Blended Learning and the BC Education Plan:

Delivering Flexibility and Choice in Intermediate Language Arts

by

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We accept the Process Paper as conforming to the required standard.

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Abstract

The introduction of the BC Education Plan represents a substantial shift in pedagogy within British Columbia. The Ministry of Education has indicated that educational priorities are changing and new skills and competencies need to be developed by students. Personalized Learning, offering students increased flexibility and choice over what, when and how they study is a means of increasing student engagement while simultaneously building these competencies. Blended Learning, the thoughtful integration of online learning with traditional face to face teaching, is a growing educational trend across North America. It promises to provide the desired flexibility and choice required to deliver Personalized Learning.

In this major project, students were given the opportunity to explore and complete a number of units on digital literacy, mythology, folklore and short stories in a Blended Learning environment. They created and maintained e-portfolios to meet some of their learning outcomes related to intermediate Language Arts as well as Applied Design, Skills and Technology. The units were subsequently evaluated both by the students and a group of educational professionals who recorded their feedback on surveys.

The major project can be found here: www.divisionthreeenglish.weebly.com

Keywords: Blended Learning, Personalized Learning, BC Education Plan, Gamification, Intermediate Language Arts, Elementary Education, Online Learning
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The world is rapidly changing. The growth of the internet coupled with increasingly powerful and portable computers has led to major changes in the way we live our lives. Our connectivity has altered the way we obtain our information and entertainment. It has transformed how we shop, how we receive medical treatment and how we practice our politics. Most significantly it has changed the way we interact with our family, friends, colleagues and the entire world.

Education is not immune to these changes. A profession which concerns itself with preparing children for the future must necessarily adapt to serve the evolving needs of students. To that end, the BC Ministry of Education developed the BC Education Plan (2015) which promises “an education system that better engages students in their own learning and that fosters the skills and competencies they will need to succeed” (p. 4). The foundation of the new plan rests on “Personalized Learning” the belief that “no two students learn the same way or at the same pace” and requires that learning be “focused on the needs, strengths and aspirations of each individual young person.” According to Cavanagh (2014) Personalized Learning programs are recognizable through by the following features: “1) learner strength and weakness profiles; 2) student learning paths / maps, and set goals for achievement; 3) progression through topics based on competency; and 4) flexible learning environments” (para. 25). Each aspect of Personalized Learning is designed to provide greater specificity to learning content while simultaneously providing greater autonomy to students.
The advantages of such an initiative are obvious. “Students, teachers and families will benefit from more flexibility and choice with respect to how, when and where learning takes place”. According to Reeve (2006), this increased autonomy has proven to lead to:

- an impressive and meaningful range of positive educational outcomes, including greater perceived competence (Deci et al., 1981), higher mastery motivation (Ryan & Grolnick, 1986), enhanced creativity (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984)… increased conceptual understanding (Benware & Deci, 1984) … greater engagement (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Barch, & Jeon, 2004) … [and] better academic performance (Boggiano, Flink, Shields, Seelbach, & Barrett, 1993) (p.228).

What is less obvious is how the goal of Personalized Learning can be achieved given the size and composition of most classes in BC and the limited resources available to teachers and students. However, it is clear that technology has a role to play. The BC Education Plan (2015) acknowledges that “educators will need greater access and supports to use technology that enriches the learning process” (pg. 8).

**Justification of the Project**

The Blended Learning environment is just one example of how technology can be leveraged to enrich the learning process. Blended Learning (BL) refers to “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004, pg. 96). Horne and Stalker (2011) define BL from the perspective of the student stating “Blended Learning is any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace” (pg. 3). They claim that BL allows for the increased customization that personalized learning demands.
According to Horn and Staker (2015):

Blended learning is the engine that can power personalized and competency-based learning. Just as technology enables mass customization in so many sectors to meet the diverse needs of so many people, online learning can allow students to learn any time, in any place, on any path, and at any pace at scale. At its most basic level, it lets students fast-forward if they have already mastered a concept, pause if they need to digest something, or rewind and slow something down if they need to review. It provides a simple way for students to take different paths toward a common destination. It can free up teachers to become learning designers, mentors, facilitators, tutors, evaluators, and counselors to reach each student in ways never before possible. (p. 26)

BL often takes advantage of computer mediated instruction to provide timely feedback to students as well as provide data to teachers to help inform their instruction. It also allows for increasing flexibility and choice in allowing students to study in the place and at the pace of their choosing. BL in the form of digital communication technologies also allows for increased collaboration between students.

**Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this Master’s project was to achieve the goal of Personalized Learning outlined by BC Education Plan (2015) through the creation a Blended Learning environment for a Grade 6/7 Language Arts program. Computer mediated instruction in grammar would be thoughtfully combined with reading and writing assignments, novel study and the creation of online e-portfolios to achieve the educational outcomes prescribed by the new BC English Language Arts and Applied Design Skills and Technology curriculum. In addition, it was hoped that increasing student autonomy through the creation of a Blended Learning environment would
lead to the development of 21st Century “competencies such as Critical thinking and problem-solving, Collaboration and leadership, Communication and digital literacy, Personal and social responsibility, Creativity and innovation and Global and cultural understanding” (BC Education Plan 2015’ p.6).

Ultimately the purpose of the project was to create a model of BL that could address the critical challenge question: How can Blended Learning increase student engagement and deliver Personalized Learning as described in British Columbia’s Education Plan?

**Project Overview**

Construction of the Division 3 English website on Weebly for Education began in July of 2016 ([www.divisionthreeenglish.weebly.com](http://www.divisionthreeenglish.weebly.com)). The site was built to establish a central hub for online assignments which students could access both at school and from home. A selection of reading material was collected that included myths, folklore and short stories that would expose students to a variety of forms and genres of texts as well as literary devices, requirements of revised learning outcomes in BC’s new language arts curriculum (2015). Owing to their age, these reading materials were in the public domain but required some adaptations to be suitable for Grade 6/7 students. They were edited and stored on Google Docs which allowed for them to be easily shared through links on the Division 3 website.

In addition, a number of writing assignments were described on the Division 3 website as well as instructions on how to navigate the course material and submit assignments. Students were furthermore given instructions on how to set up their own Weebly e-portfolio. Weebly for Education ([www.education.weebly.com](http://www.education.weebly.com)) is an ideal online tool for creating attractive and easily navigable classroom websites and student e-portfolios. It is free to use. It is user-friendly and includes many simple drag and drop features. Using Weebly for Education for this project,
students created e-portfolios to record their learning, compose reading responses and publish their writing in order to store, share and showcase their portfolio of work.

Students were not only given guidelines for creating and maintaining their blogs, they were also given information on internet safety and digital literacy. These issues were addressed in a series of assignments in the section entitled “Start Here” and had to be completed before students were given access to their Weebly for Education accounts.

To increase student engagement, elements of Gamification- the practice of incorporating game design elements and mechanics into non-game contexts- were included in the project design. Standard grading practices were replaced by experience points where students progressed towards mastery by earning credit for each of their completed assignments. This meant that students were consistently rewarded for completing work and making progress towards their desired grade. To encourage students to explore a diverse range of reading materials, no more than 150 experience points could be collected from any one genre. At the same time, students were given a wide selection of assignments to choose from on a variety of topics, different media and at varying degrees of difficulty. This is another principle of game design, what educational theorist James Paul Gee calls ”customization” (2013). Gee argues that customization empowers children by giving them different options on how to achieve goals and provides them with increased opportunities for success. This in turn leads to increased engagement.

