PDIG Final report - 2020
Grade 7 Passion Project
Macdonald High School

Project Description

This project stemmed from last year's PDIG where our staff began to explore the use of NPDL Learning Outcomes, and the Four Elements of learning design into our lesson and unit planning. Last year, we set out to craft multiple smaller lessons that were guided by the NPDL philosophy, but our attention was grabbed by the prospect of a larger project that encompassed these values, while not being tied to a specific subject or course.

We developed and executed a "Passion Project" for all Grade 7 students, allowing students to pursue a topic of interest, and create something of meaning and value to them. We were happy with the outcomes of the project, especially considering this was its first iteration, but we knew there was more unexplored potential. This year's PDIG allowed us to further expand on the strengths of last year's work, and fine-tune the task to make the learning experience more authentic and meaningful.

Furthermore, we aimed to develop a task that can model the shifting role of the teacher from disseminator of knowledge to activator of learning. There is no predetermined end-goal or knowledge that students were expected to arrive at, instead they were to determine their own learning path through inquiry and student-agency. Students were to be the drivers of this project, shaping it with their voice, while teachers were to merely act as guides and motivators. Having a project with 21st century skills as the learning outcomes, not memorization of course content, was also an important part of this project, as teachers could see the skill-development process in action and could then apply some of those concepts to their own courses.

During our first meeting, we used the [NPDL Learning Design Rubric](#) to rate last year's project, and see if there were any avenues we could improve upon. We decided that while strong in the Learning Environment and Pedagogical Practices dimensions, there was room for improvement with regard to Learning Partnerships and Leveraging Digital. To address this issue, we came up with a plan to have Grade 7 students partner with Grade 10 and 11 students at different points during the project. We also spent time creating a digital portfolio template with an emphasis on sharing and collaborating.

The major shift between last year and this year was an expanded emphasis on the Citizenship learning outcome. We recognized that the most engaging projects from last year all involved the development of citizenship skills, and decided that we would use the citizenship dimension to frame the goals of the project this year. Even the title of the task changed to the "*Citizenship* Passion Project."

Through a learning partnership with Grade 10 History and Ethics students, Grade 7 students would have been introduced to the UN's Sustainability Goals, first gaining a surface-level understanding of the goals, and then choosing a small number of goals to engage with a deeper level. Eventually, the students would choose one of the sixteen sustainability goals, and develop their Passion Project around that goal.

Here is the timeline for the project that we established. Obviously, very little of it was actually accomplished, but this can be easily repurposed next year:

Timeline for students and staff:
- Introduction to the project, and to the concept of sustainability (March 11-13)

- Some grade 10 students will help grade 7s getting familiarized with the UN sustainable goals (March 19)

- Students choose one of the sustainable goal they would like to explore - through Google form in Homeroom (March 23)

- Blocked periods 5+6: explore and discuss the chosen sustainable goal - group+individual work (March 25)

- Submission of project proposal through Google form (March 27)

- Blocked periods 2-4: create an informative/awareness piece about chosen goal (April 1)

- Submission of informative/awareness piece (April 6)

- Blocked periods 5-6: work on project (April 17)

- Blocked periods 1-4: work on project (April 21)

- Submission of final Citizenship Passion Project (May 6)

Here are some of the resources we developed during our initial release time at the planning stage of the project:

- [Library Introduction](#) Google Slides Presentation
- [Introductory Activity](#) images to print

- Grade 10 examples of student work for UN Sustainability (only a few submissions, school ended before this could be completed)
- Template for Grade 7 students' Digital Portfolio
- Letter to parents explaining the project
- Project "vetting" slips for teachers

Logistical Changes

Due to staffing changes and a maternity leave, the project team changed slightly. Initially, we thought we would begin planning the project in 2019, but due to a shift in how our school does midyear exams, teachers' energies would have been stretched too thin. We were only able to get to work in February. At the time, that seemed like a very good idea, as schedules were winding down and we had time and energy to devote to the Citizenship Passion Project. Regardless of when we would have planned the actual project, students would have only begun working on it in March though, so while we could have perhaps completed more planning and content creation before the pandemic hit - the students would have still never been able to complete the project. As it stands, two groups of students saw the library activity where they were introduced to the project. Schools were closed on "day 2" of the actual project rollout.

On a personal note, I would like to bring up the fact that we struggle with journaling for PDIG reports. This is not the first PDIG that most of our project members have participated in, yet we still do not leave enough time for journaling. In future PDIGs, I would consider asking for some extra release time for this purpose (or perhaps you could automatically add a specific percentage for the project leader and administrator for journaling/report writing purposes?) We get so worked up with creating content and debating ideas during the actual release time, we run out of time for reflection, and speaking from personal experience there is little energy left to go home and journal after a productive PDIG session. Perhaps this is an issue that only our staff faces, but I imagine it is relatively common - reflection time is important, but as educators we are too used to stretching every possible dollar, so release time almost always goes towards activities directly related to the project.

Project Goals

We hope that students will develop skills such as citizenship, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. We think it is important to have tasks that build skills, while offering students the time and opportunity to reflect on the skill-building process. Such a task is not always feasible in regular courses, as teachers often feel the need to move on without giving students proper time for metacognitive or reflexive work. We also hope that students can start to see these skills as transferable, and not tied to a specific subject matter.

Moreover, we wish to increase student engagement with schoolwork; something that we know drops considerably over the five years of high school. Research has shown that when students participate in real-world activities, they see more meaning and relevance to the task, and thus their engagement increases.

We also hope that some of the projects extend beyond the requirements of this assignment, and that students find new passions, create new partnerships, and feel more connected to the world around them.

In regards to teaching staff, we believe that seeing a tangible example of inquiry-based learning is important to progressing along our Deep Learning journey. Project members will gain invaluable experience with learning design activities to promote 21st century skills, learning partnerships, and higher-order thinking skills, which will no doubt be transferred to their day-to-day teaching - ideally spreading between departments, and then perhaps between schools in our board.

Project Outcomes

We are absolutely planning on picking up where we left off next year. We did not get to rollout the project, but at least were able to plan most of it. It is a very strong foundation that can assuredly be built upon next year.

The pedagogical experience gained by the project members was a memorable one, and I can safely say we all learned a lot during the process. Hopefully with a proper rollout of the project next year, we can leverage those gains and expand them to staff beyond this year's core project members.

Reinvestment

Apart from the obvious fact that we will redo this project next year, we will also aim to invite other schools to view the project in action during the implementation phase - not just the final product. Ideally this project will be scaled to other schools, who can put their own original twist on it, and that similar endeavours will be attempted at Mac in other grades.