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Transforming Classroom Practice

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TRANSFORMING

CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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Is it possible to foster excellence, engagement and intergenerational understanding through a Year Eight Technology project?

Nigel Lynn wanted to engage his design students at Avondale School in meaningful learning experiences in the Technologies Key Learning Area (KLA). He designed a complete unit to open an authentic way of fostering intergenerational understanding and promoting excellence in his students by partnering with Avondale Lifestyle Community (ALC), a facility catering for the elderly. The vehicle for fostering excellence, respect and intergenerational understanding was a pilot unit titled Design Challenge.

Design Challenge was conceived through questioning assumptions upon which industrial models of teaching and learning are based. The underlying motivation for this questioning stemmed from a shared passion to trial teaching strategies that would improve student learning outcomes. With this in mind, the two main aims were to (i) encourage student self-directed learning, and (ii) offer an environment where needs-based design was realised by establishing clients from society. Avondale Lifestyle Community (ALC) was approached and kindly offered to sponsor the unit as well as facilitate the process of identifying residents who were willing to be design clients. Thus, the Avondale School-ALC learning partnership was formed.

The unit involved dividing the year group into autonomous, mixed-gender 'design companies', each with 5 students. Design companies were introduced to their clients through a series of introductory sessions, including afternoon tea at the school and short visits to ALC. Positive student-client relations were engendered during

these informal meetings. Individual 'needs' of clients were identified during these times and each company designed and constructed a project to satisfy agreed needs. There were no set classes in the Design Challenge. Design companies had the chance to utilise skills from 4 specialist Technology teachers, mentors from the Year 12 Community and Family Studies class, and mentors from the Year 10 Business Studies class to solve their problem. Further to this, the design companies were permitted to work with any technology (such as textiles, wood, food, ICT, plastics, metals) to realise a solution to their clients' needs.

At the end of the unit the entire Year 8 cohort visited the ALC and formally presented their design solutions to respective clients. Projects such as a wooden knitting caddy box, a patchwork quilt with client family photos printed on it, a cushioned stable table with inbuilt iPad stand, a chess table with inlaid playing surface and chess-piece drawers, were just a few of the excellent works created for clients. The atmosphere at the formal presentations was humbling as teenagers and elderly clients openly expressed high regard for one another. Intergenerational friendships were established, with evidence of ongoing contact subsequent to the unit.

Data gathered over the course of the unit revealed that the initial aims of the activity were realised. Quantitative analyses of the Design Challenge and student results have informed subsequent styles of pedagogy and assessment in Year 8 Technology. The pronounced qualitative data associated with student behaviour and performance during the unit were:

1. Striving for excellence: authentic use of design process by students was higher during the challenge than with regular, school determined projects;
2. Intergenerational understanding: student perception of elderly citizens changed as their language evolved into one of inclusion and respect toward their client;
3. Heightened engagement: students with low records of engagement improved in this unit; and
4. Students with a poor behaviour record

showed heightened sensitivity to their clients and improved work ethic.

In acknowledgement of the benefits of this innovative unit, ALC received the national award for Diversional Therapy with the Design Challenge, and furthermore, the University of NSW is running an intergenerational research project on the 2015 Design Challenge.

In this collaborative task, everyone emerged a winner. The outcomes for designing and constructing a technology project were met, but more than this, attitudes changed, intergenerational understanding was enhanced, and engagement levels rose as students met the needs of real people in a real life situation. **TEACH**



Above: Participants (L to R): Lara Maybury, Sage Chapman, Mrs. Margaret Peck, Lexy Stansfield, Zane Hick. Project: Timber Memories Chest (A place to store historic/sentimental memorabilia). Photography: Kerrie Howells.

“Everyone emerged a winner. The outcomes for ... a technology project were met, but more ... attitudes changed, intergenerational understanding was enhanced, and engagement levels rose”



Participants (L to R): Mackenzie Eunson, Annalea Bishop, Fay Waldrip, Mrs. Kath Heise, Samuel Siv, Broden Sherrat. Project: Aluminium Walking Stick Clamp (A clamp that can be attached to various sized structures to hold a walking stick while the client is seated). Photography: Kerrie Howells.