

STELLA :A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION FOR A SCHOOL COMMUNITY

STELLA – Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia

ALEA National Council recognises that professional standards are currently an important subject of professional discussion and debate in Australia.

This paper will outline the development of STELLA in 2000 and the findings of the STELLA project initiated by ALEA national council in 2005/6. It will outline a whole school's adoption of a mentoring process using the STELLA materials to guide reflection of practice within the teacher professional appraisal process operating in that state.

History of STELLA

In 2000 the two English Teacher associations ALEA (Australian Literacy Educators' Association) and AATE (Australian Association for the Teaching of English) were given significant funding by the Australian Research Council (ARC) along with the Science Teachers Association and the Mathematics Teachers Association to research and develop specific standards for Australian teachers.

As stated in the STELLA: English in Australia Middle Years Journal 2001 (9.1), teachers from around Australia were invited to share their understandings and experiences of 'good' teaching. The teachers began by writing accounts or narratives about moments in their teaching that might exemplify 'good' practice. They reflected on them and tested and revised them in conversations with other teachers. The narratives collected as the starting point of this project remain at the core of the standards material.

From the narratives the question was asked 'what elements of good teaching are shown here? Or what principles of good English Literacy teaching does the narrative illustrate?'

The 2000 project team distilled clusters or 'families' of descriptive statements into a standards framework of 'key words' which might capture in the broadest possible way attributes or essential qualities of good teachers. The words are linked to questions, the answers to which connect with accounts of good practice – and back to the narratives.

The project held the belief that good teachers facilitate purposeful and authentic learning which leads to productive outcomes for students; good teachers reflect on their teaching in order to improve it and enhance their students' learning.

"The standards materials ...are more than definitive statements, which sign off on behalf of future members of the profession. They are also a platform for professional development, identifying current best principles and practice for English Literacy teaching while constituting continuing dialogue about what 'good' English Literacy teachers believe, know and are able to do".

(AATE, ALEA 2001)

Teachers who have worked on different STELLA projects since 2000 have described the STELLA materials as a significant intervention in their day to day teaching lives which has generated a critical perspective to their work. . Some have wondered why the school day cannot be structured to allow for more discussion and reflection of this kind. Others expressed their satisfaction at being able to engage in a more dynamic kind of professional development.

Description of the STELLA materials

Standards documents commonly consist of a set of categories that identify the knowledge and skills the teachers should be able to demonstrate

- a) preparing the way for productive student learning
- b) advancing student learning in the classroom
- c) improving longer range professional practices through critical reflection and engagement.

STELLA takes the form of:

Core area 1 Professional Knowledge

- 1.1 Teachers know their students
- 1.2 Teachers know their subject
- 1.3 Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate

Core area 2 Professional Practice

- 2.1 Teachers plan for effective learning
- 2.2 Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment
- 2.3 Teachers assess and review student learning and plan for future learning.

Core area 3 Professional Engagement

3.1 Teachers demonstrate commitment

3.2 Teachers continue to learn

3.3 Teachers are active members of the profession and the wider community.

Each standard has an accompanying statement and each statement has a set of keywords questions. There is also a set of mode statements; reading, writing, viewing, listening, and speaking

A bank of narratives written by teachers around Australia and illustrating the Standards in action, capture the multidimensional and contextualised nature of teaching.

Trial of STELLA as a tool for reflection.

In 2005 ALEA National Council funded a trial of the STELLA materials in WA, SA and the ACT. The aim of the trial was to ascertain the viability of STELLA as a tool for reflection and professional development of teachers and the effectiveness of mentoring to facilitate the reflection. In the project the eighteen teachers from a broad range of settings chose an aspect of their teaching they wanted to develop further or something they wanted to introduce to their teaching practice. They also chose different STELLA materials to enable them to investigate their area.

The trial showed unequivocally that STELLA was a very useful framework for reflection and the professional development of teachers at diverse stages of their career. The mentoring process was found to be very successful to facilitate the professional conversations throughout the project. (See project evaluation on the ALEA website, www.alea.edu.au . All the STELLA materials are available at www.stella.org.au. The teachers and mentors involved in the 2005/06 project have reported their learning journeys in *Teachers' Stories: Professional Standards, Professional Learning*. ALEA 2006.

