

Canada (British Columbia)

Community of Learners Network, Nanaimo Ladysmith

This is a 'mini-network' within the larger Network of Performance Based Schools in BC. It involves intensive collaboration on applying inquiry methods. Despite operating in the traditional structures, the teaching/learning interface is markedly different from traditional modes of schooling. The curriculum and schedule are built around large-scale inquiries that blur traditional school subjects and schedules. Formative assessment and metacognition are integral to the learning, as is collaboration through the 'Circle Discussion' approach which is also a core element: circle discussions are referred to as Literature circles, Information Circles and Numeracy Circles, and generally comprise 4-8 students. Aboriginal place and culture are fundamental and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students are taught to respect traditional values. Community members with expertise are regularly invited into classrooms, and community and local resources viewed as an integral part of the learning environment. From beginning with three teachers, now there are eight learning environments that fully integrate the core approaches.

Main Focus of Innovation: LEARNERS, TEACHERS, CONTENT, RESOURCES, ORGANISATION

Other keywords: equity Vignette

General Information

Name of the ILE: Community of Learners Network, Nanaimo Ladysmith

Location/Address: School District 68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith). 395 Wakesiah Avenue, Nanaimo, British Columbia V9R 3K6

ILE submitted by: Paige Fisher, PhD, Vancouver Island University, and Mary-Lynn Epps, Lynn Brown (Teachers and leaders of this case).

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

The 'case' we are proposing for inclusion in the project is a group of teachers in a community on Vancouver Island who are working with an innovative combination of instructional approaches within the confines of the traditional structures of their school system. They have called themselves a 'mini-network' within the larger Network of Performance Based Schools, in that they are collaborating intensively to utilize inquiry mindsets in their own classrooms and providing educational leadership to continually expand the use of these approaches in the classrooms and schools of their colleagues within the community and across the province. This group of teachers is also working closely with teacher educators and student teachers at Vancouver Island University to create a multi-level approach to deepen and expand their work.

As a teacher educator and an educational researcher, I have spent considerable time in many of the classrooms in question. As I began to read *Using Research to Inspire Practice*, and to engage with the ‘Core Principles of Effective Learning Environments’ I was repeatedly struck with the thought that a complex interweaving of the ‘principles’ of effective learning environments is very evident in these learning spaces. What is the most impressive about these learning environments are the levels of engagement, self-regulation, metacognition and achievement among the students. Guests are often invited into the learning spaces to learn from the children and teachers within, and they are universally impressed by the depth of the thinking, the ownership of the learning and the achievement of the students, regardless of diversity in age and perceived ‘ability’.

The potential of these learning environments also lies in the fact that they are operating at this time within the traditional structures of the school system that surrounds them, yet the interface between teaching and learning is drastically different. There is great opportunity and potential to significantly shift the nature of the learning environment within the existing structures of schools in the early stages, yet the more flexibility that can be built into the schools, the more potential there is to ‘grow’ the approaches. The team is working to support the learning of other educational practitioners, and have found that even student teachers and teachers with few years of experience in the field are able to integrate these varied approaches and create learning environments that are rich, engaging and challenging, once they have been ‘coached’ and supported in the implementation.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE

What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners’ social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

The core learning aims are to holistically develop a purposeful orientation towards learning activities in an environment that encourages the development of a strong ‘sense of self’ for all learners involved, in that students develop a strong sense of their learning needs and are able to advocate for themselves in varied contexts. The Community of Learners concept encompasses many aspects of social and interpersonal development (as explained above) in that it seeks to create a deep sense of attachment to community, interdependence and respect for diversity. Students are immersed in an environment that seeks to balance structure and autonomy so that they experience a combination of safety and accountability.

These learning environments are being employed in various contexts, so the ancillary learning aims vary. The work in ‘Elementary’ classrooms (children aged 8 – 13) is very multidisciplinary, and seeks to incorporate as many ‘subject areas’ as possible within the larger Inquiry Units. For example, the Healthy Living unit that the teachers have devised incorporates Language Arts, Social Studies, Physical Activity, Visual Art, Dance, Drama, Science, Healthy Relationships and Social Responsibility. At present, this is possible because of the structure of British Columbia Elementary schools that tend to place one teacher in each classroom of 30 children who is responsible for all subject areas.

The teachers who are creating these learning environments in Secondary classrooms (14-18 yr olds) tend to be restricted by a focus on a particular ‘discipline’ or ‘subject area’, although the learning that results from the student inquiries moves well beyond disciplinary boundaries. For example, this learning environment is being very successfully employed in English, Visual Art and Photography courses at the Secondary level. The student inquiries are represented through Writing, Art and Photography, but engage with broad issues such as social injustice, globalization, media influences, societal challenges such as poverty, terrorism and the environment.

