2012 Sabbatical Report

Roy Sye

Tamatea Intermediate School

Are we 'virtually' there yet?

'On demand' access to student assessment and reports

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– 'On-demand' access to student assessment and reports.

Executive Summary

Approaches to assessment reporting within schools have traditionally used scheduled written reports and parent interviews/conferences to share student assessment data, learning goals and progress. The intention of this traditional approach is to engage parents/students within the learning process to identifying areas of success and areas of need.

This traditional approach has the potential to promote a disempowered relationship in which the school controls the timing and delivery mechanisms of information sharing, thus providing potential barriers to the development of a true learning partnership. Attempts to increase the frequency of this traditional style of reporting can negatively impact on teacher workload and can represent an inefficient use of time.

The Best Evidence Synthesis (2009) highlights that leadership that impacts positively on student outcomes creates educationally powerful connections (Dimension 6) and selects, develops and uses smart tools (Dimension 8).

This projects aims to enhance both mine and the school's capability and capacity to work in these dimensions.

Recent development of cost effective internet-based Student Management Systems (SMS) and Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide tremendous potential for schools to engage students and parents within assessment and learning information using "on-demand" access. Through use of this technology parents/student are no longer restricted by when they can view, comment or engage with a student's progress or learning.

This sabbatical project investigates some of the thinking and issues around "on-demand" "24/7" access, explores the concepts of building online communities, identifies the features and capability of current web-based tools and develops an evaluative process for a small scale pilot to be implemented within the school setting.

Assessment Reporting Practice – empowering v reporting?

There is an increasing tension developing between the ideals of formative assessment and learning practices and increased central government reporting and data requirements.

As educators our goals are to successfully use assessment information to adjust our teaching strategies, and empower students to adjust their learning strategies. While this is actively supported by Government initiatives (TKI 2012), school systems and processes must also increasingly comply with the prescriptive requirements set out within the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) including; National Standards Reporting. At

times these differing requirements can seem mutually exclusive - as high quality 'rich' learning data must be synthesised and refined to broad, prescriptive terms and measures.

Many schools are attempting to seek ways to effectively manage assessment data and reduce the workload requirements on teachers to enable them to focus on their core responsibilities – teaching and learning.

At our school we have traditionally provided three written reports each year to parents, supported by Parent/Student/Teacher Conferences. The written reports provide a snap shot summary of the current levels of student achievement, effort and levels of engagement. The Conferences are designed to enable the sharing of richer assessment data, providing context for the written reports and 'next learning steps' plans. Students are encouraged to be actively involved in the process.
Despite numerous attempts to modify and streamline this process, it continues to be a significant workload and time commitment for staff. It begs the question

- **Could this time be more effectively spent?**

Having families for two years presents specific challenges to an Intermediate School's ability to build relationships between home and school. My survey responses and focus group discussions with parents/whanau indicated that while the majority are generally 'satisfied' with our reporting cycle there appears to be only a surface level of 'buy in' or effective engagement by the majority within the process. Analysis of parent/whanau attendance at Conferences has shown a downward trend over the past two years.

My visits to other schools confirmed that we all share an overarching aim to create a sense of community and partnership between home and school. This extended to a genuine desire to share achievement data and actively involve parents/whanau within student's learning. However, similar barrier to achieving this were identified in these other schools, irrespective of socio-economic or cultural make-up. These barriers included:

- time constraints
- working parents
- cultural differences
- blended families
- attitudes to school
- educational jargon
- teacher 'buy-in' and
- apathy.

To varying degrees these all conspire to insidiously undermine a sense of community and partnership.

This experience reinforced my resolve to determine if there was a more effective way to build and support this sense of community and shared purpose within a school around assessment, reporting and student learning.

Online Communities

Much has been written about the 'potential' of online technologies to support the building of relationships. The tremendous growth in Social Media over the past 3 years is indicative of the increased capacity and acceptance of these technologies in our day to day lives, as has the proliferation of mobile devices and levels of interconnectedness.

