



Left: Bernadette Hawker, Goondiwindi State High School's Master Teacher and Senior English teacher, shares her award-winning journey of whole school success around the teaching of writing with ETAQ committee member, Dr Sherilyn Lennon.

## QUESTION: WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE WHEN AN ENGLISH TEACHER SETS OUT TO LEAD WHOLE SCHOOL CHANGE AROUND THE TEACHING OF WRITING? ANSWER: A SHOWCASE STORY OF EXCELLENCE, THAT'S WHAT!

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All of us understand the difference a passionate and committed English teacher can make to students' learning, but what becomes possible when an English teacher joins forces with teachers from across her school to design a project focussed on improving students' writing performances in EVERY class? The following article draws from Bernadette Hawker's experience of leading a school-wide literacy project that was collaboratively conceived and designed with the intention of making a measurable difference to students' writing practices and outcomes in every year level and discipline across the school (see Figure 1). While the innovative project led to a 2018 *Education Queensland Showcase Award for Excellence in Education*, in real terms it achieved far more than that. This article examines how whole school pedagogical reform around the teaching of writing was envisioned and enacted - and how it managed to *go viral* across an entire school. In documenting what has been accomplished and how this has been achieved, there is an opportunity for others to learn from *Goondiwindi State High School's* extraordinary story of success.

### Some background

Goondiwindi State High School (GSHS) is a rural secondary school four hours west of Brisbane on the Queensland/New South Wales border. The township in which the school is nestled is located in the midst of some of the most fertile agricultural land in Australia. This is a community where most people know each other and lives are interconnected by the seasons. The school has a total enrolment of between

Figure 1: Bernadette captured in action sharing her school's success story at the 2016 ACER Excellence in Professional Practice Conference



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500 – 600 students. Approximately one in five of these students are indigenous and there are about 50 teaching staff. GSHS's rural isolation means that it is not unusual to have nearly a third of its staff members in their first or second year of teaching. In fact, both of the article's authors arrived in Goondiwindi as first year teachers many moons ago.

In 2015, NAPLAN data for the school indicated that there was a need for improvement in the area of student writing, particularly in Year 9. The data triggered school leaders to act. In the ensuing years writing became a key improvement priority for the school's professional learning community, known as the STEAM Team (Smart Teachers Enthusiastically Achieving More). The STEAM Team, led by Master Teacher, Bernadette Hawker, met fortnightly with the Principal, Brett Hallett. This team identified the need for a cultural shift in practice whereby all teachers – regardless of their subject disciplines – might embrace the teaching of writing through a common commitment to the integration of explicit literacy pedagogies and practices in their classrooms. The school's goal was to create a Professional Learning Community (PLC) that consistently applied research-informed pedagogical practices to support the teaching of writing. Improvements would be monitored using NAPLAN writing data, students' A-E classroom performances and qualitative data recording teachers' perceptions of their capability and confidence using writing pedagogies. Online and hands-on resources were created to support this improvement agenda. These resources were designed to provide clear steps for targeted improvement. The STEAM Team merged research with their teaching experience to become the 'expert teaching team'. Initially they drew on this expertise to enhance the capability of teachers to effectively teach writing across all subject areas in Year 8. Evidence-informed teaching strategies and resources were collaboratively developed, modelled, trialled and evaluated.

An edStudio was created as a one-stop shop for all things STEAM. This included a blog where peer observations and feedback from teachers utilising STEAM strategies in their classrooms could be recorded and shared. The blog was made available for all staff across the school to access.

Fast forward four years and by the end of 2018 the STEAM program had successfully improved students' performances in writing - bucking the national downward trend in NAPLAN for Year 9 between 2015 and 2018 – by achieving four years of continuous improvement in Year 9 NAPLAN Writing results. The STEAM team's process for leading and managing the change had been recognised nationally - including two awards at the ACER Excellence in Professional Practice Conference in 2017 and a 2018 *Education Queensland Showcase Award for Excellence in Education*. GSHS was also identified in *The Sunday Mail* as one of the Top 10 biggest improvers in NAPLAN from 2016 to 2018. So how did Bernadette, and what was initially a small group of Year 8 teachers, so successfully make the teaching of writing everyone's responsibility?

