# Hands On Learning Australia: The Hands On Learning method

www.handsonlearning.org.au

## Innovation

Hands On Learning (HOL) is a method used by schools to reengage students who otherwise fall between the cracks. The HOL method is predicated on the formation of respectful relationships that are both enduring and endemic to the students' normal environment. To these ends the structure of HOL is intended to establish an environment *within the school itself*. The focus is on forming and maintaining quality relationships between disengaged students, peers and adults for periods of time measured in years rather than weeks. Teams of ten cross-age students work with two adults on creative building projects around the school and community, effectively providing these vulnerable young people a place to belong, people to belong to, real things to do, and a chance to contribute to their local community.

## Outcomes

Schooling has a pivotal role to play in young people's lives. Government secondary schools, or indeed all schools catering to disadvantaged communities, face many pressures making it difficult to cater to the needs of all students, particularly those who are disengaged. The dominant culture currently privileges academic success above all and this creates an incentive for schools to exclude disengaged students, especially disruptive ones. As such, the impetus for HOL to begin was the need to give schools an alternative to exclusion.

HOL's approach privileges relationships with disengaged students. By providing students with emotional support and developing their social skills and capabilities, it is possible to 'turn around' these students so they reconnect to their academic schooling in a more positive way than they did before.

In a number of cases, the same evidence can identify improvements across different outcome areas. For example, pre and post data on a student's intra-personal skills can assist with the clarity of analysis and understanding around 'student behaviour', 'social and emotional wellbeing', 'student engagement' and the development of specific 'student capabilities'.

## Examples include

| Improving | What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through… Evidence and approaches, such as |
|---|---|
| **Student engagement**<br><br>**Social and emotional wellbeing**<br><br>**Student behavior** | • Self-management skills (e.g. is able to prioritise activities and manage their time in order to meet deadlines, is able to follow instructions etc.)<br><br>• Changes in students' own detention rates (e.g. are they increasing or decreasing?)<br><br>• Changes in students' own suspension rates (e.g. are they increasing or decreasing?)<br><br>• Inter-personal skills (e.g. is able to listen and communicate clearly with others, is able to resolve differences without resorting to violence or confrontation etc.)<br><br>• Achievement of short-term micro-social skills, referred to as focus plans in the HOL context (e.g. show us you can look people in the eye when you speak to them, show us you don't always have to have the last word etc.)<br><br>• Relationships with other students (e.g. Ability/inability for students to form constructive and cohesive relationships with peers)<br><br>• Relationships with HOL artisan-teachers (e.g. Ability/inability for students to form constructive and cohesive relationships with the HOL artisan-teachers)<br><br>• Relationships with classroom teachers (e.g. Ability/inability for students to form constructive and cohesive relationships with their classroom teachers – evidenced by feedback to and from teachers, frequency of disciplinary incidents, and reflections of the students themselves during focus plan sessions) |
| **Student capabilities:**<br><br>resilience; personal and social competence; functional literacy and numeracy, leadership, critical and creative thinking | • Intra-personal skills (e.g. is able to exercise self-control, is able to bounce back or get over things etc.)<br><br>• Literacy and numeracy skills (e.g. is able to read and understand written instructions, is able to do basic maths etc.)<br><br>• Roles undertaken within HOL team (e.g. taking on the role of team leader for a particular job within a project, being an encourager of others, teaching someone a new skill etc.) |

# Examples include

| Improving | What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through... Evidence and approaches, such as |
|---|---|
| **Quality teaching** | • Collection of pre-/post- baseline, and daily logbook, data (e.g. successful completion of pre- and post-baseline data to assess student ability before and after HOL, and completion of daily logbook tracking student performance across a variety of measures)<br><br>• Attendance and active participation (e.g. vocal contributions, partnering with other schools on community projects, utilizing shared resources etc.) in school cluster meetings, regional meetings, and the HOL annual conference.<br><br>• Engagement of teachers at the learning gatherings noted above<br><br>• Observations and assessment by HOL support staff of their practice via day-to-day operations, communication and working with others in the school, competence with practice elements, management of OH&S, maintenance of evidence of educational outcomes<br><br>• Participation in annual events, including regional raft races, billy cart derby, and annual conference<br><br>• Diversity of HOL projects (major, minor, long-term, short-term, community focused etc.) and completion rates (indicative of the impact HOL is having in the school and community) |
| **Student attendance** | • School Attachment (e.g. has a positive attitude to school, attends school regularly)<br><br>• Attendance records<br><br>• Unexplained absence frequency<br><br>• Attitude toward academic subjects<br><br>• Student achievement data is used to help clarify and understand 'where a student is at' and shifts in student achievement over time and whether this might correlate to their attendance, behavior, engagement (e.g. national and within school test results, and value-added data) |
| **Student retention** | • School Attachment (as noted above)<br><br>• Real retention measure (not apparent). (i.e. real retention relates to which students in Year 10 started at the school in Year 7, while apparent retention relates to the number of students in Year 10 compared to the number of students in Year 7 – it is possible to have greater than 100% apparent retention, while real retention must always be less than or equal to 100%) |