These online technologies have the potential to:

- Positively impacted on levels, quantity, timeliness and quality of communication;
- Enhanced the development of communities online;
- Provided the opportunity for the creation, sharing and use of knowledge between individuals. *(Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2003, cited in Fox, 2004)*

I believe there is a significant difference between the informal online interactions generated through Social Media as opposed to the type of Online Community which could be useful to a school. Social Media is predicated on 'shared' immediacy for social contact, the forums are by default intended for larger audiences, lack moderation and the length of postings are relatively short and informal. While potentially useful for imparting information, general notices, praise and encouragement there applications ability to support engaging in discussions about learning, achievement and support are very limited for schools.

One of the greatest benefits of online technologies lies in the ability to create both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities for communication. Synchronous related to those interactions which are immediate, they are dependent on both parties being online at the same time. Asynchronous communications are not time dependent. Parties can post, upload or contribute at a time that is convenient to them. It is apparent that asynchronous tools hold the greatest benefit for schools.

From my reading and research a potential 'frameworks' became apparent that could be useful to guide schools in creating an Online Community

The essential shared elements for such an Online Community include:

- A clearly articulated purpose
- An authentic reason for voluntary participation of members
- Quality facilitation and guidance
- Appropriate and simplified use of technology that support the sharing of knowledge and interaction
- Recognition that while the technology support the interaction, it takes people to create community
- Active participation is supported, valued and encouraged
- Levels of activity are sustainable

Sociability and usability are key factors for designing successful online community.

- Sociability is primarily concerned with how members of a community interact with each other.

- Usability is primarily concerned with how members interact with the technology of a community of practice.

A number of strategies have been identified to support sociability and participation:

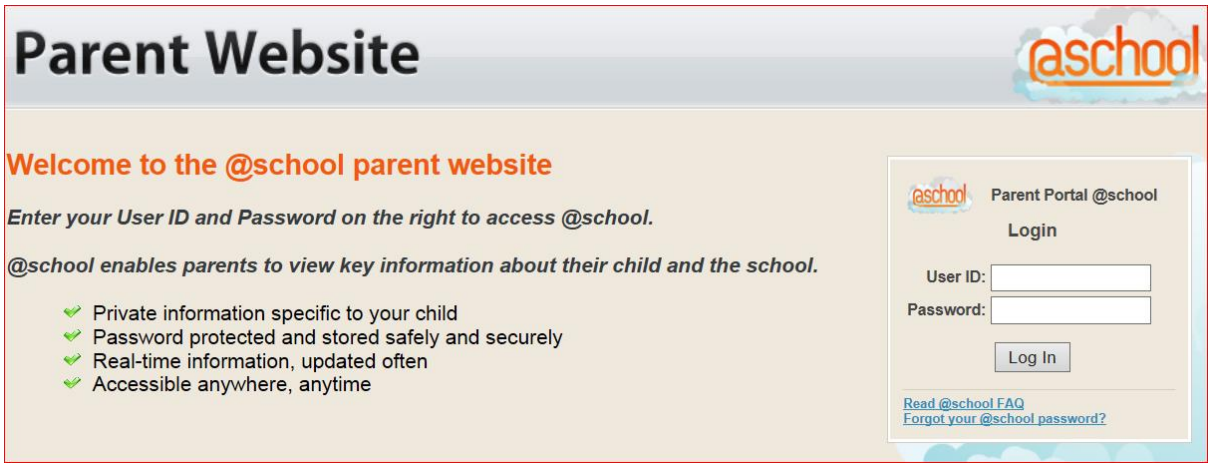
- Allow members time to participate;
- Add value to the community
- Build a sense of community;
- Allow different levels of participation;
- Build social relationships and trust;
- Develop clear policies; and
- Ensure ease of use of technologies. *Preece (2000, 2001, 2004)*