Finally, students were able to keep track of their progress, compare and compete with their classmates through a class leaderboard maintained on the website Classdojo (www.classdojo.com) though anonymity was maintained through the use pseudonyms. It was hoped that this would further increase the motivation of competitive students.
There are a variety of models of Blended Learning including individual rotation, station rotation, flex model, a la carte and the flipped classroom (Horn and Staker, 2015). For this project, the station rotation model was used. Students were placed into one of three reading groups. Every third day during the class’ USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) students were given time to work on online reading assignments on a bank of computers located in a shared common area located immediately outside the classroom. On the other two days they participated in a guided novel study or engaged in reading of their own choosing. This pattern reflects the typical blended model which when designed and implemented effectively, allows teachers to leverage both the virtual and face-to-face learning environments; enabling students to use their time together for inquiry and project-based learning activities and providing students with a more personalized learning experience (Horn and Stalker, 2013, p.6).

In addition, all students were given one 45 minute block per week in the computer lab to work on writing assignments for their blogs and comment on their peer’s work. The benefits of blogging are well documented in research. Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003) found that student who engage in the use of computers to develop their writing, on average are not only engaged but have also made improvements in the length and quality of their writing. Students are more motivated to write when the writing activity is authentic as is the case when they are writing for an audience of their peers. Goldberg et al (2003) found that students wrote more often, for longer periods of time, and produced more writing when they used a computer instead of paper-and-pencil. Students were furthermore encouraged to work on assignments at home.

Assignments for reading were designed to assess comprehension, build vocabulary and develop common reading strategies including: visualizing, making inferences, asking questions, making predictions, drawing connections and summarizing. Assignments took the form of
multiple choice quizzes, short writing assignments, art projects and performances. They were submitted electronically through Edmodo (https://www.edmodo.com), a learning management system, and through traditional paper and pencil activities. The majority of assignments were completed individually, but a significant portion allowed for collaboration among students. Furthermore, students were encouraged to share their work with their peers as well as offer and solicit feedback from others.

According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), the ability of BL to bring students together into an online community of learners is one of its pedagogical strengths. They claim, “What makes Blended Learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence.” (p.97). BL has the capabilities to facilitate these conditions and adds an important reflective element with multiple forms of communication. This is confirmed in a study by Vaughn (2014) who reports that students enjoyed the “collaborative learning applications and team-based project work” (p. 256) of their BL environment.

After six weeks, students were asked to complete a short questionnaire to provide feedback on their overall experience with the Language Arts program. Additionally, a group of educators were asked to evaluate the site and its potential to increase student engagement.

This paper documents the development of the major project from its inception to its development, trial and revision. It examines the major project through the lens of Personalized Learning described by the BC Education Plan to determine whether or not a Blended Model of instruction can increase student engagement by provided increased flexibility and choice.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Expected Timeline For Project Completion</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prepare Major Project Proposal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build Blended Course for Grade 6/7 English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administer course and collect feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed draft of Process Paper submitted for Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finished Project and Process Paper Accepted</td>
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There are no anticipated costs in the creation of this project.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review is an examination of the evolving nature of educational aims and the underlying causes of these changes. It addresses how increased access to information via the internet has altered the role of teachers from “content experts” to “learning facilitators” and ushered in the era of Personalized Learning. It demonstrates how the educational aim of Personalized Learning can most practically be achieved through a Blended Learning model of instruction. A definition of Blended Learning (BL) will be presented and a survey of the current research examining its effectiveness will be undertaken. Challenges to implementing a BL model will be addressed and the chapter concludes with some further considerations and conclusions. All of this in an attempt to answer the critical challenge question: How can a BL model of instruction be used to meet the aims of Personalized Learning for intermediate students as outlined in British Columbia’s Education Plan?

The Movement Toward Personalized Learning

The role and function of education is constantly being refined and evolving. Modern public schooling, funded by government, and offered as a public service, originated almost three hundred years ago to serve the needs of the bureaucratic and administrative “machine” created to manage the British Empire. The goal of schooling at this time was to furnish each educated individual with the ability to read, write and perform simple number operations so that they could carry out administrative duties in the service of the empire (Mitra 2013). A requisite understanding of geography and of the classics were also desirable.
According to Sir Ken Robinson, this traditional schooling was modelled on the interests of industrialization and in the image of it. Schools were organized like factories complete with ringing bells, specialized subjects and the arbitrary segregation of students into classes according to the year of their birth. This lead to increasing standardization of curricula and conformity amongst graduates (Robinson 2010). However, modern educational theorists have called into question the desirability of these outcomes. Numerous organizations have made claims that the new millennia calls for a new model of what it means to be educated.

In an age of unprecedented technological advancement, the only constant is change. The goals of BC’s new Education Plan reflect a desire to adapt to our changing circumstances. Rigid learning objectives with carefully delineated outcomes, including the scope and sequence of content knowledge, have been replaced with flexible core competencies including, critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration and leadership, communication and digital literacy, personal and social responsibility, creativity and innovation and global and cultural understanding (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). Many of these are further echoed in the Conference Board of Canada’s Employability Skills 2000+ Report, which emphasizes a need for flexibility and encourages personal ownership of self-directed, lifelong learning (“Employability Skills 2000+”).

More than educational outcomes are being altered as a result of our technological advancement. As we adapt and refine the aims of our educational system, there are a series of cascading changes that have the potential to alter everything from our pedagogy to the architecture our schools. One of the most significant changes felt immediately is the change to the role of the teacher. As the Ministry of Education (2015) explains “the teacher’s role will shift increasingly towards that of a guide, coach and mentor – focusing more on helping students learn
how to learn – and away from being the primary source of content and information” (p. 8). This represents a significant departure from past conceptions of the role of teachers as “content experts” and is an implicit acknowledgement that students, by virtue of their ability to access the internet, have unprecedented access to information.

As Jason Mander (2015) reports, “the internet is capturing more and more of our time each day – with total hours spent online via PCs, laptops, mobiles and tablets growing from 5.55 in 2012 to 6.15 in 2014”. This statistic is further borne out by Kemp (2015) who identifies Canada as the most connected country on earth with 93% of us regularly accessing the internet through desktop PCs, tablets or smartphones. While a great deal of this time is spent on social media and entertainment activities, the “literature on the potential of Internet information and communication technology to support meaningful educational experiences has been well documented” (Garrison 2004, p.98). Given the right skill set and access to the internet, students will learn (Mitra, 2013).

If teachers will no longer be the primary source of content knowledge, there is an increased flexibility in what can be studied. Classes are no longer limited by the knowledge of their individual teacher or even by the contents of a solitary library. Students have the freedom to study a greater variety of topics than ever before and learn at their own pace. This is what the BC Ministry of Education (2015) describes as “Personalized Learning” (p, 5). It “is focused on the needs, strengths and aspirations” of students and they “play an increasingly active role in designing their own education path as they develop and mature” (p. 5).

The appetite on the part of students and their parents for Personalized Learning has never been greater and with good cause. The BC Ministry of Education claims, “The best outcomes are achieved through learner-centered approaches that are sensitive to individual and group
differences, that promote inclusive and collaborative learning, that harness students’ passions and interests, and that deliver tailored feedback and coaching” (p. 3). However, recognizing the desirability of this approach is significantly easier than implementing the changes necessary to achieve these aims. Logistically, how does a teacher manage a class where all students are pursuing their own interests at different paces yet at the same time manage and track student progress and promote collaboration, personal and social responsibility, teach communication skills and achieve all the other educational aims?

The first solution would be to greatly reduce the current student to teacher ratio, a choice rendered impractical due to the high cost associated with finding and hiring a large number of teachers as well as modifying school spaces. The second, more practical solution is Blended Learning. Teachers are using blended delivery models to add variety to their instruction and to free them to spend more time working with individual students. Schools are also using the adaptive and self-paced nature of some online systems to re-engage students, particularly those with the greatest academic needs, by enabling them to learn at their own pace and appropriate level of challenge (Murphy, R., Mislevy, J., Gallagher, L., Krumm, A., & Wei, X., 2014, pg. 7). Blended Learning, and specifically the station rotation model, allows teachers to achieve the aims of personalized learning outlined in the BC Education Plan regarding Personalized Learning with minimal adaptation to school infrastructure and change to student teacher ratio. As a result, it is being touted as one of the most important methods for education reform today (Picciano, A. G., Dziuban, C. D., & Graham, C. R., 2012, pg. 135).

