

# Designing extended, creative learning experiences and gathering evidence of success in meeting competency-related curriculum goals: a case study of innovation in a New Zealand school

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## ***Introduction***

This paper discusses the challenges that teachers encounter when attempting to deeply rethink the purposes and practices of traditional schooling, with an intention to shift to a “twenty-first century” learning frame. It suggests that an enabling national curriculum framework and genuine reform intent on the part of a school and (at least some) of its teachers are not sufficient to transform schooling. *All* teachers, students and parents hold both tacit and explicit beliefs about what constitutes evidence of learning and how that evidence might be brought into view (i.e. what constitutes “proper” assessment). Practices that challenge these views are unlikely to succeed unless space is made to examine them within a framework where the nature of educational change, and reasons for its inception, are also a subject of explicit and ongoing exploration.

The overview paper has briefly outlined the national context for curriculum and assessment reform in New Zealand. This paper illustrates some of the ways in which one school has made sense of the complex policy context outlined there.<sup>1</sup> The school’s existing direction fitted with the intent of NZC and this paper focuses on just one of the change initiatives being enacted – three-day learning episodes that happen once each term when the routine timetable is suspended. Two case studies of actual three-day episodes are used to highlight the assessment challenges that surface when non-academic learning and skills are fore-grounded as a means of enriching the curriculum that students experience.

## ***Innovation in the context of one secondary school***

Alfriston College is a newly built secondary school in a rapidly growing low socio-economic area of Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city. Both staff and students come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. From its inception six years ago Alfriston College has sought to be a school for the twenty-first century. While the school was being designed and built the foundation staff was being assembled and they had time together to explore ideas and plan the structures and processes of their school. For

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<sup>1</sup> The project from which this paper draws was funded by New Zealand’s Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI), funded by the Government and administered by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

example, they identified a suite of Independent Learner Qualities (ILQs)<sup>2</sup> that they wanted to be fostered in all formal learning situations, as well as within the wide range of other school activities and ways of being. ILQ posters are prominent in every classroom and in the library. One teacher has dedicated leadership of the Independent Learner Centre where students are supported to strengthen these qualities in the context of learning challenges designed by their subject teachers.

Adapting the traditional timetable to try and make space for deeper learning was another aspect of the school's vision. The school has longer than usual learning periods (100 minutes) and once a term the timetable is suspended for three days when students work on an extended project of their choice. Teachers work together in teams and students are often mixed across year levels, depending on their choices and interests. These times are called "three-day learning episodes". The planning manual for these episodes suggests that they will allow the curriculum to be "delivered in an authentic and connected way" by "creating a learning, rather than a teaching, environment" (Alfriston College, N.D., p.3). Informal feedback from foundation staff points to the hope that students would be able to experience the powerful engagement known as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) that comes when immersed in a learning activity of one's choice, on one's own terms. The three-day episodes are expected to provide opportunities for students to strengthen their ILQs but only some of the episodes are directly linked to the school's academic learning programme. The case studies chosen for this paper are examples of episodes that set out to foster non-traditional outcomes,<sup>3</sup> including but not limited to strengthening ILQs.

A programme committee has always vetted proposals prepared by teachers. Although expected to identify clear learning outcomes and provide indications of how the achievement of these would be demonstrated towards the end of the extended learning time, there was some concern when the research was initiated<sup>4</sup> that quality was slipping, along with attendance of some students whose parents did not see the learning value of the episodes, and hence regarded them as optional extras, rather than an integral part of the school curriculum. Accordingly, the research aimed to investigate whether the innovative approaches to scheduling time for teaching and

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<sup>2</sup> Alfriston College identifies ten independent learner qualities: caring, creative, collaborative, curious, enterprising, joyful, persevering, resilient, thinking, wise. These preceded but broadly align with the intent of the five key competencies identified for The New Zealand Curriculum: managing self; relating to others; thinking; using language symbols and texts, participating and contributing.

<sup>3</sup> Arguably, strong "academic" skills are involved in the episode created by the English teacher, but they are non-traditional in the sense that they focus on multi-literacies, not traditional literacy.