Existing Online Tools

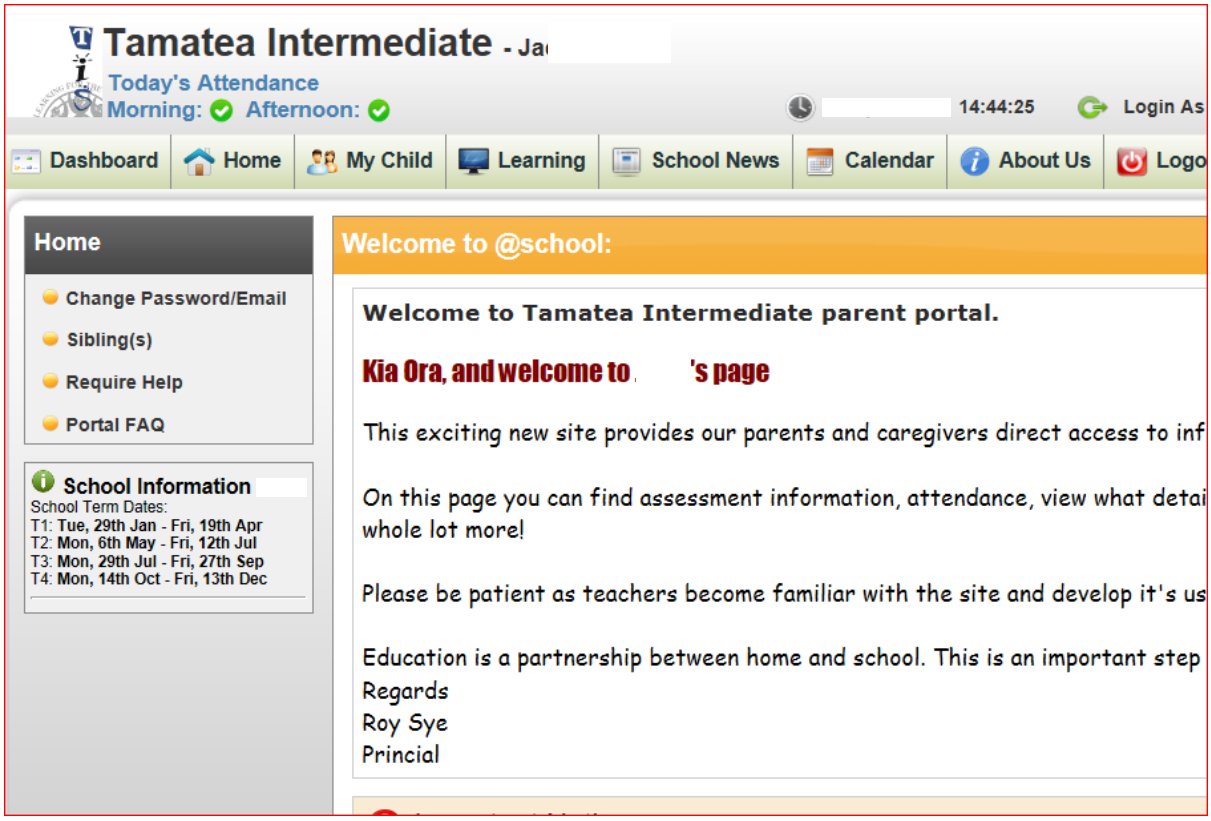
A range of Student Management Systems (SMS) are now available via the Web. This allows teachers to access them at any time from any location. Increasingly these SMS are offering Parent Portals that allow parents/whanau to access information about their child. This includes administrative information as well as assessment and report information.

One particular SMS packages explored to identify capability and capacity eTAP as this was the SMS we were using in my school.

For parents eTAP uses an interface called **@School.** This has a distinct, secure log in where parents can view a range of information about the school and their child.

