

TALONS Social Studies: Experiential Learning and Citizenship Education in the
Gifted Classroom

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Background

Drawing identified-gifted learners from the Coquitlam School District, Gleneagle Secondary School's TALONS (The Academy of Learning for Gifted Notable Students) Program offers Ministry-identified gifted learners interdisciplinary core curriculum (Social Studies, English, Math, and Science for grades 9 and 10, all at an honours level), as well as experiential opportunities to complete Planning 10, Leadership 11 and PE 11. TALONS learning is largely organized around inquiry-based projects that make use of outdoor education and community service elements to imbue learning objectives with a greater tangible relevance to students and their local, as well as global, communities. In addition to covering provincial Ministry of Education curricula in the above courses, the program is grounded in George Betts' Autonomous Learner Model (Betts & Neihart, 1986), with an emphasis on metacognition and acquainting each member of the cohort with skills and habits uniquely tailored to their own social and emotional roles in cultivating interdependence and community.

This design project was conceived to align both the explicit and implicit foci of British Columbia's Social Studies 9 curriculum (*Social Studies 8 to 10 Integrated Resource Package* 1997) with a larger narrative expressed in the personal and collective learning in the TALONS classroom. By bringing the "Hidden Curriculum" into the open in this manner, the learning design intends to conceive of *means* of engaging the course material which are congruent with its *ends*.

Learners

Upon entering the program in the fall, TALONS learners each have the opportunity, in consultation with their parents and teachers, to write their own Individual Education Plan (IEP), a British Columbia Ministry of Education document that enables gifted learners to address unique aspects of their student profile. This process is supported by orienting experiences in reflection and collaboration with their peers throughout the fall: journal writing, outdoor team-building, and artistic explorations of individual and group identity, goals or challenges.

During the spring semester the two split-classes of 28 grade nines and tens are communities undergoing a process of becoming, where opportunities for individual and collective learning culminate in the practical examination for Leadership 11 that is the classes' five-day outdoor Adventure Trip. For the grade tens such year-end experiences present moments of synthesis as they make meaning and forge understanding out of two years' work with an intimate cohort of peers in exploring personal themes and challenges in learning. The grade nines, meanwhile, are undergoing their own process(es) of discovering their voice(s) in the creation of the TALONS learning environment, and are the inheritors of a culture that will eventually be passed on to their own grade nines, and beyond.

To support this unique community of identified gifted learners, TALONS teachers engage in an ongoing dialogue and assessment of learner needs through weekly teacher-meetings, class discussions, regular parent-contact, and instructional

designs which strive to integrate learning across the curricula and the broader lives and interests of the class. TALONS learners are encouraged to take ownership over their learning in as many ways as can be provided within the classroom setting, as well as to become self-directed contributors to the class' culture of learning.

Learning Goals

In attempting to unify the cohorts' learning across academic disciplines and experiential learning conducted in the local community as well as the great outdoors, TALONS teachers' goals for various learning opportunities can be seen to revolve around a central point of citizenship education. As Biesta, Lawy and Kelly (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009) have noted:

Young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship – including their own citizenship – through their participation in a range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught. (p. 7)

Taking this into consideration, TALONS teachers consistently work to create learning opportunities which reflect John Dewey's (Dewey, 1916) dual purpose for public schooling:

- To transmit the facts, dispositions and cultural heritage society considers to be of value; and
- To instill in the younger generation the skills, persistence and ingenuity to transcend our historical moment and contribute to human progress.

As the classes consider the transcendent period of 16th century Europe in the Social Studies 9 curriculum, such meta-cognitive learning comes into congruence with a view of society and knowledge that relies on the process of transgression that Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1984) defined as Enlightenment itself, which:

Should be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (p. 50)

In British Columbia, Social Studies 9 introduces students to the political, economic and technological revolutions that spread across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and which Jurgen Habermas described as "the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere" (Habermas, 1991). This learning design intends to present the study of the democratic institutions conceived during this Enlightenment period in such a way that provides an opportunity to rehearse the skills required to contribute to an educated (and liberated) citizenry. Douglas

Kellner describes Habermas' public sphere as "social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power" (Kellner, 2000), and it is the intention of this design to create a context of learning that reflects such a civic skillset.