<sup>4</sup> Four years after the school opened

learning at Alfriston College were having a significant impact on student learning, to identify best practice for use of extended periods of learning time, and to widen discussion about the nature of “evidence” of learning.

Student and staff surveys carried out in 2007, the first year of the research, confirmed that both students and teachers preferred the 100 minute lessons, but also showed that length of the lesson per se does not significantly change teacher practice. At the same time, the survey results gave interesting indications that more substantive pedagogical change was already occurring in the three-day episodes, and that teachers believed this was possible because there was “no assessment” and the learning was not directly linked to the curriculum (Hipkins, with Shanks, and Denny, 2008). Discussions amongst members of the research team suggested that we would need to challenge deeply held assumptions about teaching and learning if pedagogical change was to occur across the whole curriculum and focusing on the three-day episodes seemed the most productive way to do that. Our goal for 2008 became to use the three-day episodes as a context for a school wide conversation about learning, with a view to bringing to the surface tacit understandings about the nature of learning and what is worth learning. To start the process a group of volunteer teachers worked with the research team to develop a set of design principles that were then used by all staff for two rounds of three-day episodes, with each round evaluated by the research team.

### ***Developing design principles for three-day episodes***

Early in the second year of the research, a day-long workshop was designed with the intent of creating conditions for “psychologically spacious” professional learning (Garvey Berger, 2004) where teachers could be supported to draw on their tacit understandings at the same time as their professional expertise was seen to be valued. The participants were all experienced in designing and running three-day episodes and had volunteered to give up a day of their holidays to take part. The teachers were invited to begin by exploring the question of what makes some three-day episodes more enjoyable than others, and responding to a question about what puzzled or intrigued them about three-day episodes. A carefully structured process of collaborative conversations ensued, culminating with the drafting and sharing of design principles for three day episodes.

Only after the teachers had shaped their own ideas were they introduced to the enriched assessment framework for the international project. The evident coherence between their ideas and this framework was very affirming for the group, and gave them added confidence in the value of their own professional expertise.

In another day-long meeting the research team then took all the proposed principles (different groups had focused on different aspects) and created a synthesis of all the ideas. The resulting framework was subsequently affirmed by the wider team (see table on next page).

### Design Principles for Three-Day Learning Episodes

Design Principle	Potential Indicators			
<p><b>Nature of Learning</b> The planned learning should provide opportunities to strengthen learners' capabilities, including "learning to learn" dimensions and provide for engaging, interactive learning experiences.</p> <p><b>Ownership</b> The planned learning should foster autonomy by providing choice and flexibility within a supportive framework.</p>	<p><i>Does the learning provide....?</i></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td data-bbox="772 419 1294 810"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A range of experiences</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to demonstrate autonomy</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to reflect on their progress</li> <li>Opportunities for development of the key competencies and Alfriston College Independent Learner Qualities</li> <li>Choice (context, process, outcome, and/or indicators of successful learning)</li> <li>Opportunities for co-construction</li> </ul> </td> <td data-bbox="1328 419 2033 735"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities for learners to take risks and push personal boundaries</li> <li>Challenges (intellectual, physical, ethical, cultural, social, practical, and/or creative)</li> <li>Opportunities to build relationships (learner/learner, learner/teacher, learner/wider community).</li> <li>For the possibility of divergent pathways to emerge</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to participate in developing indicators of successful learning</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A range of experiences</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to demonstrate autonomy</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to reflect on their progress</li> <li>Opportunities for development of the key competencies and Alfriston College Independent Learner Qualities</li> <li>Choice (context, process, outcome, and/or indicators of successful learning)</li> <li>Opportunities for co-construction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities for learners to take risks and push personal boundaries</li> <li>Challenges (intellectual, physical, ethical, cultural, social, practical, and/or creative)</li> <li>Opportunities to build relationships (learner/learner, learner/teacher, learner/wider community).</li> <li>For the possibility of divergent pathways to emerge</li> <li>Opportunities for learners to participate in developing indicators of successful learning</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Connectedness, Authenticity. Relevance</b> The planned learning should help learners' make authentic and relevant connections between their learning experiences and the world they live in, in ways that expand their horizons.</p>	<p><i>Is the learning....?</i></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td data-bbox="772 880 1294 951"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framed by a clearly defined big picture idea</li> <li>Related to a future focussed theme</li> </ul> </td> <td data-bbox="1328 880 2033 983"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expansive (ideas, contexts, personal skills, connections, types of thinking)</li> <li>Relevant to learners' lives now or in the future</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Framed by a clearly defined big picture idea</li> <li>Related to a future focussed theme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expansive (ideas, contexts, personal skills, connections, types of thinking)</li> <li>Relevant to learners' lives now or in the future</li> </ul>
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<p><b>Outcomes</b> The planned learning should conclude with an evaluation of the anticipated goals so that achievements can be celebrated.</p>	<p><i>Which types of learning outcomes are anticipated and what might the evidence look like?</i></p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td data-bbox="772 1074 1294 1182"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening the independent learner qualities</li> <li>Positive relationships</li> <li>Mastery of a process</li> </ul> </td> <td data-bbox="1328 1074 1599 1144"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production of an artefact</li> <li>A dispositional change</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table> <p><i>How and by whom will the learning be evaluated and celebrated?</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening the independent learner qualities</li> <li>Positive relationships</li> <li>Mastery of a process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production of an artefact</li> <li>A dispositional change</li> </ul>
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### ***Enacting the design principles***