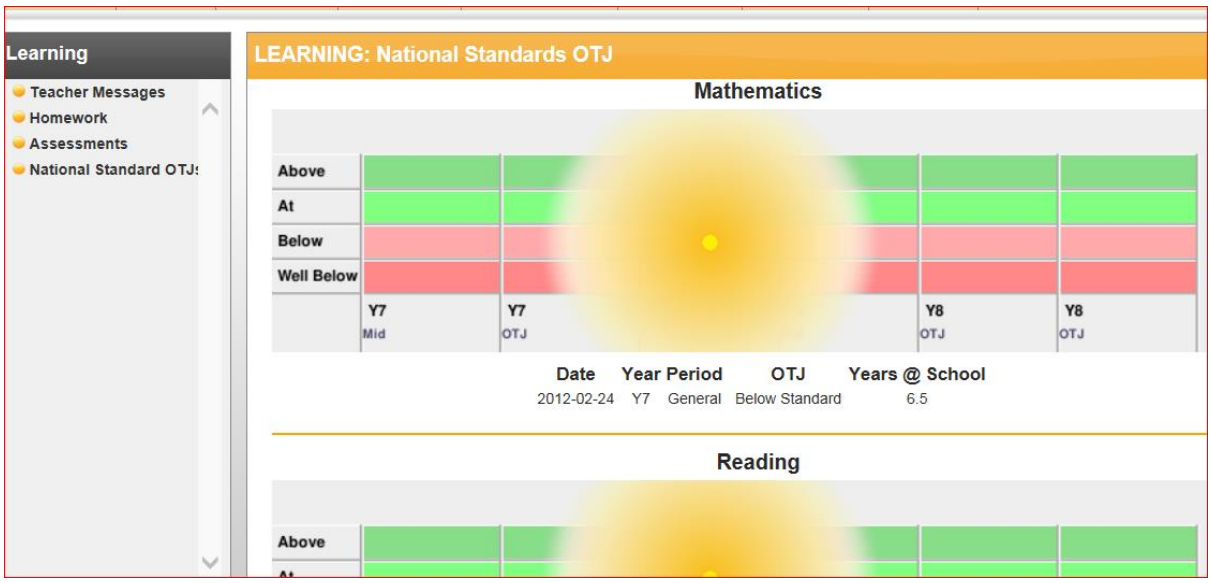


This included administrative data such as; attendance, medical incidents, newsletters, pastoral care, calendars, accounts details etc.



They are also able to view learning data including messages from the teachers, homework tasks, cumulative assessment data and reports.

Teachers are able to create the data for display either on a whole class basis or an individual basis so as enabling them to customise information for particular students.

