learning innovations described in her article.

Similarly, the *He Whakaaro Anō* contribution by Michael Harcourt and colleagues challenges history teachers to develop their own thinking about the discipline of history. They propose an innovative approach to teaching at sites where historical events have been memorialised, in order to develop *students'* historical

thinking. I see a literacy theme at play here too—if we interpret literacy in its broadest sense. The approach they suggest aims to support students to become critical "readers" of the memorialised landscape, putting them in a better position to problematise representations of the past rather than naïvely accepting them. Directing attention to the disciplinary features of history, they argue, "has the potential to help students become active and critical meaning-makers of the 'content' of the past and its application to the present" (p. 30). Michael and company suggest ways teachers might use the approach they describe with students; it would be interesting to read a future study about how these ideas play out in practice.

I began this editorial by asking what it takes to sustain and develop innovative approaches to supporting students' learning. The articles in this issue point towards at least one important ingredient—teachers' deep knowing and understanding of their disciplines, and how these can support learners to become more conscious and critical generators and evaluators of knowledge. It appears that particular kinds of professional learning communities support teachers to develop expertise in these ways of working, and it is worthwhile asking whether there are sufficient supports and opportunities for teachers in our current educational system to develop this expertise. Of course, innovation requires other ingredients, too, such as an enabling curriculum, a supportive school culture, good leadership and assessment approaches that support rather than constrain opportunities for meaningful learning. I hope that future issues of *set* will explore the transformative edge of these other ingredients for innovation.

*Rachel Bolstad, Senior researcher
New Zealand Council for Educational Research*