English - English Studies- Success, a teacher’s perspective transcript  
   
(Duration 14 minutes 28 seconds)

Presenters:   
Denise Tsirigos – English Curriculum Advisor   
Nadia Mitchell – Leumeah High School

(soft music)

Denise: Welcome everyone. Today I'll be talking with Ms. Nadia Mitchell from Leumeah High School. Hello, and welcome Ms. Mitchell. To start, tell me a little bit about your school and your school context.

Nadia: First of all, thank you for having me. It's a pleasure being here with you. A little bit about the school that I work at. So, I'm at Leumeah High School. We're located in South Western Sydney. We have a great leadership, an engaged student community, and we have amazing students. We have quite a diverse range of students. About 43% of our students come from a non-English speaking background. And we have about a 7% indigenous student population as well.

Denise: That's great. So that's really, it's a typical in many ways, a typical, metropolitan, South Western Sydney high school, you know. There's a diverse range of kids. You have a range of abilities, and then you also have students that really want to be academic, and students that have other pathways to schooling as well.

Nadia: Yeah.

Denise: Which is really great, when we're about to talk about, which is Studies, right? So last year you actually taught the English Studies exam students to their examination. How did they go?

Nadia: They did extremely well. I was very proud of them. They scored 7% above the state average, which is a result that they should be extremely proud of. They worked consistently hard throughout the year, and it definitely paid off.

Denise: Yeah. And it's an optional exam, right?

Nadia: Yes.

Denise: So how many of your students actually did the examination?

Nadia: About 70% of my students sat the exam.

Denise: That's spectacular, for such a small cohort, and to be 7% above state average. That's amazing.

Nadia: Yes.

Denise: So what were some of the things that you did to engage those Studies students? There must've been some really good activities or strategies that you took on?

Nadia: The way that I tackle my Studies cohort is vastly different to that of my Standard. I try to have a lot of my activities replicate the real world so that students can see real world application, and so that they can see the relevance in the activities that we're doing. I collect a lot of student data through surveys so that they feel they have a voice in what we do and how they are being taught. We watch a lot of short clips in between activities, which was one of the suggestions from the surveys. Students really enjoy that, discussing them afterwards, and that kind of thing. As much as I can, I try to include physical activities as much as I can. Students really enjoy that. For example, when we were studying the film "Billy Elliot" students went on a film technique scavenger hunt around the school. We use the school iPads, and they found that really fun and engaging.

Denise: That's amazing.

Nadia: Yeah, and also the texts that we study, we choose texts that students can relate to. So, a protagonist that they can relate to, or themes and issues that they have a real connection with.

Denise: Oh, I love that. And I love that you regularly survey them. So that's something that you really engage their student voice with. And it gives them the opportunity to feel really invested in their own learning. That's fantastic.

Nadia: Yeah.

Denise: So as a Studies teacher, and obviously you have them again this year, do you have any tips or tricks that you have utilised especially getting them ready for the 2020 examinations?

Nadia: Yes. So, the first thing would probably be for this cohort, you need to be kind to yourself, and to know that this year has been an unusual 2020 HSC year. And we just have to accept it. So we're just going to have to run with it. The next thing would be to stay organised. Have a realistic and achievable study routine, and divide your study material into chunks so that it is achievable. My biggest advice would be, have a digital detox, okay? You need to get off the phone. Before you know it, you would have wasted hours on social media, hours that you will never get back. And you need to know your text. This one is really important. Just have key scenes, key quotes, just a few up your sleeve. Ones that you can manipulate to any question.

Denise: I love the digital detox. I think that that's a key sort of tip or trick for any student in any course. Especially this year, because everything has been online. Because we had so much of, you know, learning from home, and everything's moved into that space, which is great.

Nadia: Yeah.

Denise: We also need to be able to separate. And English gives, I guess, that really amazing bonus of knowing your text, and if your text is a novel, or if your text is some poetry, then you don't have to be digitally engaged to know your text. You can have your examples there on old school hard copy.

Nadia: Yes.

(both laughing)

Denise: And even though I'm for, and I'm sure you are for all of the digital spaces, it's also important to have that balance.

Nadia: Yeah.

Denise: So for texts in Human Experience module, which is the Common Module for Standard, Advanced, and Studies, what is your prescribed text, and what are some supplementary texts you've used in your class that have really engaged your students and really helped them deepen their understanding of quite a complicated Common Module because there are so many avenues that a human experience can take?

Nadia: Yeah. So our prescribed text is "Billy Elliot" directed by Stephen Daldry and Lee Hall. I think it's a fantastic Bildungsroman text that includes a lot of issues that students can really relate to. Regarding, our supplementary texts. I think it's really important that you know your students and read your class, which is the reason why I use a lot of music and song lyrics because it fits my cohort. My students understand music. And it's a really good way to hook them in. Supplementary texts that I use to build context include a lot of short clips, especially to build their understanding of the historical context of the film, with the mining strike and all of that kind of things. As well as viewing interviews with Stephen Daldry and Lee Hall to deepen their understanding of the purpose of the film, and what the film was intended for.