Learners

Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

This learning environment is aimed at students registered in public schools and placed in classrooms ranging from Grade 3 (8 - 9 yr olds) to Grade 12 (17-18 yr oldsschool administration teams. The students have diverse abilities and interests. The learners are not ‘selected’ to work in these environments – at this

stage, the teachers work with the group of students who have been enrolled in their classrooms, and seek to implement these practices therein. Generally, each classroom enrolls 14 – 31 students grouped by ‘grade level’ with one teacher per group. The cross-grade multi-age work comes about as a result of collaboration between teachers at various grade levels.

Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

Dr. Linda Kaser and Dr. Judy Halbert are the leaders of the Network of Performance Based Schools. Their professional backgrounds include school and district level leadership, senior policy roles with the Ministry of Education and they are currently faculty members at Vancouver Island University. They were the initial developers and leaders of the Network of Performance Based Schools (www.npbs.ca)

Dr. Paige Fisher is a supporter/facilitator of the classroom work through her role as a teacher educator and researcher at Vancouver Island University. The students in her pre-service education courses are introduced to the same methods being employed in the classrooms described in this case. The student teachers also visit the classrooms and work with the classroom teachers and the students to further enhance their understanding of how to create learning environments such as these in their future classrooms. As these student teachers obtain teaching positions throughout the province, they are beginning to spread the approach beyond the Central Vancouver Island region. In addition, various student teachers are placed as practicum students in these classrooms so as to receive intensive coaching.

Three key teachers initiated the combination of approaches described above. They have mentored several other teachers to take on the work, and there are now six teachers intensively implementing the approach, and they are in the process of mentoring more. Each of the new teachers involved is committed to mentoring more teachers. We have discovered that a period of intensive support and coaching is essential to helping each new teacher establish comfort with the processes, at which point, they are ready to support others. We anticipate that the numbers will continue to grow through this process.

Four of the teachers involved have many years of teaching experience, mainly in elementary schools. Two of the newer teachers have been teaching for less than ten years, and have proven themselves more than capable of adapting the approaches to their contexts.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Community of Learners foundation

There is a profound and explicit focus on the development of a Community of Learners. -This concept has been developed by the teachers over time, and has come to be seen as a foundation of their work with students and colleagues. The basic premise is that a sense of a Community of Learners is essential to the establishment of a learning environment that is characterized by emotional safety and interdependence. This is as essential for the teachers in these environments as it is for the students. The teachers view themselves as learners first, and children are encouraged to view themselves as learners and as learning coaches or teachers. This mindset is essential to enable the creation of a learning environment where inquiry can flourish. Members of a Community of Learners are supported through the ‘messy uncertainty’ that characterizes rich inquiry environments.

Each of the teachers recognizes that they need the support of their colleagues as they move into unknown areas of practice. They also recognize that their students need this same level of support as they learn and grow.

Each teacher facilitates a process by which students articulate their vision of a Community of Learners in the classroom, where productivity is enhanced by the recognition that each member of the community is

responsible for the learning of themselves and others. Healthy relationships within the learning environment form the basis of a positively interdependent community.

Inquiry mindsets

The use of inquiry-based learning to facilitate inquiry mindsets among students and teachers and completion of meaningful, relevant inquiry projects: The teachers view themselves as teacher-researchers who are continually inquiring into their practices, and the impact of their practices on valued student outcomes. Students in these classrooms are also encouraged to approach their learning with inquiry mindsets. The curriculum and schedule are built around large scale 'inquiries' that blur boundaries between traditional 'subject area' disciplines and traditional schedules. Each Inquiry Unit is framed by an overarching inquiry question that is designed by the classroom teachers in collaboration with each other. The questions are designed to be meaningful, relevant, rigorous and transformative. They are derived from various curricula documents, and accompanied by a clear set of learning intentions for the unit of study. Students are then supported in developing their own inquiry questions that enable them to delve deeply into particular areas of interest. (See sample teacher and student inquiry questions appended)

Responsive teaching through formative assessment

In these learning environments, formative assessment processes are embedded and inseparable from teaching and learning. By drawing on the seminal work of Black & Wiliam, the British Columbia Ministry of Education and the Network of Performance Based Schools have articulated a set of key assessment strategies that they have been promoting through publications and professional development activities across British Columbia. They have come to be referred to as the 'Six Big Assessment for Learning Strategies'. These strategies are: learning intentions, criteria, descriptive feedback, self and peer assessment, questions and ownership. In addition, the Ministry has facilitated the creation of a set of 'Performance Standards', which are learning progressions designed to articulate widely held expectations in the areas of Writing, Reading, Numeracy, Information Technology, Social Responsibility and Healthy Living.

