

Canada (British Columbia)

Saturna Ecological Education Centre and Middle Years Shared Ecological Education Centre, Gulf Islands School District

The learning in this remote community is focused strongly on how students learn, albeit aimed at a deep appreciation of other generations and of the natural environment. The environment is the main learning resource and the ecological lens runs through all the learning programmes. The centres also host students from other parts of the province with the host students acting as 'environmentors'. Among the senior (grades 11-12) students one of the five programmes is 'Teaching and Learning', covering theories and practices of teaching and learning and employing this with younger students as mentors. The Independent Directed Studies course sees each student working in a mentorship relationship with an adult in the community. Among the middle-years learners, about half the time is spent outside the school building working on personally-designed small group projects. Students experience a great deal of inter-dependent, intergenerational learning, and this is supported by 'Connecting Generations' – a database and system which allows young people and older members of the community to connect up for focused 'cognitive apprenticeship' opportunities, as well as more general learning from each other.

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

Other keywords: alternative philosophy, blended/non-formal, equity

General Information

Name of the ILE: Saturna Ecological Education Centre and Middle Years Shared Ecological Education Centre, Gulf Islands School District

Location/Address: School District # 64, Gulf Islands: 112 Rainbow Road, Salt Spring Island, BC, V8K 2K3

Website (if available): www.sd64.bc.ca and <http://seec64.ca/index.php?/home/index>

ILE submitted by: Jeff Hopkins, a leader 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?

SEEC and MYSEEC are well suited to be included in this project for a number of reasons. Because the world has changed from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, so too must our education structures. These two programs respond directly to this need. At their core, these programs not only have eco-systems as a curricular topic, but also as a model for how the learning takes place. Students experience a great deal

of interdependent, intergenerational learning, including not only their learning but the learning of others. Also, learning is largely “place based,” in that it is not the kind of learning that looks the same irrespective of learning environment. The program takes full advantage of the communities and the natural setting in which it is located, helping its learners make a deep connection to place and to recognize the importance of place as a context for learning. Finally, much of the learning is co-constructed by students and teachers, guided by the concepts of social constructivism and highly-personalized learning. This is all recently supported by a separate initiative called “Connecting Generations” – a database and system that allows us to connect youth and older members of our communities for focused “cognitive apprenticeship” opportunities and to learn from one another in more general ways as well. Please see the link for more information on the Connecting Generations initiative:

<http://www.sd64.bc.ca/connecting.html>

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 more about how students learn than it is about specifically what they learn. This is key and is what makes this program innovative. Having said that, fostering a deep appreciation for other generations and for the natural environment are learning aims as they are both a major part of the environment in which the programs are located. The knowledge aspects of our curriculum are focused on helping students acquire an understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness, interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and how their learning translates into the “real world.” The skills and attitudes, or habits of mind, that are acquired by students in these programs are generally about learning about their own passions and strengths, finding value in the natural world, and recognizing their own ability to shape their learning and, by extension, almost all outcomes in their lives. The curriculum used is of our own creation, but also supports the learning outcomes of the BC education system. Much of the curriculum is process-oriented, due to the constructivist nature of our approach.

Please see the following link for more details on curriculum:

http://seec64.ca/index.php?/programs/seecsemester_overview

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?

These programs are aimed at all learners. In terms of ages, the programs are specifically for students in Middle Years (MYSEEC) and in senior secondary, usually grades 11 and 12 (SEEC). Of course, younger students are involved by nature of the program. Anyone is eligible to take part at no cost to them, except food when they choose to live on Saturna island for a semester. There are currently 42 students in the programs, ranging in ages from 11 to 17. Students are in several different places at any one time, but this is not via distance learning. There are also many times at which the students are also all together.

Facilitators

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

The teachers are currently Steve Dunsmuir and Sarah Bateman. They are also the leaders. Their backgrounds are very different from one another, but both have strong foundations in personalizing learning, nature-based learning, and translating field projects and interdisciplinary learning into BC curriculum. Their roles could be defined as teaching directly, facilitating or guiding learning paths, and connecting students with the outside world – blurring the lines between school and community. No distance learning is incorporated into this program, except when connecting students with expert mentors who did not live in our communities.

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?

These programs are based on two broad pedagogies: social constructivism and place-based learning. These pedagogies are embedded in a learning model that is ecological – a model in which all things are interrelated and in which any part of the system can be a teacher/mentor and a learner.

