

SET-BC Projects Final Report: *Inquiry-based Collaborative Learning in Grade 8 Humanities*

Submitted by the Spencer Middle School Team

I. Project Overview:

The purpose of this project was twofold: 1) to empower students to collaborate with each other and use effective inquiry-based approaches to deepen their understanding of the processes and content involved in the Humanities (Social Studies and English language arts); and (2) assist educators to collaborate and gain a deeper understanding of how to effectively meet the needs and support students with diverse socio-emotional and learning needs in a Humanities classroom.



The project took place at Spencer Middle School; a diverse school in a growing school district with a population of approximately 600 students. This year was the first year for Spencer to transition into a grades 6-8 junior middle school model (previously it was 7-9) and to embrace a policy and practice of full inclusion for all students (no more 'life skills' separate classes). This project was focussed in two grade eight Humanities classes. The team consisted of Donna Sagodi (LA/IS Teacher), Jen Nixon (Classroom Teacher), Chris DoSouto (Teacher Librarian) and Jon Carr (Aboriginal Support Teacher). A real strength of both Humanities classes was the classroom diversity, consisting of students with a variety of social, behavioural, physical, and learning needs, including several students designated as 'special needs'. This diversity lent itself well to an inquiry project that incorporated the Universal Design for Learning principles, namely providing multiple means of representation, expression and engagement.

The project goals for both the students and the teachers were as follows:

- 1) Students will develop and deepen their understanding of the inquiry process and methods (connecting and wondering, investigating/researching, constructing, expressing/sharing, and reflecting). The Inquiry model followed was the ["Points of Inquiry" Model](#) supported by the BC Teacher Librarians Association.
- 2) Students will develop a sense of independence during the inquiry process, including having opportunities to



make choices that impact their learning (developing an inquiry, specific tools to use, variety of forms of expression).

- 3) Teachers will gain a greater understanding of how to support and meet the needs of students with diverse needs.

SET-BC provided 4 iPads and 4 Toshiba laptops to assist with the implementation of this project. We had requested 8 devices, because the classroom teacher was set to transition her classroom from 30 individual desks to 8 large tables, seating four students at each round table while also providing spaces for students to work alone if/when needed. Our initial plan was that every round table would have access to a digital device. Besides these digital devices, SET-BC also provided capacity-building, collaboration time, and networking opportunities through monthly meetings with project participants from across BC and with the project coordinator, Elyssa Derban.



II. Project Implementation:

As will be discussed in Section III, due to a delay at the school board office, we did not receive the equipment at the school site until December, thus delaying the start of the project. Although we did not have the technology provided by SET-BC we were still able to model and scaffold the inquiry project, borrowing equipment from other sources and just ensuring that lessons and activities were not heavily tech-focused. In general, this is how the project proceeded:

- Initial formative assessments were conducted. Students completed a brief questionnaire (using a Survey Monkey questionnaire we created) so that we could get a better sense of their knowledge about the inquiry process, as well as, as their proficiency using different digital tools and applications. From this survey, we found that the majority of students did not understand the term “inquiry” or the processes involved; as well, that most students only had basic understanding and proficiency with digital applications and web-based tools (using basic social media, email, and word processing or presentation application only). Besides the questionnaire, a literacy assessment (DART) was also done to gather baseline data on the students’ reading comprehension and fluency. Parents were also involved and informed about the project through informal channels and regular communication in the form of weekly emails and blog posts.

(Jen) had also started to learn about and pilot the use of the Google Apps for Education and Google Classroom. Within two months of starting the SET-BC project, all students in the Humanities classes also had their own school district-based Google account and were part of the classroom teacher's Google Classroom, which we soon discovered was an excellent companion and support to the SET-BC Inquiry project.

- The process of inquiry took on two forms in the Humanities classes. On the one hand, the inquiries were curricular content-based and more teacher-facilitated inquiries. Some of the driving questions that we have explored in these curricular inquiries have included: *Do societies always deserve their reputations?* (Vikings inquiry); *What are the traits of a modern-day hero?* (mythology); *How can I create and publish a book like a professional graphic artist?* (graphic novels literature circles); *How is climate change affecting my life and my world?* (current events); and *What factors make a civilization unique?* (Medieval Japan). Students are currently involved with our main collaborative inquiry, looking at the question: *How have scientific technology and innovation changed people's lives?* (Renaissance), but this inquiry will not be wrapped up by the time this report is due. These content-area inquiries have provided a great opportunity to really teach the inquiry process through explicit teacher modelling and scaffolding. On the other hand, the two Humanities classes also do 'Genius Hour' every Friday morning. Genius Hour is based on Google's 20% time and students are able to use the inquiry process to learn about topics that they are interested and passionate about. These Genius Hour, or passion-based, inquiries have provided my students with the opportunity to play, experiment, take risks, and follow their passions in a more student-directed inquiry, which values creativity, critical thinking and collaboration.

III. Main challenges and how we overcame them:

- Acquiring technology from district - The equipment for the project was sent to the school board office to be imaged. As we are a growing district, with two brand new high schools, there was a long delay at this step. We were able to appeal to our Principal, as well as the Principal of Student Support Services, and they helped to make our devices a priority. Additionally, we were able to begin the inquiry process with the classes by borrowing ipads from the French department and laptops from the Learning Commons until the equipment arrived.
- Sharing devices - we found as we started the project that we underestimated the appropriate amount of devices for the class. We planned for 1 device between 4 students. At several stages of the inquiry process this

meant students were waiting to use technology. We probably would have benefited from one device between two students. We were able to supplement our technology with devices in the Learning Commons - which conveniently is right next door to Jen's room.

