

# The Learning Network

*A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants*

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## The Real Work: Getting Better At What We Do

“Wow! We’re on the speaker’s circuit!”

That was the reply of a high school student who made a presentation at the recent small schools conference in Portland when she was asked if her group would like to make the same presentation at a March conference in Washington.

Hearing that comment, with its mix of excitement and irony, made us all smile. It’s also a reminder that Washington is increasingly a place where educators in other parts of the country look to understand what it means to engage in serious school redesign.

Welcoming those folks into our schools and sharing candidly the struggles and successes you and others are experiencing is important. We want others to benefit from our experiences here—and, we want to repay the many kindnesses others showed us when we asked to visit their small schools over the past several years.

But it’s not the real work, and it’s so important to remember that. The real work happens minute-by-minute, day-by-day in our work with kids and families and one another. The real work is being certain that, at the end of each day, we’ve inched our way a bit closer to creating schools and cultures and classrooms and relationships that serve each student well. (Some days, of course, just not losing ground is enough, but that doesn’t sustain us or nourish our students...)

Part of that forward movement is learning new skills and polishing existing ones. It’s not broadening our “repertoire” as teachers so we can become pedagogical virtuosos—not the “Look, Ma—no hands!” of our early bike-riding days. It is focusing as thoughtfully as possible on deepening the skills, knowledge, and understandings that will help us release the capacity inside each of our students. It’s knowing what strategies to use when and with whom; it’s having sufficient skill and confidence to be

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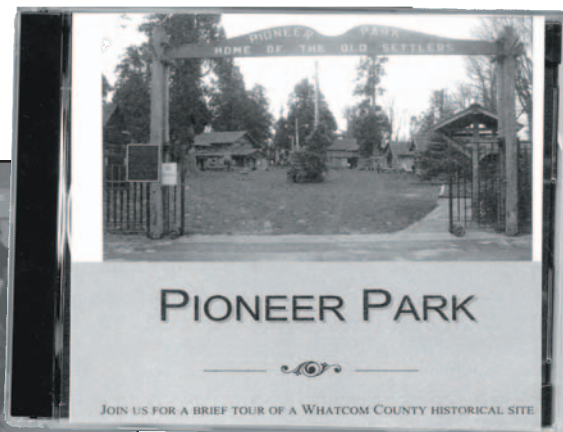
## PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

### DVD Project Connects Windward Students With Their Community and Their Future

“The question lots of kids have about school is, ‘How is this going to help me in the future?’ Well, here it is.”

That’s how sophomore Ryan Williams describes the project he and his classmates recently completed in Kris DeBruine’s video production class at Ferndale’s Windward High School. The class produced a 12-minute “virtual tour” DVD of Pioneer Park, an historical site in Ferndale.

The Ferndale Heritage Society had suggested the project to Windward students for several reasons, according to Society



Ferndale community members attend the premiere showing of Windward students’ Pioneer Park DVD.

president Serena Leibrant. “We needed a promotion piece and also something we could show to park visitors who can’t navigate the park areas that aren’t handicapped-accessible,” she says. “And because our mission is to educate, it made sense to have students get involved in their community and learn their own history.”

Teacher Kris DeBruine began by dividing the class into five groups of five. Each team was assigned to cover two houses in the park, with responsibility for conducting research, writing a script, sketching a storyboard and shooting both stills and video.

They also created the DVD sleeve and label.

Ryan—who wrote some of the DVD’s script and narrated all of it—says, “It was a lot of work and sometimes it was stressful because we had deadlines. But after all was said and done, it was worth it, because it seems more applicable to real life.”

At the end of the five-week project, the students invited the Ferndale Heritage Society and other interested community folks to a premiere viewing at the school. “It’s awesome,” says Serena, who is already thinking of other possible student projects.

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In her second year of teaching, Kris credits the tools she and her school coach developed for helping her organize the project and for keeping students on task. These tools include a job description form that the small groups used to determine individual roles, a research form, and a grading rubric. You can access them—and other tools Kris used—at [www.windward-high.org/kdebruine/video/projects/pioneerparkintro.html](http://www.windward-high.org/kdebruine/video/projects/pioneerparkintro.html).

Kris says logistics can be challenging when you are trying to get groups of students out into the community. However, she plans to offer a major project every semester—ones that develop real-world skills—because she believes assignments like this add authenticity to her students' work.

"I could see in the way the students handled themselves that they were taking the project more seriously," she concludes.

That's good news for students like freshman Jake Mallahan, who says, "I like this kind of learning because I like to get my hands on stuff and experiment. It works better for me than learning out of a textbook."

## Sharing Projects, Sharing Wisdom



Dan Falk, English/social studies teacher at The Innovation School (Mountlake Terrace), shows a video as part of his project presentation at the January Gates high school meeting.