What is Blended Learning?

The broadest definition declares Blended Learning “as the integration of almost all multiple learning methods or techniques such as the combination of laboratory sessions, face-to-
face lectures, assigned readings, formal coursework, self-paced, collaborative, online format, as well as supervised hands-on practice” (Cucciare, M., Weingardt, K. R., & Villafranca, S. 2008, p. 301).

In their article, *Blended Learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education*, Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define Blended Learning simply as “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” but acknowledge “there is considerable complexity in its implementation with the challenge of virtually limitless design possibilities and applicability to so many contexts” (p.96).

Graham (2006) took the view that BL might best be understood from a historical perspective. He defines the term Blended Learning as

part of the ongoing convergence of two archetypal learning environments. On the one hand, we have the traditional F2F learning environment that has been around for centuries. On the other hand, we have distributed learning environments that have begun to grow and expand in exponential ways as new technologies have expanded the possibilities for distributed communication and interaction (p. 5).

Horn and Stalker (2011) created a definition that stems from the experience of students. “Blended Learning is any time a student learns at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace” (p. 3).

It is easy to see why Oliver and Trigwell (2005) claim that Blended Learning, alternatively known “Hybrid Learning”, ‘is ill-defined and inconsistently used” (p. 17) and complain that the term is problematic for researchers attempting to evaluate educational
outcomes as well as those seeking to establish educational frameworks, pedagogies and best practices around BL instruction.

Regardless of the exact terms used to define it, Blended Learning is generally understood as combining efficiency of digital learning technologies and computer-mediated instructional elements with the traditional Face to Face (F2F) learning experience.

**The Advantages of Blended Learning**

Blended Learning is now increasingly found in K–12 education (Picciano, Seaman, Shea, & Shaw, 2012, pg. 128). Horn and Stalker (2011) claim that “online learning is sweeping across America” and “most of the growth is occurring in blended-learning environments” (p. 1). What is it about Blended Learning that is fuelling its growth and making it so desirable to educators and administrators?

According to Graham (2006), “there are many reasons that an instructor, trainer, or learner might pick blended learning over other learning options”. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) identified six reasons that one might choose to design or use a blended learning system: (1) pedagogical richness, (2) access to knowledge, (3) social interaction, (4) personal agency, (5) cost-effectiveness, and (6) ease of revision. Graham claims “overwhelmingly, people chose BL for three reasons: improved pedagogy, increased access and flexibility, and increased cost-effectiveness” (p. 8).

On the topic of pedagogy, Horne and Stalker (2011) claim that Blended Learning allows for “a more consistent and personalized pedagogy that allows each student to work at her own pace and helps each child feel and be successful at school” (p. 6). They add “leveraging technology, blended-learning programs can let students learn at their own pace, use preferred learning modalities, and receive frequent and timely feedback on their performance for a far
higher quality learning experience”. This is key as timely feedback is one of the most significant influences on learning outcomes according to Hattie (2009). We know that much of the satisfaction and success of blended learning experiences can be attributed to the interactive capabilities of Internet communication technology (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2003).

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) claim “What makes Blended Learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on the Internet.” (p. 97). Communities also provide the condition for free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement—the hallmark of higher education. Blended learning has the capabilities to facilitate these conditions and adds an important reflective element with multiple forms of communication to meet specific learning requirements. This was confirmed in a study by Vaughn (2014), which examined the strengths and challenges of blended learning classrooms. He found that students enjoyed the “collaborative learning applications and team-based project work” (p. 256) of their Blended Learning environment.

Blended Learning can offer a higher level of interaction than commonly experienced in face-to-face courses. This is because the various technology tools available in many blended courses and course management systems combine to form a communication environment such as facilitating access to course materials and experts that might not be otherwise available (Dziuban, C.D., Hartman, J., Juge, F., Moskal, P.D., & Sorg, S. 2005, pg 196).

Ultimately, improved pedagogy leads to improved learning outcomes. Blended Learning has the potential to be more effective than traditional F2F learning as evidenced by the study conducted by Heterick & Twigg (2003) which found that students demonstrated improved learning on 19 of 30 projects and recorded higher satisfaction rates than with F2F instruction.
Similarly, Means et al. (2011), in a major meta-analysis of research on blended and online learning for the U.S. Department of Education, reported:

> In recent experimental and quasi-experimental studies contrasting blends of online and face-to-face instruction with conventional face-to-face classes, blended instruction has been more effective, providing a rationale for the effort required to design and implement blended approaches. When used by itself, online learning appears to be as effective as conventional classroom instruction, but not more so. (p. xviii)

Blended Learning has proven to be more effective than either online learning or direct F2F instruction. It’s not surprising then that, “Blended Learning is likely to emerge as the predominant [educational] model of the future” (Watson, 2008, p. 3).

**Challenges to Implementing a Blended Learning Model**

Despite the advantages that Blended Learning offers both over F2F instruction and fully online instruction there are impediments to its successful implementation at the intermediate level. Key among these is a lack of digital fluency on the part of teachers and students (Mirriahi et al. 2015). While it is true that 21st century learners are well acquainted with technology to deliver entertainment, many of them lack the necessary background and skills to use computers effectively as educational tools. Krégor, Breslin, and Fountain (2012) report 32% of respondents in their study were less than confident with the use of Information and Communication Technologies in learning and teaching. Therefore, in order to adopt a blended learning model, it is first necessary to furnish teachers and students with the skills and knowledge that they need to be successful. These skills may collectively be referred to as “Digital Literacy”.

Teachers’ “confidence and skills in using online technologies remain low” (Johnson et al. 2014, p. 22). This can create a reluctance on the part of educators to embrace computer mediated
The Blended Learning Implementation Guide 3.0 (Bailey, J., Martin, N., Schneider, C., Vander Ark, T., Duty, L., Ellis, S., Terman, A., 2015) suggests that the creation of a Blended Learning Model requires the cooperation of “eight groups of stakeholders: the superintendent, the school board, teachers, the teachers’ union, principals, leadership schools, the community and families.” (p. 15). It stresses the importance of good planning and emphasizes the importance of making careful decisions in advance of implementation on: strategy and timelines, school models, platform and content, devices, staffing and development plans and improvement and impact measurement.

Khe Foon Hew and Wing Sum Cheung (2014) created a Blended Learning matrix in their book Using Blended Learning. They stressed the need-for teachers to have a strong educational objective in mind for their BL environment. They recommended having institutional support in place for the project as well as a robust infrastructure. Beyond these considerations, teachers, students and content needed to be prepared before pedagogical approaches and instructional
strategies can be determined and a BL model can be developed. Multiple implementation models stress the need for careful planning and collaboration so that the technology is used effectively and not used merely used for its own sake. Beyond these there are other important considerations in establishing a Blended Learning environment.

**Additional Considerations**

Blended Learning is not a panacea for all the problems faced by educators. Although Canada is one of the most connected countries on earth not everyone has equal access to technology. This “digital divide” is far more complex than simple physical access (Hengstler, 2011). It now resides in differential ability to use new media to critically evaluate information, analyze, and interpret data, attack complex problems, test innovative solutions, manage multifaceted project, collaborate with other ins knowledge production, and communicate effectively to diverse audiences—in essence, to carry out the kinds of expert thinking and complex communication that are at the heart of the new economy (Levy & Murnane, 2004, p. 6). Lower-income students often receive less instructional access at school, since poorer schools are under the greatest pressure to raise scores on state tests that do not include any online new literacies (Hengstler, 2011). As a result, poorer students may be doubly disadvantaged when it comes to Digital Literacy.