The research team was assigned leadership control of a teacher-only day that had been earmarked for exploration of NZC. They used the time to introduce the framework to the whole staff, exploring its evident synergies to NZC. Thus Alfriston staff began their formal curriculum implementation learning in the context of strengthening their existing three-day episodes.

All Alfriston teachers are now required to demonstrate how their proposed three-day episodes meet the design principles and the programme team will ask for clarification or provide guidance where necessary. Ongoing revision continues to fine tune the principles and they are now being adapted for other aspects of the school's work – for example the modular studies programme of one-term long units of work. To explore the impact of the principles in practice, the research team undertook a range of activities: a structured reflection process as part of the school-wide professional learning programme; an analysis of student self-reflection;<sup>5</sup> and focus group interviews with two groups of teachers at the end of the 2008 year, when two rounds of three-day episodes had been designed to the principles and subsequently enacted.

Two case studies are now presented to illustrate and give a context for the issues raised in the final section of the paper. They were derived from multiple data sources: artefacts generated during the structured staff reflection times; analysis of student self-review responses; informal discussion in the research team, and the focus group interviews that concluded the field work. The cases were written retrospectively by the lead researcher and subsequently confirmed by the teachers whose activities they recount.

#### **Case Study One: From Shakespeare to Comic/From Song to Comic**

Students began by studying *The Tempest* and then turned part of the play into a contemporary comic format suitable for publication. The English teacher who designed this episode anticipated that the task would create a range of intellectual, physical, ethical, cultural, social, practical and/or creative challenges. Next term, he revised his idea to have students focus on converting a self-selected song into a two page comic, to increase learner ownership of the project and encourage them to be involved in the entire process from idea to publication. Many of the students who chose the song-to-comic three-day episode were repeating the experience. The teacher contrasted the “nice, calm, different world” of the learning environment he set

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<sup>5</sup> As well as asking about *what* they had learned we asked them to describe things they were thinking about differently, or ways they now saw themselves differently. These more reflective questions tended to be thoughtfully answered only in those situations where the teacher scaffolded the response process – as in the second case study below.

up for them with the “hurly burly” of normal classes. Students who wanted to be more “physical” had chosen different types of episodes, and the students who chose comic creations appreciated the tranquillity.

Students typically associated this learning episode with the development of their creative, perseverance and curiosity ILQs. Some have continued to meet on a Friday after school, with visits from guest comic artists facilitated by the teacher. He said that students now forged ahead with ownership of their own learning. They have shown him how to use drawing tablets and he described this as “the reality of the espoused benefits” of independent learning.

