

# SURPRISING OUTCOMES

## FROM AN UNFINISHED ASSIGNMENT

BY LESLIE DYSON



Vernon Community School held a school-wide Passion Night (platonic of course) in March. One of the highlights was a presentation by eight students in grades 7 to 9 who had set out eight weeks earlier to follow their passion for *Star Wars* by collaborating on a video. Several weeks in, they had to admit that the outcome was far different from the initial intent.

There was plenty of passion. That wasn't the problem. But the real lessons came from the process, which revealed a lot about each participant.

"We definitely ran into complications," said Bowen, Grade 7. "There wasn't enough communications, the guys were getting confused and upset. It was a gong show."

Bowen was an actor and also as-

sisting the director, finding props, and helping with costumes. "We had to have a meeting to make sure no one felt excluded."

At the end of the circle talk, he said they learned that "people have to have the right roles because we had people in the wrong roles." He thought he wanted to be the director but said, "I learned that I'm very creative, but scattered." Not the right quality for a director.

Vernon Community School, with 55 students in grades 7 to 9, received a \$5,000 innovation grant from the Ministry of Education to try out new strategies that deliver the core competencies and an education that is truly rooted in social justice.

Ken Gatzke is Principal of Vernon Community School, which functions within Clarence Fulton Secondary School.

He was at the Passion Night. "I saw lots of student learning in prog-

ress and the kids' passion. The video wasn't finished to where they wanted it to be but it was truly their own work and their own learning. They talked about the challenges of working as a team and the parents gave them lots of hoots and hollers during their presentation."

It was remarkable listening to the students describe what they'd learned about making videos and about themselves.

Ryan, Grade 9 and the director (as well as editor and an actor) said the group voted for him to be the director. He didn't offer much more, but suggested people watch the trailer on YouTube (search *Star Wars: The Knights Order*).

Hunter, Grade 7: "We ended up with a 1:51 trailer but we were hoping to get a 15-minute movie done. A half-month in, we realized we didn't have anything!" Some of the problems erupted when Hunter tried to

**“THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE PROJECTS IN MY TIME IN EDUCATION,” SAID PRINCIPAL KEN GATZKE. “WE’RE WORKING WITH THE NEW CURRICULUM ANDEVEN PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE NEW CURRICULUM. THE PARENTS WERE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DRIVEN BY THE STUDENTS WHERE THEY OWN THEIR EDUCATION AND ARE HAPPY.”**

offer feedback to the screenwriter. “I gave him critical feedback and he didn’t like it. He was hurt. I didn’t know that he was sensitive to critical feedback. We needed a director who’s not afraid to take charge. I’m a strong leader and a forceful presence when I want to be.” Hunter is the new director and the group plans to continue working with a revised goal of creating a trilogy.

Devon, Grade 8 and the script-writer: “They didn’t have a script-writer so I took it up. I came up with the base story line and we’ve kept it. My strength is that I’m really creative but I’m not good with feedback and they changed a lot of it. I took the criticisms of me too seriously. And the people who were feeling left out, I didn’t take as seriously. I’m actually really glad now because the end product was spectacular. I did the light sabre effects editing.”

Cam, Grade 8: “At the beginning it was great. Then it got kind of angry, annoying, and hard. I missed a couple of filming days and I thought they wanted to kick me out, but I found out it wasn’t true. But in the end I was really happy and proud of the trailer.”

Shawn, Grade 8: “I joined in late February and it was kind of chaotic. They were scrambling to get something done. But it seemed pretty normal because I know how everybody can be but it drove me to chaos. We brought in Ryan’s dad to do some editing and mentoring. I learned making a movie can be crazy.”

Caleb, Grade 8: “It’s hard but it’s fun. We knew there would be bumps but we didn’t know there would be bruised friendships. No one knew that. The hardest thing for me was that they were arguing about what, I don’t know. But we had to get to the root of the problem and we have [teacher] Kim [Ondrik] to thank for

that. We didn’t know who to apologize to. We didn’t know who we offended. It wasn’t just a movie damaged, a production slowed down, but friendships broken. Those are the risks you take.”