Learning Objectives

This type of experiential citizenship education places a strong emphasis on the consistent engagement of student voice and agency in the creation of assignments and the learning design itself. To this end TALONS learners are asked to generate goals and criteria for projects and assignments, seek out and evaluate materials to supplement learning activities, and negotiate the different needs and purposes of unit tasks and activities. Alongside the populations of England and France, whose difficulties with self-determination following the overthrowing of their monarchs TALONS learners are to study, classroom learning proceeds as learners are able to discover, express and assess their progress toward a statement of their collective purpose.

This aspect of the learning design is rooted in Paulo Freire's (Freire, 1970) critical praxis, and takes inspiration from the intention to resolve what he called the teacher-student contradiction (p. 72). Freire's emancipatory education proposes that learners engage in the investigation of individual generative themes:

To investigate the generative theme is to investigate the people's thinking about reality and people's action upon reality, which is their praxis. For precisely this reason, the methodology proposed requires that the investigators and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as co-investigators. The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality. (p. 106)

By providing space for learners to "take possession of [their] reality," the TALONS classroom enables a learning process to reflect an emergent epistemology, which presents a unique problem to address while fulfilling government curriculum. Osberg and Biesta (Osberg & Biesta, 2008) observe that:

If we hold that meaning is emergent, and we insist on a strict interpretation of emergence (i.e. what emerges is more than the sum of its parts and therefore not predictable from the 'ground' it emerges from) then the idea that educators can (or should) control the meanings that emerge in the classroom becomes problematic. (p. 317)

It is hoped that through the implementation and reflection upon an emergent learning design throughout the year, the TALONS classes experiment with

transcending this apparent conflict between public schooling's ideals and its institutional realities.

Learning Environment/Technology

Throughout the spring semester, the TALONS classroom offers numerous opportunities for learners to create experiential, place-based learning opportunities for themselves and their peers. As the program has evolved over the past seven years, TALONS Leadership 11, Planning 10 and PE 11 learning have built upon program-teacher Quirien Mulder ten Kate's (Mulder ten Kate, 2011) research and

Analysis of nature study/environmental education, place-based education, biophilia education and deep ecology [which] informs the identification of three types of direct experiences in nature: initiation, immersion and intimacy. (p. iii)

In planning and implementing class projects and adventures in the local community and wilderness, TALONS learners are given opportunities to rehearse the democratic processes of consensus-building, teamwork and leadership that constitute the skills components of citizenship learning. These processes work to provide learners with space to supplement British Columbia's *Applications of Social Studies 9 (Social Studies 8 to 10 Integrated Resource Package 1997)* curriculum, wherein:

It is expected that students will:

- Identify and clarify a problem, an issue, or an inquiry
- Select and summarize information from primary and secondary print and non-print sources, including electronic sources
- Assess the reliability, currency, and objectivity of different interpretations of primary and secondary sources
- Defend a position on a controversial issue after considering a variety of perspectives
- Plan, revise, and deliver oral and written presentations
- Co-operatively plan and implement a course of action that addresses the problem, issue, or inquiry initially identified (p. 22)

In the same vein, Daniel Schugurensky (Schugurensky, 2002) has written about how:

The struggle over politics and democracy is inextricably linked to creating public spheres where individuals can be educated as political agents equipped with the skills, capacities, and knowledge they need not only to actually perform as autonomous political agents, but also to believe that such struggles are worth taking up. (p. 60)

It is the intention of this design to conceive of a Social Studies curriculum that supports such a view of citizenship learning, and creates a classroom-learning environment that offers the opportunity for students to learn the skills required to create and contribute to the public sphere of the classroom, and the world beyond.