### **Case Study Two: King of Kings/Sons of the Pacific**

One teacher constructed two different learning episodes with a focus on encouraging male students from Pacific Island backgrounds to value their own and other Pacific cultures and to stand tall as learners in the New Zealand school system. She wanted these students, some of whom were typically considered “problem” students, to experience successful learning *as* Pacific students and to gain a sense of the value their cultural resources could provide to them as learners in general. The teacher was invited to participate in the focus group because of the range of interesting and insightful self-reflection comments made by the students, and because there was a general perception amongst the staff that these had been outstandingly successful episodes, with demonstrable changes in the attitudes of some participants to their subsequent learning, and with very positive feedback from parents who attended the final performances.

The first episode, called “King of Kings”, was designed for boys whose families originated from the island of Niue, thus sharing the teacher’s cultural background. The second three-day episode, “Sons of the Pacific”, was open to all Pacific boys. Both episodes challenged students to draw on common and differing elements in their cultural backgrounds to devise and deliver a performance for an audience that could include their relatives as well as other students. This took place on the afternoon of the third day. Each episode provided space for every student to demonstrate leadership at some point, with the teacher “pulling strings from the back” if they needed support. The students were most likely to associate this learning episode with the development of their joyful, creative and collaborative ILQs.

These episodes clearly fulfilled the design principles – they had focused learning intentions and the teacher noted that she frequently drew the students’ attention back to these – “what are we here for? What’s our aim?” She was in only her second year of teaching at the time, and said that understanding the principles had initially been a challenge – “I had to go and sit in a corner and think about them”. Once she “got” them however, the design and delivery of the episodes came much more easily. Asked how she had encouraged such perceptive written reflection from students not

known for their writing fluency, the teacher described a practice along the lines of a poroporoaki.<sup>6</sup> Gathered in a discussion circle over a shared lunch on the third day, students spoke one at a time about what the learning had meant for them. As they heard others speak, each was free to mentally shape and expand their own ideas, so that when it came time to write, they had already rehearsed what they might say.

### ***Designing learning to foster creativity***

In both the above case studies students identified creativity as an ILQ that they had developed. Most three day episodes generate a product of some kind, and the case studies contrast individual and collective ownership of these products. Our comparisons of the different episodes, student self-reflection and informal comments, the focus groups, and anecdotal teacher conversations and observations led us to identify two qualities for the “ideal” type of product which seem to be important for engaging students in meaningful sustained learning that harnesses their creativity: the product is *personalised* – students bring their creative and critical energy to bear on the form that it takes; and there is *something at stake* – the product matters for more than simply being produced.

The research team further identified a broad continuum of possibilities for each of these qualities. Stakes are high when there is a public performance of some sort or there is competition involved. When a critical audience awaits the product needs to measure up to expectations. Stakes are medium when the product is intended for use beyond the personal, so must be of an acceptable quality, and stakes are low when the product is for private use or pleasure only. Ownership is high when the product cannot be produced without both critical and creative input from the student. Ownership is medium when there is space for creative input within predetermined parameters. Ownership is low when the task can be completed by following instructions or copying.

The research team discussed how these dimensions might interact, again drawing on anecdotal accounts of students’ learning and teachers’ reflections on this. This analysis led us to conclude that, depending on the personality of the student, the stakes might not be as critical to creative engagement as the *ownership* quality of the episode. Students for whom ownership generated a high level of intrinsic motivation did not necessarily need the outcomes of their learning to be seen as high stakes by anyone else. This was especially so for some female students who made items for their personal use. What matters to such students is that *they* value what they are doing. However rather more of the students appeared to relish the extrinsic

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<sup>6</sup> A form of reflective, inclusive meeting closure used for traditional gatherings of Maori New Zealanders.

motivation of a competitive performance of the outcomes they sought. Of course, this is not a simple either/or dichotomy. A public performance of one's own goals still has to be underpinned by a self-generated motivation to put in the necessary effort and practice to reach the intended outcomes. Both social and personal factors are likely to be in play here. Pride in the product, whatever its nature, is likely to be a strong indicator of engagement and hence of learning success.

Products are visible evidence of learning and so can, if desired, be judged known assessment methods, typically involving the generation of marking criteria. However, products such as those resulting from some three-day episodes may be collectively generated. This is an issue when the individual learner must be attributed a grade for a genuinely collaborative team effort (as also described by Sumara and Davis, 2006). Future-focused literature suggests this challenge needs to be addressed if students are to be prepared for "knowledge work" in the twenty-first century, where the creation of new knowledge in the spaces between different individuals' contributions is the expected way of working (Gilbert, 2005).

