

Over the horizon

As August draws to a close, preparations are well underway for the 2014 academic year. While much of the landscape of educational support is in re-development, xsel will continue to deliver a selective schooling curriculum in English, mathematics and science in Years 7-10 among our partner schools.

Planning Term 4 activities and the residential school is in hand and xsel teachers, having begun the planning for curriculum in May, are finalising teaching and learning programs for the implementation of the new syllabuses in Years 7 and 9 next year. While there has been no need for wholesale changes from our earlier programs there are some refinements and new focuses to implement. These are always invigorating and anticipated with pleasure as a means to refresh and renew the teaching and learning in our virtual classrooms.

And speaking of the new ... as well as catching up with our partner schools principals and current students, I had the great pleasure last week of meeting a few of our new students and their parents at Broken Hill. In an unusual turn of events xsel, 5 students who will attend Broken Hill High School and Willyama High School in 2014 have accepted offers to join xsel in the Year 7 cohort. I am delighted! In coming days I will also meet their future classmates in Cowra, Canowindra and Cobar while Orange, Dubbo, Parkes, Mudgee, Dunedoo and Lithgow also figure in my itinerary beyond that.

Right here and now

We were delighted to receive news this week that xsel Year 10 English teacher Ms Lesley Wade has received a Minister's Award for Excellence in



Principal of Denison College Bathurst High School Mr Geoff Hastings and Head Teacher English Ms Sandra Chapman congratulate Ms Wade (centre) on receipt of her award.

Teaching in recognition of her outstanding contributions to Public Education. Ms Wade, who teaches at Denison College Bathurst High School Campus, was aptly described in her citation as an exceptional, inspiring and dedicated teacher who demonstrates a passionate love of teaching and learning and devotes herself wholeheartedly to promoting student achievement. The students and staff of xsel would heartily agree. An xsel English teacher since the program's inception in 2010, Ms Wade's success at eliciting the best from her far flung students is testament to her considerable skills. Her contributions to Public Education make her a worthy recipient for this award and she has our heartiest congratulations.

I'd also like to take a moment to congratulate our students and teachers on their persistence, autonomy and inventiveness over the last few days when a range of challenges have beset the delivery of synchronous lessons. We've experienced at least one major system-wide technical fault, local issues and a variety of co-curricular activities, as well as what seems from my perspective to have

been a 'flu season of plague-proportions. Well done to those who have soldiered on in the face of all these challenges. And to those who succumbed or just been elsewhere, remember it's alright to ask for help to get back on track.

I must also thank and congratulate Mrs Nicole Hunt and her staff and students at Nyngan High School who this week hosted Ms Winters and I at their very entertaining production of 'The Wedding Singer'. The inclusion of students from St Josephs Primary School and Nyngan and Hermidale Public Schools was a wonderful touch; enthusiasm and excitement shone from every face. The rousing cheers of the cast and crew at the end of the show was testament to their enjoyment and wonderful teamwork.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to watch xsellians Keegan, Ellita, Zara, Zoe and Luke in action and catch up with some of their parents. I congratulate Mrs Hunt and her cast and crew on their excellent production; we had a most enjoyable evening. We hope to share some photos of the show with you in a future edition.

A shout out to our four teams this Friday at Mind Marathon held at East Hills Boys High School. This year with the inclusion of girls' teams permitted, Mrs Bannister, Mrs Cluff and Mrs Wiggins have coordinated the participation of twice as many teams travelling to Sydney for the event. Involving students from 13 of our partner schools, this year's xsel contingent is very much a representative sample of the best and brightest from the bush. We look forward to reading their report in our next edition.

Good luck to you all! A special vote of thanks too goes to the parents who have gone to great lengths to transport their children and their teammates over great distances. We couldn't do it without you.

Mindfulness

A developing meme in education is the value of "mindfulness" in assisting students to manage

stress and maintain wellbeing. An ancient tradition of awareness, [mindfulness](#) is an important tool in contemporary positive psychology practices which is beginning to filter into the welfare and student support areas of education. It is the central focus of the school-wide practices of some selective high schools in Sydney and underpins welfare initiatives in the larger education community throughout the world.

