

MAKING CONNECTIONS THROUGH PROJECT BASED LEARNING

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Introduction

In January 2013, a group of six educators worked with a visual artist, as part of the Vancouver Biennale BIG IDEAS Program. Their goal was to collaborate, design and create artwork involving an inquiry based process focused on the theme of "change and transition". This involved three classes of students at the elementary and high school level. All of the participating teachers worked in the West Vancouver School District at three feeder schools and taught a grade three class, a five- six split, and grades 10 to 12 in a sculpture and ceramics program. A further goal of the project was to enable students to explore their fears, assumptions, and hopes as they transitioned from one school to another.

This article describes the dynamic connections arising from the project including:

1. the connections between a public sculpture and students' own artistic explorations and creations;
2. the connections between schools and age groups within the public school spectrum;
3. the connections between educators and a practicing artist designing and developing an inquiry based process;
4. connections between the schools and the wider community. The project should serve as a model for collaborative arts-based programs within classrooms and beyond.

The Vancouver Biennale and the BIG IDEAS Education Program

The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit, charitable organization that celebrates art in public spaces. Each exhibition they support transforms the urban landscape into an open air museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, newer media, performance works and film. The goal is to use visual and performing art as a catalyst for transformative learning and social action.

The BIG IDEAS Education Program is a key Vancouver Biennale community outreach program is open to all grades and school districts. Through a grant, it brings local artists together with teachers to collaboratively foster creative, critical and reflective learning opportunities in the community. To date, over 5,800 British Columbia students from 72 schools and nine school districts have registered in this program.



When the BIG IDEAS Project is launched, students visit one or more Biennale art installations to engage in a discovery process of previous sites. They are encouraged to freely explore the artwork within its natural surroundings in order to connect with the program theme and cross curricular learning concepts. The learning process continues in the classroom where students are guided and facilitated by an artist collaborator. They learn to respond and express their thoughts through art-making activities that may involve one or more art forms (dance, drama, music, visual arts).

Beginning the Project

Three classes from Lions Bay Community School, Gleneagles Elementary, and Rockridge Secondary were involved in the project. Andrea Crowdis, the grade 5/6 teacher, explained why the theme of "change and transitions" was chosen for the project:

"We decided on change and transitions simply because we wanted a connecting piece for our community. Our students begin at Lions Bay, they go to Gleneagles then on to Rockridge, the high school. We wanted something that would speak to all three age groups."

The teachers chose to link their inquiry to the Biennale sculpture 217.5 x Arc x 13 by Bernar Venet, whose sculpture is located on the beach at the bottom of Denman Street in downtown Vancouver. The sculpture consists of 13 steel beams, curving into welded arcs forming a rib-like pattern. The teachers presented the sculpture to the students as a visual metaphor for change and transition; they described the 13 arcs as representing their 13 years from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

Each of the three classes worked with artist, Amelia Epp throughout the inquiry process. She collaborated with the classroom teachers and led the students through a process of reflecting on their emotions based on changes and transitions.



This resulted in interpreting important ideas in the artwork representing their feelings.

Connecting to A Public Sculpture through Multi-Age Inquiry

To begin the inquiry process, all three classes came together to visit the Biennale sculpture, 217.5 Arc x 13. The students were broken into smaller multi-age groups and took part in warm-up activities to get to know each other. They were given time to engage with and observe the sculpture in small groups, documenting it by creating sketches and taking photos with iPads. The students then interviewed each other, filming their interactions with the iPads. The students asked each other about their experiences transitioning from one school to another.





Collaborating artist, Amelia Epp, described some of the goals for this field trip:

Most of the children have seen the sculpture in pictures but to actually have that tangible experience, being up close to it and engaging with it is such a different experience. Hopefully, they will be really inspired by the form, presence and location.

They will go back to their classrooms and have these written documents with sketches of the sculpture and also photographs. The next step for them is to create their own abstract shapes or forms connected to their own feelings or stories about change and transition.

One of the primary goals for the field trip was for students to make a personal connection to the sculpture 217.5 Arc x 13 through physical contact, closely observing it, and through discussion of its meaning with other students. One student described their experience of engaging with the

public sculpture and discussing its meaning with others:

Today, we drew some pictures of the arc and also took some photographs and basically it was looking how one simple sculpture can mean something so different to each individual person.

An important goal of the field trip was for students of different ages to connect with one another and learn from each other's experiences of change and transition. A participating high school student described her positive experience of working with younger students during this field trip, reflecting on one of the original intentions for designing the project as a multi-age inquiry:

We are all here with the primary students today and it kind of, for us older students in high school, it makes us remember what it was like going through those transitions and it's good to help mentor them and help them understand what it's like to go to high school and talk about their worries and nervousness.

The high level of engagement and enthusiasm exhibited by students on the field trip, as well as positive comments were indicators that visiting the sculpture in person and interacting with a multi-age group of peers were valuable experiences.



Connecting Art Inquiry Experience to A Classroom-Based Art-Making Process

After taking part in the field trip, each of the three classes separately embarked upon creating their own sculpture over a period of three months; these were combined into a collaborative work that was displayed hanging from a standing metal structure resembling a swing set. The three class sculptures were exhibited together at the culmination of the project.

