

Taking a Walk on the

■ by Jeff McMillan and Rich Tamblyn

As intermediate teachers, one of our major concerns is motivating our students. How can we engage our students in meaningful learning experiences and, at the same time, create a lifelong love for learning? Ontario has an alarming dropout rate.


At Commonwealth Public School in Brockville, we are attempting to address this growing problem by giving our students the opportunity to become totally engaged in their learning experiences.

Commonwealth is a small, urban-centred school of about 300 students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. We encounter our fair share of high needs. Our intermediate division has two grade 7 and 8 classrooms with 65 students who have a wide range of learning styles and learning abilities. Our teaching team is made up of one full-time educational assistant and two full-time teachers – one with 10 ten years experience and one with 28 – who share a similar philosophy and approach to teaching.

We believe strongly in developing good citizenship, using differentiated instruction, assessment through awareness of students' multiple intelligences, and involving all students in meaningful real-life experiences. We have embraced experiential learning as a model for learning in today's world.

In this model, the student is the centre of his/her education, and our role as teachers is to facilitate learning by returning the responsibility to the student. As teachers, we blend enduring understandings (curriculum/knowledge), essential questions, authentic challenges, and assessment targets, while connecting to the world beyond the walls of the school.

In 2004 our new administrative team gave us an opportunity to broaden the scope of our teaching philosophy. Our new principal, Olga Grigoriev, understood its strengths from her own experience as a teacher. We visited several "alternative" schools in Toronto to see how others made real-world connections.



If our job as teachers is to prepare our students for the world beyond school, then why do we confine student learning to the insides of our classrooms and school?

“Real” Side



Our program, which we coined “The Current Experience,” has taught us a great deal. We began our curriculum planning by looking at project-based learning focused around central themes. For example, this year’s program consists of three themes: environmental issues, media and technology, and social injustice. Within each of these themes, we plan authentic challenges that connect curriculum to real-life experiences. As these connections are the essential components of experiential education, it is necessary to develop strong ongoing partnerships with professionals in the community who become the “expert” resources for students. This is not a “field trip” but an ongoing professional partnership that students can access throughout the school year.

From theory to practice

Our first term began with students exploring environmental issues. Establishing community partnerships was much easier than we anticipated because professionals enjoy working with knowledgeable, engaged students. Our partners included the Ministry of Natural Resources, Leeds County Stewardship, Cataraqui Region Conservation Area, Environmental Connections, and the Frontenac Arch Biosphere.

The students’ challenge was to help restore a fish habitat in one of our local streams. To prepare, we began by having them acquire background information on streams, fish habitats, and environmental restoration projects. We invited stream biologists and other environmental professionals to speak about the health of our local streams and how the students could assist with the restoration project. Students then prepared for the physical work in and around the stream, which included building stream deflectors and establishing shoreline buffer zones.

Once in the “field,” we became aware of the endless opportunities to integrate other areas of the curriculum. We asked students how they could use our stream experience as a way of exploring real-world math concepts – such as volume, perimeter and area, density, velocity, random

sampling, and data management. The excitement the stream study generated carried over as they worked in teams developing and designing real-life math activities.

We asked student teams to use technology in the presentations of their findings. These included a television show created with a digital camcorder and iMac digital editing, and computer presentations using a variety of math software. We coached and debriefed as the students became fully engaged in their learning.

Student research

A key component of our instructional strategy is an independent research project. At the beginning of each term, students explore a theme-based topic that interests them. They are required to develop a process portfolio that shows their planning, research notes, and rough drafts of their written report. The finished product involves three key components: local, national, and international contacts; a written report; and a multimedia presentation – a two-day environmental symposium in which students present to the class and members of our community. Students wrote synopses designed to encourage others to attend their presentation. We were amazed at the depth of their knowledge and understanding.

In the course of their independent studies, students were asked to make contacts with people



working in their area of research. One student studying global warming established a partnership with Environment Canada. In addition to providing key information, his contact invited him to attend a United Nations-sponsored international conference in Montreal. Hearing this we worked with our administrators so that a few of our students could attend. They took photographs and made videotapes, and made a presentation to their peers on their return.

This experience went way beyond our expectations. It exposed our students to an international perspective on global issues. They became very impassioned about such environmental issues as the Kyoto Protocol, nuclear waste, endangered species, and pollution. The knowledge they gained was much deeper and richer than we could ever have provided using a traditional approach to teaching.

As our students developed a passion for the environment, they quickly realized that because of their knowledge and understanding, they now had a “voice” to share with others, and that they, as individuals, could make a difference. They began to comprehend the power of knowledge, and soon they were writing editorials and letters to people in power. We couldn’t stop smiling as we heard them suggesting ways of reducing greenhouse gases and slowing down global warming.

The energy and momentum this approach to learning created further reinforces our belief in it. Passion for learning cannot be taught; it is something each student must experience. Authentic experiences give students the opportunity to explore their passions, which in turn “hooks” them into becoming life long learners.

As the school year progresses, we are building on this momentum and passion, and the students’ desire to learn. Excitement is rising as we begin our exploration of media and technol-

ogy, a theme close to every student’s heart. Some students are exploring web page design by taking over responsibility for the school site. Another team has started a television talk show and is interviewing key community people. They have already interviewed our director of education about the board’s connection with the Frontenac Arch Biosphere.

Experiencing rewards

As teachers, we have never been so challenged, yet so fulfilled. The energy students create has motivated us to continue to build this program, and to provide enriched experiences for all.

Some teachers may find this approach difficult because the learning experiences and challenges do not necessarily follow the sequential flow of a textbook. There is often an element of the “unknown” because of the variety of student interests, abilities and learning styles. Flexibility and teamwork are essential ingredients in teacher planning when working with the experiential model.

Colleagues ask how we maintain control of students and how this style of teaching affects our classroom management strategies, but we have found that with careful planning, and when all students are engaged and motivated, behaviour management takes care of itself.

Assessment is another consideration. Experiential education can be very difficult to evaluate conventionally. Our assessment and evaluation strategies include the use of achievement chart targets from ministry documents, qualitative analysis, process portfolios, and exhibitions. One of our challenges is to match the learning taking place with the curriculum expectations because students take part in such a wide variety of learning activities and situations often involving team and partner collaboration. We encourage students to show their understanding of content in ways that are comfortable for them by reflecting on their multiple intelligence strengths and learning styles. We also encourage them to explore other areas of their “M.I.” as ways to strengthen those skills.

Finally, it is important that all people involved believe in the benefits of this approach to learning and the continued support of our administration has been a vital component its success.

If we encourage our students to take risks, then we, as educators, must be willing to do so as well. All students want to know how school relates to the real world. If we are to help students become life long learners, it is our responsibility to provide a meaningful context where they can make that connection. ✓