Celebrating the immediate is the stuff of contemporary media but sometimes the mindfulness of some younger media stars surprises. Tavi Gevison is a fashion blogger who began her career precociously early at age 11. In a recent interview for the Melbourne Writers' Festival, Gevison, now 17, reminded me that even the most connected, celebrated and successful sometimes need help to stay grounded and use some very old-fashioned paper-based tools to achieve it.

She [Tavi Gevison] is a passionate advocate of keeping a journal - it is something she does every day. Talking about the pleasure of those small things and small details, she mentions that when she travels she also has with her a folded-up piece of paper with "the meaning of life" written on it, "for when I get disillusioned". It contains some fairly basic notes: "Things like, get off the internet, don't be lazy."

Read more:

<http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/fashion/meaning-of-life-for-a-creative-teenager-20130821-2sbgp.html#ixzz2d2JNYhD5>

Mrs Bannister returns

Mrs Barbara Bannister has returned to xsel after her sojourns among the academics of gifted and talented education in Kentucky. Her report is published in this edition. Many thanks to Mrs Virginia Cluff at Dunedoo High School who so ably stepped into the role of Teaching Learning & Technology Officer while Mrs Bannister was away and to Ms Fiona Isaacs who took over Mrs Cluff's xsel teaching duties from the "remoteness" of Sydney. A particular note of recognition is extended

to Fort Street High School in Sydney who hosted Ms Isaacs for the period.

Term 4 Residential School

Commences **Wednesday 6 November 6:30pm**
Concludes **Friday 8 November 2:00pm**

I cordially invite parents to attend the assembly that will conclude our final residential school for 2013. Parents of Year 10 students are particularly invited to share the celebration of their child's xsel participation. With several weeks of learning still to be completed after the residential, this is not the traditional end of year presentation ceremony that takes place in our partner schools. It is nevertheless our opportunity to share and celebrate with parents our students' achievements.

The assembly will commence at 11:30am, concluding with an informal lunch at 1pm before students depart for home. Details will be circulated to parents in a separate communication.

Pauline Freeburn



Teaching, Learning & Technology

It was a very great pleasure to speak about xsel at the international conference in Kentucky in mid-August, and the national conference in Sydney in late July. The USA conference was attended by academics, teachers and parents from across the globe and I certainly learned at least as much as I shared. As always, the description of the current xsel methodology results in a "jaw drop" moment especially when the ESSA data appear on screen. There is something about solid quantitative data that invites belief and admiration.

At both of these conferences I was also able to share some teacher reflections that were gathered some time ago, but that remain current. These include comments such as "...since I'm married to a local farmer, the opportunities for me to transfer are very limited. Being an xsel teacher has allowed me to grow professionally in a manner that was not available to me before" or "How's this? I work in a remote location but I'm a teacher in a selective high school! That was never on the cards for me and I'm extremely proud to tell people what I do" and my personal favourite "... being part of the xsel staff has not only developed my own capacity but I'm able to share all the resources we develop as an xsel team with my local colleagues. Since we are a remote school and some are beginning teachers, this has helped the professional growth of all of us".

I asked some students last year to think about a few questions for me, to gather some student feedback as well. I identified the students as "Hermione, Harry and Ron" when I use their reflections to help an audience get a grasp of what it is we do. To the question "Do you think you have grown as a learner" they all answer an unequivocal yes then elaborate beautifully. When I asked the students to explain what they saw as differences in the xsel classroom, again the students answered candidly with the most common theme being that the expectation is unspoken but high, and that the level of challenge is high. Both of these attributes are what I think constitute a selective high school

curriculum in a nutshell. It is extraordinary that our students can articulate this so well.