Cole, Grade 8: “It looked OK at first.” But the circle talk showed just how much damage had been done. “I couldn’t do much, but I didn’t make it any worse. Next time, if a group member is getting upset, I’m going to try to solve it. I am really good at getting people’s attention. I have a loud voice in a small group.”

Ondrik said, “I didn’t sit with them because I saw that they had a problem. Hunter came to me.” She made it clear that the meeting was not to assign blame. “We’re here to go deeper,” she told them. Hunter spoke first but all voices were heard.

“I saw that it was getting complicated.” Ondrik said. “Not everyone’s an auditory learner so I grabbed some paper and pens and did graphic recording. As I wrote things down, they’d say, ‘That’s not right.’”

Together, they learned about Devon’s sensitivities. Bowen felt bad because he wants to be a good person, but they talked about “the light and shadow sides” in all of us.

“They were at the bottom,” On-

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Editor

Richard Williams

drik said. “They cracked open.

“Vulnerability is key. You can’t learn if you’re not willing to open up. They’re old enough to know it’s true.”

Then she added, ‘We won’t rescue them. In the past, I would have stopped them sooner, but I’m learning a lot. Adults can be counterproductive. When we pre-empt, they don’t own it.’

To make this mentoring approach work, Gatzke, Ondrik, and teacher Murray Sasges, have to be open and able to make decisions quickly.

“We are devoted to how kids learn and we’re incredibly flexible,” said Sasges.

Sasges and Ondrik had the opportunity to meet and talk while walking the picket line during the strike in 2014. They discovered that they had a lot of ideas in common.

“We wanted to stop talking about

an ecology of learning and growth and just do it. We are developing the program as we learn and we’re finding the rhythms and the protocols as we progress. So the kids are thriving!”

Ondrik is drawing on what she learned while earning her five-year degree in special education. She’s now working on her master’s thesis. “Special education is not about content, but on how to teach and analyzing what skills we have. The new curriculum is how I was trained. Now we have a document from the ministry saying, ‘Yes, this is good.’ It’s about building the core in people, not worrying about how to create a movie trailer.

“In early primary, we see these competencies – agency, voice, understanding emotions,” she said. “Kids say, ‘I have ideas, I can take risks,’ but it’s lost over time. The

ministry is now saying ‘We want them to leave school as curious as they come in.’”

“It’s beautiful language,” Sasges said of the core competencies, “and what you’d hope for in every developed human being.”

Sasges is convinced that co-teaching is the way to deliver a program like this. “I could never go back to working solo where there’s no one to question or support you. People ask, ‘How is this sustainable?’ But if you’ve done this, [then] going back to desks, rows, and textbooks—that is unsustainable!”

“We’re very mindful of what’s going on,” added Ondrik. “It could be perceived as permissiveness but we’re always paying attention. We come home much more exhausted.”

The plan is to have the program expand and grow with the first cohort that enrolled. Next year, Grade

Teacher Kim Ondrik developed a graphic organizer for the core competencies using images of a developing seedling. Letter grades were dropped in the second year in favour of these charts which students use to observe and explain the progress they’re making in thinking, personal and social, and communication growth.