The third grade students worked with recycled cardboard objects to create two reliefs or 'terrains' of emotion that included diverse forms and textures representing their hopes and fears about transitioning to Gleneagles Elementary. The grade five and six students also created reliefs using shape and texture to represent their feelings about transitioning to Rockridge Secondary. These reliefs used found and recycled materials as well as Plasticine. The grade five and six students then cast their reliefs using paper pulp. When dry, the

paper layer was removed from the original reliefs or 'moulds', resulting in delicately textured two-sided reliefs.

The grade 10/11/12 classes followed a different creative process, in order to adapt to their needs and interests. They created ceramic reliefs as well as intricate cut paper sculptures. For the final sculpture, they worked in small teams to create 13 swings made of plaster to represent 13 years of schooling, from Kindergarten to grade 12. Each swing represented the students' individual experiences of that particular year of schooling (in collage and relief work).

In summary, the inquiry based art-making processes in which each of the three classes participated was linked to the common theme of change and transition and initial experiences while visiting 217.5 Arc x 13. The hands-on experience and the connections forged with other age groups provided a foundation and reference for the students as they proceeded with their own inquiry processes.

Connections Between Schools and the Broader Community

The finished sculptures, an abstract representation of the students' collective voice, were shared with the broader community at four public exhibitions: the Lighthouse Art Festival, a West Vancouver School District Art Festival, the Park Royal Shopping Centre, the Lions Bay Art and Garden Show, the Gleneagles Elementary School Open House and the Gleneagle Community Centre. The Lions Bay and Gleneagles students proudly served as ambassadors at the Lions Bay Art and Garden



Show, sharing with the visitors their collaborative learning experience. This provided meaningful life experience for the students, enabling them to communicate their learning as they acquired skills in public speaking.

All three classes came together at the conclusion of the project to view the finished artwork on display at the Gleneagles Elementary School Open House. This final sharing was a celebratory event and an important opportunity for the students from the three schools to spend time with one another, sharing their completed artwork, and reflecting on their experiences. Students were organized into smaller multi-age groups where they discussed what they had learned about changes and transitions. One student shared the following reflection:

I thought it was really cool because we got to interact with all the different grades and work together and see like the difference between all of those different types of artwork.

A similar sentiment was echoed by many of the students who shared their enthusiasm about working with classes from other schools, something that is unusual within the public school experience. Students were also very curious about other classes and the way they expressed pride in their completed work. An important part of this culminating celebration was the communal experience of partaking in homemade cookies and snacks that the grade 5/6 students brought from home.

Reviewing the Learning Outcomes

A unique aspect of this inquiry process was the collaborative way in which it was designed. The collaboration allowed for connections to be made between educators from different schools and



from different grade levels. While scheduling meetings with teachers from multiple schools was challenging, it resulted in diverse skill sets and areas of expertise being brought to the table. In addition, the collaborating artist, Amelia Epp, brought a unique skill set to the group. She worked individually with all of the teachers, bringing continuity to the process that unfolded in three different classrooms. Amelia described the positive experience she had working collaboratively with the teachers:

I really enjoyed working with five different teachers and a principal from three different schools. I learned much from their diverse ideas and teaching approaches. I think that this diversity in experiences and teaching approaches brought a great deal of richness to the project.

The whole team met three times throughout the project in order to map out key components, such as the field trip and the closing reflection and celebration at the Gleneagles Open House. While some aspects of the project were planned early on, such as the field trip, the project unfolded organically as the inquiry process was carried out with the students in each of the three classrooms.

The classroom activities were planned and presented collaboratively by individual teachers

and the artist. The artist and teachers would plan and communicate by email prior to each classroom visit that the artist made. The teachers continued to work with their students on various aspects of the project in between classroom sessions with the artist. This helped to reinforce the students' learning and deepened the students' understanding of the concepts they were exploring through art-making.

Online Documentation of the Project and Online Resources for Teachers

To learn more about this project and previous BIG IDEAS Projects, visit: <http://www.vancouverbiennale.com/learn/>. This website also provides innovative, inspiring, concept-based multi-media unit plans and learning cases as instructional samples for teachers and parents throughout the province. The online resources are based on BIG IDEAS in-School Projects developed through partnership with the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education, project participants, curriculum specialists, and program advisors.

What's New and How to Get Involved

The 3rd Vancouver Biennale exhibition, Open Borders/Crossroads Vancouver promises an unprecedented 18-month public program of contemporary art, new media, music, and film. Highlights include major outdoor installations by internationally renowned artists Ai Weiwei, Vik

Muniz, Jonathan Borofsky, Andy Goldsworthy, and a large-scale building mural by Os Gemeos. The Biennale is expanding its program to include a new International Pavilion, which will host a national Brazilian group exhibition; a new CineFest LIVE documentary film program with retrospectives, urban projections, and live presentations by master filmmakers.

Also new is the Biennale International Artist Residency Program, which will bring 92 of the most exciting emerging artists from around the world to Vancouver in cross-disciplinary groups to create public artworks and social interventions. The Resident artists will engage with local artists, art organizations, and art aficionados in a groundbreaking cross-cultural sharing of ideas, technique, and experience through a series of public talks and open house events.

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The BIG IDEAS in-School Program will open for application from September to mid-November, 2014.

