

ANNUAL CONFERENCE REFLECTION

Connecting the dots: learning and applying for the benefit of students

Fiona Nicholson, MDBA Scholarship Winner

What an amazing experience my first NSW GTA Annual Conference was! This year's conference enabled me to do exactly what the key theme stated: *Collaborate, Inspire, Learn*.

I went to conference 2017 with the intention of connecting with people, gathering information for the new syllabus and focus areas and driving more amazing stuff for the education that we're delivering through distance to our students, who are all, in some way, in challenging circumstances.

My excitement was palpable at the start, but it is nothing compared to my post conference level. I come to work with new ideas every week and the experience has given me the skill and knowledge to step into a world I couldn't conceive of effectively in February. My teaching has changed; my delivery has changed and my love for Geography has morphed. Thus, my students are more engaged, they are getting creative, they are thinking more freely and outside the box.

I was fortunate to receive one of two MDBA Scholarships that helped fund my conference experience. I would like to acknowledge and thank both the MDBA for the opportunity to participate, learn and represent, and President Lorraine Chaffer and the GTANSW committee for their encouragement and support.

The conference was jam-packed with information and experiences – this was evident from the start when faced with the plethora of workshop choices – my first challenge. Currently I work in the Distance Education context implementing the new Geography syllabus for online delivery so I settled on two key workshop streams; Masterclasses for upcoming focus areas and using technology to enhance learning.

My key takeaways, because of the inspiring and informative keynotes, presentations and workshops have informed (and in some cases changed) my programming decisions and the way we incorporate digital options into the courses being delivered across stages 4 and 5.

Distance education

To add context and for people who may be unfamiliar, my school caters to isolated, medical, travelling, and gifted and talented students throughout the state, from the ACT, and across the globe. As a result there is the usual breadth and depth of academic rigour required of and for students, along with the need to make adjustments for individualised learning plans.

With this in mind the courses we design and deliver need to be flexible, yet challenging. The role of student choice and agency has now moved from my peripheral thinking to front and centre as I design and write. I incorporate this more widely throughout the student learning experience as a direct result of my participation at conference. What I had not encountered was just how much students have been 'told' what to do in their educational experience and how unfamiliar they are with the freedom and opportunity of choice they are being presented with. This has created its own challenge, more so from the older students, but is something we are continuing to develop and nurture.

So how did conference inspire these actions you may be wondering – how relevant was it?

1. Keynote presentations

As I listened and reflected on the keynote presentations, I discovered there were clear links between the Stronger Smarter ideology and new syllabus programming opportunities. I saw a chance to encourage students to step outside the box and self-direct more, step into their own power, and to engage themselves more through taking personal responsibility - so that internal motivation is driving their learning, not extrinsic stimulus. This was brought home through the STEM presentation on Bushfires for Stage 3. It made me think about several things, but I was particularly struck by my observations about agency and choice that I had never paused to consider.

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Dr Chris Sarra's message was about student's having infinite potential within and that we should be looking for the positive in that and not sitting in the stereotypes. He blasted away old stereotypes of populations in socio economic areas and as teachers – he put the challenge out there – What are you doing? Are you reinforcing the stereotype or are you moving and taking each child and creating a love for learning and a sacred space aspect to what you do with teaching students? Are you giving them access to new worlds? Do you treat them individually? And do you not only treat them as human but trust that their inner light is there regardless of how and where they are and have come from. I found the connections Dr Sarra made interesting to contemplate and inform the way I design and deliver tasks, particularly to year 7.

Since the conference we have involved stage 4 in using Micro:bit – if I hadn't seen the St Ives STEM presentation I would never have had the impetus to change the direction of the teaching and learning activities in Year 7 and 8. We can incorporate and include these technologies (and others spotlighted at conference from Clare Kinnane, Bec Nicholas and Mick Law) for problem solving, data gathering and creativity specifically in terms of geographical inquiry and fieldwork across stages 4 and 5. As a result we are investigating the purchase of our own drone to enhance our fieldwork experiences ...and that is really exciting.

2. Technologies

The other major takeaway on the tech front was a result of three presentations:

- Geography in the online world. Making connections – Clare Kinnane
- Simple Spatial Technologies for Primary (middle school) – Mick Law
- Using BYOD in the Geography Classroom – Bec Nicholas

It was like the perfect storm! There was so much inspiration, from the presenters as well as from the constructive collaboration and sharing with colleagues ... and it all made so much sense!

The biggest takeaway for me however was that despite the multitude of apps and options to 'tech' the courses we must remember that technology is only a tool, and deep learning and quality work that demonstrates what the student can achieve in line with course outcomes is the driving educational goal. Bec Nicholas's *most* constructive point was not to flood the students with try it, try it, try it but rather pick 1–3 tools they'll use

throughout the year so they upskill in the apps and can advance to others the next year.

The question for me became how can I do this successfully in the DE setting? – Part of the answer lay in the additional PL I have undertaken since conference. The focus on what students can do, paired with the choices they make within their learning context, and their existing tech capability has shaped the way we ask them to do things, no longer prescribing what they use to communicate their work but giving them options to choose their 'digital communication' tool. In the first assessment task this resulted in students meeting their outcomes using software they were already familiar with such as MS Word, PowerPoint, Sway and iMovie. The only caveat placed on them was that we had to be able to read/see it using our system. For a first task, the students shone!