- Time and Patience - Inquiry learning takes a lot of time!! As a teacher you need to trust that the time is worth it and learning happens even when the result is not the beautiful put together project you first envisioned. At the beginning, as the students and teachers learned about how to follow the inquiry process and use the digital tools, there were a lot of times when we needed to remember that deep learning is happening in the struggle.
- Unexpected Delays - In the fall Jen was called into the role of acting vice-principal which took her out of the classroom for five weeks - this delayed the start of our inquiry learning. In the spring Jen also unexpectedly had a student teacher - unfortunately the teacher was not ready to do the inquiry approach so the project again needed to sit a little on the back burner (however students still did Genius Hour and used some of the digital devices for research and output). We are still working on the major inquiry project in Jen's class and hope to have a celebration of learning before the end of the year (unfortunately not before this report was due).

IV. Successes and Overall Achievements

- Student engagement - The students loved to work on the inquiry process. During the year they did several mini and major inquiries, were very engaged in Genius Hour, and are currently working on a large Humanities inquiry around the Renaissance. The inquiry process has become a part of their 'culture of learning', and we don't look at a topic or concept without adding our own "wonderings" to it. For middle school students, being able to follow their passions and have choice in what they are learning are powerful motivators.
- Differentiation - Jen's classes had a very diverse profile - gifted students, students with learning disabilities, a physically dependent student, a student with a mild intellectual disability, as well as non-designated students with learning and behavioural challenges. Inquiry learning and using the digital tools we were provided with through SET-BC allowed for multiple entry points for learning and a large outcome space for success. Throughout the project students were able to explore - sometimes guided and other times independently - various ways to access information and to show their



learning. Many of these students would have been overwhelmed, or under challenged, in a traditional one size fits all classroom.

- Professional Sharing - we were able to share our inquiry learning with several colleagues in both our school and our district. Within the school, another grade eight Humanities teacher was able to do one of the mini-inquiries and also collaborated with us and is currently doing the Renaissance inquiry. Donna was able to collaborate with the grade six teachers on an inquiry project at that level. During the New Curriculum Implementation days both Donna and Jen facilitated workshops for the entire teaching staff at our school and were able to share with colleagues ways to use inquiry within the new curriculum. At a district level, Jen led a very well attended workshop on one of our Pro-D days focussing on inquiry and the passion-based learning (Genius Hour).
- Integration with a district initiative on inquiry - We were able to tie this project in with a district initiative for middle school inquiry projects. This gave us additional time to collaborate on the project as well as a venue to share our learning with colleagues throughout the district. On Thursday, June 2nd there is a celebration of the projects where we will be able to share our work with teachers, administration, school trustees, and upper-level management throughout the district.
- Lasting connections and student mentoring - students were particularly engaged in the passion-based inquiries (Genius Hour) and requested that a separate Google Classroom be set-up just for Genius Hour, that all 60 of the students are part of. The idea is that students who wish to will stay a part of this virtual classroom even as they transition to high school and will informally act as “mentors” to the middle school students next year.

V. Recommendations and Reflections

- Block collaboration time into the schedule with LA/IS and other support teachers - we found that not having blocked in time meant that Donna did not get into the classroom as often.
- Be patient - It may not be a smooth ride at first and it is a very different way of learning for many students - but it is worth it!
- Have a backup plan - technical glitches (particularly around wifi and bandwidth) happened regularly, so be adaptable and have a backup plan to follow if things don't go as anticipated.
- Consider carefully the device to student ratio. If students are waiting for a device learning slows and behaviour ramps up. That being said, many of your students may have their own devices or you may be able to use resources in your learning

commons or library to increase technology availability. We found an ideal device to student ration would be approximately 1:3.

- Be ready to let go - one of the important and powerful parts of inquiry is that it is student driven. As a teacher you are there to provide support, teach skills, scaffold, and provide background knowledge but the students are the ones that are leading their learning.
- Find and use as many people as possible - during this project we reached out to curriculum coordinators, librarians, principals, support teachers, other classroom teachers and educational assistants. Each made a valuable contribution - together we are smarter (and many hands makes for lighter work!)
- If the opportunity arises, pair your project with district initiatives. We paired ours with a district-supported collaborative inquiry. This enabled us to have some release time to collaborate as well as provided us with a venue to showcase our learning.
- Make the technology and the digital devices a part of your classroom culture; if possible start incorporating lessons and discussions on digital literacy and using the devices at the start of the year. Using an online platform (like Google Classroom) made it easier and more efficient for disseminating and collecting resources and student-created projects.
- Lastly, have fun, take some risks, and don't be afraid to fail. As we teach our students, a lot of learning happens when things don't go as planned!

VI. Summary

Overall, we view our SET-BC Inquiry project to be one of success. We have learned immensely from the struggles and successes and from each other. Our monthly sessions with the other project participants provided us with a venue to bounce ideas around, learn from each other, and reflect on our own practice and learning. Our involvement in this project has been empowering - not just for us as educators, but ultimately for our students; it has provided them with opportunities to make choices, provided them with tools to encourage their independence as learners, and enabled them to become more confident and willing to take risks on their inquiry journeys. Thank you for this incredible opportunity!

