



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: D.P. Todd Secondary **District:** SD57 Prince George

Area of focus: Student Level

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Question / focus area: The Language and Landscape Program: blended Learning course combination project: English 11 and Geography 12 together for a full morning each day with opportunities for flexible blocks where some students came for seminar and the rest worked independently at school or at home.

- 1) Transitions – preparing students for new learning environments (blended learning, independent inquiry, cross-curricular, small group “seminar” settings including student-led)
- 2) Making modern connections to Traditional Knowledge (cultural and ecological)
- 3) Place-based learning (incorporating field study)

Scanning: Students recognized that blended learning was a skill that, if mastered, could be very useful. They were very honest about how challenging it would be to own their learning time and be responsible for meeting outcomes with minimal supervision during the time set aside for “flex work.” Many students were unable to use flex time to our satisfaction, and, more surprisingly, to their own satisfaction. They found some of the cross-curricular and “identity-rich” work challenging – very much an indicator that while we often ask our students to think outside the box, or to put themselves into their projects, we have much to learn about doing this on a daily basis and in a comprehensive, dynamic manner. Put simply, the students were good at small tasks and discreet outcomes, but synthesis and broad connections were somewhat elusive.

Focus: We set out to see what happens when conventional English and Geography curriculum came together in a context that emphasized skills and inquiries that are currently more common in post-secondary environments - blended and independent learning, cross-curricular project work, field work, and discussion-based seminars that are co-facilitated by teacher and students.

The main inquiry was on the work of students in the Language and Landscape program but this was continued with similar cross-curricular learning in a subsequent locally developed course called *Middle Earth 12*.

Hunch: Our hunch was that students are often challenged to work harder or get more organized, but not often challenged to take charge of their own learning agenda. We

wondered whether mind/body connection would be the way in to this discussion. Students have a somewhat better handle on what it means to own their physical development (e.g., diet, exercise, choices about drinking/drugs). Their educational experience, however, is largely constructed by others and seems designed to receive passively. In a broader context, we wondered about whether our school and district were ready for significant experimentation with “schooling.” For example, were they ready for blended learning?

New professional learning: We’ve learned that it takes an incredible amount of something to make a system-wide change. That something could be:

- a) Sticktoitiveness – eventually people understand what you’re trying to do
- b) Collaboration – having a groundswell of support and shared work towards a goal
- c) Luck or knowing the right people or being at the right place at the right time

In the case of our blended learning experiment, we obviously didn’t have enough of this “something.” Despite assurances from the start from the local curriculum department and our principal, and support from the Ministry of Education that what we were planning was exactly what they wanted to see, the flextime component of the course (the heart of our blended learning model) was shut down by the district senior management. Ironically, a similar “flex” approach is being used by two entire secondary schools in our district as a means of scheduling tutorial time for students and collaboration time for teachers. We suppose the individual classroom was the wrong scale for the application of this idea.

There were also many cool things we took away from the course – “Good, Bad, and Ugly” of Social Learning, stages of student project development in problem-based learning, using narrative self-inquiry as a tool to explore established curriculum, use of an online program, making community and parent contacts to support learning (rather than just to ask for stuff or send/receive communications). We also learned more about local Lheidli T’Enneh culture through two of our field trips, one of which was student facilitated.

Taking action: Aside from what has been mentioned above (e.g. blended learning design), part of the overall strategy was to encourage students to think more about what their course work and education looks like when they settle in to a few good questions about themselves, the topic, and ways they can connect the two. We did this in two main ways. First, there was an ongoing invitation to add to the course blog (response to prompts, many about the process of learning over the product of learning). Second, we did small group brainstorm & poster paper shares on every aspect of learning design, starting with student expectations for themselves and the teacher, and progressing to their deep questions around the purpose of education and the reasons why school has been set up the way it is.

A complete list of strategies would exhaust this exercise... much of it is included in the course blogs. We incorporated field study (e.g. Ancient Forest, Exploration Place,

UNBC), and we allowed time and freedom to return to a theme that arose during the brainstorming work at the beginning of the course (connection to place – *topophilia*).

Checking: Students definitely got a handle on the extent to which their learning style and habits would support their plans for post-secondary (school or work). The foray into blended learning (curtailed after intervention from the school district) helped expose a gap in our school system: are our senior students ready to take on their own learning in a partially supervised setting? The answer, or course, was varied and coloured by individual bias (some students were hard on themselves when reflecting, others were not). The feedback was collected in conversations, exit forms, and on the course blog(s).

While our trip to the Ancient Forest was the most fun and physically/metaphysically satisfying, the trip to UNBC to participate in a “day of Geography” was the most rewarding according to the students. Many of them had no idea what university life was like and found the tours, talks, and round tables with faculty and students enlightening.

Reflections/advice: We’ve learned that one should not try to break the mold on every item. We took on too much. We would suggest that other schools look at one new focus per year per course or program, and try to get all stakeholders together to agree on parameters before it starts.

We were so glad that we included parents in the process – they were very clear about what we were trying to do and this helped convince the students to push their own comfort zones. They knew that the teacher and their parent’s goals were the same.