### Laying the foundations

The project began by focusing on Year 8 students in 2015 and over the next few years scaled up to include every student from Years 7 to 12. In its infancy considerable research was conducted to guide the project's design and implementation. According to Bernadette, overwhelmingly, the literature pointed to the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as extremely effective vehicles for creating cultural change in schools. PLCs help to re-culture schools by creating collaborative spaces and processes that break down teacher isolation and the siloing of knowledge (Eaker, Dufour & Dufour, 2002). These strategically constructed communities work because teachers are encouraged to feel collectively responsible for improving students' learning (Eaker et al., 2002). With this knowledge in hand, the STEAM team

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determined that they wanted to create a PLC which addressed the problem of how to make the teaching of writing the responsibility of everyone in the school.

The implementation of the PLC was guided by the work of Eaker et. al. (2002), and Kotter's Change Model (1996; 2014). Kotter (2014) proposes that there are eight critical steps in successfully leading change: increased urgency, encouragement of buy-in, building the guiding team, getting the vision right, enabling action, creating short term wins, not letting up and celebrating success. These steps were the guiding tenets that underpinned the operational logistics of the project.

According to Fisher, Frey and Hattie (2016),  
Students have to know what they are learning, why they are learning it ...what it means...to be 'good' at this learning, and what it means to have learned...it requires that teachers understand which strategies and instructional routines are useful in which teaching situation. (p.p. 2–3)

These understandings informed the STEAM team's focus on making the explicit and visible teaching of writing every teacher's responsibility across the whole school. According to Goss and Hunter (2015), great teachers are very strategic and thoughtful in the ways that they choose to intervene in student learning. This idea positions teachers as also always learning. Dinham (2016) argues that a quality teacher in every classroom should be the goal but how this gets achieved is the 'big question'. The STEAM team's approach to designing and implementing their project goes some way towards answering this big question. Bernadette and her team decided that, if students' learning outcomes were to be improved at GSHS, the school needed:

1. A collaborative PLC guiding change
2. To use a research-informed model for managing change
3. Targeted teaching to lift teacher and student performance using evidence-informed high impact strategies, and
4. To develop structures and approaches to support widespread and sustained use of successful teaching practices

### Creating the conditions for a whole school shift in culture

Creating sustained cultural change in schools is hard but not impossible. According to Parris-Brassens (2017), 'once the beliefs and behaviours of a critical mass of people are engaged, the new ideas or behaviours will spread like a virus or an epidemic, bringing deep change at a fast pace.' Over the next two years Bernadette worked with her team to create and spread a virus that was linked to the teaching of writing. They attracted 35 of the school's 52 teachers to join the STEAM team PLC. This number surpassed the 60% 'tipping point' suggested by Parris-Brassens for embedding cultural change. By utilising 'the power of the few' (Parris-Brassens, 2017) to mobilise action and impact others, a 'sense of urgency' (Kotter, 2014) was created around a desire to make a difference to the writing abilities of students at the school. Coupled with this desire was a need for teachers to develop the expertise necessary to be able to effectively teach the writing skills of their discipline areas and for students and teachers to have self-efficacy in achieving sustained success.

Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann and Cooper (2014) warn that school improvement agendas are often short-lived if extra support stops or school leaders move on. In an effort to circumvent this from happening to the STEAM team's writing project, Bernadette spent considerable time and effort with her small team of Year 8 teachers creating a sense of urgency around the need for pedagogical change. This process involved 'catching' teachers' attention in order to create 'buy-in' and then developing a uniquely home-grown and tailored approach to addressing the issue. Bernadette labelled her approach 'The Trojan Horse' approach. While seemingly focused on improving students' results in writing, the PLC was actually being used to build teacher capacity and efficacy around the use of writing pedagogies. This 'backdoor' approach encourages teachers to develop a strong sense of ownership over the problem which, in turn, instigates a need for developing practices and pedagogies that address the problem. All the while the focus

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remains steadfastly on improving students' outcomes – not on identifying deficiencies in teaching practices and/or pedagogies. This can be a rather tenuous tightrope to walk but Bernadette explains how it might be done.