## The Growth of Thinking Competencies: *creative thinking*

<i>Core Competency:</i> <b>CREATIVE THINKING</b>	<i>full of promise</i> <small>not yet open to learning &amp; growth</small>	<i>promise emerging</i> <small>open to learning &amp; growth</small>	<i>promise rooting &amp; first expressions</i> <small>desire to learn &amp; grow</small>	<i>beyond promise</i> <small>taking up learning &amp; growing opportunities provided</small>	<i>promise realized</i> <small>self-directed learning &amp; growing</small>
<b>Novelty &amp; Value</b>	Not aware or fearful of unfamiliar ideas that don't fit existing ideas of self &/or others whether external or self-generated	Open to new ideas whether external or self-generated	With support, recognizing, borrowing & generating new ideas	Independently, recognizing, borrowing & generating new ideas	Recognizing the connectedness & impact of new ideas on self, others & the greater community
<b>Generating Ideas</b>	Not open to ideas from the internal or external environments	Open to ideas from the internal or external environments	Generate ideas inspired by the internal or external environments	Generate multiple ideas inspired by the internal or external environments	Generate multiple ideas from multiple perspectives inspired by the internal or external environments
<b>Developing Ideas</b>	Not inspired to engage in the development of ideas from the internal or external environment	Beginning to engage with ideas: - select - develop  Not able to persevere / can't tolerate failure	Engaging with ideas: - select - develop - refine  More able to persevere / with support can tolerate some failure	Engaging with ideas: - select - develop - refine - implement  Able to persevere / can tolerate failure	Engaging with ideas: - select - develop - refine - implement - inspired with new ideas  Perseveres & uses failure as feedback

11 will be added and a new teacher will be hired.

It's not easy to administer such a program when there are long-standing traditions and collective agreements in place.

"I'm still learning how to administer it," said Gatzke, who has 17 years experience as an administrator and 25 years in education. "Doing things differently is hard in education and always has been. There are local challenges at the district level and at the ministry level too. I commend our district for taking a chance and doing something quite different."

Gatzke is also trying to administer a school within a school when the two have different timetables, demands for space, and philosophies.

"To facilitate this, we have to take risks and be flexible. We're often challenging policies and practices," said Gatzke. For example, the district has a "date and time stamp process" for transferring students. That means first come, first served and, because of high demand, some families were lining up at 3 a.m. to get in.

But it's a new program with a vastly different approach, so the district has agreed to allow staff in the program to interview students and their

families to make sure it's a good fit.

"This is one of the most unique projects in my time in education," said Gatzke. We're working with the new curriculum and even pushing the boundaries of the new curriculum."


He said, "The parents were looking for something driven by the students where they own their education and are happy. They're not necessarily interested in provincial exams. The parents have a lot of influence and involvement."

Parents want a social justice component and that is a focus during the morning check-in. A strong connection to the community was also identified and the teachers spend many hours arranging for community mentors to share their expertise and enthusiasm with the students.

"Because of the way they learn, these kids could be more adaptable and prepared for whatever the future has to offer," said Gatzke. "We're supporting vulnerable kids too. It's a much more inclusionary model."

However, Gatzke admitted that this mentoring approach is not the future for all education in the province. "We need different options. It's something I've come to see. There are people in the regular system

who are very happy with it ... families who like a more structured environment where the teachers are more in charge and there are letter grades and percentages."

Gatzke said, "I give the teachers huge amounts of credit because they're building something new while flying a jet plane in mid-air. It is very fulfilling and I can see the benefits of the work." 

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The BCPVPA is a partner in the K-12 Innovation Partnership (<http://k12innovation.ca/>) and the Vernon Community School is working with UBC Okanagan.

The university is providing feedback, support, and assessment.

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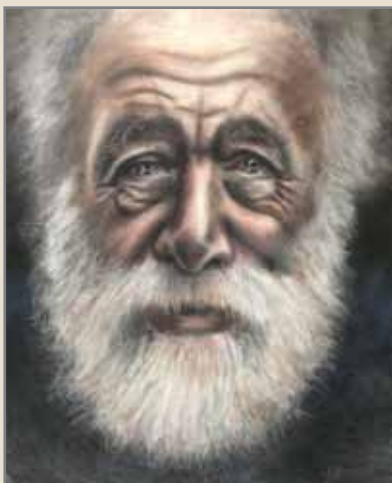
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## Cover Story



Our cover art for April is by **Zanna Thompson**, a dual credit student at Vanier Secondary School as well as North Island College in Courtenay (Comox Valley).

The assignment, a soft pastel drawing on rag paper, was a large scale portrait for an advanced drawing Independent Studies class. The student was to use a model or reference an image to create a well-lit realistic portrait of a subject. The original artwork dimensions are 3 feet by 4 feet.

Our thanks to Zanna, her teacher Dave Randall, and Jason Cobey, Vice-Principal, for submitting this work.