Denise: Yeah. And I guess, like you said, like our Standard kids, and our Advanced kids, this common text, this prescribed common text in many ways gives capacity for scope, even for the Studies kids. And your 2020 cohort are really engaged with music. But again, next year, as you said, knowing your kids, is if your students were a different cohort of students, your other texts in your class would change, wouldn't they?

Nadia: Definitely, definitely.

Denise: Yeah.

Nadia: The cohort that I have this year is vastly different to the cohort that I had last year. So the texts that I chose were very different. Like I said, if you choose text types that they're comfortable with, they're likely to do a lot better.

Denise: So just talking about the prescribed text, what... Just thinking about all the other areas. So you have to do all the different modules, and then there's also the writing skills section of the examination. What has been one consistent activity that you have introduced to your class really, that you feel has made a difference in their preparation, particularly when you think about the levels in your classroom, because you have a range, as we said, about your school context before. You have such a range of kids within your classroom as well.

Nadia: One activity in particular that I use quite often, I use it as somewhat of a reward strategy to broaden my students' vocabulary and improve the sophistication of their writing, and that is a spelling bee. So, when students engage in an activity, or a lesson that they don't classify as particularly fun, I like to conclude with a spelling bee. I use the NESA challenging words that can be found on the NESA site. And by students being introduced to these words on a regular basis, they become familiar with the words, and it ends up becoming part of their vernacular. So they're familiar with the words, they ask for the definitions if they need to. And before you know it, they're using these words in their responses. So, yeah, we are really broadening their vocabulary in a fun way.

Denise: I love that activity. It's like stealth **by learning** **(9:06)**, you know. The kids are being exposed to quite complicated and complex questions, like from the glossary terms that they then utilise in their exams and in their extended responses without really realising, because it's this fun activity, like the ‘Buzz Off’ activity that you would do with your Stage four kids. But it's, it can be used in such a way that it's actually deepening their knowledge. That's great. So, in saying that, that's something that you do consistently in your classroom as an engaging activity. What has been something that you've changed or you've now utilised consistently to support them with their examination?

Nadia: Sure. So, at Leumeah High School, we run on a two-week cycle. And every second Wednesday, students begin their day with a double period of English. In that double period, they sit a mock examination. Now, this is in response to the RAP analysis data, that we're consistently engaging with to inform our teaching practice. In this mock exam, it's structured the same way as the trial and the HSC. So students are familiarising themselves with the style of questions that they're going to be confronted with. And also they're getting practice writing under exam conditions, which is really important. So students will receive a stimulus booklet, a question booklet, and writing booklets so that they're not overwhelmed on the big day when they have so many papers in front of them. They're used to it. They're used to it, and each time they improve.

Denise: And I guess it's a great formative task for you too, because it isn't about, even though it looks like a summative, because it's a little unseen, but because it's a mock exam, you get to give them really good peer feedback responses. They get to work with each other on their responses. And there's opportunities to have that consistent practice of the exam, which the Studies exam is this one sit, two-and-a-half-hour exam. So it's quite a deep exam. And this is important for the kids out there to also know that are doing Studies this year, that this exam, they need to know the preparation for the exam themselves, don't they?

Nadia: Yeah, we do do a lot of peer feedback as well as, so students will mark each other's papers.

Denise: I'm loving hearing a little bit about all the different activities that you're doing with your class, and how engaged your Studies students are. And obviously, that has been reflected in their results. There's also something that you call a quick write activity. Can you give us a little bit of detail about this activity and its purpose in your lessons, and what that's done for your students?

Nadia: The quick writes are actually faculty mandated now because they work so well. This is something that has been implemented across the board. So each student enters their English lesson with a quick write ready to go on the board. Now, for our junior classes, it's a general question, nothing too strenuous. It might be a reflective question about content that they learned the previous day, an opinion piece, or a persuasive piece, whatever seems fit really. But for our senior classes, our quick writes are short answer questions in response to an unseen text. Again, in preparation for the exam. This is in response to the RAP analysis data as well. So, what happens is they come inside the classroom, they get their books out straight away. The quick write is on the board. We might spend a minute or so unpacking the question. And then they have about four or five minutes to answer it. We generally have a few students who would like to volunteer to share their answer afterwards as well. So it's a really good way for students to get settled into the classroom, and also practise writing in response to unseen texts.

Denise: And that's a really big component of the examination. And has always been one that kids can't really prepare for. It's not like a pre-prepared response. So having that practice of how to unpack and analyse in really short four or five minute chunks, because that's all they're getting every lesson is a good little introduction. Have you found that that's actually made a difference in their writing?

Nadia: It has. It definitely has. Especially when we go through some of the student answers, we discuss them, how they could improve, what they could have been missing, and what we really liked in that student's answer.

Denise: Fantastic. And finally, I actually want to thank you, Ms. Mitchell, for taking the time to sit with us today. And I'm sure Studies students across the state and their teachers have found this very invaluable.

Nadia: Yeah. Well, thank you for having me, and thank you for allowing me to share my experiences. I want to wish all of the teachers good luck in preparing their students for the exam. And I also want to wish all of the HSC students good luck in their preparation for the exam, and for the examination itself. Thanks.

(soft music)

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