



2015-2016 AESN TRANSITIONS CASE STUDY

School: Southern Okanagan Secondary **District:** #53 Okanagan Similkameen

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Our focus for this year: Creating an interdisciplinary, land-based program for our grade 9 and grade 10 students who recognized their need for a different approach for learning.

Scanning: We started the scanning phase with a staff group discussion on the overall lack of success and engagement of many of our Aboriginal learners. We noticed that our efforts with traditional teaching methods did not appear to be meeting their needs. The questions that were most helpful were the 'why' questions.

- Why are they not engaging?
- Why are so many Aboriginal learners not graduating within the five-year window.
- Why does further support not seem to be making a significant difference? (extra time, Education Assistants' (EA) support, Aboriginal Education support workers)

The realization that our current efforts were not effective with this group was the result. We surveyed our entire student body using two of the four key questions on two separate occasions concerning success and connections.

Focus: Many of our students are not experiencing success in school, yet they have areas outside of school where they are very engaged and extremely focused. What does this mean for our learners?

How could we design a learning experience for our students that could provide the opportunity for our students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to find success?

Our focus began by looking to other programs for inspiration where the focus is on indigenous, hands on and project based learning that centers around the Aboriginal community and culture of our local peoples, the Okanagan.

Hunch: Our hunch was that the traditional classroom approaches to learning were not meeting the needs of all of our learners. We believed that our Aboriginal students in particular were not meeting their potential within school due to their learning styles being incongruent with traditional practices.

By recognizing this need for new and exciting practices to engage our Aboriginal learners, we considered the inclusion of all of our students. EPIC has been designed to be an inclusive program where all students are welcome, and providing the First Peoples Principles of Learning as a foundational aspect of EPIC allows students of Aboriginal descent and students of others cultures the opportunity to embrace the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

New professional learning: The acronym for EPIC reflects Experiential, Project Based,

Indigenous and Community focused learning. As a team of professionals our learning has been an important piece to the program.

The primary areas of our learning have included: an awareness of our local Aboriginal culture, establishing a curriculum that embraces a land-based, cross-curricular and multi-grade structure.

Assessment practices are process oriented and student driven which allows for a personalized and competency based practice. This required a pedagogical shift for the teacher and students. Learning to embed technology into daily practice around curation, creation and presentation has been an important aspect of our professional learning and ultimately the learning of our students.

Our district is fortunate to have inquiry time set aside for professional dialogue and action. A group formed for valuable time together ten times through the year around the inquiry question and EPIC.

Taking action: Focusing on developing a new culture of learning for the students and weaving the curriculum of Social Studies, Physical Education, Woodwork and Information Technology was the main focus of the semester. Working as a team to support the actions in daily practice was an important first step in creating a new program at Southern Okanagan Secondary School. With support from our formal leaders (district and school) and the teacher librarian, the teacher and students could reach out at any time for support of all types.

Checking: After our first semester of EPIC the best resource for 'checking' was with our students. The Four Key Questions explored the differences EPIC has made for the students, whether these changes were enough, and what changes were evident for our students. The responses below outline the evidence of change, learning and growth.

Student Responses - Interviews - Four Questions & Responses

- "I would like to say I am doing pretty good with my learning because I am learning in a different way."
- "The point of school is to learn and go farther in with life." "Mr. Baptiste feels that I will be success in life."
- "EPIC is a course that is really unique in the way that it is not a normal classroom setting. We learned a lot about all sorts of things like Aboriginal peoples and culture. I'd say it was a really fun semester and I would recommend it."
- "We made things like fish traps, canoe paddles, and many other custom projects." "I am glad I had the opportunity to take this course."
- "It made me closer with kids that I didn't know and it was a fun journey."
- "Once we started getting deeper into the Aboriginal community Mr. Baptiste started teaching us about spitlem (also known as bitter root) and how it helped the Aboriginal people. So eventually he suggested we actually go out to dig it, and it was fun!"
- "Overall the EPIC experience was amazing and definitely a highlight in my time in high school and I would recommend this program for other students."

Reflections/Advice: Being a new teacher going into my third year of teaching, I was ready for the challenge. The program required many hours and days of prepping and working with our EPIC team (Rachelle, Tracy, Marcus, Alanna, Jeremy). Implementing the program allowed the freedom to go on multiple field trips and to learn outside the classroom. This was a learning experience for myself as well as the students.

We based assessing the students on the Prescribed Learning Outcomes for each of the four courses that were taught. Although challenging, we felt this method of assessment gave parents a better understanding of how their son/daughter was doing in the program. We are looking at making some changes to the assessment that would shift the emphasis in certain areas.

Next year we will implement changing the course credits from Physical Education, Information Technology, Wood Work and Social Studies to First People's English 10 and English 9. We are beginning to plan for a Senior EPIC with a focus on Earth Science for the 2017-2018 school year.

The visible changes we saw as a result of EPIC were not perfect, but we noticed greater engagement and more connections made both inside, and outside of the program. Our staff recognized the positive impact the program had on these students.

I got to know this group of students very well having worked with them all day, every day, for the entire semester. On the last day of school, it was sad watching them leave for the last time. Overall, EPIC has been a great experience and I look forward to teaching it again next year.

Outside of EPIC, our staff is becoming more willing to take risks, challenge their own practice, follow their passions and share with their students.

One question that is at the front of our discussions, as we head into September, is how our students return back to traditional classes?