

Rethinking Core Competencies in the Intermediate Classroom

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I started my journey with the redesigned curriculum about three years ago. Since I've adopted pieces of it slowly, I now feel confident embedding core competencies into the learning and assessment process across all areas of learning.

In our Grade 6/7 classroom, we use inquiry and design to develop critical and creative thinking. Sometimes we focus on inquiry questions that require a reasoned judgment in areas such as Social Studies or Science. Literacy is naturally embedded in these inquiries, as students learn to research, interpret, and communicate new information and learning.

Sample Inquiry Questions:

- Is it ethical for child soldiers to be used in African countries?
- To what extent were humans' decisions about settlement, trade, and agriculture in Mesopotamia related to climate and geography?
- Should we continue to use pesticides to eradicate the gypsy moth in order to protect other native species?

Students share out their learning from these inquiries in a variety of ways (e.g. blogs, eBooks, documentaries, fine arts). Having choice in how they share their learning promotes personal responsibility. We reflect on our personal strengths and challenges regularly to help students learn to make responsible choices and as part of our ongoing communication of student learning. Students also have opportunities to design their own inquiry questions to help guide their learning in these curricular areas.

Our Numeracy program is focused on open-ended questions, project and place-based learning, and developing Math language through tutorials and Math journals to help us communicate our thinking. This year, we are also exploring ways to incorporate Numeracy centres and games into our week as well as real-life alternatives to traditional Math lessons such as coding and design. All of these learning activities help personalize the experience for students and develop thinking and communication competencies. Rotating through various activities and experiences also provides us with more time and flexibility in our learning.

Sample Questions & Activities:

- Where do you see geometry on our nature walk in the forest?
- Using any combination of 12 base 10 blocks, how many decimal numbers can you make?
- Bedroom Design Project

Learning Intention:

- I can create a scale plan of my dream bedroom from IKEA and figure out how much it will cost to realize my plans.

Criteria:

- My floor plan is drawn to scale and uses actual IKEA furniture measurements.
- My floor plan includes area calculations for each furniture piece and the total floor space.

- My floor plan leaves enough space to move through the room comfortably.
- My costs are accurately calculated including any discounts and taxes.

Maker time is probably students' favourite way that we value creative thinking in our classroom. We have acquired and collected a variety of items and tools to help us learn about the design process. So far this year, students have explored Makey Makey, Little Bits, coding, knitting, DIY projects, and disassembling electronics to learn about their parts. This block is a coveted time in our week where all students are engaged in meaningful learning experiences surrounding making and design. They communicate their learning through monthly blogs that focus on the creative process and how they learned to solve problems or overcome challenges. It is this focus on process that helps us make connections between our maker learning and other curricular areas.

When we teach and learn in an environment that values connections, time and space need to be restructured. In our class, we incorporate choice blocks into our day so students can choose how to spend their time and energy. This also allows me to conference with students individually and allows time for student reflection as part of ongoing communication of student learning through digital portfolios. We have 6 mobile devices that belong to our classroom and a BYOD policy, so students have learned to work collaboratively and to be flexible so everyone has access to digital resources and tools. We continue to work toward our ideal learning space including flexible table groupings, a variety of seating options, and vertical writing surfaces to promote collaborative thinking. Whenever feasible, we take our learning outside.

My hope is that more and more intermediate teachers will consider collaborating to design flexible learning environments – in terms of pedagogy, time, and space – for our students. I have seen the impact that choice has on student engagement and I can no longer imagine meaningful learning that does not include student voice. As we move toward more cross-curricular inquiry in the redesigned curriculum, we need to rethink the way we see school to support the development of core competencies.