



Connections: *Getting Down, Getting Dirty*

A Year 9 student community-based program



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Introduction

The intention of this case study is to document an example of a Connections project in order to describe potential activities, identify challenges and opportunities and reflect on the project to-date providing suggestions for implementation in 2007.

It also provides a means to collate existing ideas and resources into one easily accessed document.

Overview

The Connections learning program offered to Year 9 Lara Secondary College students provide relevant and student interest-related projects, which use an experiential learning approach and focus on student engagement. Connections can be community-based, involve a city investigation, environmental task or an individual challenge.

Connections projects are run every Wednesday on a term basis. Students are allocated to a particular project for that term usually making up a class of no more than 16 students, with two teachers working in a team-teaching approach.

The intention is to run long-term projects where learnings from previous years are used to inform and guide the project and in some cases use data collected over previous years as a comparison to identify changes or trends.

Keeping the student numbers no higher than 16 and having two teachers with every class, enables excursions and visits to local community sites to be more manageable and for students to work in small teams with equipment and materials that are required for students to achieve the project aims.

Common to all Connection projects is the use of 'Round Table' presentations where students reflect on, and present their learnings to a panel consisting of a peer, a teacher and a community member. The panel provides feedback and assesses the student based on agreed criteria. The student also self assesses their presentation.

Getting Down, Getting Dirty is one such project on offer where Year 9 students are actively involved in community projects, building relationships and developing a sense of connectedness to their local community.

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Getting Down, Getting Dirty

Context

Identifying the local community as a valuable context for learning can help to engage all students and in particular those students who find it difficult to achieve in a formal classroom setting.

Learning in the community gives young people opportunities to develop, apply and refine valuable skills and knowledge while increasing their capacity to participate in and contribute to the world around them.

The focus on local issues strengthens the role of the school in the community and helps to develop long term partnerships with, and commitment from, local community groups and agencies.

Supportive relationships with interested adults provide the sense of connectedness, in particular to family and school, which help build resilience in young people¹.

Aims

The project is based around the following aims:

- Developing students' 'employability skills' including teamwork, organisation, initiative, communication and negotiation
- Developing a sense of connectedness to school and local community
- Raising students' awareness of the water quality of local waterways, recognise the impact people have on the environment in particular littering and pollution of waterways and be involved in taking some form of action to address the issue at the local level.

¹ Toward School-Community Partnership, 2001 EDUCATION FOUNDATION RESEARCH SEMINARS, Education Foundation

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Victorian Essential Learning Standards

A multi-disciplinary approach to curriculum planning was used, to develop the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program.

Getting Down, Getting Dirty incorporates the following strands and domains:

Physical, Personal and Social Learning

- Personal Learning
- Civics and Citizenship

Discipline-based learning

- Science

Interdisciplinary Learning

- Communication
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Funding

The *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program was funded through the Australian School Innovation in Science, Technology and Mathematics ASISTM project

<http://www.asistm.edu.au/>

Getting Down, Getting Dirty is part of a larger You Yangs Community Cluster project coordinated by Meg Parker, the You Yangs Cluster Educator. Meg has provided valuable support and guidance to the teachers involved in the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program as well as the other school leaders involved in the ASISTM cluster project.

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***Getting Down, Getting Dirty* planner (Term II and III)**

The following planner is a guide to the activities and tasks associated with the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program. The planner is a guide only and it is expected that teachers will modify the program based on student needs and interests, time constraints and other resourcing issues that may arise.

Term II

During the first day of the program, time was set aside for students to have their input into the structure of the program to ensure it met their needs. Overwhelmingly students wanted an activity-based program as opposed to one based around writing and discussions hence the highly active program.

Yacht building crew

A group of five students worked with the National Heron Yachting Association and local Lions Club members to assist in the building of a wooden sail boat. Students experienced a real workplace and were monitored by the school SSO. Students continued this project into Term 3.

Lara walk

Completed a walk around the local Lara area to observe whether there were any potential litter hot spots and to collect and appropriately dispose of any litter observed. Discussion about why people litter, whether the students litter and what can be done about it.

Photos were taken and generally found that Lara was quite a clean town—not surprising given Lara enters the *Tidy Town* award and has a graffiti squad and Litter Committee.

Student negotiated tasks

Students were given the opportunity to choose tasks that they would like to complete as part of the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program that had a school or local community focus. The following activities were suggested:

- Catch a Carp Day: Students were involved in a fishing day at the local waterway that has introduced fish, the European carp.
- Build a Garden: students build a garden in the school to beautify an area.
- Odd Job day: students are involved in a range of tasks which they listed as important jobs to get completed such as repair outdoor tables, repair damaged desks, repair soccer nets, clean sports store and sweep school paths.
- Sausage Sizzle Fund raising: Students organised a fund raiser to send money to a worthy cause. Students decided on the Indonesian Earthquake victims appeal.
- Painted fence posts around sports fields and parks.

Burying litter

Students were to be involved in burying litter and comparing litter made from different materials to observe the effects over time. Unfortunately this did not occur.