> **Student achievement data is used to help clarify and understand 'where a student is at' and shifts in student achievement over time**

## Examples include

| Improving | What might help you notice whether improvements are being made? Through… Evidence and approaches, such as |
|---|---|
| **Family engagement** | • How many parents and students turn up to 'HOL pizza nights' during Parent/Teacher Interviews at the school<br><br>• Frequency and number of parent volunteers involved with HOL<br><br>• Changes in Parent Attitude to School survey (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/management/Pages/performsurveyparent.aspx)<br><br>• Incidental feedback from Parents |
| **Community engagement** | • Participation in Community projects<br><br>• Participation in annual inter-school HOL billy cart and Raft races<br><br>• Reduced vandalism rates in the local community<br><br>• Proactive identification and nomination of community projects - such as community gardens, hall restorations, boardwalks, decking etc. - provide a vehicle for at risk young people to make a positive contribution to their local community as a way of increasing their sense of belonging, and improving their perception within the community |

## Lessons learned

*Individual and program-wide data:* We realised early on that while it is obvious to students, parents, and teachers what a difference HOL makes with young people, these improvements were as individual as the students themselves. Therefore, in addition to these individual improvements, we have learned that it is important to establish some sort of regular data collection from the HOL practitioners (the HOL team, students, teachers and families) about aspects of the method that were sufficiently general so we could aggregate these more personal improvements *and* capture 'method-wide' improvements. As part of this approach, we ensure baseline assessment data and post-HOL 'intervention' data is gathered around our priority outcome areas (e.g. student pre- and post-HOL method interpersonal skill data).

*Capacity building with schools:* Given that we had identified the need to capture very specific data, and we were in the fortunate position to have dedicated staff implementing our method, over time we realized the importance of developing an easy to use framework and provide specific support to

> **improvements were as individual as the students themselves.**

> **it is important to establish some sort of regular data collection**

the dedicated HOL staff at each school to assist with their data collection. Such resources and specialized expertise are often not available within our school system, particularly in the less well-resourced government sector. If as a not-for-profit we did not support HOL schools in this way, there would be no true and accurate way to understand how and why our method works.

*Joined up resourcing and learning:* Alongside our current evaluation practices, over the years we have learned to look for and be open to opportunities where we can align (not 'shoe-horn') our evaluation needs with other organisations. For example, we are working on a joint project with The Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne and several other not-for-profits that also connect with schools. The project has developed and is evaluating a framework that identifies three key strands of student 'Connection (e.g. How much did you feel listened to today? How effective did your team or class feel today?), Control or Capacity (e.g. How much did you feel you got to use or improve your skills or learn some new skills today?), and Meaning (e.g. How much of what you did today felt like it mattered to you or was part of something important?) (CCM)'.

In HOL, the quality of relationships is viewed as a critical success factor for reengaging disengaged school students. So this joint project is allowing us to 'test' this assumption in a broader context with external feedback and joint learning sessions with other project 'partners'. In this sense, the project is a source of data as well as an improvement strategy for us. Through the CCM Framework, we are trialing gathering data from students, through a questionnaire, about the kinds of things that make a difference to how they feel about school and themselves. The CCM Framework is being piloted with other agencies and we hope it can start to form a shared basis for measuring the impact of relationship-based projects like HOL. We welcome hearing from others who might be interested in further collaboration.

> we have learned to look for and be open to opportunities where we can align (not 'shoe-horn') our evaluation needs with other organisations.

> the quality of relationships is viewed as a critical success factor for reengaging disengaged school students.