

The gateway to learning

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Introduction

In 2006, Mountain View Adventist College (MVAC) made a bold decision. It commenced a class for which students were not chosen by age or class year, but by their ability to work independently. These students were called the Gateway class.

The Gateway class has been designed to support students by recognising their potential

The College Council felt that some students could benefit from a more flexible approach to learning by changing the 'learning culture' of conventional classrooms. There is no age, gender or economic barrier, but each student must be able to work independently, at their own individual pace.

The Gateway class has been designed to support students by recognising their potential, encouraging them to think creatively, develop their imagination, and strengthen their decision-making skills. The curriculum utilises a multi-sensory, integrated approach designed to emphasise academic success, organisational and social skills, and developing responsibility.

MVAC staff believe that Gateway 'applicants' should participate in deciding whether they go into the class or not. The selection, therefore, is made not only by the teachers but by the students themselves, including their peers. Each year, during

the fourth term, students of years two, three and four are asked to write to the MVAC administration (in a very informal manner) and explain why they want to belong to the Gateway class and what they hope to contribute to it. Their peers also have a part in supporting the 'application'; parental consent is an additional requisite.

As a principal, I'm 'totally sold' on running this kind of classroom. It's a huge commitment for any teacher to take on, which means that, to begin with, one needs to find the right teacher to facilitate the distinctive learning environment.

When I walk into the Gateway classroom, there is busyness everywhere; some students are working on the computer, others are writing creative stories, while another group is making a material collage of their own design, on the story of creation.

The teacher sets the tasks for the students, and encourages them to work on the project at their own pace. They are provided with resources to embark on these projects: Internet web sites, library time, books in class, or even a special visitor, with the expectation that the *students*, after being given the task, will manage it, under the direction of the teacher.

All the curriculum areas and outcomes are taught, employing an innovative and less structured



approach. The teacher creates rubrics for every outcome, so that students are familiar with the framework in which to complete their work. If they want to achieve an A, the students know, at a glance, what the assessment criteria are. If, 'at the end of the day', they only receive a D, the teacher can easily indicate which criteria were met, and which were not. This, in itself, is a huge incentive for the students to do well. They know what quality controls their work must pass to receive the top mark. In this learning environment, students have considerable control over the assessment of learning. It is less dependent on the teacher. This teaches students not only to achieve goals they set for themselves, but also to take responsibility for their learning. A further step in assessment may involve self and/or peer assessment.

There are days when Gateway students are so immersed in their learning, they don't want to go out to recess. The students just want to continue with their work. They'll tell you: 'Learning is fun.'

Students are also encouraged to become involved in as many community projects as practicable to nurture not only their academic side, but also to develop a community spirit. It is becoming commonplace now to see a bus load of Gateway students heading off to the local reserve to support the council in tree planting or potting tube plants to help the nursery. They also spend a lot of time thinking of ways to beautify our school grounds and will even don their work clothes and gardening gloves for a day, to help move chip bark in the local 'school forest.'

At the end of their Gateway journey – after the students have spent up to three years in the class, I would like to see our students having grown and matured in their ability to reason, solve problems, and in their interest in the local community. Furthermore, I would hope that they had learned how to achieve their goals, and the value not only of independence, but also inter-dependence.

I encourage all schools to trial their own Gateway class; for teachers or principals to go into the classroom every now-and-then to monitor progress and observe how some students can benefit from a different, but rich learning environment. **TEACH**



- 1 Communion
- 2 McDonalds trip
- 3 Wilderness adventure
- 4 Cooking

[Photography: Gateway]