Students from all backgrounds need online access, but it is especially important for children from disadvantaged homes. Hicks & Turner (2013) recommend, "In the districts where technology and access are not readily available and community resources are slim, teachers need to work extremely hard to make sure that their students are given comparable, if not equitable, opportunity to engage digitally and develop their literacies” (Hicks & Turner, 2013, p.59). One of the ways this can be accomplished is through adopting a BL model.
Conclusion

The rapid advancement of technology has brought sweeping changes to many industries and fundamentally altered the way we live our lives. It has undermined long established institutions, upset traditional beliefs as we now find ourselves swimming in unfamiliar waters. But all this change is also an opportunity for further growth and development.

Technology is not a panacea for all the difficulties educators face in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, but Blended Learning can allow students more choice and flexibility in how and what they study. Working online can facilitate the creation of communities of inquiry amongst like-minded peers. Ultimately the internet can provide students with access to resources that are lightyears better than the film strips and encyclopedias that were in favour just one generation ago. Though there are undoubtedly some drawbacks to all the change we see around us, students have never had so much open access to information via technology or learning tools.
Chapter 3 – Major Project Design

The Major Project was developed as a complementary online addition to my regular F2F teaching of English language arts. The online component critically allowed for increased choice and flexibility for students over what, when and how they studied literature. While many of the same learning outcomes were being addressed through the online material, the online component further leant itself to the incorporation of elements of the new applied design and skills and technologies curriculum. It engaged students in a constructivist approach to learning where they were required to actively participate in the creation of knowledge for themselves and their peers. This, according to Vaughn (2014), is one of BL’s strengths. He found that students enjoyed the “collaborative learning applications and team-based project work” (p. 256) of their BL environments. Ultimately, the purpose of the project was to create a model of BL that could address the critical challenge question: How can Blended Learning increase student engagement and deliver Personalized Learning as described in British Columbia’s Education Plan?

Building the Project: Gathering the Content

One of the distressing aspects of the new curriculum, for myself, was its lack of emphasis on literary classics. The authors of the new curriculum seem to be of the postmodern mindset that no work of literature is inherently more valuable than any other. There is little guidance with respect to what stories teachers should use on their teaching. Only a recognition that “stories and narrative texts, whether real or imagined, teach us about human nature, motivation, and experience, and often reflect a personal journey or strengthen a sense of identity. They may also
be considered the embodiment of collective wisdom.” (BC Ministry of Education New Curriculum, 2016)

I subscribe to a different school of thought. While recognizing that there are issues with traditional folklore and mythology that have to be addressed, these along with stories from Bible lay the groundwork for understanding and interpreting most Western literature. This makes the studying of these stories of central importance to learning to appreciate the English language. I would have liked the new curriculum to have acknowledged their primacy. However, one of the many benefits of the new curriculum is that it allows and even encourages teachers to make these types of determinations for themselves and to teach those things which they are passionate about. For me that meant folklore and mythology.

My earliest conception of the project was a gamified learning environment that allowed students to explore Norse mythology as well as the myths of Ancient Greece and Egypt. According to Kapp (2012), Gamification, the process by which elements of game design are incorporated into non-game environments, provides another layer of interest for students. Game elements such as points, leaderboards, levels, badges, feedback and collaboration both motivates and educates learners. I began working on a gamified project in OLTD 508: Mobile Learning and Gaming, completing the unit on Norse mythology. A tour of that project is available on Youtube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNMDKR_TgxM.

Mythology and folklore appealed to me both because of their literary importance and because there was already an abundance of content, resources and materials for it in the public domain. As a result, I could edit and adapt to my purposes freely.

I downloaded a number of books of folklore and mythology from http://www.gutenberg.ca/ including The Children of Odin: The Book of Northern Myths by
Padraic Colum, Tales of the Greek Heroes by Roger Lancelyn Green and the “Colour” fairy books of Andrew Lang. The latter are collections of Fairy Tales from around the world that were very popular in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. From these I extracted a number of stories and put them into Google Docs where they could be easily accessed and edited. Stories were evaluated to ensure that they were appropriate for Grade 6/7 students and then assessed by the readability evaluator https://readability-score.com/ to ensure that they were sufficiently easy to read. Readability-score evaluates writing using a series of algorithms that determine the complexity of a text by analyzing the vocabulary and sentence structure. Reading levels fluctuated between the different materials, but all fell within the broad range that I had established as desirable, namely they were at or above the fifth grade level and below the eighth grade level. Occasionally, where necessary, changes were made.

By August, I had developed a better understanding of the new curriculum. I made the determination that my project should include a significant First Nations component. I had also discovered that there was a dearth of appropriate material on Egyptian mythology in the public domain. I replaced the latter in favour of the former and discovered a wealth of collected material on the Native American Lore Index at http://www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/loreindx.html. To maintain continuity I also put these stories into Google Docs.

Finally, to round out the collection and provide more variety for those students who might be less enamoured with very old stories, I selected a number of more modern short stories from a wide range of genres. These collected stories would form the basis of three distinct online units that would compliment my regular F2F writing program and novel studies.

Building the Project: Applications
While I was pleased with the overall concept of the project, I was dissatisfied with the both the functionality and design of 3D Gamelabs platform that I used for the creation of my Norse Mythology unit in OLTD 508. I did not want to use it for my Learning Management System (LMS). This brought to mind my previous dissatisfaction with the Desire to Learn LMS and reminded me of the non-LMS toolkit that I had built for OLTD 503.

Looking back I realized that I had already made many of the determinations that I needed to in order to build my project. My main page would be built and hosted by Weebly for Education (www.education.weebly.com). It was a free service and I was most familiar with it as a result of building multiple sites on it since beginning my OLTD graduate diploma program at VIU. It’s simple drag and drop features made building and editing pages easy and I liked the wide variety of themes that it offered.

For continuity's sake, I decided to use Weebly for Education to host my students sites as well. In past years, I have used another blogging platform with my students: Kidblog (http://kidblog.org/). Of the two, Kidblog is easier to use and it has many desirable safety features such as allowing the teacher to moderate both student blog posts and comments made on them. However, Weebly for Education allows for more customization and personalization as well as allowing for multiple blog pages. After meeting my class in September, I was confident that they would be able to rise to the challenge of using the more complex blogging platform and furthermore they would appreciate the ability of customization that Weebly for Education allowed. While the safety features of Weebly for Education were not as secure as those on Kidblog, they were more than sufficient to protect students’ privacy.

To communicate with students and parents, as in years past, I relied on Edmodo (www.edmodo.com), a social networking site designed specifically for educators. At its most
basic, it allows teachers to communicate with their students safely and securely, but teachers can also use it to assign homework, keep track of marks, award badges, create quizzes as well as share resources and videos with their entire class. Best of all, like Weebly for Education it is free to use.

Accessibility and ease of use were the two main reasons why I chose to store my work on Google Drive and use the Google Applications as the platform for delivering my lessons to the students. Readings and assignments were kept in Google Docs and accessed through a hyperlinks from the project. Google Docs is very easy to use and is accessible from any computer with access to the internet. It has a number of features that allow for the quick and easy editing of documents. I also created a number of multiple choice quizzes using Google Forms. Like Google Docs, Google Forms are very easy to create, edit and share. With add-ons such as Flubaroo, teachers can create quizzes using Google forms and have them marked automatically in seconds.

The final piece of the puzzle for my gamified learning environment was a means of keeping track of the students’ score. Initially, I considered using a simple Google Form to keep track of completed assignments and student progress, but this proved to be an unwieldy solution. Instead, I adapted the classroom management tool Classdojo (www.classdojo.com). This allowed me to award points relatively easily and gave student an easy means to keep track of their totals. I also chose to routinely share the class’ progress and this allowed students to track their progress against others on the leaderboard.

**Procedures and Methods**

Before students could begin construction of their e-portfolios, I sent home a letter to parents explaining the goals of the major project, highlighting the benefits of blogging and requesting their permission to publish their children's’ work online. This is a requirement of
FIPPA regulation 30.1 which states that the school district must obtain parents’ consent to store personal information outside of Canada.