In considering technology that might support such a classroom environment, the learning design again looks to Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere* in determining the role of media in engaging citizens in democratic processes. Kellner (Kellner, 2000) notes that:

For Habermas, the function of the media have thus been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing, and limiting public discourse to those themes validated and approved by media corporations. Hence, the interconnection between a sphere of public debate and individual participation has been fractured and transmuted into that of a realm of political information and spectacle. (p. 262)

Habermas' vision of such a degraded public sphere creates the possibility for the digital citizenship learning Gardner Campbell calls for in his argument that schools prepare learners to own and manage their own personal cyberinfrastructure on the read-write web (Campbell, 2009). Citing Marshall McLuhan's major thesis that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967), Campbell observes that "Print is not advanced calligraphy. The web is not a more sophisticated telegraph. Yet higher education largely failed to empower the strong and effective imaginations that students need for creative citizenship in this new medium" (Campbell, 2009).

By incorporation of technology into the learning process in Social Studies, this design is indebted to Campbell's proposed personal cyberinfrastructure where students "would play with wikis and blogs; they would tinker and begin to assemble a platform to support their publishing, their archiving, their importing and exporting, their internal and external information connections."

In building that personal cyberinfrastructure, students not only would acquire crucial technical skills for their digital lives but also would engage in work that provides richly teachable moments ranging from multimodal writing to information science, knowledge management, bibliographic instruction, and social networking." (Campbell, 2009)

Here we see the intersection of digital citizenship learning with what may constitute an antidote to the degraded public sphere, as Kellner observes that "Habermas offered tentative proposals to revitalize the public sphere by setting 'in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it'" (Kellner, 2000). Through the engagement of student learning both in the democratic applications of the Social Studies curriculum through experiential classroom, community and outdoor learning opportunities, as well as on the open

web, it is the intention to this design to cultivate a truly personal individual and collective sense of learning as part of a community. TALONS learners are each an administrator of their own unique Edublog site, which is used to cultivate a student-portfolio of work and reflection on their two years in the program, and encouraged to engage on social media with their peers, teachers and community beyond the school as agents possessing individual contributions to dialogue on the global, wider web. The classes also maintain and contribute to open educational resources on the TALONS Blog¹ and course wiki sites², which are each accessed by hundreds of visitors from around the world every month.

Opening Activity

To introduce Social Studies 9 within this wider context, the TALONS classes were presented with a reading in *The Economist* that argued “five centuries before Facebook and the Arab Spring, social media helped bring about the Reformation” (“How Luther went viral,” 2011). This reading was paired with multi-media resources on remix culture (Ferguson) and a CBC Radio documentary presenting Wikipedia as a forbearer of “the greatest knowledge revolution in human history ([which] began in our lifetime)” (Kennedy, 2014).

These initial readings sought to contextualize the TALONS study of the Enlightenment period and the revolutions in Europe within our modern information landscape. As a means of interacting with the material reflecting these themes, the classes then broke into smaller groups which remixed portions of the CBC broadcast, and shared their work on K12 web radio station 105 the Hive.³ Here TALONS learners became not only the recipients of a shared cultural heritage, but also its conduits as their own interpretation of the episode’s themes and ideas were reconstituted and shared with an online audience of their peers, as well as the show’s producer, Philip Coulter, who contacted one of the TALONS teachers to say that he appreciated the various incarnations the class had made of his radio program, and to congratulate the class on authentically engaging the remix form.

Learning Tasks

With this foundation, the TALONS Social Studies classes transitioned to the prescribed learning outcomes associated with the English Civil War period in Social Studies 9. Here, students were provided with the relevant outcomes and asked to generate individual and class goals for the unit, and then to submit readings and resource materials that might meet these goals using a Google Form embedded in the class’ public wiki site. These resources were assessed by each of the TALONS class using the CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) Test for evaluating online materials (Blakeslee, 2004), and formed the basis of the curricular content used during the ensuing unit.