The Performance Standards and the AFL strategies are woven throughout the learning activity in these learning environments. The Performance Standards offer the teachers 'benchmarks' by which they can determine the progress of their students in terms of widely held expectations of achievement for skill development. They are used diagnostically, in planning, formatively and summatively, as a guide to student progress. The language within the Performance Standards is used to help teachers and students develop criteria to guide their work. The criteria is then used to offer opportunities for self and peer assessment activities, which lead to enhanced ownership of the learning and the progress of each student. Much of the descriptive feedback occurs through 'circle meeting' conversations, where groups of students meet with the teacher to share their developing understanding of the topics under study. The teacher facilitates the conversation and offers feedback through varied questioning techniques, as students build their understanding together. In addition, students meet with peers to regularly offer each other feedback that is based on criteria that have been developed collaboratively.

The feedback is made concrete through feedback sheets such as 'Two Stars and a Step' or 'Stars and Next Steps' that students take away and apply to subsequent learning tasks. Most feedback occurs during formative stages of learning projects so that it is applied to learning in progress, not merely to summative products.

The explicit use of learning intentions is evident in the extent to which students within these environments are able to articulate the purpose of their learning activities. The key goal of learning intentions is to help create a purposeful learning environment in which students are able to articulate the learning that is derived from their activities.

Cooperative/ collaborative Learning

Flowing out of the Community of Learners foundation, there is an implicit understanding in this learning environment that learning is a socially constructed process. Collaborative learning is used to build in emotional safety and accountability for the learning. There is extensive use of peer coaching/partner talk, multi-aged peer coaching, jigsaw structures and collaborative inquiry projects. The 'Circle Discussion' is a core element of the inquiry work. Circle discussions are referred to as Literature Circles, Information Circles and Numeracy Circles, and generally comprise 4-8 students. They involve students working together to prepare background materials to bring to the circle discussion, where they share their learning with the rest of the group. The classroom teachers use this discussion time to facilitate sharing of information, to prompt in-depth thinking, to offer feedback, and to highlight key elements of the topic under discussion.

Focus on metacognition and awareness of own learning processes

Students begin the school year by exploring their understanding of the tools and processes that support their learning. In the beginning, this is often a challenging task for students, as they are unused to thinking about and talking about their learning processes. Throughout the learning activities that take place, students are involved in planning the approaches they will take to their learning, self-assessing their learning, and reflecting on their learning processes. Three questions; What's working? What do I need to rethink? What's next? guide their responses to learning challenges. As the school year draws to a close, the students become intensively involved in creating an ePortfolio that represents their 'learning journey' through photographs, project samples, music, video and voice. Each year there is impressive evidence of a shift in the students' ability to express an understanding of what they need to support their learning. They often refer to the pivotal role of feedback, inquiry questions, criteria, conversations and peer coaching as essential to supporting their learning work.

Learners as core participants

It is clearly evident that these learners are active participants in their learning processes. The work of inquiry, particularly as students work within larger inquiry themes to select and plan their own inquiries is central to this ownership. The extent to which students see themselves as essential members of a community of learners who are responsible for contributing to the knowledge building that occurs in the classroom is also a key factor. As students teach each other in their collaborative work and circle meetings they bring their knowledge and understanding to their peers.

The formative assessment processes that are embedded in the teaching/learning work also contribute significantly to the degree to which students are core participants who 'own' their learning. Students are continually engaged in metacognitive processes whereby they examine and reflect on their learning and set goals and 'next steps'. Even the evaluations that are required by District and Ministry policy are co-constructed and negotiated between students and teachers so that students are aware and involved in the processes of reporting on their learning.

Recognition of varied learning styles and use of adaptive technologies

Implicit in the learning environment is recognition that learning happens through various means and evidence of learning can be represented in myriad ways. Students are encouraged and supported in the use of adaptive technologies such as word processing and text-to-speech software. Learning opportunities are facilitated through traditional 'texts' as well as Internet sources, literature, physical and dramatic engagement with ideas, the Arts, field study and experimentation. The problem-based learning that culminates each Inquiry Unit is represented through representations such as mind maps, models, music, digital representation, oral presentations and dance.

Community Involvement - a commitment to honoring 'place' in the teaching and learning.

There is a profound recognition of a 'sense of place' and the notion of connection to 'traditional territory' in these learning environments. As a Community of Learners is developed, the children are taught to look to the Aboriginal cultures that are embedded in, and surround, the community for a sense of communal values. Through literature, oral tradition, and the presence of Elders and young Aboriginal leaders, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children are taught to respect traditional values. In addition, community

members with expert knowledge in a variety of disciplines are invited into the classroom to enhance the learning. Groups of children go out into the community to learn there as well - community centres, local forests, historical sites and local educational facilities such as museums are considered to be essential to enriching the learning environment.