The Ainslie School Project 2007

Ainslie School is a government primary school in the ACT. The staff chose to use STELLA and the mentoring model as part of their Professional Pathways process. In the ACT Professional Pathways is the process used by Department of Education schools for teacher appraisal. In this appraisal process teachers create an individual Pathway Plan. In the Plan, each teacher identifies goals and strategies for the year. The Plan focuses the school's agreed goals and priorities, the professional learning for the teacher and the strategies for development and on the teacher's professional work performance.

Ainslie School has a focus on reflective practice and the use of the STELLA materials within a mentoring framework was seen to be a positive vehicle to both develop teacher practice and to meet the Department's accountability requirements of Professional Pathways. The school's leadership team recognised the value of the Ainslie staff being engaged with a professional standards framework as it would value and promote professional growth and discussion with demonstrably positive outcomes for the students.

In addition, Ainslie had the benefit of having Bette Triglone, a teacher on staff who had contributed to the original writing of narratives that formed the basis from which the Standards were developed in 2002 and which can be found on the STELLA website. Two other Ainslie teachers, Lyn Sinclair and Angela Maynard had been part of the national trial of STELLA in 2005. Their stories can be found in the ALEA journal *Teachers' Stories Professional Standards: Professional Learning* and these have provided role models for the staff.

Each year Ainslie School staff selects three shared whole school goals as part of their school improvement process. These goals are aligned with the school's three year development plan which reflects the system goals articulated by the ACTDET. The goal to be the focus of the 2007 work with STELLA was "**Maintain excellence in Literacy achievement and further develop staff skills in literacy teaching**".

The leadership team has planned for the project to run for four terms and supports the teachers by providing some in school time to meet with the Mentor each term. The structure of meetings consist of an initial whole staff session followed three weeks later with meetings of one or two teachers together with the Mentor in the teachers' regular in-school admin and planning time. Four weeks after that the three teams (Junior, Middle and Senior) meet with the Mentor for two hours at in-school meetings. The purpose of these two hour team meetings is to discuss how STELLA is being used as a reflective tool and to report on evidence teachers have gathered on the learning outcomes or attitudinal change in each teacher's focus group of students. This model has been used in term one and term two and is expected to follow on for terms three and four.

At the initial whole staff professional development session with the Mentor that began the year teachers undertook preliminary exploration to define a personal area of investigation and they familiarised themselves with the range of the

materials that constitute STELLA. Once teachers became more familiar with their class of students they were better able to refine their individual goal.

Following this, in the week four meetings, pairs of teachers met with the Mentor to clarify what teaching challenge they had identified. Their challenge involved introducing a new teaching strategy or refining or further developing an aspect of their teaching. They each discussed how they would use the STELLA materials as a framework for their reflection and also identified a group of students as a focus for their reflection.

There were formal and informal discussions throughout term one and term two. Formal discussions involved the teachers meeting with the mentor in pairs and then in their year group teams. Informal discussions occurred spontaneously as the need or opportunity arose. Each term the Mentor also met informally and formally with the team leaders, deputy principal and principal ensuring the professional conversation about reflective practice continued. This also allowed for changes to meeting timing and ensured other issues could be met flexibly.

The following is a table that summarises what some teachers chose as their teaching challenge and which STELLA materials supported their reflection.

Teaching Goal	STELLA Standards	STELLA Statements/Narratives	Other resources
<p>Lucy, Years 5/4</p> <p>To develop the student's passion for texts that have personal significance</p> <p>To engage children with reading at many different levels</p> <p>Identify a group of students to monitor closely.</p>	<p>3.1 Teachers demonstrate commitment. Keywords: enjoyment, enthusiasm, dedication</p> <p>How does the teacher demonstrate and inspire in students a passion for texts that have personal and cultural value for them?</p> <p>Standard 1.3, Teachers know how students learn to be powerfully literate . Keywords: challenge, complexity.</p> <p>What range of learning opportunities does the teacher provide so that all students are able to achieve optimum success and recognition for their performance in language and literacy learning?</p> <p>How deep, complex and connected is the intellectual content encountered by students?</p> <p>Standard 2.2 Teachers create and maintain a challenging learning environment. Key words: Momentum.</p> <p>What decisions does the teacher make about timing, order and balance in teaching?</p> <p>How do these adjustments and interventions support literacy learning?</p>	<p>Standard Statement 3.1 Teachers demonstrate commitment.</p> <p>Narratives: <i>Sue's Boys</i> by Helen Nissner</p> <p><i>What will you read to us today?</i> by Kerry Packer</p> <p><i>As Simple as ABC. Year 5</i> by Suzanne Key</p>	<p>Plotting students on First Steps Reading continua</p> <p>Developing student portfolios</p> <p>Observations of student's reading behaviours</p> <p>Student Questionnaire for reading preferences</p> <p>Collection of samples of students' responses to texts.</p> <p>Three Level Guides</p>

