Module 1 – Introduction to ALP

Background

Assessment and Learning Partnerships (ALP) are joint projects between the Assessment Research Centre at the University of Melbourne and various schools and systems.

The ALP framework or data-driven differentiated assessment and teaching evolved from a project on reading comprehension in 19 Catholic primary schools in Melbourne. The gains in student outcomes from that project were so compelling that the use of the framework has spread and is now used in CEO and DEECD schools, in primary and secondary situations and in the areas of reading comprehension, numeracy and problem solving.

A recent analysis of the student outcomes in reading comprehension for those first 19 partnership schools over the first three years of their involvement are shown in Table 1. The project was implemented across Grades 3 and 4 in the first two years and then expanded to include Grades 5 and 6 in the third year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 6</th>
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<td>1.04</td>
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<td>1.06</td>
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Table 1. Average student growth (in logits).

The average growth in student outcomes between March and October was calculated across the 19 schools for each grade and for each year. The unit used to measure the change in student ability is called the logit. (In the same way that the metre is the unit used to measure distance.) This analysis shows that the growth in student outcomes increases markedly over the first three years of the schools’
involvement in the project. In the third year of involvement, the average growth was approximately double that of the first year.

**Components**

Underpinning the ALP framework that supported these marked increases in student outcomes in reading comprehension are two core components. The first is the establishment and effective operation of ALP Professional Learning Teams (PLTs). The second is understanding and use of assessment data.

In the ALP approach, PLTs use a data-driven decision making cycle to collaboratively agree on teaching interventions for all students in classes, taught by members of the PLT.

**What does an ALP PLT do?**

![Figure 1 The data-driven PLT cycle](image)

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Effective PLTs

Effective implementation of the data driven PLT cycle relies upon the operation of effective PLTs. Simply having a PLT does not guarantee success. If a PLT is to be able to operate successfully a number of pre conditions need to be met. These fall to school leadership.

For a PLT to be successful it has to be valued. To be valued its work has to be seen to be high priority. The actions and goals of the PLT need to be reflected in the school plan and be reported upon to the school community. At the same time, the value of the work has to be acknowledged internally. School leadership communicates what is valued in the school through the allocation of time and money. If the school leadership include arrangements for regular PLT meetings in the school’s meeting timetable, and does not allow these meetings to be hijacked for other purposes, it is making a strong statement about the importance of the work of the PLT. The same can also be said when school leadership supports PLTs by providing necessary resources to support their planning; or, even better, when school leadership is seen to build school’s budgetary process around PLT evidence-based decision-making.

Other statements of support from school leadership for PLTs include:

- Participating in ALP either through completion of the ALP Short course for School Leaders, or being a member of a PLT
- ‘Walking the talk’ on the use of data for decision-making
- Providing a safe environment for teachers to try new teaching strategies
- Celebrating success

If the PLT itself is successfully to evaluate and use evidence of student learning to improve teaching; identify developmentally appropriate goals; plan strategies; identify and marshal relevant resources; and review growth in learning (including the learning of the PLT itself); a number of requirements need to be (progressively) met.

These include:
• a focus on data
• understanding of developmental learning
• emphasis on ‘our’ students, not ‘my’ students
• the use of observable evidence
• a culture of challenge which questions the validity of evidence and practice
• reaching out to the research base to broaden PLT member knowledge and to focus professional practice; and
• a commitment to reflecting on the developmental level of the PLT itself and to take developmentally appropriate steps to build PLT understanding and performance

This course has been designed to help PLTs engage with these requirements as core elements of the shift to data-driven differentiated assessment and teaching. Some PLTs will be well advanced and others just beginning. The emphasis on developmental learning in this course will help PLTs identify where they are at, how they will know, where they are going, and what they need to do next. It will also support their sustainability.

This brings us to the second core component of ALP framework, understanding and use of assessment data.

**Principles of good assessment practice**

Just because a test claims to measure some characteristic of a student, it does not automatically make it a useful or valid form of assessment. Not all assessments are good and most are far from perfect. The following points discuss some important principles of good assessment practice:

• The primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. Good assessment improves learning through directing teaching practices.
• Assessment should be based upon theories of learning which provide teachers with an understanding of how students learn. This is best achieved through developmental learning theories.

• Not only should assessment be an integral component of course design, teaching is an operationalised form of good assessment and reporting.

• Good assessment provides useful information to all stakeholders in a student’s achievement from parents, teachers and pupils to principal, district and educational governing bodies.

• Good assessment requires clarity of the purpose of the assessment, goals, standards and criteria and multiple measures and multiple forms of evidence.

• Good assessment should use instruments with established validity, reliability and consistency, and teachers should follow procedures that improve both validity and reliability of assessment to the classroom.

• It is important that assessment practice includes attention to both outcomes and processes. Attention to outcomes enables us to understand what students learn. Attention to processes enables us to understand how students learn and to identify appropriate points of intervention to improve learning. Assessment data indicates where a targeted intervention is to be appropriately based.

Victorian DE&T (2006)

Validity is the use of the test information where inferences made from the test are reasonable, appropriate and useful.

Reliability is the consistency of the results.

Assessment – the beginning not the end

Much of the time, assessment is taken as the measurement of an end point of learning. It starts with the measurement of a student’s ability or skill and ends with the reporting of a grade or score. However, our position is that assessment should be the beginning of learning and the beginning of change. Within a five-step approach to developmental assessment as proposed by Patrick Griffin (2007),
assessment becomes the origin of educational interventions, resource implementation and policy development (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Five steps from assessment to policy, Griffin 2007.

The focus of the work of the ALP PLT is data-driven differentiated assessment and teaching. Griffin’s five step approach to developmental assessment depends upon PLT member understanding of assessment, the nature of evidence, how assessment can be used, when it is reliable and valid, what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from it, and what hypotheses formulated to use as the starting point for deep discussions about student learning and teaching.

Understanding and using assessment and the functioning of effective PLTs are closely intertwined. Because of this, the modules in this course move from PLT focussed to Assessment focussed and back again, each drawing from the other, and in the process ensuring that the purpose, processes and complexity of the ALP approach is captured.
Term 1: Modules 1-3

In your first reading for this course, *Assessment is for Teaching*, Griffin and Care (2009) illustrate the relationship between assessment and PLTs, setting out the principles upon which this course was designed.

In Modules 1-3 which correspond to Term 1, the focus is on:

- 1 - familiarisation with the ALP principles
- 2 - administering and targeting Assessment Research Centre Online Testing System (ARCOTS) and Students with Additional Needs (SWANS) /Abilities Based Learning and Education Support for Students with Additional Needs (ABLES) assessments;
- 3 - building a strong understanding of developmental learning

Modules 1 and 2 should be completed at Meetings 1 & 2 of the PLT in February. This is because Module 2 is directly related to ARCOTS testing which needs to be carried out by the school during the testing period March 5-30, 2012.

It is important that each PLT understands the need for and use of bi-annual testing as part of the ALP approach. At the heart of ALP testing is the need to identify what the student can do, described in turn in terms of placement on a developmental progression. Testing is not, however, the only source of evidence. Teachers observe individual student achievement on a daily basis. Properly formulated and targeted tests can provide focussed information about student performance at a given point in time. They cannot, however, tell us whether the work is typical of the student or not. Teachers can. Where teacher opinion and test result converge we can locate a student's zone of proximal development (ZPD), the point at which the student is most ready to learn and where teacher intervention for the student will have the most impact. Where they do not, the teacher will need to investigate.