

Covering the bases

Project-based learning in Langley engages students, and peer mentors, to approach a single subject from a variety of perspectives. And parents are involved and committed, too!

by Leslie Dyson



The culmination of what grade 8 students in English, social studies, math and science had learned was on display at a Roman Games tournament that pitted the students' gladiator models against frozen and then thawed raspberries hurled by student-built catapults.

A cohort of 52 students is engaged in project-based learning for all four subject areas simultaneously, said George Kozlovic, Principal of Walnut Grove Secondary in Langley. The program is called Gator POD, in recognition of the school's teams, the Gators. "They work on the same project, but from different perspectives."

This particular unit used the Roman Empire to have students research and write legends and de-

sign and create models of fictional characters from that period for their English class taught by Kim Robinson and social studies teacher Logan Kitteringham. Math teacher Eric Balzarini set the specifications for their models while helping them understand ratios and how to draft objects to scale. None of the characters survived the raspberry assault. That meant students could apply their knowledge of human body systems and learn forensic techniques to determine the cause of death in Fraser Blackwell's science class.

The room divider in the double classroom is open which allows teachers to work together. The school's double-block system and careful scheduling provides the flexibility that's needed for team-teaching and substantial blocks of time for exploring subjects in greater depth and going on field trips, Kozlovic said.

The previous unit, using *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman as a base, was chosen because of its historical subject matter. A field trip to the Fort Langley cemetery provided an opportunity to learn about historical figures and significant events in the community. Students also recorded the dates of births and deaths to do statistical analyses and apply inquiry-based strategies to look for trends and explanations.

"Traditionally, you go to a science class to do science and a math class to do math," said Kozlovic. "Rather than bits that don't connect, the focus is on working together. It's collaboration all day, every day."

"Gator POD is an attempt to combine 21st Century learning with an interdisciplinary approach," he added. In addition to the emphasis on collaboration, the program also emphasizes critical thinking, oral and written communication, infor-



mation analysis and effective use of technology. “It’s part of the *BC Education Plan* but done in a unique and fun way.”

The POD program also receives support from four or five senior students in each of the four classes who act as academic and social mentors. Several of these students, like Nathan, led the lessons in how to build the catapults using Popsicle sticks, elastic bands, paper clips and plastic spoons.

“You need patience and a lot of prep,” he said. “They thought it would be a lot easier to do. Even I thought that.” Not surprisingly, the boys were eager to get to work, “but the girls liked it too,” he said.

Nathan, in grade 12, was keen to sign up as a mentor. He took a leadership program in grade 11 and could see the value of the POD program. “I knew the grade 8s would love it. It’s fun and you’re learning too.”

Sureet, in grade 8, said the student leaders were helpful and he liked the fact that they’re just a few years older. But the class work is more demanding, he added. In an exercise like the Roman Games, “you could be tested for every subject in one day.”

On the day of the tournament, students were assessed on their oral

us, Ortho Dontist, Flabianis, Little Caesar and Joe Smith.

Melissa and Andrea, who created and constructed Marcella Antonius, told students about her life as a “housewife” who longed to be a war hero. “I’m pretty sure there would have been women gladiators,” Andrea said.

Melissa said she likes this approach to learning. “It’s more fun and more creative, and quite hard.”

David said, “We’re learning everything at once [and] there are fewer assignments but they’re worth way more.”

Carter said he appreciates the teaching videos posted by math teacher Eric Balzarini. “He doesn’t talk a lot in class so that we can discuss things. But he has really good explanations in the videos. You get more work done and learn better this way.”

David said he likes the many ways that technology is integrated. Students use laptops and can use their smartphones if they have them. The teachers use SMART Boards and Prezi for presentations. There is a link on the school website to Edmodo where everyone stays up-to-date on assignments. Some students are more comfortable with computer conversations than class discussions. So Kitteringham uses Tumblr as a

presentation skills as they introduced their characters who were about to enter the arena, among them, Octavius Primus, Lucias Hilari-

blog to post documents and graphics and then has students respond to the various items.

Sureet said access to the school’s Wifi is not always dependable, a problem in many schools in the province.

Robinson was teaching a session on powerful writing that was dependent on materials she had loaded onto her computer. “But the wireless went down. There was no way to access the information, so I said, ‘OK, we’re going in another direction.’ The kids have to be flexible too.”

Program participants have learned that the best reception is in the sewing room so that’s where you’ll find some of them when they have work to do. It’s an issue that the school is hoping will be resolved over the summer.

The idea of the POD sprung from the school’s book club. Several staff members read Tony Wagner’s *The Global Achievement Gap*.

Robinson and Kozlovic discussed the notion of team-teaching the core subjects. The goal was to offer it to as large a group as possible. “Logistically, kids take all four subjects,” Robinson said. However, there were obstacles to overcome.

“The challenge is finding the time for collaboration. We do it on our own time,” she said. “We’re texting each other at all times of the day and evening. But it’s our first year, so it’s a bit more intense.”

The success of the program hinges on the compatibility of the teachers. “We complement each other very well,” she said. “And you have to have an administration that’s supportive.” She said Kozlovic is the kind of principal who “gets excited when he sees raspberries flying around” because he understands the learning that’s going on as well.



Using this teaching method with grade 8s quickly acclimatizes them to the school culture. “They get to see what it means to be a Gator in terms of spirit,” she said. Students in the program belong to four houses and they earn points for their house. Robinson said most of the students left shortly after the bell rang on the day of the Roman Games. However, two stayed behind to clean up the crushed berries

and put the rooms back in order. They received a point for their respective houses.

Opening the program to grade 8s also means the staff has little knowledge of the students beforehand. Initially, it was mostly boys who signed up, so a few girls were placed in the program to provide better balance. Even so, it is clear that this is a high-energy group. The teachers have also seen a jump in the number of emails from home. Robinson said, “That’s because the parents are involved and committed.”

Robinson has been teaching for 21 years but this approach is “much more powerful.” Using the students’ presentations of their legends as an example, she said, if she had issued a speech-writing assignment, as she might have done in the past, “the students would have been bored after the second speech. This is just a better way.

“I remember when criterion-referenced assessment came in. It was foreign to every teacher, but after four or five years, it was expected.”


Robinson said she believes multi-

discipline teaching could become standard practice.

Next year will bring new challenges. “We will have to refuse some kids,” she predicted. “At the grade 7 parent night, I had a lineup of parents wanting to sign up their child.”

Students will have to fill out application forms and the teachers will be conducting interviews, looking for students with a range of interests, abilities and personalities and who are interested in learning, take initiative with their education and who are strong collaborators.

The final unit of the year will have the four teachers tie together socially conscious poetry, the study of world religions and misunderstandings, a unit on how statistics can be manipulated and a comparison of science and religious theories for explaining the world around us. The culmination activity has yet to be decided.

Although this is the first year the school is offering PODs, Robinson said “most things we would do again, but we’d fine tune them. That’s the nicest thing about teaching, doing it again and refining it.” 

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