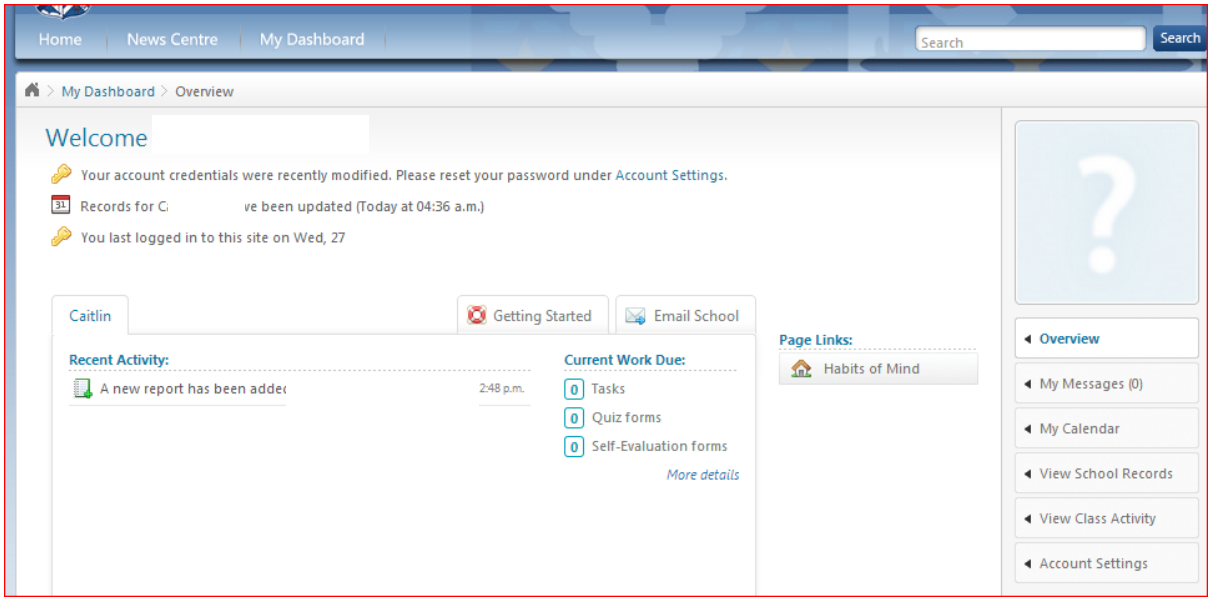


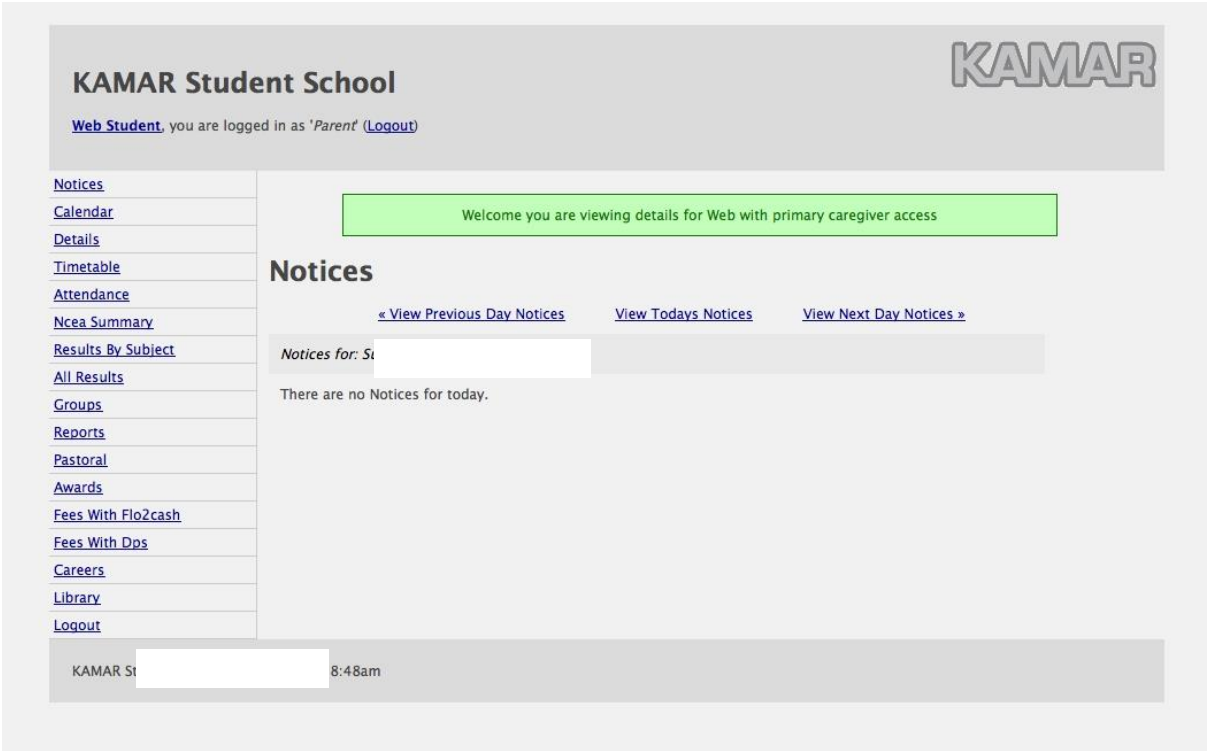
Teachers are also able to post specific comments. Once these are created parents and students are able to post/reply to the teacher thus creating a potential for an on-going online learning discussion.

Another interesting feature is the ability to view the access logs for each student to determine when parents are accessing the system.

To determine the level of functionality of eTAP it was important to view what other schools were using. Comparisons were made through visits to other schools using Ultranet and KMAR. While both of these packages offered similar administrative and reporting functions neither appeared to have the ability for parents to post/reply to comments i.e. to engage parents/whanau. That said the capability may exist but not activated at these schools.

The passive nature of both of these packages appeared to limit the level of usage by parents/whanau with the majority of schools finding that parents only accessed the portal to download written school reports. The main reported advantage to the school was savings on printing and postage.





