

## **The RAS Alert and its role in the classroom**

**By Eric Frangenheim**

Public speakers know they have two to three minutes to engage their audience. People navigating through a website will go elsewhere after 30 seconds if they cannot find what they are looking for. Are there any lessons here for what happens in a classroom? It can be claimed that if students are unsure where the lesson is heading within a few minutes, they become confused and switch off.

This is where the Reticular Activating System (RAS), a part of our reptilian brain, our 'fight or flight' mechanism, could be of value to teachers.

### **What is the RAS and the RAS Alert?**

Its major purpose is to keep us safe, to recognise danger and to make us successful. It is usually context-based and filters out unnecessary stimuli to allow us to focus on the job at hand. For example, when driving a vehicle, the RAS filters out scenery as soon as a potential threat emerges and alerts us to those potential dangers such as a person on a bicycle, erratically driven vehicles and also suspiciously parked white vehicles with cameras. The reason this occurs is that our past experience has taught us to be alert to these potential dangers.

When on a shopping mission, once we have decided on a particular item such as clothing, food or technology, our RAS Alert filters out unnecessary stimuli to allow us to identify these objects as we enter the relevant store. We will also notice this item elsewhere in the public domain.

Students who have one or more tormentors in a school situation have an acute RAS Alert and will easily spot these people, even in a larger crowd. The reason is that the RAS Alert filters out other stimulus in order to help them identify potential danger in order to keep them safe.

As teachers, we can use the same principle of the RAS Alert at the start of the lesson to give more purpose to what is to follow. One idea may be to draw a bow and arrow pointing at a bull's eye on the top left-hand side of the whiteboard. Next to the Bull's Eye, identify the major topic or purpose of the lesson to follow. Then list 3 to 7 dot points identifying the major subsets of the lesson. These dot points could include content headings but could also include behavioural and organisational points such as active listening, being careful with technology and collecting and returning resources.

For example, in a lesson about Romeo and Juliet, we used this RAS Alert

(Dear Editor. Can you insert a pic of a Bow and Arrow pointing directly at a Bull's Eye.)

Next to it

### **Year 10 English Lesson**

#### **'Romeo and Juliet- A question of Power'**

followed by several dot points below.

- Understanding interaction of characters
- Understanding relative strength of the two gangs
- Noticing links to life today in school, sport and commerce
- Discussion – analytical thinking
- Working in pairs – active listening and providing feedback
- Writing a concluding paragraph

Here is another example of a RAS Alert

### **YEAR 3/4 : SCIENCE/LITERACY LESSON**

#### **THE SUN :**

followed by several dot points

- The importance of the sun - how it touches us
- Research and Discovery
- Sun Smart
- Small group work
- Important Words
- Presentation of a story
- Self-confidence
- Recall/ Comprehension/Decision Making
- The Sun and the Seasons

### **Why is the RAS Alert valuable in the classroom?**

Spending one or two minutes on this RAS Alert at the start of the lesson could prepare students for clarity of purpose and lead to greater engagement. Leaving the RAS Alert on the board is also useful if the teacher regularly refers to it during certain stages of the lesson. This is not the lesson plan but rather the lesson purpose. It assists in avoiding confusion for students and is more likely to ensure greater understanding with reflection. Both detailed and global learners

(commonly referred to as left and right brain learners) will appreciate being offered a map of the lesson.

Stephen Covey in 'The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' talks about the importance of being proactive and 'sharpening the saw'. By this he means it is better to spend a few minutes preparing for the task, such as in sharpening the saw or axe, before embarking on the job of cutting the wood since any time lost in the initial preparation is soon recovered by the use of a more efficient tool. In this case, the RAS-Alert is also a tool for use in the classroom.

### **How to write your RAS Alert?**

Identify your major content areas to be covered. Then ask yourself, what are the major outcomes, Essential Learnings or Key Competencies you wish to achieve? Note these and decide how they link to the content areas. Finally, include any particular management advice you wish to ensure occurs during the lesson.

**Observation and Reflection:** The RAS Alert at the start of a lesson is more than an agenda. It is a list of what you as a professional educator would wish to see occurring in your classroom. Sharing these ideas by RAS Alerting your students will more likely lead to shared ownership and purpose of the lesson. You can also test the usefulness of the RAS Alert by asking students what they think of it.