Lincoln's ABE Academy shared an interdisciplinary English/social studies project that asks students to choose a person from a certain era, write a biography, and make a presentation.

She says, "It was good to get feedback from others. I learned that an important key to a successful project is to have very clear and specific guidelines for students. As a result, I will try to be more specific, maybe giving students the actual rubrics."

Other teachers shared projects still in the planning stages. For example, Mary Hoback, ninth-grade math teacher from Marysville Junior High, laid out a year-long Model House project that she is designing using Understanding by Design. Participants in her small group gave her warm feedback about the way she's incorporated EALRs and essential questions into her plans and cool feedback about some possible missing pieces.

Participants at the January Gates high school meeting shared class assignments and projects with each other, getting and providing warm and cool feedback in the process.

Some brought projects they'd already tried with students. For example, Christene Snellgrove from

Mary says, "I liked the ideas about ways to get parents and people from the community involved. Because math is a challenge for many people, it's not like some subjects where it's easy to find parents to come in to help. Someone in our group suggested asking the students if they know anyone—maybe they have a parent who is a contractor—who could help us build our model houses. Kids are valuable resources, too, and I forget that!"

Other feedback that Mary will take to heart was around tailoring for diverse learners and finding ways to accommodate for students with poor fine motor skills. She also recorded other comments about resources and logistics—many of which she can't yet answer. She concludes, however, "It's my belief that if you create an awesome lesson that helps kids make connections, then the resources you need will be found."

About the process of presenting her project to teachers she didn't even know, Mary says, "I was nervous at the beginning, but the feedback was incredible. There's nothing like having someone who is totally disconnected from the planning process look at your work. Their fresh, unbiased eyes provide invaluable information."

Susan Spong, art teacher from Monroe's AppLe 21 Academy, shared an ambitious and exciting macro-project that will include more than half of the academy's faculty and will tackle issues around land development in Monroe's burgeoning community. Susan says, "After listening to the feedback, one thing I plan to take back to our staff is the need to refine our overall guiding question."

**"The push for PBL equals stress—time, relevance, creativity, resources, support, loss of 'coverage.' But the work today confirms to me that even one well-crafted project makes learning better."**

TEACHER/PARTICIPANT

JANUARY HIGH SCHOOL MEETING

**"The project needs to be the curriculum, not just the add-on at the end. Essential Questions are the key to success."**

TEACHER/PARTICIPANT

JANUARY HIGH SCHOOL MEETING

Participants in Susan's small group had other suggestions, but the last word was a powerful one from another teacher who said, "What's important is to just start doing this project. Don't wait until it's perfect. Don't worry if you don't have all the pieces in place. You'll learn a lot as you go, and so will the kids."

*You can find materials and protocols used in this meeting on our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org) in the Resources and Publications section > From the Gates Foundation > High School Meetings.*



Student Abdullah Rauf introduces his “interviewee,” Mr. William Imholt, during Oral History Night.

## EXPLORING THE 1950s: AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

*Last semester, about 50 students at Clover Park’s Phoenix Academy completed a quarter-long, project-rich unit on the 1950s in an interdisciplinary course, Contemporary Studies. The course is taught by social studies teacher Travis Campbell and art teacher Michelle McBride. This page briefly describes the project and student reactions to it; turn the page over to get the teachers’ perspective.*

### Beginning with essential questions

Some of us find it hard to think of the 1950s as “history.” Not today’s teenagers.

For them, the United States that existed half a century ago *is* history. And learning that history can be both “rigorous and relevant,” especially when it’s project-based, according to Abdullah Rauf, a senior in Clover Park’s Phoenix Academy.

Abdullah is one of the students who completed the 1950s unit last semester in the interdisciplinary course, Contemporary Studies. Throughout the project-packed unit, he and his classmates explored two Essential Questions:

1. What was life like in the 1950s?
2. What do we learn about our culture today by examining the culture of the 1950s?

Some of the projects students engaged in included interviews with Korean War veterans, creation of display boards about various aspects of 50s life, interviews with senior citizens who had turned 18 by 1950, creation of PowerPoints and websites, and participation in a final exhibition—Oral History Night—held in late November.

### Students learning from students

Abdullah describes a part of the work: “Before we selected our interviewee from the 1950s, we needed to understand what we would be talking about, so we divided into groups of four to do research, write papers, and make poster boards about

different aspects of 50s life. Then we did a Learning Walk so we could learn about other groups’ topics.”

About his hour-long interview with community member William Imholt, Abdullah says, “I learned a lot about the 50s, like what was popular then, what people were like, and what the culture was like.”

Abdullah used the interview—which he taped—to create a short PowerPoint presentation that would tell Mr. Imholt’s story.