Few of the schools visited using Ultranet or KAMAR appeared to be taking advantage of other functionality of their Portal

All the eTAP using schools visited used the @School functionality for the generation and posting of School Reports. These reports needed to be developed and formatted by eTAP, which put schools off making any changes as this incurred further cost. Limited use was evident of the sharing of assessment records and two school posted teacher comments on line, with varying degrees of success.

Trial Project

To determine the capability of eTAP as a tool to create an online community, a small scale implementation was trialled involving 12 parents from two classes over a period of one month. The parents were chosen at random but needed to have internet access at home or work to participate (all of which did). While I could see that this trial implementation would be problematic and not an ideal trial platform when assessed against the identified list of shared elements of an Online Community listed earlier, it was necessary to actually see the system in action to appreciate capability.

Parents were given individual logons including the ability to customise their own password. The teachers were provided with three training sessions and handbook information was asked to post all relevant assessment data, homework and engage with the parents online.

Initially levels of participation and interaction were high. This included daily log-on from all parents for the first 4 days. However this quickly declined. By week 2 less than half the parents were still logging on to @School. By the end Week 4 only 3 parents were still logging on.

Discussions and a debrief focus group meeting with parents identified the following experiences/issues:

- All parents found the @School interface clear and easy to navigate
- Assessment data generated by the package was not clear i.e. S4 was Stanine 4, reading age was unclear, straight numeric data had no comparison (out of what?)
- National Standards Graphs were clear
- Ability to comment back to teachers felt artificial given the size of the dialogue box
- A number of people forgot their original password
- All parents reported the needed for there to be fresh information each time you logged on to make it worthwhile
- 4 parents felt @School was gimmicky and not ‘authentic’
- 6 felt that their level of communication with the teacher had improved although 5 of them reported that they followed up with direct email contact to expand/enhance the communication process.
- 7 parents reported logging on with their child
- The majority of parents reported logging on while at work (during their lunch break of course!)

Debriefing with the teachers involved in the mini-pilot provided valuable insight and feedback:

- Teacher felt the @School teacher interface felt cumbersome
- Despite the expectation to the contrary there was a duplication of tasks
- The nature of the pilot felt artificial
- Generally the comments and engagement with parents did not feel authentic.
- Time commitment to be on the computer updating and posting data was more than they though. It was hard enough with 6 parents from their class and they couldn't imagine doing it effectively with the whole class
- The process did not adequately involve/engage the students
- Both teachers could see the potential of @School but felt the interface was too restrictive and prescriptive.
- With the advent of mobile technologies such as iPad, smartphones, tablets etc teachers would prefer an interface that worked across platforms rather than just a computer. They felt that this would help make it more usable in the classroom and assist parents with access.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project has re-energised me to find an effective platform to create an authentic online community platform to engage with parents. The SMS tool used in the mini trial had potential as a 'Summative reporting Tool' but didn't really fit with our assessment philosophy of rich data and students empowerment and involvement. While the intention was to decrease the amount of time a teacher would have to spend entering data or duplicating data this was not the case. Parents also did not find the experience authentic enough.

In a previous section above I identified a list of essential shared elements for creating a true Online Community. These included:

- A clearly articulated purpose
- An authentic reason for voluntary participation of members
- Quality facilitation and guidance
- Appropriate and simplified use of technology that support the sharing of knowledge and interaction
- Recognition that while the technology support the interaction, it takes people to create community
- Active participation is supported, valued and encouraged
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Watch this space! - Future Research

As a result of this sabbatical a new research project has been started to create an alternative platform that will be used alongside the formative eTAP reporting tool already trialled. These new tools will enable teachers **and** students to capture and share authentic learning data that can then be shared with parents to record the learning journey. Used in conjunction with the above list of elements we hope an online learning community can be successfully created.

Acknowledgements

As a principal I cannot acknowledge enough the value of being provided with time to reflect, research, recharge and think!
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- The parents who worked with me

The true value of this Sabbatical Award is providing time to professionally read, discuss and reflect. For me this has reaffirmed my role as the learning leader in my school and renewed by energy and enthusiasm.

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