It is our student collaboration that is also unique. In the studies I have undertaken over the last 12 months or so in a variety of countries, virtual or online provisions rely on one teacher (or no teacher, just material) and one student. The xsel model of a group of students with a teacher several times per week is unique and I am beginning to learn is one of our very great strengths. I have observed first-hand the unique “energy” that our wonderful students create amongst themselves when they collaborate online. They develop understandings that are far more robust than can be developed in a single student to teacher connection.

I attended a session presented by the Director of London Gifted & Talented whilst I was in Kentucky. In that session the presenter explained successful techniques (measured across thousands of teachers in London) for engaging students and presenting highly challenging work with a low entry point. The description was very close to what we do in xsel already. Once again our world class approaches were affirmed.

Another session of interest was one on metacognition by gifted learners, presented by (of all people) an academic from the University of New England in Armidale. The irony of meeting each other on the other side of the world was not lost on either of us and we spent quite a bit of time debriefing after sessions.

Another session from the Netherlands was about teacher and manager perceptions of how schools are going with the implementation of a gifted profile within the school. It seems their findings reflect those from a few other countries and that is that gifted education training is essential for teachers of gifted students if there are to be any measurable gains in student outcomes.

A lunch time conversation revealed that Texas has just implemented a mandatory 30 hours of gifted

education training if teachers are to go anywhere near a gifted class and if they have a gifted class for more than one year they have to do a six hour refresher course annually. This system I believe is to be more widely adopted in the future in more USA states.

Discussion with lecturers from several Australian universities showed that a unit on gifted education is becoming compulsory in more undergraduate education degrees in Australia. It was extremely gratifying to hear this about our local institutions.

Two moments of immense pride were when xsel was recognised by other presenters as the place to seek further information for support of gifted students in a rural setting. To be recognised like this both nationally and internationally was indeed a very proud moment. It is this recognition of the expertise we have developed as a team in xsel that makes all the hard work we do together worthwhile.

Perhaps the most alarming moment was lunch with a senior psychologist from MENSA. I couldn't decide if I was holding my cutlery correctly, or if my body language was open enough – or maybe too open, did I make enough eye contact or too much eye contact– I'm sure you can well imagine the perceived pressure one can put upon oneself in a situation like that! It turns out she is married to an Australian so the conversation was then quite easy. Finally I would like to extend an enormous thank you to Mrs Cluff for filling my position while I was away. I will resume my school visits now that I am back in the country and look forward to seeing students and staff as I travel.

Barbara Bannister

Taking the plunge

xsel is by nature a school of ‘firsts’ and we congratulate Elijah Stanger-Jones who has created and published an app for iPhones to help pool owners navigate the NSW Swimming Pool regulations.



To view the application see www.swimmingpoolregulations.com

xcellians love a good argument and we congratulate Alexandra Boyd, Eleanor Delaney and Isabella Bankovic who with schoolmate Freya Hawke have successfully debated their way into the position of Western Region Champions. We wish them well as they take the argument up to the Riverina region champions.

Talking rubbish - Litter-ally

Congratulations to Harry Roth who came close to cleaning up in the 'Did your Drop One' competition run by the Keep Australia Beautiful WA. One of 3 runners-up, Harry's ad '**Litter-ally**' was judged to have high potential for commercial application and to influence litter behaviour. It was well liked by the judges who have encouraged Harry to continue with his creative pursuits. You can view it here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9zBpwFQ6Hw>

Harry keeps busy- he also achieved a Credit in the recent Australian History Competition. Congratulations to David Clare who was awarded a High Distinction, an exceptional result for this talented young historian.



History making champions- David and Harry were well pleased with their results

Recently the state government has introduced new laws regarding swimming pools in New South Wales. If pools do not comply with these regulations owners could be up for hundreds of dollars in inspection costs. The app simplifies all the regulations to save pool-owners time and money. Proving that his market research was on target, Elijah notched up his first sales within hours of the site going live.

Elijah spent countless hours developing the app and reported "It was an incredible learning experience and one of the most challenging things I have done." One wonders whether there may be a market for a timesaving homework app...