The letter was a modified version of the letter for parents originally created by Kidblog.org, a platform that I have used previously. The original letter is no longer available online. It also directly referenced Burnaby School District Regulations and Procedures Policy # 7.90.01, the district’s technology and information systems acceptable use policy. A copy of the letter can be found in appendix A. Response from parents was mostly positive, although some parents expressed reservations. Ultimately, all but one consented to allow their child to publish their work online.

Given that my students had vastly different levels of proficiency and experience using computers and working online, it seemed sensible to begin the year with a review of expectations and to do some teaching with regards to online safety. These lessons were delivered F2F and culminated in a project in which students prepared safety posters that highlighted safe practices such as protecting privacy, reporting harassing behaviour and managing their digital footprints. Further expectations were laid out in section entitled “Blogging Guidelines” which, in addition to reinforcing safe practices, reminded students that their blogs were being created and maintained for academic purposes and should therefore reflect their best efforts.

Finally, as October began, students were shown how to sign-in to Weebly for Education and begin building their own website. Each child was instructed to create a homepage with a minimum of 3 additional blog pages, one for each of “Reading”, “Writing” and “Reflections”. Beyond this, students were encouraged to personalize their websites with unique themes, images and videos. With the holiday approaching, the students’ first assignment was to complete a blog
post under the heading of “Reflections” that explained what they were thankful for. All but a handful of students completed this assignment as instructed.

**Major Project Delivery**

With their first assignment under their belt, the students had demonstrated they were competent to write and publish on their own. At this point, I created a link to the project on our class Edmodo homepage and instructed students to begin working on reading assignments.

I adopted a station-rotation model for our class’ Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR) block. Each day, during this period, the majority of students in the class read books of their own choosing. A small group was sent to the library for book exchange and another group was allowed to go on the computers to work on reading assignments for the project. In response to students’ requests, I also printed out a number of the stories and put them into duotangs in the classroom. This allowed for more students to continue to work on assignments when all the computers were in use. While I initially imagined a regular schedule throughout the week, increasingly I gave the students a choice of where they would like to go and what they would like to work on at this time.

**Assignments**

There were six different types of reading assignments. The most common asked students to demonstrate their comprehension by summarizing the story they had read. Other assignments asked students to answer a series of comprehension questions. These asked for details from the story as well as inferential questions. Two assignments asked students to create their own questions about the stories that they had read. One asked for short answer questions, the other asked for multiple choice questions. The fifth type of assignment was a character sketch. The final type of assignment used Google Forms to administer multiple-choice quizzes.
Assignments were designed with the grade six and seven Language Arts curricular competencies in mind. Specifically students were asked to “apply appropriate strategies to comprehend written, oral, and visual texts” as well as “recognize and appreciate how different features, forms, and genres of texts reflect different purposes, audiences, and messages”. In composing blog posts for their webpage, they were required to “transform ideas and information to create original texts” and “use an increasing repertoire of conventions of Canadian spelling, grammar, and punctuation” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016).

Feedback on student work was given in the comments section of each blog post. In providing feedback, I generally followed the pattern of two positive comments highlighting what the student had done well on either side of a piece of constructive criticism on what could be improved in their next post. Where there was significant errors in punctuation, capitalization or spelling, or it was apparent that the student had not invested significant effort into completing the assignment, the student was instructed to revise and re-submit it. This happened very infrequently.

Feedback and Conclusions

At the end of October, approximately six weeks after introducing the project to my students, I prepared two surveys on Google forms to collect feedback on the project. One was given to the students in my class via a link through Edmodo and the second was given to a number of my teaching colleagues via a link sent directly to them in an email. Further responses were requested from the OLTD community, a group of experienced online educators, in a Google+ post. The purpose of the student survey was to solicit feedback on how the project might be improved for future students. The survey given to educators asked them to assess the
effectiveness of the website. Responses to both surveys were anonymous and were automatically collected and presented in a Google Docs spreadsheet.

The feedback from students and other educators identified those areas of the project that were successful and also highlighted areas of weakness that required further development. These responses formed the basis of the next chapter and informed the conclusions drawn in the recommendations in chapter five.

Upon completion, the process paper and project were submitted to my faculty supervisor prior to it being forwarded on to the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Vancouver Island University.
Chapter 4 – Field/Beta Testing

Methodology

The major project was tested in three ways. First, students were invited to participate in a trial using the major project as part of their Language Arts program. They were subsequently invited to provide feedback via a Google Form. Second, educators were invited to review the major project and offer criticism and suggestions on another form (See Appendix B: Summary of Evaluator Feedback). Both students and educators were invited to consider the appearance, ease of use, variety of reading materials and assignments. They did this by rating the site on a 5 point scale with the following prescribed values: 1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good, 4=very good, 5=excellent. Educators were also asked to rate the appropriateness of the selected reading material and assignments using the same five point scale. Educators provided additional feedback in informal discussions during lunch hours and after-school. The third and final method of assessment involved making a determination of the major project’s effectiveness through observing students as they participated in the program.

Appearance

The were a few minor discrepancies in the opinions of the educators who looked at the site and in the opinions of students who used it, the most striking of which was their views on its appearance. Educators in general had a favourable opinion of the overall attractiveness of the design with the overwhelming majority rating it excellent. One teacher said it was “very good”.
The majority of students, on the other hand, when asked the same question felt that the appearance was “good” with a much smaller number suggesting it was either “fair”, “very good” or “excellent”. Aesthetics are always a matter of taste and it is easy to understand why the subdued colours of the site and renaissance paintings are more appealing to adults than to children. Judging from the websites that the student created themselves, the key to making the major project more appealing is to use brighter colours and include more pictures of characters from popular culture. However, one educator also commented that she felt that the site would be more appealing to children, and more specifically girls, if the paintings of the elderly authors were replaced with pictures of the characters they made famous in their stories. She suggested that I get rid of Hans Christian Anderson and instead include the Little Mermaid and do something similar for the Brothers Grimm.

**Ease of Use**

There was a broad consensus amongst students and educators on the topic of the layout of the site. Both groups felt there was room for improvement with the majority of responses indicating that the layout was “very good” not “excellent”.

Educators suggested the following areas for improvement. Several teachers suggested that the assignment for each reading should be included in the reading document itself rather than referenced by a second link. Another educator complained that she had difficulty finding the readings and assignments because she was unfamiliar with the symbol for the drop-down menu. Students were also critical of the drop-down menu and complained that it was difficult to access from tablet devices.

**Content**

Both students and teachers had a very favourable opinion of the stories included on the
site. The overwhelming majority of respondents rated the variety of reading materials as either “very good” or “excellent” and several educators highlighted the variety of reading materials as one of the chief strengths of the project.

Teachers felt that the reading materials were very engaging. According to one, I had “...done an excellent job of selecting stories that will interest students”. Another claimed students would benefit from “a great amount of choice”. One teacher clearly shared my opinion of the importance of folklore and myths. She wrote, “I believe the students will enjoy reading the variety of stories that have been chosen. The stories are classics and many students would never have an opportunity to read them. As well, several stories are very memorable and knowing them will help create more literate students for secondary school.” Most agreed with the assessment of the educator who claimed that students would be “very engaged by the selection of reading materials”.

Teachers also had a very favourable view of the appropriateness of the reading material with all but one rating the appropriateness as “excellent”. This was an opinion confirmed by the majority of students who reported that the difficulty of the reading material was neither too hard nor too easy. However, during the course of the trial, it became apparent to me that students were gravitating towards those stories and assignments that were perceived to be easier than others. This may indicate that some of the readings may be beyond the the abilities of many of the students, but the volume and variety of materials allows all students to feel successful.