Families are involved in various ways. They are invited to celebrate student learning at 'Learning Showcases' at periodical intervals throughout the school year. They also get involved in school/community projects such as fundraising for international development projects.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

Much of this is described above. Much of the school-based work takes place in a traditional classroom within a traditional school. The seating arrangements are arranged so that students are easily able to meet with each other and work collaboratively. Parents and community are involved in various ways as described above.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

The collaborative inquiry that sparked intensive innovation was initiated by the collaboration of a small group of teachers who are members of the Network of Performance Based Schools. The inquiry work that was begun through their involvement in the Network has deepened and grown as the teachers continually inquire into their own practices and the achievement and engagement of their own students, while seeking out and creating leadership opportunities that enabled them to influence the practice of teaching colleagues within their own schools, schools in their community, and across the Province.

The work began with three core teachers. Through their educational leadership such as workshops, 'learning rounds', coaching and mentoring, the approaches used by these teachers are expanding to other classrooms in various ways. At present, there are approximately eight learning environments in the region that are fully integrating the core approaches as described above. In addition, there are many classrooms and practitioners who are working with partial integration of the approaches.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

These classrooms receive the same funding as any other classroom in the school districts. Some additional funding (up to \$1000 per year) is offered to the schools as a result of their involvement in the Network of Performance Based Schools through a small grant from the Ministry of Education.

Learning Outcomes

What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

Each year, the schools involved in the Network of Performance Based Schools submit a case study report to the Network. We have appended a sampling of three case study reports from Randerson Ridge School to highlight the evolution of this school's inquiry practice over the time period from the Fall of 2007 to the Spring of 2010. An examination of these case studies reveals an evolving spiral of inquiry-based professional practice and the subsequent impact on student achievement in this setting.

In the initial stages, the Network supported teachers in the use of achievement data to develop instructional goals. Teachers began to analyze student data more closely than they ever had before. This analysis led to collegial dialogue that helped the teachers to discern trends and patterns in student achievement, and learning needs were identified. Inquiry questions were created to address the learning needs of students. In addition, strategies to address these needs were supported through professional learning groups, co-planning and co-teaching.

It is clear that teacher learning improved along with student achievement. Teams of teachers increased in their depth of understanding of student learning and teacher learning. For many of the teachers involved, the use of formative assessment, as articulated by what the NPBS refers to as the ‘Six Big AFL Strategies’, has evolved to a point where the use of formative assessment strategies is seamlessly woven into their instructional practice. Teacher inquiry questions grew in depth and complexity, the sophistication and breadth of their instructional practice expanded, and collegial relationships deepened to support further growth.

With each cycle of inquiry, inquiry questions deepened and broadened to multiple curricular areas. Teams of teachers developed their skills in the assessment of student achievement and their ability to use assessment data to determine next steps in their professional practice.

The inquiry processes that the teachers were involved in eventually translated into the development of very similar inquiry processes for the students. The cycle of acquiring background knowledge, formulating questions, developing strategies and plans to answer questions, showcasing and sharing the results, then developing further questions is shared by teachers and students. When these cyclical processes are accompanied by continual reflection, feedback and goal-setting, metacognitive processes are solidified for teachers and students.

Listed below is a sampling of school, classroom and personal inquiry questions from the 2007-2010 period, followed by the Case Studies as submitted to the Network of Performance Based Schools.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE

Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

Sample School Inquiry Questions submitted to the Network:

07-08

Will the explicit instruction of writing and reading skills accompanied with constructive feedback have a positive effect on students' learning?

08-09

Will developing inquiry questions help to improve the reading of non-fiction text as demonstrated through written responses and persuasive essays?

09-10

Will student learning improve in the area of reading for information and math problem solving if we focus on non-fiction reading strategies and problem solving skills with thoughtful feedback on student work?

Classroom Inquiry Questions:

Water has the power to change everything. What will you do to transform yourself and others to ensure there is a well for the future?

Healthy living is the key to a balanced life. How will you transform your thoughts, actions and beliefs towards healthy living, and provide leadership for others to do the same?

How can we develop and continue to evolve as a Community of Learners so we can all succeed?

Student Inquiry Questions: (leading out of the broader class inquiry questions)

How is global warming affecting the well?

(The pair of students who worked with this question wrote a letter to the local newspaper that outlined water conservation strategies and facts about global warming)

How can a passion for physical activity be shared to help inspire others?

(This student wrote poetry about her passion for running which was published in the Canadian Runner magazine)

How is growing flowers like being in a Community of Learners?

(This student tracked her successes and challenges with growing flowers and compared the process to the successes and challenges experiences by groups of people trying to learn together)