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Term III

Week 1	<p>Tasters</p> <p>Students listen to the range of activities available for them to participate in during Term III and list their preferences. Where possible students are given their first preference.</p>
Week 2	<p>Water Quality Testing</p> <p>Anne McLaughlan from Barwon Water introduces the issue of water quality and provides her expertise accompanying the group on the excursion around the Geelong to test water quality in several waterways Upper Barwon, Fyansford and Breakwater.</p> <p>Collect and describe water samples using the water sampling kit. Looking at why it was different in different areas eg. Agricultural run off.</p> <p>Litter analysis and take digital photographs.</p>
Week 3	<p>Round Table</p>
Week 4	<p>Swan Bay Excursion</p> <p>Observe/record water samples. Students canoe to several observation sites.</p> <p>Local expert provides expertise to assist students to understand about the ecosystem and the effect of pollution on water quality. Familiarised students with biodiversity dependent on that water way.</p>
Week 5	<p>Course Counselling (Senior School)</p>
Week 6	<p>Barwon Waste Management visit</p> <p>Walk through different life spans of different litter. Litter testing, Life Cycle Analysis.</p> <p>Observe/record litter samples in school</p> <p>City of Greater Geelong COGG – locate storm water outlets to paint.</p> <p>Classified litter. Discussion about litter, different kinds and attitudes to litter. Claire Davidson 5227 0892</p>
Week 7	<p>Stencil Design and painting</p> <p>Paint drains to the bay sign of local Lara stormwater drain covers.</p> <p>Bike ride to follow stormwater drains out to Limeburners.</p>
Week 8	<p>Catch A Carp</p> <p>Observe/record water samples</p> <p>Litter Analysis, dig up buried litter made from different materials and compare decomposition rates (planned but did not occur).</p>
Week 9	<p>Maribyrnong River Excursion</p> <p>History of the river from a historical point of view.</p>

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Week 10	Water Circus Different activities, model of suburb, Aboriginal storyteller, Electric fishing, Water sampling, Snake charmer, Painting performance. Newport PowerStation visit (abandoned due to rain)
Week 11	Round table presentation and conclusion



Canoeing: Swan bay excursion



Catch a carp day



Barwon Waste Management visit



Odd jobs day



Water Quality testing Geelong waterways

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Links to PoLT

The *Energise me* program has direct links the Department's Principles of Learning and Teaching (PoLT).

1. The learning environment is supportive and productive.
2. The learning environment promotes independence, interdependence and self-motivation.
3. Students' needs, backgrounds, perspectives and interests are reflected in the learning program.
4. Students are challenged and supported to develop deep levels of thinking and application.
5. Assessment practices are an integral part of learning and teaching.
6. Learning connects strongly with communities and practice beyond the classroom.

Program successes

Students' needs and interests (links to PoLT Principle 3)



In Term II, students were offered a high degree of flexibility to choose the type of activities that would contribute to their participation in and completion of the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program.



Students decided on the tasks they wanted to complete which included successfully fixing damaged and vandalised equipment in the school during their 'Odd job day'. These tasks were often not seen as important and therefore not a high priority to fix – the students managed to get them done displaying their skills in organisation, negotiation and persistence.

A small team of students were given the responsibility to organise a day of the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program. This involved:

- listing telephone contacts
- gaining permission from principal
- creating a requirement list for each task
- creating publicity posters
- allocate roles
- booking the necessary equipment
- writing and organising an article in the newsletter.

Each team successfully organised their day.

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Relationship building (links to PoLT Principles 1, 2)

An integral part of the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program was the development of student-student relationship building and also teacher-student relationship building.

The two teachers* working in partnership provided a supportive environment through a number of approaches that included:

- o knowing and valuing their students
- o providing opportunities for students to feel comfortable to take part in group discussion eg community circles
- o developing student trust and respect through supporting them in their learning and listening to all points of view
- o providing a structured program with clearly identified goals but with flexibility where appropriate
- o praising and celebrating student achievement
- o advocating on students behalf and believing in what they are doing.

Student-student relationships were developed through:

- o encouraging students to work outside friendship groups when working on tasks
- o supporting groups to work through issues
- o supporting groups to set goals, discuss and assign roles and where appropriate provide feedback and direction.
- o assessment that includes peer review.

* Experience shows that implementing the program requires a high level of commitment from both teachers.

Beyond the classroom (links to PoLT Principle 6)

Getting Down, Getting Dirty program involved students in experiences beyond the classroom. This was achieved through:

- o excursions to test water quality in their local environment supported by a scientist working in the area
- o combining recreational activities such as fishing and canoeing with learning about water quality issues such as introduced species (European carp) and pollution.
- o making signage to promote the importance of not polluting our waterways



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- promoting their learning beyond their classroom to other school students, the principal, staff, parents and the broader community through email to principal, posters, school newsletter and round table presentations.

Round table presentations (links to PoLT Principles 2, 4, 5 and 6)

The round table presentations provided an excellent finale to the students' participation in the program. Students work independently to complete the associated documentation that is required to be submitted at the round table presentation. Student motivation has a considerable impact on the standard of presentation and submitted works.