### Bernadette's story

#### Creating teacher buy-in

*In our first meeting, we drip fed a combination of qualitative and quantitative data about a student we had all taught. Key data included the fact that this student was failing all his subjects. The only pass he had was in Literacy and he was in that class because he had already failed English.*

*This child's name was Andy Smith<sup>1</sup> and when we revealed his face to the group as the final slide in our presentation, there was a collective gasp in the room.*

*That was 'the moment' – the moment when we all looked at each other and felt the weight of responsibility for Andy's lack of success – the moment we knew we were all responsible – the moment we knew we had to do better. Every one of his teachers shared the sense of urgency this moment created and committed to doing better, not only for Andy but for every child they taught. We had our buy-in.*

*Once we had buy-in, it became very easy to build our guiding team. Initially, it consisted of all the Year 8 teachers, the Principal and the Master Teacher. The team consisted of teachers from every subject area in Year 8 and represented a mix of experience from first year teachers to our English Head of Department. One of our first jobs was to give ourselves an identity and, consequently, we collaboratively developed our PLC name – STEAM (Smart Teachers Enthusiastically Achieving More) to capture the essence of what we wanted to achieve. Our research had emphasised the importance of collaboratively creating a strong vision as our 'test of truth'. The vision we came up with was:*

***We are dedicated to developing a consistent and collaborative approach to improving student writing in our school. We want students who are confident in their ability to write effectively and know what they need to do to improve. We want teachers who understand that we are all teachers of writing, who feel confident to effectively teach writing and who know 'what' to teach students to help them become better writers.***

*We also collaboratively developed our STEAM values. We used [www.answer garden/net](http://www.answer garden/net) to share our collective ideas and then exported these to [www.tagxedo.com](http://www.tagxedo.com) to create a visual representation of our values. This step was extremely important in terms of creating a strong sense of shared ownership of our PLC and what we wanted to achieve. Our mission and values have consistently underpinned our progress as a PLC and remain as relevant and significant now as they were when we began our journey.*

#### Tailoring the project for explicit literacy learning

*We knew we had to develop a model for improvement that was specific to our students, our teachers and our context. We had used NAPLAN writing data as one of the key measures of our success over time. Hence, the NAPLAN writing criteria and the Literacy Continuum were utilised to determine what writing skills students required and what resultant gaps there were in our own knowledge.*

*In 2015, we began by analysing the Year 7 NAPLAN writing data for the Year 8 cohort. It was very obvious that paragraphing was their biggest deficit area.*

*As a PLC, STEAM decided we would begin by prioritising paragraphing. This was an area we all felt comfortable beginning with as every subject required students to write in paragraphs. We conducted research and decided on a consistent paragraph model –*

1. A pseudonym has been used for the student's name

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*TEEL (topic sentence, elaboration, evidence, linking sentence). We agreed to use this metalanguage consistently across all of our subject areas in Year 8. STEAM meetings were primarily used to model strategies that supported paragraph writing practices and build teacher confidence and capability in teaching paragraphing writing skills.*

*To further support staff, we developed a range of specific resources including a Literacy Placemat and class sets of differentiated arrows linked to the NAPLAN writing criteria designed to assist students to track their own writing improvement.*

*We also created our STEAM Team EdStudio – a one stop, online shop for all things STEAM. The EdStudio includes everything we have done over the last four years – research, data, PLC presentations, strategies, reflections, STEAM observations and feedback and success stories. Part of our methodology involved team teaching of the agreed upon strategies. I remember going to a Year 8 Industrial Technology and Design class with the class teacher, one of our most passionate 'early adopters' of STEAM, and team teaching how to write a TEEL paragraph. I will never forget looking out at this class of 25 boys writing in ITD and knowing we had the beginnings of something special.*

*What that teacher epitomised was the culture we had created – having a go in a supportive environment and being able to say, "I don't know how to do this? I want to try but I need help." We then invested time reflecting with students on their successes and very soon teachers and students were on board. TEEL quickly became part of our school's vernacular. We were confident in the process we had adopted and we have replicated this ever since – from paragraphing, to vocabulary, sentence structure and punctuation.*

### Full STEAM ahead

*To maintain momentum, we regularly shared short term wins amongst members of the PLC as well as with the wider school community.*

*Some examples of short term wins included documenting and sharing students' paragraph writing that demonstrated clear improvement in their literacy skills. For instance, some of the students who had received a 0 for paragraphing in their Year 7 NAPLAN test were now demonstrating an ability to write well-structured and complex paragraphs.*

*We made sure we identified these improvements and shared them with all teachers involved in the project. Another example of significant improvement came from a Year 8 History class. This class demonstrated a distinct improvement across the whole class between two pieces of assessment – one completed before the teacher began implementing STEAM paragraphing strategies and one after six weeks of teaching the skills to the students. When moderating the task, other teachers wanted to know why there had been such a significant improvement. The teacher explained that she had been consistently using the STEAM paragraphing strategies and that this had a marked influence on student performance. Those teachers immediately asked if they could join STEAM.*