The SEEC part of the program is organized as follows:

High school (mostly grade 11 and 12) students are enrolled in five courses for one semester: three fairly traditional academic courses (thought aught through an ecological lens) and two not-so-traditional. These two are Independent Directed Studies 11 or 12 (a BC curriculum course, and one that allows students to go into greater depth in an area of interest), and Teaching and Learning 11 or 12 (two courses that are Board Authorized by our Board of Education). Teaching and Learning sees high school students being instructed on learning theories and practices and then employing them as tutors of younger students who attend the same school on Saturna Island. The Independent Directed Studies course sees each student working in a mentorship relationship with an adult from the community in an area of the student's choosing. Both the younger and older students also host visiting students from other schools in BC to engage in an ecological immersion day or days. The Saturna students act as "environmentors," employing the skills, knowledge, and habits of mind that they have learned. Each student becomes a facilitator of learning for visiting students as well as an expert on at least one aspect of Saturna's natural environments (e.g. intertidal zones). The MYSEEC part of the program is organized as follows:

Middle years students are grouped in two cohorts and are based on Salt Spring Island. These students spend at least one whole year in the program and are learning their entire curriculum through an ecological lens and pedagogy. Over the course of the year, students will spend about 50% of their time outside of the school building working on personally-designed, small-group projects that will fulfill aspects of the curriculum. The two cohorts often join together for activities that can involved the larger group. Both groups also travel regularly to the four other islands in our district, sharing their activities with students in those host schools. As with SEEC, the visiting MYSEEC students act as leaders and mentors to the host students.

Feedback for students is of the "explicit feedback" type, making use of portfolio-based reflective practice and regular group debriefings after mentorship activities. Feedback for the program is directly solicited through parent surveys and interviews with both parents and students.

SEEC is run by two teachers – one who is primarily responsible for the high school part of the group and one who is primarily responsible for the younger students. Of course, however, these groups and most often mixed together, and the two teachers are working together more often than not. MYSEEC is run by two teachers – one with each cohort – and sometimes involves other teachers when these cohorts join the mainstream middle school in its exploratory programming.

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?

Learning takes place inter-generationally, interdependently, and in the community and natural world wherever possible. Students in the programs are both learners themselves and also teachers of younger students. Parents are deeply involved in aspects of the program as they are a part of each student's context. Community resources are all voluntary and access to those mainly human resources is managed by our Connecting Generations initiative.

Digital resources are typically used in a moderate way, but it depends very much on the personal learning paths of each individual student. The environment itself is the main resource, and all other learning resources support learning through the lens of ecology and nature. Much of the learning takes place in natural settings and in the community.

History of ILE

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

The program was initiated by a principal, Steve Dunsmuir, in the Gulf Islands School District in 2007. It was started for several reasons, the first of which was to re-create a sense of vibrancy at a very small elementary school on Saturna Island – a remote community in the Southern Gulf Islands of BC. The introduction of high school students and the connection between them, the resident elementary students and the adult residents of the island did, in fact, meet the goal. The second purpose was to create a program in which we could begin to test structures for more personalized learning that might inform our decisions about reforming our mainstream learning systems. These purposes have not changed.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

Right now the program is funded as a normal part of our public educational programs and falls within our regular funding policies in the district. There are no exceptional costs to run this program. There are no plans to change this.

Learning Outcomes

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

There is a great deal of information regarding the outcomes achieved, much of it anecdotal. The graduation rate for the years that SEEC has been running is 100%, and this number includes some students who were actually at-risk for not completing high school at all. A documentary film was made (Part 3 of a series called “Evolving Education: Creating Community,” made by the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and the University of Saskatchewan) that outlines very well the social, interpersonal, personal, and meta-cognitive outcomes from the point of view of teachers, students, parents, and community members. This can now be most easily found via YouTube or the CCL site.

Many of the outcomes, because the program is project-based, were quite concrete. A typical example is a project completed by two students who chose to meet their Biology 11 curricular outcomes by creating a field guide for Winter Cove National Park on Saturna Island. They worked with a wildlife biologist for several months, creating a beautiful and useful book documenting the species of birds and plants to be found in that place.

Since graduating from the program, we have seen our graduates go on to great things, each of them citing the confidence they got from being a part of this program.

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)

The documentary film mentioned in the item above, as well as the many websites referenced throughout this form, form the best documentation of this program. The documentary was done as an evaluation itself, but other evaluative materials are available upon request. Most of it is embedded in the websites.

Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE

It was the success of the original SEEC program that spawned MYSEEC. After hundreds of middle years students visited Saturna as guests of the SEEC kids, students began transferring to Saturna to be a part of it. That success was actually detrimental as it took focus away from the high school – elementary partnerships and eventually drove away too many high school students who did not want to be part of this emerging middle years program. We created MYSEEC and took a year off on Saturna, also giving us time to complete our residential cabins and to reclaim the roots of this wonderful program that we almost let slip away. Fall 2011 sees the reopening of the SEEC program, after this short hiatus, with a stronger, more well-defined purpose and structure.