### Students presenting their learning

Several of these presentations were part of Oral History Night, an event that was student-planned and student-implemented.

“After setting initial frameworks—management structures, timelines, participation expectations, etc.—Travis and I really stepped back,” explains teacher Michelle McBride. “The students decided what needed to be done, created individual actions plans, and implemented all of their planning.”

Student Jaclyn Pittenger found her role as program project manager to be “pretty

stressful.” She says, “I had to make sure all the groups were communicating. But the experience did help me to learn how to get what I need.”

### Creating an authentic exhibition

According to Travis, Oral History Night

served as a performance assessment for the unit. It included displays of web pages, culture display boards, original works of art, and presentations of “How Far We’ve Come” that drew on an assignment where students

“When you do good projects, you work with your hands and your brain. And you get to create an image of what you’ve done and what you’ve learned.”

ABDULLAH RAUF, STUDENT

PHOENIX ACADEMY

CLOVER PARK HIGH SCHOOL

made “contemporary connections” to the themes they had studied during the quarter.

“This unit was designed so that students had the opportunity to have an authentic exhibition of their work,” Michelle explains. “We wanted them to see that everything they learn about/engaged in was for a reason. No busy work!”

Abdullah has the last word: “When you do good projects, you work with your hands and your brain. And you get to create an image of what you’ve done and what you’ve learned.”

## From The Teacher's Perspective: Helping Students Construct Their Own Learning

*Travis Campbell and Michelle McBride—the teachers who facilitated Phoenix Academy's Oral History Project—work hard to incorporate project-based learning into all their courses. They took a few minutes recently to answer some questions for us.*

### How do you get started with the design of a good project?

**Michelle:** Before we started planning content or activities, we used the UBD (Understanding by Design) framework to distill what is really important for them to know and be able to do at the end of the unit. And we filtered this through our Academy's competencies as well as the state EALRs.

**Travis:** We also use the Coalition of Essential Schools lens (Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions) and the concepts of Expeditionary Learning to look at our plans. And we start right out knowing what the final product or "what the biggest thing students will have to do" will be—in this case, the Oral History Project Night.

**Michelle:** Doing things this way—starting out with the big picture—is not easy or simple, but once you have a solid structure or framework, all of the other "stuff" fills out the work.

**Travis:** And then, once you are looking for actual projects and activities, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. First, I spend a lot of time on the web where you can find resources on just about everything. In fact, for the Oral History Project, I was able to pull a number of resources—the pre-interview worksheet and the rubrics, for example—from somewhere else.

### Do you worry about covering all the required content?

**Travis:** Teachers don't have to do it all. If you know from the beginning what you want the kids to know, there are so many ways they can access the content. They

can research it themselves. They can teach each other. They can learn from community members, as they did in the Oral History Project.

### If you're teaching an integrated course, how do you find time to collaborate?

**Travis:** Sometimes we meet during planning periods. Sometimes we meet on Saturdays. But we *make* time, because it's a priority for us.

### I'm looking at all the supporting material (activities, rubrics, etc.) for a couple of your projects, and it seems like a lot more work than giving kids assignments out of a textbook. Are you ever "done" with project planning? If not, why do you do this?

**Michelle:** Yes, it does take an enormous amount of time. And you are never "done." But it does get easier. The more we work with each other, the more we realize what

works best, and how we will do things differently next time.

What drives me is my belief that this is truly best for our students. And that's my number one purpose: to do everything I can to ensure that each of our students is successful and meets standards.

**Travis:** Every year, I experience a kind of renewal, just *because* it's never done. You have to start with where the kids are and you have to keep adapting, so the direction I take this year with any particular project will be different than last and next year will be very different, too.

Why do I teach this way? Because I'm not satisfied with "good." I'm striving for "great" which is measured by how well the kids do, and I think kids get a lot more out of this kind of learning. But I get a lot more out of it, too, because I love being in an environment where kids are actively constructing their own learning.

*You can see the Oral History project assignments and rubrics on our website, [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org) in the "What's New?" section.*

## PROJECT-BASED LEARNING ON THE WEB

The web is a great place to look for resources, with the suggestions below being just two of many useful ones:

√ [www.ali.apple.com](http://www.ali.apple.com)

The Apple Learning Interchange provides engaging lesson plans and classroom activities that incorporate technology.

√ [www.pugetsoundcenter.org/coaching\\_tools](http://www.pugetsoundcenter.org/coaching_tools)

The Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology's website provides examples of best classroom practices featuring a project- or inquiry-based approach to learning. It also includes links to numerous other helpful websites.

If you have used other websites that have been particularly helpful to you in designing effective projects, pass the word along!

## PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

### An Introduction to Standards-Focused PBL

Standards-focused PBL is a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks. This definition can cover a broad spectrum, ranging from brief projects of one to two weeks based on a single subject in one teacher's classroom to year-long interdisciplinary projects that involve adults outside the school.

### Use a Driving Question

Often, projects have been used as fun or change-of-pace events completed after students have been pushed through homework assignments, lectures, and tests. In standards-based PBL, students are pulled through the curriculum by a Driving Question or authentic problem that creates a need to know the material.

The Driving Question (also known as an Essential Question) is tied to content standards in the curriculum, and assessment is explicitly designed to evaluate the students' knowledge of the content.

### Avoid these pitfalls

- √ **Don't rely on technology because it's available or fun.** Technological tools can supplement PBL, but they should rarely be the central focus of the project.
- √ **Don't let the activity drive the instructional content.** Let the instructional content drive the activity. It can be compelling to have an interesting activity idea and then try to "shoehorn" in content from the curriculum. However, it is far better to start with the content—powerful, central ideas or complex concepts—then plan activities around this content in such a way that the challenge associated with the project is in discovering and using subject matter principles.
- √ **Be wary of dividing student labor.** When there are central ideas that everyone should understand, or critical skills that everyone should obtain, division of labor can lead to differential learning and differential commitment to the task. Structure group work so that all students learn common core concepts.

*Adapted from the Project Based Learning Handbook, Buck Institute for Education. Teacher-leaders at each small school received a copy of this comprehensive manual at the recent Gates high school meeting. Some sections are available on our website. Or you can order the handbook by contacting the Buck Institute for Education at 415.883.0122 or [www.bie.org](http://www.bie.org).*

## PBL TOOLS YOU CAN USE

While there are lots of project-based materials available, a good place to start is with the Spring 2003 issue of *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools*. This issue devotes 40 pages to PBL and includes articles, sample units, rubrics, and a bibliography.

Also see page 289 of the Winter 2004 issue for "The Project-Based Learning Continuum," a graphic tool for understanding and identifying the stages of implementing meaningful project-based learning into your classroom.

You can access Planning Resources issues on-line at [www.smallschoolsproject.org](http://www.smallschoolsproject.org) in the Publications and Resources section. You can also purchase copies by ordering on-line.

## Effective Internships Include PBL Components

Andrea Farrell, Forks High School junior, enjoyed just about every aspect of her semester-long internship with Quillayute Valley's weekly newspaper, *The Forks Forum*. While she spent time in the paper's circulation, layout and design, and business areas, Andrea also wrote an insightful and sometimes lighthearted weekly column that built her quite a following, says *Forum* editor George McCormick.

Andrea, who says she's always wanted to be a writer, hopes to find another internship position during her senior year because "you learn a lot in a working situation."

Effective internship experiences like Andrea's—that allow students to engage in rigorous, complex work with real-world impact—include components of project-based learning. The challenge, says Steve Goll, director of programs and outreach for the Forks Connecting Schools and Communities (CSAC) grant, is to tie these experiences to academic learning.

According to Steve, while he and the Forks faculty continue to grapple with making those connections, a current project may provide an example. In a partnership between the school's careers teacher and Steve's office, up to a dozen students interested in education will be paired with district elementary and middle school teachers for internships. The careers teacher will provide the content; the CSAC office will provide support and will monitor the required internship assignments.

*The Learning Network plans to check with Steve later in the spring for an update.*



Andrea Farrell, Forks High School

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A Newsletter for Washington State High Schools that Receive Gates Reinvention Grants

# TLN



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### The Real Work, *continued from first page*

flexible and adaptable in the face of the changing and differing needs of the students we teach.

That work—getting better at what we do—is never done. In this issue, several teachers describe their efforts at getting better. For some of you, it will seem like old stuff. For others, it will be new and fresh. For still others, it will shift your perspective—perhaps only the tiniest bit—enough to allow you to move your own practice forward another inch or two.

We thank these teachers for their willingness to share their practice and growing understandings with us, and we invite you to do the same, starting with the colleague down the hall, or across the lunch table. Doing that feeds us all.

*Rick Lear, Director*

## USING YOUR PLANNING RESOURCES

The titles read *Planning Resources for Teachers in Small High Schools*. But it's not just teachers who might find this series helpful.

*The Learning Network* recently heard from Maggie Bates, assistant superintendent of the Hockinson School District, who says she's shared the advisories section with the middle school principal and the project-based section with the high school principal. She has also used selections from the adapting classroom practice section in her work on a district literacy committee. And she sent a section on to Vancouver School of the Arts when their staff was struggling with some curriculum integration and advisory issues.

Thank you, Maggie.

*If you are using the planning guides, we'd love to hear from you (write [nancylun@u.washington.edu](mailto:nancylun@u.washington.edu)).*

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