Matt, Year 3			
Improving writing skills in a group of children whose progress in writing has been very slow.	<p>Standard 1.3 Teachers know how students become powerfully literate.</p> <p>Key words: Challenge, Growth, Fairness.</p> <p>What range of learning opportunities does the teacher provide so that all students are able to achieve optimum success and recognition for their performance in language and literacy learning?</p> <p>What knowledge about patterns of development in language and literacy inform teaching decisions.</p> <p>How does the teacher ensure that students from all social and cultural backgrounds are guaranteed equal access to, and opportunities for success in, the full range of language and literacy outcomes.</p>	<p>Standard statement 1.3 Teachers know how students become powerfully literate.</p> <p>Mode statement: Writing</p> <p>Narrative: <i>Stepping back to move forward. Year 1.</i> Angela Maynard (2006)</p> <p><i>Let's Write. Year 4/5</i> By Julie Gibbs (STELLA CD)</p> <p><i>Writers' Circle – a pathway for reflection.</i>(year3 /4) by Annamaria Zuffo</p>	<p>Plot children on First Steps Writing Continuum</p> <p>Questionnaire for students: open ended questions with some specific questions for each of the target students to probe their attitude to writing and their writing strategies.</p> <p>Writers' workshop</p>
Jane, Kindergarten			
Identifying and valuing the students' community literacies.	<p>Standard 1.1 Teachers know their students</p> <p>Keywords: Insight, Sensitivity, Difference</p> <p>Questions: How well does the teacher know the individual learner and his or her capabilities?</p> <p>How well does the teacher demonstrate care and concern for students in a context of fostering their linguistic competence?</p> <p>How does the teacher know and understand the communities to which the students belong and their aspirations?</p> <p>2.2 Teachers create and maintain challenging learning environment.</p> <p>Key words: Trust, Respect, Participation.</p> <p>How does the teacher plan for</p>	<p>Standard Statement 1.1 Teachers know their students.</p> <p>Narrative: <i>Can the Tooth Fairy read English?</i> By Susan Rogers</p> <p>Mode statements Reading, Writing and Listening and Speaking.</p>	<p>Plot students on First Steps Reading and Writing continua</p> <p>Systematic observation and gathering of work samples</p> <p>Interviews with students and parents</p> <p>Student portfolios</p> <p>PIPS testing results</p> <p>Observation of students' responses to requests for examples of home literacies.</p> <p>Collection of students' writing samples.</p> <p>Observation of students' literacy behaviour: listening, speaking, writing/drawing and</p>

	<p>all students to have confidence to take risks in English/literacy learning?</p> <p>How does the teacher enable students to engage with and make connections between school and community based literacies?</p>		reading.
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Teachers’ Stories

As a beginning teacher the STELLA standards have given me a clear framework on which to base my literacy teaching practices. STELLA also gives me the opportunity to reflect on experienced teacher’s successes. The narratives are like a window into other teachers’ classrooms; allowing me a glimpse into diverse literacy strategies. More importantly, my ideas regarding literacy teaching and learning are focused using the keywords within the standards. Keywords such as Sensitivity and Insight ask me how much I know about my students in a meaningful way, concerning individual capabilities and my care and concern with regard to fostering their linguistic competence. STELLA has given me the opportunity to learn more about the individual student through my goal around finding out more about the children’s home literacies. STELLA also promotes working collaboratively with colleagues and as a beginning teacher, this has been very valuable. (AW Kindergarten teacher)

I have found the STELLA materials easy to use and valuable in providing a focus for my reflection. The mentoring process is an effective way to share idea it provides me the opportunity to discuss aspects of my teaching with other teachers and to share strategies. Working with STELLA standards has led to positive outcomes for the students in my class. A group of students I have targeted has already demonstrated significant progress in their writing skills. (JB Year 3 teacher)

I have gained a wealth of knowledge about myself as a practitioner and ways to enhance my student outcomes by using the STELLA standards as a guidance tool. The use of the mentor has been extremely beneficial as she has facilitated conversation among colleagues, enhancing dialogue around professional knowledge, practice and engagement. The narratives supported me through acting as a stimulus for strategies to use in my own teaching and to learn through other teacher’s journeys. (JG Yr 5 teacher)

School Leaders’ stories

Deputy Principal

The professional learning session with the Mentor at the beginning of the project proved an excellent introduction for out teachers, to the STELLA materials. Feedback to me from the teachers (13 responses received) indicated that they strongly valued the experience and felt it had helped them to clarify and frame their Pathways goals. One of the music teachers suggested that the STELLA framework could be applied to Music and teaching in general, not just to English/Literacy.

