

Episode 49 - Alternative Assessment - Reg and Lily

#49 - Meet Reg and Lily who share with us their journey of changing how they assess their students at O'Connor Catholic College in Armidale, NSW. The most profound thing they have done is removed summative assessment tasks. This has created more engaged learners, due to students not just studying or learning for a particular task, but learning and improving on everything they are being taught! It has also changed the professional conversations within the staff, teacher-student conversations, how teachers report to parents and how parent and teacher interviews are carried out. This is an eye-opening and mind-opening conversation!

Reg grew up in Albury, trained for her teaching degree at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, NSW and has had experience in a variety of schools in a variety of states in Australia. Lily was born in Canberra, did her schooling at Gunnedah, and went to university at Armidale. She initially achieved a Bachelor of Agriculture, then went on to do her Dip Ed through the University of Southern Queensland, and ended up teaching at O'Connor Catholic College.

Reg is principal of O'Connor and Lily is the co-leader of Learning of Science and also coordinates the EVET courses at the school.

Assessing at O'Connor has moved away from summative assessment tasks in Years 7-10. They removed all formal assessment and now everything counts towards their grade. This has taken away students asking, "Do we have to do this? Is this an assessment?" They found that students started to engage more with all of their learning.

The staff will meet at the beginning of every term, regardless of their subject area, and work out what students are going to learn. Then they will work out self moderation tasks across all subject areas. After these tasks have been completed, staff then meet again, look at the task and responses given by students, which then gives an understanding of where students' learning is at. Everything the students do counts towards their learning progress.

The school has been assessing this way as a progression over the last few years. As a result they have now changed how they report to parents and how Parent and Teacher interviews are carried out. Students have a better understanding of where their learning is because they get fast feedback from teachers and they find the value in their learning. There are discussions between teachers and students on how they can improve? It has now become part of the school's culture, as it has evolved over time.

There is an adjustment phase moving into Years 11 and 12 as it is to be expected. Assessing this way has worked in their favour though as students progress into the senior years. Students are more likely to interrogate teachers (in a good way) and ask for more feedback. Students don't get a mark back immediately. Instead, students will mark their own work first and then talk with their teachers about why or why not they should get a particular result, then compare their results with the teacher's results.

In years 7-10 the students are constantly building on skills used for Years 11 and 12. As a school they map out what is needed in Year 7, all the way up to Year 10. Marks for student's work are not necessarily given but more discussions between teacher and student.

The change in assessing happened because Reg wanted students to have skills to discuss, collaborate and learn how they can grow as a learner. Reg has the idea that everyone can learn. This underpins everything they do at the school. If a task is something extra, why are we doing it? It's also not only the academics, it's also about the student's well being and other areas of their life.

Giving up assessments shows there is a real belief in the teachers. It builds that trust that teachers do have evidence of learning and that all teachers need to work together.

Reg thinks that what stops our creativity and real application of learning is the HSC (Higher School Certificate). There are better ways to assess learning for the 13 years of school.

Assessment should instill a love of learning.