Assignments

The area most in need of improvement according to both educators and students was the assignments. Some educators and students felt the variety of assignments was only “fair” and of all the questions of both surveys “How would you rate the variety of assignments?” had the
lowest average score with an average rating of 4.14 out of 5 on the teachers survey and 3.64 out of 5 on the student survey.

More tellingly, when asked how the major project could be improved both groups highlighted the need for different assignments. One student stated bluntly, “I would like to have had more variety on the assignments”. Another student requested “more writing assignments” and a third asked for “more and different assignments”.

One teacher offered detailed feedback regarding how assignments could be improved upon. She stressed the need for students to make personal connections to the stories they read as well as demonstrate an understanding of the elements of fiction. She furthermore encouraged me to move away from simple multiple choice comprehension questions and towards open-ended questions that forced students to consolidate their thinking. She also indicated that students should be given clearer guidelines with regards to the length of assignments. She highlighted the benefits of a suggested word count and suggested that students should be given examples to model their writing upon or rubrics that further lay out the expectations.

Not all teachers were critical however. One acknowledged the lack of variety amongst the assignments, but viewed this a strength of the major project. She claimed that Grade 6/7 students “would benefit from the repetition of doing similar assignments multiple times”. In practice, I observed a general improvement in the quality of student work over time as they incorporated suggestions from my constructive criticism of their work into subsequent assignments.

**Engagement**

Ultimately the purpose of the project was to create a model of BL that would increase student engagement and deliver Personalized Learning as described in British Columbia’s Education Plan. However, it was difficult to make a determination of the success or failure of the
project due to the non-quantifiable and deeply subjective nature of “student engagement”.

Nevertheless conclusions can be drawn from participation rates of students, observations and from responses from students and evaluators.

After approximately four weeks of working with the major project the class had completed an average of 3.64 reading assignments per student. This excludes the mandatory assignments undertaken in the opening weeks of the project. The least active student in the class had completed a single assignment while the most active student had finished 14. The trial produced very uneven results with approximately one third of the students completing either one or two assignments, a second third completing three or four assignments and the final third completing five or more assignments. Overall, these results suggest levels of engagement varied greatly within the class.

However, evaluators were very optimistic about the major project’s potential to increase student engagement. They identified many of the same techniques that turned up in my literature review on the effectiveness of BL environments, including the aspects of Gamification. One wrote, “I think students will be very engaged by the selection of reading materials and by the "game" like aspect of collecting points to reach a level.” Another teacher claimed that “students will love the independence to choose which assignments to do, very engaging.” echoing Reeve’s (2006) findings that increased autonomy has proven to lead to “an impressive and meaningful range of positive educational outcomes” (p.228). A third teacher wrote, “I think kids respond well to any given autonomy in their learning. Since they get to choose what, how & when I believe they will become more engaged in the process, thus learning will take place even on an unconscious level.” This is consistent with Horn and Staker (2011) claim that BL allows for “a more consistent and personalized pedagogy that allows each student to work at her own pace and
helps each child feel and be successful at school” (p. 6). Finally, a fourth teacher identified the students’ “opportunity to make an online collaborative community” as having the potential to increase engagement. This is the almost the same claim as the one made by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) who wrote “What makes Blended Learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on the Internet.” (p.97).

Summary

On the whole, feedback on the major project was extremely positive. Evaluators were very optimistic about the potential of the project and consistently offered encouragement while at the same time offering constructive criticism identifying areas where there was room for improvement. Additionally, students responded favourably to the project and expressed strong positive feelings about the stories, creating their own web-sites, and, in particular, the elements of Gamification included in the major project. The major project remains a work in progress and it will continue to evolve in response to feedback from students, advances in technology and refinements suggested by educators. However, its seems apparent that evaluators appreciated the increase in student autonomy offered by the major project and most felt that the BL environment created would allow for more personalized learning and increase student engagement, a conclusion that I will examine in greater detail in the final chapter.
Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

It is simplistic to evaluate the major project in terms of success and failure. The goal of the major project was to create a BL model of instruction that allowed for personalized learning. According to the BC Education Plan (2015), a personalized learning environment would deliver “an education system that better engages students in their own learning and that fosters the skills and competencies they will need to succeed” (p. 4). Undoubtedly this goal was achieved by many of the students who participated in the trail of the major project. However, it is also true that many students did not experience greater engagement as a result of increased autonomy. In this chapter I will evaluate the project objectively to determine what aspects contributed to its successes and what aspects need to be refined for future students.

Learn at Your Own Pace

One of the most important aspects of BL environments is that it allows students to learn at their own pace. As Horn and Staker (2011) put it, “leveraging technology, blended-learning programs can let students learn at their own pace, use preferred learning modalities, and receive frequent and timely feedback on their performance for a far higher quality learning experience” (p. 6). For motivated, highly independent students, the freedom offered by the BL environment allows them to go further and faster than ever before. In participating in the trial of the major project, many of the students in my class read and wrote more than they ever had in the past.

However, “independent” and “highly motivated” aren’t universal qualities found in all grade 6/7 students. In fact, while it is not part of any curriculum document that I am aware of, a key component in teaching upper intermediate students is to promote increased student autonomy and independence in advance of their promotion to high-school. This is part of the so-
called “hidden curriculum” of upper elementary school. For many students this can be challenging learning. Especially for those who have come to rely on the myriad of supports available to elementary school students.

As the trial of the major project progressed, and I became increasingly aware of the disparity in student engagement. I made interventions. For some students, simply assigning the completion of any story by a date was enough. For other students who found themselves overwhelmed volume of stories and the variety of choice, I had to assign specific stories with deadlines, effectively taking back the autonomy promised by the design of the major project.

This was necessitated in part due to the compressed timeline of the trial of the major project. In the future, I believe I can engage more students by completing a number of assignments as a class, then moving through a progression of activities prior to freeing students to work at their own pace. Rather than completing only one writing assignment before inviting students to proceed on their own, with future classes I can complete a number of reading assignments together with the whole class, then invite them to complete several more with partners before working on their own, gradually weaning them off of direct instruction towards self-directed learning. Second, I will establish baseline minimum so that students are aware at the outset what is expected of them or even a recommended sequence of stories with a suggested timeline for students who favour explicit instruction. While these changes somewhat reduce student autonomy, it is an adaptation that recognizes “no two students learn the same way” (BC Education Plan 2015, p. 4) and some require tighter parameters around their independence.

**Communication and Community**

One of the major strengths of the BL environment lies in its ability to facilitate communication and the creation of community through the interactive capabilities of Internet
communication technology (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2003). During the trial of the major project, I was in contact with my students like I had never been before. I received emails through Edmodo nightly and I provided comments on each and every student assignment submitted as quickly as I was able.

Intermediate students on the cusp of puberty can be extremely self-conscious and some of them are reticent towards asking questions in front of their peers. For many students at this age, their self-esteem is fragile and they would rather keep their confusion to themselves than admit a potentially embarrassing ignorance. This reluctance to ask questions can interfere with their ability to get clarification or seek further instruction. Communicating through Edmodo however allowed students to seek clarification and get further instruction without embarrassment. Students asked questions and made requests with candour when they knew the communication was private. This was one of the more unexpected benefits of the BL environment.

Students were even more eager to talk with one another. The online environment facilitates communication so they were in constant contact, offering feedback, suggestions, recommendations and teaching one another like no class I had ever taught before. This is one of the major benefits of the BL environment identified by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) who claim, “What makes Blended Learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on the Internet.” (p. 97) I was delighted to hear students discussing the stories they had read and making suggestions to one another based on their expressed preferences. The stories were fresh in my mind as well, as I had worked with them extensively over the past several months while putting the major project together. This allowed me to make a much better determination of student comprehension through brief
conversations and questions. In short, all of the elements—teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence of a “Community of Inquiry” were apparent in our trial of the BL environment.