As team leader (K-1 teachers) I have observed the improved confidence and capacity of some of the teachers to articulate not only their responses to the STELLA materials, but also their insights into aspects of their teaching practice and the learning of their students. The presence of Bette Triglone in the team and the use by some teachers of her STELLA narrative has been invaluable. The teachers have gained so much from their sharing with the Mentor and with each other.

Overall, throughout the past five months, I have been impressed with the positive response and high level of engagement of our teaching staff with the project. With five classroom teachers new to the school at the beginning of this year, one very positive outcome has been their ready acquisition of the culture of reflection ad professional learning already becoming established at Ainslie. This culture has been strengthened, with out doubt, as a result of the STELLA project. (Dr Carolie Wilson)

Principal

Our school has an ongoing focus on teachers reflecting on their practice and taking action as a result of this reflection. I had seen the value of this through the participation of the two teachers in the 2005/06 national STELLA project and wanted the whole staff to have this experience. As a principal I wanted to set up conditions for all teachers to engage as a learning community with a shared language and shared professional conversation. The STELLA materials have provided that shared language and linked with the mentoring model we have adopted, the teachers are more consciously looking at their practice, sharing their practice, asking questions about themselves and their students. To date I have seen a greater focus on looking at where students are at and where they need to go next. Teachers are using

more strategies to gather information and to track students. Working with an external mentor has been a wonderful experience. The Mentor being from outside the school has allowed the meetings to take on a non-supervisory feel, even though the whole process is linked to the appraisal process. The leadership team is also learning more about mentoring and leading and developing teachers so it is great professional learning for everyone. We wanted to value the teachers' time for professional conversations, for sharing of practice, for the problem-solving that teachers do collaboratively when they have time to talk about the challenges they face in moving on each individual student in their care, and that is why we have set up the structure for regular in-school meetings. This has meant paying for relief teachers and paying the Mentor. I am confident this investment will be worth it and our teachers, our students and our profession will benefit.

While teachers have a number of goals in their Pathways Plan and the Mentor is specifically working with them more on one goal related to literacy and the STELLA materials, the flow over to the other goals with each teacher has occurred very naturally. Working with a standards framework and looking at the areas of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement has enabled each teacher to investigate their teaching across all areas. (Jo Padgham)

The Mentor's story

At Ainslie School already there is growing evidence of rich professional discussions occurring frequently in multiple settings both formally and informally. There is also growing evidence of students beginning to respond in new ways to the learning experiences their teachers are providing. The systematic gathering of data both formally and informally is providing the teachers with evidence of these changes.

While it is early days to draw firm conclusions the signs are there that this school community is on the move! The overwhelming response of teachers during the mentoring process has been very positive. Firstly all teachers have identified changes in the learning of the students who they had chosen to make their focus. Almost all teachers also identified positive changes in other students in their class. These changes included improved learning outcomes and improvement in attitude to learning. It was very pleasing to see how the STELLA materials were used to reflect on the teaching that was taking place. The teachers used these materials as a guide to look at their identified teaching challenge from a different perspective. It frequently led them to continue "getting to know" their students and it also led them to either seek new teaching strategies or to adapt teaching strategies to particular students' needs and learning styles. STELLA is providing a "language" for discussing and reflecting. (Anne McNamara)

Concluding remarks

The use of STELLA materials as a framework for reflection in the teacher appraisal process is a work in progress at Ainslie. At the time of writing this paper, the teaching staff had been engaged with the STELLA materials and their goals for only five months. The project will run throughout the school year and will conclude at the end of the year. The Professional Pathways cycle finishes in December. We are looking forward to sharing and further documenting the journey with the teachers.

Jo Padgham and Anne McNamara
16 June 2007

References

Australian Association for the Teaching of English & Australian Literacy Educators' Association (9.1 2001) *STELLA: Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia*. Norwood, SA ALEA

Australian Literacy Educators' Association (2006) *Teachers' Stories; Professional Standards, Professional Learning: Using STELLA as a Framework for Professional Learning*. Norwood, SA ALEA