*We sent random samples of student paragraphs to a QSA NAPLAN marker for analysis to ensure that our assessment of student improvement in their paragraph writing could be independently verified. It was. The independent assessor indicated that there was a clear improvement in individual student's paragraph writing when compared with their Year 7 NAPLAN performances.*

*We regularly celebrated teacher success in our STEAM meetings. Teachers routinely shared their progress and improvements. These 'sharings' spilled outside of our STEAM meetings and went viral in staff rooms, in faculty meetings and in other forums. Students who were being exposed to the STEAM strategies by some teachers began to ask other teachers why they weren't using them. This led to further interest in STEAM from teachers outside of Year 8. The 'virus' was spreading as more and more teachers began regularly attending STEAM.*

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*One of our STEAM members made a short film to get a sense of our whole-school take-up of TEEL. She went out one lunchtime and interviewed a wide range of students from Year 7 to Year 12. Without any prompting, she asked them how we do paragraphs at GSHS. Every single student answered – TEEL and could clearly articulate what each letter stood for. For us, this represented a clear line of sight between our mission, our research, our data and our practice.*

### **'Miss, I never thought I could write before but now I know I can'**

*Teachers could see the clear improvement in student writing as a result of implementing our STEAM strategies and this helped maintain momentum for staff and students. Feedback from teachers indicated that they felt much more adept at providing specific and explicit feedback to students in relation to their 'next steps' for improvement. NAPLAN and A-E data clearly demonstrated this. Our commitment to providing detailed feedback to students led to the introduction of our post-NAPLAN feedback interviews with Year 9 students. STEAM members were allocated small groups of Year 9 students to interview post-NAPLAN. These teachers showed students their Individual Writing Criteria reports and engaged them in a discussion around their performances.*

*One of the highlights of these interviews in 2016 was when one of the students cried after they received feedback on their positive results in NAPLAN writing. Her response to the teacher was, 'Miss, I never thought I could write before but now I know I can.' This year our Principal shared the NAPLAN writing success of one of our most challenging Year 9 students with his mother in a post-suspension interview. The mother cried because the student had improved so significantly. It was the only positive news a school had ever provided her about her son.*

*GSHS has had much to celebrate over the course of its STEAM project. Some of these successes include measurable improvements in both qualitative and quantitative data with, arguably, the school's longitudinal*

*NAPLAN data the most significant indicator of improvement. In comparison to like schools, GSHS students' performances in writing in Year 7 and Year 9 demonstrate significant improvements in Mean Scale Score and in Individual Student Relative Gains over the four-year duration of the project. As a consequence, GSHS was recently identified as being in the Top 10 of the most improved performers across all high schools in Queensland in a recent feature article in the Sunday Mail (October, 2018). What is particularly affirming is how the NAPLAN improvements are being mirrored by improvements in other areas of literacy and numeracy across all Key Learning Areas across the school.*

*In 2018, the school was awarded the Darling Downs South West Regional Showcase Award in the Senior Years for their project entitled 'How do we make the teaching of writing everyone's responsibility?' GSHS went on to be named as State Finalists and then eventual winners of the State Showcase Award for Excellence in the Senior Years.*

*The school's Principal, Brett Hallet, was central to the STEAM team's ability to maintain the momentum of the project amongst the busyness of school life. Brett attended nearly all STEAM meetings where he was an active participant. His input was invaluable in modelling the importance of the project to teachers across the school and to the wider school community.*

*One of our biggest successes has been the fact that, even though we are still below the National Minimum Standard (NMS) for our achievement in writing, we have significantly closed the gap. In fact, we have improved by almost 20 percentage points. Our goal for 2019 is to achieve NMS in Year 9 Writing.*

### **Making it stick: Lessons for others**

There are learnings for others in what the STEAM team at GSHS has managed to achieve through their creation of an Expert Teaching Team driving and leading change across the entire school. As Bernadette explains, "We are

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*all using the same STEAM writing strategies, observing one another's practice and providing feedback. Everyone in our school knows and understands what STEAM is and does and we have managed to maintain this momentum and keep building on it".* Some tangible – and potentially replicable – strategies used by the STEAM team in achieving this include:

