

Highly engaged and knowing learners

George Bonner Middle School in the Cowichan Valley creates a grade 7 class that focuses on personalized learning. Teachers and students are empowered to engage in inquiry and innovation.

by Heidi Grant

In 2011 I left my position as Principal, Discovery Elementary (Shawnigan Lake, SD#79) to become Principal at George Bonner Middle School (Cobble Hill). My first year was marked in many ways by “job action.” While there were a lot of things that we couldn’t do, there were many that we could do. Firmly believing that something good comes of everything, I kept my mind open to possibilities. Last year was all about conversations. Anything worth communicating to staff was communicated through conversation. Teachers, being forward thinking and focused on learning, had a lot of questions about what Personalized Learning and the BC Education Plan were all about. George Bonner is a middle school

with a long established timetable and a strong system of teaming. A structured timetable, while having many benefits, does not always lend itself to flexibility and choice, a key component of personalizing learning. With my time not taken up with meetings, there was time for thinking and talking (*while perpetually being on supervision*). Through this chatting, interest, and enthusiasm, a germ of an idea was born.

One of our department heads, Rich Ready, had taken particular interest in many aspects of personalized learning. We had many philosophical and “what if” conversations. Timetable building began and the discussions became more about what we could do. I had given a lot of thought and much conversation to what could be different; to how

we could add flexibility to increase engagement. My goal was to empower teachers to see the possibilities and to engage with inquiry and creativity. One day I casually suggested we might have room in the timetable for a one division class with a flexible schedule. It might be multi-graded, but, at that point, I couldn’t be sure. Would he be interested? What happened next was one of the most rewarding and invigorating experiences of my career. I don’t think Rich slept for a week as I received emails at all hours of the day and night. We were going to try it; now what would it look like?

My role was to set the parameters and let my colleague create the framework and make it a reality. The parameters were simple. The class had to have the same class size

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and the same class composition as any other class. Reporting, at least for the first year, needed to follow the same schedule and use the same format as other classes. Students would still follow the exploratory rotation (art, drama, technology, French, Coast Salish Studies, woodwork, metalwork, cooking, and sewing). Students would have daily PE and full access to the band program. Those classes would be scheduled. Otherwise, the timetable was flexible. Other important parameters were a focus on integrating technology and, of course, personalizing

learning for every student.

The next consideration was how we were going to fill the class. By this point we had determined it would be a grade seven group. It was important that all students and their families knew about the opportunity and had a chance to express interest. We had no idea what the interest would be. As an administrative team, we had worked with our PAC and had sponsored a number of speakers and workshops on the BC Education Plan, including having Rod Allen from the Ministry of Education present to our par-

ent community. They knew about Personalized Learning. We created a brief description of the class we were creating and an application form. The number of applications we received from this somewhat low key process, from both inside and outside the school, gave us the impression that the community was ready for educational change and that students had clear ideas about what they wanted for their learning.

It has been delightful watching this group of learners come together both as individuals and as a group. It is a dangerous place to go as an observer because it is hard to tear yourself away. These learners are highly engaged and are becoming aware of themselves as learners. The language they use to talk about their learning is an indicator of the kind of language used every day in the classroom. The following quotes are a small sample of feedback they have provided to me when asked:

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What are you learning?

- The main things I'm learning are how to learn differently and the best way for me to learn.
- We are learning about core competencies, habitudes, A/B partner talk, active listening.
- I am learning how to write strong and effective sentences and paragraphs.
- I am learning how to go at solving a problem.

How are you doing and how do you know?

- We get descriptive feedback and that tells me I am doing well.
- I am really challenged in this class and am forced to think outside the box a lot and to look at things a different way.
- He also will usually give us a rubric to look through so we can sort of self-evaluate ourselves and to try and figure out what we work on or fix or add more of something.

Where to next with your learning?


- I would like to explore the history of Hip Hop music.
- Next I want to master all of my 6, 7, 8, and 9 timestables.
- Right now I really want to learn more about Mesopotamia and how people lived thousands of years ago.
- I have a lot of questions I want to answer. I want to enhance my learning more by trying new things and new ways to show my understanding. I have a strong calling toward my family's culture and would like to next do an independent project on it. I am proud of the person I am today and would like to ac-

knowledge my ancestry.

- I would like to learn more about Earth Science. How do they know about the Earth's core without going down there?
- Next I'd like to do a project for the rock fair about the quarry on Cobble Hill Mountain.

What is personalized about your learning?

- We can choose how to present our work.
- Before I take a test, Mr. Ready normally makes us do an AFL test, which isn't for marks. Then when we're ready, we can do an AOL test, which is for marks.
- I'm allowed to use an iPad instead of using my hands.
- I really like our class because every block isn't scheduled so then let's say you're on a roll while doing something then you can just continue doing it instead of packing up and going to your other class.
- We have choices about how we show our understanding.
- I am able to research into the topics I am passionate about such as the Northern Gateway Pipeline.

As the year winds down, we are in the reflection process. It has been an incredibly successful project. Other staff and TTOCs who have taught this class continually remark on their engagement and enthusiasm. This extends from the special needs students in the group right through to the highly gifted. We are proud; the teacher is humble. We have learned much along the way, however what we really have are more questions and more ideas. Learning rounds are in process involving other interested staff from our school. A visit to a neighboring district is upcoming and we are taking a team of ten interested staff. The students are asking how they will be able to continue with this approach for their grade eight year. The teacher is exploring many ideas including a move away from letter grades. Like the definition of Personalized Learning, there is no recipe for what we have created. The greatest lesson we have taken is the power of empowering teachers and students to engage in inquiry and innovation. 

In addition to her responsibilities as Principal, George Bonner Middle School, Heidi Grant is a member of the BCPVA Board of Directors and can be reached at hgrant@sd79.bc.ca

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