However, our community wasn’t solely focused on the myths, folklore and stories of the major project, but also on technical questions relating to web-page development as well as random tangents that sprang up from classroom conversations and Youtube videos. Students found new folklore and traded it with their classmates as well as videos based on short-stories they had read, further enriching their own understanding and the understanding of their classmates. Undoubtedly, this is an example of students playing “an increasingly active role in designing their own education path as they develop and mature” (BC Ministry of Education 2015, p. 5) a hallmark of Personalized Learning.

Challenges to Implementation

In the course of my literature review, I identified a number of potential barriers to implementing a BL learning environment. The first was a lack of digital fluency on the part of teachers and students (Mirriahi et al. 2015). My training in the OLTD program gave me both the requisite technical skills to manage the BL environment and the pedagogical expertise to incorporate computer mediated instruction effectively with F2F teaching. In the process of completing a number of introductory assignments my students gained some of digital literacy they needed to navigate through course material and begin to work online. As I previously indicated, however, more work needs to be done in this regard.

I work at a relatively affluent school and most of the students come from highly-educated professional homes. For the majority of students the “digital divide” is not a barrier to their participation in the major project trial. However, one unexpected challenge that I encountered
was a resistance from parents towards what they considered to be an “excessive use of technology”. Quite a number of parents expressed reservations about having their sons or daughters reading and writing online everyday. Evidently, they have been persuaded by articles in reputable news organizations that call into question the benefits of using technology in the classroom. While all but one eventually consented to have their child participate in the trial, several parents had questions about the purpose of the major project, the security of the applications we used and how it would benefit their child. This experience further underlined the importance of having clear objectives as well as institutional support described in implementation guides.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that students initially seemed to have difficulty staying on task. In the homes of many of my students, computers are primarily used for entertainment. They are used as a reward for completing other work and this has created certain patterns of behaviour and expectations in the minds of some students. The internet has the potential to be endlessly diverting and a few students were all too willing to be diverted in the early stages of the trial. Through strict monitoring and frequent reminders about school expectations, I was able to keep students on task until they developed the self-regulation necessary to do this themselves.

**Summary of Conclusions**

There is no doubt that as a result of the major project student overall engagement increased. Whether it was due to the elements of Gamification or because of their involvement in the Community of Inquiry, the majority of students were highly motivated to complete assignments and find new stories to read. Students appreciated the variety of stories and assignments presented to them and especially enjoyed having the freedom to pick and choose which assignment they wanted to complete. However, as several evaluators predicted, some
students lacked either the skills or motivation to complete assignments without direct instruction. These students required more focused interventions and support.

One area where all students reported satisfaction however was in the creations of their blogs. Students enjoyed customizing their blogs and they took pride in publishing their writing on them. After six-weeks of observing my class and reading their blogs, I came to the same conclusions as Goldberg, Russell, and Cook (2003) who found that students who engage in the use of computers to develop their writing, on average are not only engaged but have also made improvements in the length and quality of their writing. This transformation was particularly noticeable in the work of students who traditionally had low written output.

**Recommendations**

One of the strengths of the BL environment is the ease with which it can be modified, so I am neither surprised nor disappointed to discover that the major project needs further development. The two areas both evaluators and students identified as needing improvement were the reading assignments and the points system.

With regard to the reading assignments, it would be desirable to have a greater variety of assignments to address a wider range of learning outcomes from the new curriculum. I would furthermore like to make better use of the digital media available by having students make audio and video recordings. This would allow students to complete more oral language assignments without the stress of speaking in front of peers.

I would also like students to use digital images. I took some steps in this direction already. At the outset of the trial, there was a seventh type of assignment requiring students to create digital collages based on the stories they had read, but after three weeks of running the program I realized that students were avoiding stories with this type of assignment due to its
difficulty. Students complained that they couldn’t find appropriate images and struggled with unfamiliar photo editing software. Eventually, I decided to replaced this assignment, but I would like to add it, and others, to future incarnations of the major project.

The other significant revision that I need to make is to the points system. A frequent comment from both students and evaluators was that the point system that I was using was too generic. At present students get 10 points for every assignment that they complete. There are four exceptions: one writing assignment and three exceptionally long stories which are each worth 20 points. At the outset of the design process I decided to make all the stories of equal value, regardless of their complexity, because I wanted all students to have an equal opportunity to be successful. My thinking was that students would gravitate towards their “comfort level” and find those stories that were appropriately challenging to themselves. This was perhaps a little overly optimistic. Most students did not gravitate to their comfort level. They gravitated to the easiest assignments and the shortest stories.

In order to prevent students from simply focusing on the easiest assignments, I need to make sure there is a stronger correlation between the difficulty of the assignments and the points awarded for completing them. To determine both the difficulty of assignments and their appeal, I will ask students to provide feedback later in the year on the project. From this information I can further refine the points system and open up new avenues for students to be successful. Future students may decide that they would rather spend their time on a few long, complex stories with complicated assignments or they might prefer to complete a lot of smaller, shorter stories and assignments.

Another good suggestion offered by one of my evaluators was to have a gradual “opening up” of assignments or “unlocking” of assignment as students progressed through the units. I
think this is a good idea as it rewards good work with more work, but it would require transferring the project to a game based LMS like 3D Gamelab (https://portal.3dgamelab.org/).

As I mentioned in chapter 3, I have some experience with this system and although I liked the mechanics of it— the points, badges, levels and leaderboards, I found the site drab and difficult to customize. Having said that the LMS is still in its infancy and should it improve, I will go back to it.

**Final Thoughts**

In light of my experience constructing and testing my major project, I believe that Blended Learning has the potential to transform educational practices and deliver the personalized learning envisioned by BC Education Plan. However, there are some important caveats to this claim. First, the challenges to implementing BL including: a lack of digital fluency on the part of teachers and students (Mirriaahi et al. 2015), a lack of “confidence and skills in using online technologies” (Johnson et al. 2014) and “daunting challenges on the front end of the design process” (Garrison and Kanuka 2004) are by no means insignificant barriers to be overcome. Teachers not only need to develop a different skill set to be successful, they have to be comfortable with a different role. To motivate teachers to develop BL environments more evidence is required to demonstrate that there “are clear advantages to learning, teaching and assessment” (Kregor et al., 2012, p.1399).

Furthermore, to provide greater flexibility and choice for students requires greater flexibility from teachers. Maintaining a strong teaching presence in an online community meant that frequently I felt I had to answer questions and direct students outside of my normal hours of work. While this isn’t difficult to maintain for short periods like the duration of the trial, I am not
sure it is sustainable in the long term. Teachers must maintain a good work/life balance or risk burnout.

Having said that, the benefits of BL environments are real and important for education. Increased flexibility and choice leads to greater student engagement. This in turn leads to greater independence and self-direction and encourages the development of 21st Century “competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration and leadership, communication and digital literacy, personal and social responsibility, creativity and innovation and global and cultural understanding” (BC Education Plan, 2015, p.6). Ultimately, the goal of the BC Education plan is to create lifelong learners who are capable of learning for themselves. Implementing BL in the intermediate classroom and furnishing students with the skills necessary to navigate information online can be a vital step towards achieving this aim, putting them on the path towards a brighter future.
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**Appendix A**

**Permission Form for Informed Consent**

Dear Division 3 Parents,

I wanted to provide you with further information regarding Weebly for Education, the blogging tool that we will be using this year. Please read the following and visit the links provided for more information about Blogging and internet safety.

**What is Weebly for Education?**

Weebly for Education is a free website creation tool designed for K-12 teachers who want to provide each student with an individual blogs. Students publish posts and participate in academic discussions within a secure classroom blogging community.

What is blogging? A blog is a website for which an individual or a group frequently generates text, photographs, video or audio files, and/or links, on a regular basis. The term is a shortened form of weblog. Authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called "blogging". Individual articles on a blog are called "blog posts," "posts," or "entries". The person who posts these entries is called a "blogger." Here is an animated explanation and review of safety that I will reviews with students at school:

http://www.brainpop.com/english/writing/blogs/
Why am I using Weebly for Education?