- Offering regular short and sharp fortnightly meetings – every 2nd Thurs from 8 to 8:40 am. At these meetings the team continues to share research, model evidence-informed strategies, share experiences, reflect on student data, and reflect on their learnings.
- Ensuring that an edStudio is regularly maintained and updated and that weekly emails are sent to staff to remind them of the strategies that have been modelled at meetings. Suggestions are also made as to the ways that these strategies might be adapted to suit different disciplines. Sometimes templates are also provided.
- Every Head of Department in the school is now a member and advocate of STEAM. This supportive leadership framework provides a continuous driving force across the school.
- The school has introduced a Year 9 NAPLAN Prep Morning a couple of days prior to the NAPLAN test. This involves six highly interactive and engaging rotational sessions based around the top six writing 'issues' for GSHS students. These sessions are facilitated by the students' teachers and followed up by a BBQ lunch, cake and a bookmark with Top Tips for NAPLAN Writing on it. These events have helped to engage and motivate students who view them as an opportunity to show their teachers what they have learned.
- As a way of keeping parents and community members informed, the STEAM team submits regular articles to the school newsletter about students' progress around writing; what the school's focus is; why it is important; what the research says; and samples of student writing. The team also upload regular Facebook posts and write articles on student progress for the local newspaper.

- Qualitative and quantitative data are used to track students' progress and teachers' efficacy around the teaching of writing.
- Teachers also regularly observe one another's practice and provide feedback. These observations and feedback are recorded as blogs in the edStudio.

### What cultural shifts are occurring?

The momentum for change that has been created by Bernadette and her STEAM team has spread across every year level and every discipline area in the school. Bernadette gathers feedback from teachers in the form of written reflections at the end of each year. These reflections are powerful in illuminating just how and why the extraordinary shift in culture at GSHS is occurring. According to Bernadette, teachers are telling her that they are feeling as if they are *doing work that matters* and that they find this incredibly affirming. They are also claiming that they now have a common metalanguage to talk about writing with their colleagues and with their students as well as a wide range of tools and resources from which to draw. This means that they are growing in confidence in their ability to teach writing skills. Yet another benefit has been the sense of empowerment that they have enjoyed in being able to use data in a purposeful way to track and transform their students' learning. However, perhaps the most impressive consequence of the STEAM project has been its ability to create a safe space for teachers to come together to share, learn and grow professionally.

### Making a difference the 'write' way

Overall, the qualitative and quantitative data show clear and irrefutable evidence of improved student outcomes at the school over the last four years as well as increased student, staff and parent satisfaction with the school. What began as a group of fifteen Year 8 teachers committed to owning the teaching of writing in 2015, has grown to include 35 staff (well over 2/3 of the school's teachers) who are empowering each other to be quality educators.

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One of the key goals of the initiative was to build staff capacity, capability and confidence to effectively teach writing across all subject areas. GSHS has achieved this and more. Using a *Trojan Horse* approach, the school has created a professional learning community that has positively infected the whole school with a desire to do better for its students. This in turn has built a formidable platform from which to continue driving improvement across the school. In Bernadette's own words:

*We are exceptionally proud of our STEAM Team. We have analysed and discussed data in a culture that promotes learning to lead an explicit improvement agenda characterised by systemic curriculum delivery, effective pedagogical practices and an expert teaching team to create differentiated teaching and learning in our school. We have spearheaded an improvement agenda that is working in our school. We have taken risks. We have embraced challenges. We have worked together to accomplish goals we could not have achieved by working alone.*

*We have persevered despite our rural and remote location, despite our low ICSEA rating and the social disadvantage of our students and despite our young and highly transient staff because we've known right from the very beginning that we must make a difference.*

*What the STEAM team have clearly demonstrated is that with passion, perseverance and persistence and a relentless focus on student improvement, positive and sustained outcomes can be achieved.*

*We have used research to learn from and empower one another. We have committed to creating a culture where we genuinely care about each other. We have not let up because we know our work is important and that it has the power to transform the lives of countless students in our school...and that is the measure of our success.*

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Thank you to every member of the GSHS STEAM Team including those who have left us for greener pastures. Every single one of you has made a massive contribution to ensuring we are providing a quality education to the students we teach. Thank you for your commitment, passion, dedication and support. You have made 'best practice common practice' at our school.

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### About the Authors

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**Bernadette Hawker** is a senior educator with over 25 years teaching experience. She is currently working as a Head of Department (Teaching and Learning) and classroom teacher at Goondiwindi State High School in rural Queensland. She is passionate about the use of evidence-informed pedagogy and is committed to promoting teacher efficacy and school improvement through teacher engagement in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Her current work focuses on the utilisation of a PLC to improve writing across all subject areas in Years 7 to 12. This project was named the State Winner for Excellence in the Secondary Years at the 2018 Education Queensland Showcase Awards for Excellence in Schools.