### ***Other potential sources of evidence of learning and some associated issues***

Apart from the creation of successful products, what else might success look like when learning is framed as being more holistic and participatory, and how might new ways of noticing success be documented? This question has exercised the research team throughout this project and was a specific question for the two focus groups. One teacher commented that too many of his peers still think of assessment as "some physical thing you can mark". For him the learning *process* was more important.

*Learning to learn* is one of eight principles in NZC. One of four aspects of the vision statement describes qualities of lifelong learners. Advice on effective pedagogy to implement the NZC key competencies emphasises students' active role in strengthening these, and monitoring their own learning progress. Taken together, there are strong signals right through document that the act of learning per se should be a focus for attention in an enriched curriculum. What might evidence of learning look like here and what challenges might be anticipated?

One type of evidence might be an enhanced self-view as a learner, resulting from positive experiences of learning capabilities in the non-formal settings of the three-day episodes. One teacher commented that, for some students, the key learning in a successful three-day episode had been that they were "not really dumb". An increase in self confidence to *be* a different person around school in general, or to take risks with more public demonstrations of learning, was a theme threaded through both focus groups. One teacher (not the leader of the Pacific group) noted the emergence of a group of Pacific Island students as a "cultural and leadership force" in the school. He attributed this to the increase in their self-esteem and noted that such a development would not usually be connected to improved work in a subject area



(although the teachers in the focus group clearly saw this possibility). As one teacher asked “how do you measure the people we’ve become?”

The use of *self-assessment* has obvious potential here but there are pitfalls to be avoided. One teacher noted that, while students do indeed see themselves in a different light, they tend to experience this as “freedom and permission”, without necessarily being able to articulate the wider learning connections that the teacher can see: “that comes after reflection”. Underneath demonstrated dispositions, values and attitudes there lies an even more personal and private layer constituted by identity, desire and motivation (Deakin Crick, 2008). Helping learners of any age see how these might be impacting on ways they learn requires very skilful support from a teacher or mentor (see for example Zembylas, 2007). In the light of these challenges it is not at all surprising that the written reflection sheets designed for the research were generally not successful in eliciting insightful comments, even with their cues that learning might be about seeing *yourself* differently. However the second case study shows that learning-to-learn dimensions can be made an explicit focus of student attention with careful teacher scaffolding.

Another challenge raised in the focus groups was the *timeframe* within which evidence is gathered. There was considerable anecdotal discussion of evidence of engagement and learning benefits well beyond the actual three-day episode. For example the comic creators organised a regular after-school session on Fridays where they could create together. Demonstrations of competency include dimensions of agency, resourcefulness, and breadth and depth of application. If these are genuinely valued as learning outcomes, then evidence of their strengthening over time ought to be a valued indicator of learning progress (Carr, 2008). Such evidence will be missed when learning gains are only documented during or at the immediate conclusion of learning, regardless of whether or not they focus only on products of learning.

This paper concludes by circling back to where it began. The various issues raised so far have focused on what the *student* does, alone or in a group, but what the *teacher* and *relevant others* do to maximise the chances of learning success for the different students is also vital. Recognising this, the Alfriston teachers worked hard on developing and enacting design principles that might help maximise the learning value of the three-day episodes, regardless of the specific episode chosen by each student. A wide reading of other research relevant to the development of competencies emphasises the key role played by the provision of *opportunities to learn* (Hipkins, 2006). Since the teacher is typically the orchestrator and mediator of such opportunities, it follows that we might seek to place at least part of the assessment focus on how well they have met the challenges posed by the design principles, at both planning and enacting stages. Just as learning can emerge in the spaces between students, so it can also emerge in the spaces that the teacher, with the help of the students *and* all the relevant resources they can collectively marshal,

intentionally engineer (see Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler, 2008 for an extended discussion of these issues). From this complex systems perspective, traditional methods for assessment of learning as an isolated possession of each individual student seem distinctly problematic.

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