



2014-2015 AESN Case Study

School: James Ardiel Elementary **District:** #36 Surrey

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

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Question/Focus: To what extent will the participation in field based studies (Experiential Learning) enhance the learning for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, specifically in the area of writing? Additionally, will the opportunity to publish their articles in a blog format online as well as comment on what their peers have published encourage more thoughtful writing?

Scanning: In the area of writing, Aboriginal students are performing slightly below or as well than non-Aboriginal students. In the areas of meaning, style, form and conventions 86 % of Aboriginal students are minimally meeting or above compared to approximately 91% of non-Aboriginal students.

Focus: Students were excited about the opportunity to publish their writing for peers to read and comment on. Although we created individual websites with blogs attached for each student, we were met with ongoing internet access issues. The Surrey School District's crippling amount of bandwidth available for elementary schools is a fraction of what is necessary for students to post their ideas online. Unfortunately, they soon became frustrated by the inability to post their blogs on their websites.

In order to keep the momentum travelling forward, we had the students type their blogs as they would online, print them, and attach a "Blog Comment" form (hard copy) that had room for 5 students to offer written comments (see template at end of report). To our surprise, this face-to-face method of sharing and commenting was extremely successful. Without a screen between writer and reader, there was more accountability for both. More meaningful comments began to appear after discussions on what makes a valid comment (connecting to other's work; acknowledging equality of everyone's perspective) (see "What Makes a Good Comment" information sheet the students worked from at the end of this report).

Hunch: We believed these field studies (experiential learning) would increase student engagement and deepen learning. It would increase knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, traditions, and culture for all learners; increase positive identity and a sense of belonging in Aboriginal learners. Through front-loading and direct teaching, students would

develop a deeper understanding of Canada's history, including its early settlers. We also believed that experiential learning would improve student achievement in writing. When students have lived an experience, they are able to reflect on and describe their learning with greater detail and a more developed writer's voice.

New professional learning: Planning and connecting field-based events in our local community, as well as metro Vancouver enhanced learning for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The experiential learning improved student writing. In addition, it improved our own knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history, traditions, and culture. It changed our teaching as we incorporated mobile technology to develop student blogs, allowing students to write for a global audience. We were able to overcome difficulties with the online aspect of published writing, and in doing so had a positive surprise from the outcome of our adaptation.

We did lots of front loading before the students attended the field studies. The students were well prepared for their workshop at the Vancouver Art Gallery (Studies of Artifacts from the Forbidden City). The guides were extremely impressed with the knowledge and enthusiasm students brought with them, extending the length of the tour because of their avid interest. As well, the guides found our students sharing information with them that they themselves were unaware of (the kids were keen, what can I say?).

The field study of Britannia Mines included a tour of the mine and they were presented with evidence of how this mine effected the environment. They also studied early settlement of a mining community, and realized how small communities were close knit and had to work together for all to succeed. The connections to Aboriginal culture were clearly evident, and recognized by our students.

In May and June, students were involved in an outdoor education activity (canoeing lessons at Deer Lake, Burnaby). They learned basic canoeing techniques and water safety. These lessons were followed by a dragon boat excursion, where they used their paddling skills and learned the significance of the actual boat itself. They had the opportunity to review their research on West Coast Aboriginal canoes, looking for similarities and differences, and the significance of the artwork attached to these two types of boats. We saw much richness in their writing after these excursions.

Taking action: We believed these field studies would will increase student engagement and deepen learning. Through front-loading and direct teaching, students developed a deeper understanding of Canada's history, as well as greater knowledge of early settlers in Canada. Experiential learning improved student achievement in writing. When students were face-to-face with new concepts/knowledge, they were able to reflect on and describe their learning with greater detail and with a more developed writer's voice.

Because many of our students are economically challenged, they do not have opportunities to explore and visit other communities in the Lower Mainland. Providing field-based studies

through school, allows the students to visit, observe and experience environments other than their immediate community. The field studies to the Vancouver Art Gallery, Britannia Mines, Capilano Regional Park in addition to the fine arts presentations (Vazzy New France, Dream Rider Environmental Presentation) at school, deepened student learning and engagement as evidenced in their writing.

Checking: We used the BC Ministry of Education writing performance standards on personal impromptu writing for grade 7. Our base line data: In the area of writing, Aboriginal students are performing slightly below, or the same as non-Aboriginal learners. In the areas of meaning, style, form and conventions 86 % of Aboriginal students are minimally meeting or above compared to 90% of non-Aboriginal learners.

Student writing improved as we'd expected it to, as students learned and deepened their understanding of the 4 aspects of writing described in the performance standards. Students were able to write detailed, informative reflections of their field study experiences and the quality of writing was better than other impromptu writing topics as evidenced in the attached pieces. Surprisingly, blog writing posted online was not as effective as we once believed. We concluded the face-to-face sharing may have encouraged the students to have more ownership in their writing, pushing themselves to take more risks with word selection, description and presentation of their ideas. In addition, those who commented on their peers' writings were much more reflective, considerate, and full of connections to each other.

Reflections/Advice: We learned lived experience through field studies does improve a student's ability to reflect, connect and write. Putting pen to paper/typing immediately after experiential activities improves writing immensely as students are able to write a more detailed account, having stronger views, and fresh emotional connections to their experience. Technology is a powerful tool for student to "even the playing field", giving all students the quality presentation/appearance (legible, so removed stigma of "messy" work) and help with basic conventions, as well as easy access to developing more precise vocabulary (thesaurus). Face-to-face encounters regarding shared experiences allow students of various backgrounds to connect and learn from each other, and become aware of our individual perceptions. Field studies are very important to their learning and view of the world.