Weebly for Education provides teachers with the tools to help students safely navigate the digital – and increasingly social – online landscape.

Weebly for Education allows students to exercise digital citizenship within a secure, private classroom blogging space. Weebly for Education’s security features put safety first:

* Teachers have administrative control over all student blogs and student accounts
* Students’ blogs are password protected making them viewable only classmates and the teacher.
* Comment privacy settings block comments from outside sources.
* Weebly for Education does not require any personal information from students.

Internet Safety

It is important to have a discussion with your child about internet safety. At the very minimum they should know that they must not share any personal information online. Websites such as cyberwise.org recommend that children should not have access to the internet without adult supervision. This doesn’t mean that you should monitor their activity constantly- just that they should use the internet in common areas of the house rather than in their bedrooms. Parents should keep a copy of their children’s passwords for reference.

While at school, I will take every reasonable precaution and make every effort to assure the safety of your child. However, no online activity or tool can be deemed 100% safe.

Students are expected to abide by the Burnaby School District’s Acceptable Internet Use policy which outlines the following recommendations for students working online:

DO

• Use District and personally-owned devices and digital tools for educational purposes.
• Follow copyright laws and acknowledge and respect the ownership of others for their creative works.

• Keep your personal information (last name, home address, phone numbers, picture, passwords) private.

• Respect the privacy of other students and adults.

• Report uncomfortable, unsafe, or inappropriate behaviour or messages to your teacher or principal.

• Treat others fairly and with respect.

• Understand that digital tools such as e-mail, messaging, social networks, websites, wikis, blogs, texting are not guaranteed to be private.

**DO NOT**

• Share your passwords.

• Take and use someone else’s identity (their name, password).

• Falsify your identity.

• Take pictures or videos of others and share them without their permission.

• Hurt or mistreat others by what you create or share.

• Harass, stalk, bully, threaten, insult, abuse, or attack others.

• Use information or work of others as your own without their permission.

(Burnaby School District REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES POLICY # 7.90.01)

Furthermore Weebly for Education is an American company and content created by your child will be stored on an American server which are subject to American laws. FIPPA regulation 30.1 requires the school district to obtain parents’ consent to store personal information outside of Canada.
Participation in blogging is entirely voluntary and students who do not participate will be given the opportunity to submit alternative assignments for evaluation. If you have any questions or concerns about Weebly for Education, please don’t hesitate to contact me at derek.cockram@sd41.bc.ca

Please complete the following letter of consent and return it to the school at your earliest convenience.

(To be completed by the Parent or Guardian)

I do hereby give permission for my child ________________ to participate in classroom blogging. I have read the preceding information and understood the risk entailed in participating in social media online.

I consent to the collection, use and storing of some of my child’s personal information outside of Canada and to the publication of his or her work on Weebly for Education.

______________________________ _________________
(Signed) (Date)

(To be completed by the child)

I, ________________, have read and understand Burnaby School District’s Acceptable Internet Use policy. I will adhere to it whether at school or at home while posting on Weebly for Education.

______________________________ _________________
(Signed) (Date)

Please indicate the username that you would like to use online:

____________________________________________________________
Appendix B:

Summary of Evaluators Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>How would you rate the overall attractiveness of the site?</th>
<th>How would you rate the overall layout and design of the site?</th>
<th>How would you rate the variety of reading materials?</th>
<th>How would you rate the appropriateness of reading materials for Grade 6/7 students?</th>
<th>How would you rate the variety of assignments?</th>
<th>How would you rate the effectiveness of assignments for building literacy skills?</th>
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<td><strong>Average:</strong></td>
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<td>4.714285714</td>
<td>4.857142857</td>
<td>4.142857143</td>
<td>4.444444444</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of the project for increasing students engagement?

1. I think students will be very engaged by the selection of reading materials and by the "game" like aspect of collecting points to reach a level.
2. Perhaps some way to encourage the students with the points. Possibly put the students in groups, and compare the total points of each group on the home page so that students would be encouraged to 'win'. Alternatively, perhaps a line showing where the average total class point value is, compared with the individual student. Also, 'unlocking' items with points is always very popular in games. Perhaps a glossary for each reading, or an avatar (maybe just a picture) of characters in the stories can be unlocked at certain levels.
3. Students will love the independence to choose which assignments to do, very engaging. I wonder if this may also be overwhelming for some students.
4. I believe the students will enjoy reading the variety of stories that have been chosen. The stories are classics and many students would never have an opportunity to read them. As well, several stories are very memorable and knowing them will help create more literate students for secondary school.
5. I like how students have an opportunity to make an online collaborative community.
6. Great- lots of variety and opportunities for choice.
7. I think kids respond well to any given autonomy in their learning. Since they get to choose what, how & when I believe they will become more engaged in the process, thus learning will take place even on an unconscious level.
8. Looks to be unusual and therefore interesting.
9. I love the use of personalized learning methods. I thought there was a good variety in the material selection, but thought there might be room for some more oral language assignments as the majority seemed to be reading/writing based.

How might the project be improved upon?

1. I think you need to add more stories to some sections.
2. This looks like an excellent resource. A timeline showing when the stories were thought to originate might help students feel they were filling in a picture of history. Comparisons to modern day heroic stories or modern fantasy might help as well.
3. I'll think about it.
4. I would like to see some First Nation legends included in the list that would help inform students to the culture. I believe students should be exposed as much as possible to deepen their understanding. Perhaps there is something there that I missed so disregard the comment.

As well, I wondered about some classic poetry selections that tell a story as well such as
"The Highway Man", some selections of Dylan or Leonard Cohen. The addition of poetry may confuse things but it might be worthwhile as well.

5. In the "start here" section, the distinction between points and marks is uncertain. As a reader, I was not sure if marks were the same as points.

6. Continue to build on it over time.

7. I'm a bit unclear about what they are to do after they have read a piece? Are they to respond with their thoughts on the blog about what they thought about the story they read or what connections and questions they have as a result? Maybe a few more writing options would be nice?

8. Perhaps a section about information about the teacher?

Thank-you for your time. If you have any additional comments please leave them in the box below.

1. It doesn't seem right that all the assignments are the same number of points. You should adjust the points and make them reflect the level of difficulty of the story.

2. I would certainly like to see more projects like this for other subjects and levels.

3. This is great-- easy to navigate and a great amount of choice. I wonder how long you would give your students for this?

4. I have a few, in no particular order.
   Is it possible to have the assignment listed beneath the story so that students can refer to the story while thinking over the assignment.
   Instead of using the phrase "Don't let big words scare you" use "find the meaning of the words you do not understand".
   Instead of "what is the story about" perhaps "what is the "big idea" the writer is trying to impart. I think that a few students will just retell the story in fewer words and then miss the writer's purpose in telling the story.
   I like "personal connections" to a story as an assignment. Can you identify any connections to events in this story. Explain the situation and your feelings when facing a similar situation. Perhaps you could include one or two to add variety to the assignments.
   Include in the list for what to address in the assignment "demonstrate an understanding of the Elements of Fiction in your response".
   I liked the open ended questions rather than comprehension questions, although your questions were well designed. I liked the write an ending for the story as well. My worry with comprehension questions is they take to long to mark. I felt the students might be challenged to answer the entire list well.
   For the character sketch assignment perhaps include "would you enjoy spending time with the character or consider them as a friend, why or why not"
   I also wondered about the length each assignment should be. Limiting the number of words forces students to consolidate their thoughts and use brevity.
   If you do not suggest a minimum will students just give you a superficial assignment with very little thought.
I had trouble knowing where the drop down menu was, but that is probably because I did not know the meaning of the icon. I found it difficult to read the selections online because the spacing of the lines was very close. If it is possible 1.5 spacing on the text might make it easier.

Overall I thought you have done an excellent job of selecting stories that will interest students. You have been very busy setting this up but once you get it going it should be really worthwhile.