My View: Understanding Down Under

By Phil Amos, Middle School Teacher, Huntingtower, Melbourne, Australia

Enthusiasm must be very contagious! I’m sure that it was the enthusiasm of our new Head of Middle School, Peter Dry, which had me agreeing to be a part of the first wave of enrollees in WIDE World’s Teaching for Understanding 1 (TfU 1) online course, along with my fellow teachers at Huntingtower, a co-ed, Prep to Year 12 school in Melbourne, Australia.

It must have been purely his enthusiasm that made me say “Yes” to further study after promising myself that I wouldn’t commit to any more courses after some grueling years spent hitting the books.

Peter’s impetus to involve the staff in a professional development course focused on improved learning outcomes reflects a more general trend in Australian education. Schools and teachers are more focused on pursuing innovative curriculum initiatives that allow students to achieve greater involvement in, and ownership of, their own learning. Our new Middle School structure reflected this and led to a clear need at Huntingtower to bring our teaching pedagogy in line with the latest research available. For my part, I was keen to see how Teaching for Understanding could inform and improve my day to day classroom performance.

Before starting the online experience, I thought back to a previous course I had taken in Instructional Design and wondered if TfU 1 would be a repeat of that course’s systematic design of instruction. I had some hopes for TfU 1, though, since I had not found a framework in the Instructional Design
field that pertained directly to teaching for understanding or improved learning in schools. Was Peter’s enthusiasm heading me in the right direction?

When the texts arrived at school, I got my first clue that I was on the right track here, with our trusted and dynamic librarian, Fiona Hamzi, giving the contents a big thumbs-up!

I was also buoyed by being included in Peter’s team together with a colleague who can only be described as “legendary.” Pat Dove carries her New York upbringing on her sleeve, and if enthusiasm wasn’t there in full measure from Peter, Pat would fill in any gaps! So the scene was set for good things ahead. That is, until I hit the computer screen for the first time and got navigation panic.

I had thought of myself as pretty good on the old computer skills but found in the initial stages that I needed some help in finding the right places to “discuss,” find “prompt 1,” and meet Pat and Pete in the “team-workspace.” So I asked Pat to sit down with me and get me up to New York speed. It was the first in a long series of questions and supportive responses, which has become a hallmark of my TfU experience. It made me aware of the power of questioning within the security of a trusted group, with the help of structures such as WIDE World’s “ladder of feedback.”

When we first met at a serious, “sit down and let’s get a handle on this stuff,” we agreed that getting away from our busy school environment would be best. We indulged Peter and met at his house to allow him to be a part of our meeting and keep an eye on his little ones at the same time. A simple thing really, but to meet informally and get to grips with the scope and requirements of the course was more than just what we needed – it set a pattern of influential, common growth in professionalism and an understanding of the power of the TfU model.

The unit we agreed to work on was a Year Seven (12-13 year olds), Integrated Studies topic entitled, “Dryville.” This was to be a study in the planning and problem solving arena, where the Sevens would be asked to research and build a model town in an arid environment. They had to meet a variety of conditions, which were revealed to them at certain points during the course of the unit. We felt it was a good choice, especially since Integrated Studies was a new subject for Year Sevens in our school and Pat, Peter, and I were the Integrated Studies teaching team. All three Year Seven classes were together for a three lesson block on a Wednesday afternoon, with freelance use of a number of key rooms, such as the library, computer labs, and an art studio.

As a team, Pat, Peter, and I were able to gel instantly, and the focus that our TfU study gave us was the catalyst for rich and lively discussions – often while our students were deeply involved in their activities. We so looked forward to Wednesday afternoons!

Planning a town with severe water restrictions and environmental considerations was a great challenge for the students, but the lesson was supported by good resources and a well laid-out unit structure. During one of our first discussions, my team wondered what our TfU study might bring to this unit, since it was already fairly well organized.

Well, “Dryville,” proved to be an instant hit with both students and ourselves. Because we didn’t have to worry about the logistics of planning, we had more time to find out what the framework and a focus on understanding would add. Teaching for Understanding elevated our expectations and gave us the tools to meet our higher goals.

Our first task, in line with the TfU Framework, was to design an appropriate and engaging entry point or points. We took the entry point concept very seriously and looked at a number of ways to involve the students from lesson one. We decided on a slide show created from my recent involvement in a Year 11 camp to the “Outback,” followed by a group decision-making exercise.
Although Australian students live in a very large, dry country, very few have actually spent time in the real “outback.” The “outback” is an old term that expresses both the remoteness and the inhospitable nature of the environment. To begin the student’s engagement with this concept of “outback,” of “dryness,” and “hardship,” the problem-solving scenario of sharing a limited supply of water between all students was seen as a simple yet engaging session where the understanding goals of planning for limited supplies in a hostile environment were introduced in a personal, first hand situation.

All students sat around a circle in our beautiful school setting. Based on the scenario that we only had one bottle of water to last us all for many days out here in the “bush,” we worked on a consensus decision as to how to distribute the “water.”

Pat handed out a small plastic cup for each student and I held a real bottle of Coke as our “water.” The first idea, which was to let Pat distribute the “water,” was quashed when, on her own volition, she admitted that she could be “bought!” I, on the other hand, let some Coke spill as I gesticulated, much to the abhorrence of the troops. All in all, it was a lively introduction to the sort of problems the students would encounter. Not all students got a share of the Coke!

Entry points led to other framework considerations, which all made their mark on the success of the unit. Of particular note was Pat’s ongoing assessment idea of a Chart-O-Rama. The charting of each group’s progress was displayed in graphic form and led to open discussions and sharing of where groups were up to, who was involved in what activity, and what each group had learned.

Even though our teaching team was a solid one from the beginning, and the pre-TfU “Dryville” unit was well documented and thorough, our TfU study greatly benefited both our team and the students. The questions with which I began the course were answered in full by the end and all of the course’s aspects worked together. In particular, the CCDT (Collaborative Curriculum Design Tool), where all the elements could be put together in an online tool, was a definitive and tangible tool for me to use in the future.

The TfU Framework proved to be a dynamic instrument for constructing learning units, where not just rote learning was the intended outcome, but understanding. The simple yet dynamic differentiation that came about when understanding became our teaching focus inspired me professionally and took my teaching to a new level.