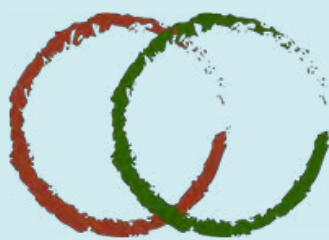
As an ongoing consideration, we have refined our selection to DoE available software, always with 'or an application you are able to use or already have access to' to ensure equity. This approach takes into consideration the reality of students using technology without teacher support and moving beyond the capabilities of their teachers, supervisors and parents and is designed so no student is left 'hanging' and unable to complete a task. It also means students are not limited by those that 'can't', or the technology refusers around them (*and yes there are still plenty out there*). The challenge in Distance Education remains – which apps are most effective for our student's and how do we implement technology in a system that has the possibility a student may never verbally communicate with us throughout an entire course?

We continue to develop our guidelines to give students a choice of technology applications and are formulating guidelines around what, as a faculty (and within school constraints) we are asking the students to use/learn without locking them in to one way of thinking.

3. Content and pedagogy

Our faculty is now using the Mulloon Institute as a case study in Sustainable Biomes, moving toward less test based summative assessment to formative models, using advice from the Changing Places and Interconnections Masterclasses to prompt ideas and creative ways of delivering content.

The incorporation of more effective and authentic links to cross curriculum priority areas, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures is a direct result of the wisdom, frankness and stories from Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* and the AECG presentations.



The
Mulloon
Institute

for Environment, Farming and Society

We believe that we have a responsibility to share our learning, experiences and knowledge not only with today's farmers, but tomorrow's leaders, policy makers, and stewards of the land and nature

Mulloon Institute: Changing Assessment Stimulus

One change we made in programming was to incorporate learning about the Mulloon Institute into our stage 5 sustainable biomes investigation. We adapted the suggested task on Sustainable Biomes from the Learning and Teaching Directorate to cater to the needs of our students and the online environment in which they are conducting most of their learning.

Students are required to 'Investigate sustainable land/farm management practices in Australia using geographical tools and information with a focus on Mulloon Institute'. They are provided with a range of available web links to direct their research and investigation and could choose their product from the range of items Mulloon farms supply to the food market incorporating paddock to plate concepts. With a scaffolded series of investigation points, students produced reports encompassing eggs/chickens, beef cattle and pigs and made recommendations for other farmers/producers to enhance agricultural yields and sustainability based on the practices they had investigated at the Mulloon farms.

Some of the student observations and discoveries surprised teachers and demonstrated growing awareness of relationships between their food supply and environmental management and production. The next phase of improving this task is to incorporate a virtual tour/experience into future iterations.

See <http://themullooninstitute.org>



Source: <http://themullooninstitute.org/what/#education-section>

A Range of Experiences

**Betty Steele-Smith, GTANSW Bursary winner
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The GTA conference of 2017 provided a range of experiences from the cerebral type case study for the uber Geography teachers who are well equipped and just require that extra stimulus to the early career teacher who is just looking for material to supplement their programs. As an early career teacher, this conference was instrumental in modelling to me what it looks like to teach geography with excellence. Perhaps one could say that it provided me with targets and exemplars to emulate and strive towards.

The conference began on a philosophical level with an exhortation to teach with excellence. Doctor Chris Sarra challenged geography teachers to teach a love for the spaces and communities in which we inhabit, particularly to be 're-enchanted' by a sense of culture and connection to the land. Something I have become increasingly aware of as a Geography teacher in regional Australia.

A wide array of seminars seeking to equip teachers for the implementation of the NSW K-10 syllabus were available. On a basic level, the conference was like 'porn' for geography teachers. Every seminar provided hours of material for lessons. Some easy lessons allow for a 'plug and play' approach for those times where you are strapped for a lesson. While appearing simplistic, these lessons were often profound in their learning outcomes and had the careful thinking and crafting already completed by experts in the field. Social enterprises such as Cool Australia and Sydney Water presented alternate ways of delivering syllabus material accompanied a myriad of free online resources to be plundered freely and easily.



Some seminars provided lesson ideas that required teacher preparation and adaptation and prompted teachers to think about the way shape the nature of fieldwork. These presented as entire units of work that are able to be integrated with skills. Oxfam Australia, The Big Issue and the 'Thankyou' company suggested a range of techno-savvy and down to earth methods of delivering material from Skype Conferences with the homeless to the more labour intensive 'Hunger Banquet' to help students better grasp the nature of spatial inequalities.

The conference provided ample material to cover the 'bread and butter' of the Geography teacher. In addition, there were inspirational and out of the box seminars on using a physical sandbox synced to a GIS system to teach topography, using multiple modes of ICT to present and model geographical information seminars on fieldwork and content that is relevant and recent.

The GTANSW conference served as a key reminder of the rigorous nature of geography as a discipline. It certainly acted as a reinvigorating agent for teachers like myself to apply some of these strategies and skills and to go forth and deliver Geography lessons with excellence.



PHOTOS: Environmental Education Centres and Zoos (EECZ) AND Sydney Olympic Park exhibited at the conference to promote their fieldwork programs