¹ www.TalonsBlog.Wordpress.com

² www.TalonsSocials.Wikispaces.org

³ www.105theHive.org

In keeping with the democratic ideals foregrounding the learning design, each class then engaged in several discussions intended to arrive at a consensus about how the unit should be taught, learned, represented, and assessed. These discussions, facilitated by TALONS teachers, and moderated by student leaders, planned activities for teaching and learning which suited each group's individual concerns, personal passions, and collective goals for the unit. The classes then set about creating a schedule for the activities – lessons, discussions, role-plays and other representations of the course content – and brainstormed questions and activities that would assess student learning at the culmination of the unit.

During these discussions and planning sessions, the TALONS teachers shared their own intentions for the unit – connecting proposed learning activities to ongoing class or individual goals, interjecting required government criteria, or highlighting significant aspects of the historical content – but sought to forge these interjections within a student-directed consensus of where the learning would take the class, and what it would eventually mean. Those seeking to adopt this design in their own classes would do well to pay close attention to this emphasis on facilitation and creating the space for this type of grass-roots dialogue to direct individual cohorts' learning activities.

To facilitate such flexibility of design from unit to unit, the TALONS Social Studies syllabus and course outline invites learners to represent and reflect upon their growth in personally relevant ways that fulfill the institutional requirements of self, peer, and teacher assessment. While the specific details of a unit or project may differ (even within a single class cohort), the TALONS praxis of reflection and action includes variations on the following types of assignments or learning activities:

- Documents of Learning
- Engagement and Participation
- Projects
- Reflections
- Tests and Quizzes

Closing Activity

At the culmination of the English Civil War Unit, each of the two TALONS classes chose to synthesize and reflect upon their learning in different ways: the morning class drafted questions to be completed in a Google Form that – upon completion – would allow each student the ability to view the accumulated responses from their classmates, while the afternoon group responded to a similar range of questions in individual posts on their student blogs. These questions asked students to reflect on different aspects of the unit: aspects of their individual contributions to the class' learning, as well as how the topics covered in the unit influenced their understanding of history, politics or group dynamics more broadly.

Additionally, these reflections included a response to one of the following “Big Questions” in a brief paragraph:

- Who ought we ‘cheer’ for in studying the English Civil War?
- If those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it, what are we ‘doomed to repeat’ by failing to learn about this period in English history?
- Do you agree with the statement, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely”?

Along with creating a lasting record of individual and collective learning on the topic now completed, these documents – along with the class’ notes, blog posts, videos, Prezis, slide decks and other resources created during the English Civil War study – formed the basis of planning the classes’ next endeavor: to learn about the French Revolution, and build upon the democratic skills and group processes established during this first unit of study.

Assessment/Outcome

Integral to the TALONS framework is an ongoing component of student-voice in unit planning and assessment that continues across aspects of the program curricula throughout the spring. As members of the program organize and implement the months-long endeavor to bring about the May long-weekend Adventure Trip, these academic classroom experiences are intended to provide opportunities for learners to appreciate their own role in the cultivation of a successful community of purpose and practice. But within this context, ‘success’ in the spring rituals of TALONS – the culmination of a five-month In-Depth Study, the Adventure Trip and other adjourning activities – varies from group to group depending on their unique needs and challenges as individuals and collectives.

However it may be possible to sum-up the nature of the test by which the program’s success might be judged by presenting the spring and the culmination of TALONS as one of the program’s alumni peer tutors did in 2012:

“Now is your chance to go recreate *this*,” a returning grade twelve said to a group of soaked TALONS hiking in the Squamish mountains, gesturing abstractly to the forest canopy overhead and any meaning the listening individuals might make of the moment, “Whatever you think *this* is.”

In creating opportunities for students to cultivate documents of this emerging understanding for themselves and the rest of our learning community, it is the intention of this design to continually shape and direct the TALONS classes in a similar praxis of learning and reflection around the evolving needs and challenges expressed by the class cohorts.

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