Students are provided with criteria on which they will be assessed from the outset of the project.

They are responsible for their Visual Diary which describes their reflections of their learning. Through this reflection students are encouraged to think more deeply about their learning, how they are learning and they become more aware of their favoured learning styles.

The panel includes a peer, teacher and community member therefore linking their learning to the community.

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Challenges

Students expectations of a non-academic program

In general, students expectations of this program was to be involved in 'hands on' activity with minimal academic follow-up particularly in the form of written work.

Many of the students were difficult to motivate in a formal classroom setting and wanted the Connections program to be experienced based and not resemble other subject areas such as English, Mathematics or Science.

The Community Circle strategy was used effectively to promote oral discussion with students reflecting on the day's experiences, however translating the discussion into a written record continually proved to be a challenge.

Community perceptions of teenagers

An unexpected challenge in the program arose when students were designing and painting a 'Drains to the bay' sign on local drains.

Some of the local residents objected strongly to students being able to paint signs on their drains and went as far as hosing off the painted signs.

Accompanying the teacher on this activity was a representative from the City of Greater Geelong who had given the students permission to paint the signs and could see the benefit of students being involved.

It highlights the need to keep residents and local community informed about what the school is trying to achieve and the respect everyone needs to show each other and how important it is to consider all people's perspectives.

Reliance on funding

Several aspects of the program require bus travel which incurs a significant cost. Students were not charged travel costs associated with participating in the program. For this program to continue other funding would need to be sourced or alternative transport be considered.

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Opportunities

Visual diary and reflection

As part of their Round Table students present their visual diary as evidence of their learning. The visual diary is based on their reflection of the day's experiences and is generally conducted at the end of each Wednesday.

Generally students' visual diaries for this program were not well constructed. There were several reasons for this being the case. The following suggestions may help to address this situation:

Divide the class into two smaller groups with a teacher to assist students in each group to get started and guide them using a scaffolded process incorporating an ICT or Arts-based solution. Time was often wasted where students were unsure about how and where to start. Prior to dividing and separating the class initial teacher guidance and support may include developing a brainstorm of words associated with each day's experiences. This approach will provide support for those students with lower literacy levels.

Provide templates or more scaffolded approaches to completing the visual diary, ideas include:

Photo Story using PowerPoint

All photos from excursion, visits and activities are available on the Network in a designated Folder. The PowerPoint template can include 'The title is ...', a text box to identify the author and an introductory page with text '*Getting Down, Getting Dirty*' is all about ...

Questions on following slides to prompt students' thinking, eg:

- What is this picture about?
- Why did we do that activity?
- Why did you add this photo?

The final page can be a conclusion type page with the text 'What did the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program do for you?'

The template can be developed by the teacher and used by students as a starting point. Students can customise background and fonts after they have entered their own text.

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WebPage

The WebPage template could have a title box, by line, image boxes to insert digital images, text boxes to describe images with similar questions suggested for the PowerPoint photo story. The WebPage could be set up with a front page with week 1, week 2, week 3 etc with links to secondary pages for images and information. A text box titled 'Conclusion' can be added for students to describe what they got out of the experience.

Rap

Students could be provided with a rhythm which they could add their lyrics which describes their experiences. Students would need appropriate equipment and a suitable space to record their rap which can be done using a Laptop with microphone, therefore being easy to access in Round Table presentation.

Diorama

Students doing a diorama should plan the message they are trying to convey before immediately moving on to create their artwork.

It may be possible to compare and contrast:

- two areas visited
- before and after
- reasons for a particular issue such as water pollution and its effects.

Encourage students to move beyond a comprehension level that just relies on observations of the area and use higher order thinking skills.

Survey and graphs

For those students who are more mathematically predisposed you may suggest they develop 4-5 survey questions for students in the group to answer. The results can then be presented in column graphs.

Sample questions may be provided as a starting point:

- What was the best part of the day?
- What was something interesting you found out?
- How would you improve the day?

A template made in Excel that has a spreadsheet of collected data for a sample survey question which is linked to a column graph would prove useful for students with limited experience in using Excel.

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Starting point for the next year

As part of the conclusion to the unit, students could, as a class, list their achievements, providing a summary of what they did and how they went about organising various aspects of the program. They could provide advice under headings such as:

- projects we started and would like to see continued
- challenges we had and solutions we used
- things to look forward to
- data we collected.

This process would place a higher value on the work students from the previous year had undertaken and provide the students beginning the *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* unit with a valuable starting point from which to commence the program.

Evaluating the program

Provide a brief non-threatening questionnaire before starting the project with several relevant questions to assess expectations, attitude, knowledge and behaviours. The same questions could be asked at the end of the unit and used to assess any changes. This would provide useful data to evaluate the program.

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Suggestions for 2007 implementation

The following suggestions are based on a reflection by the teacher who implemented the 2006 *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program.



Litter in the school

Litter in the school will be a major focus. Work with primary school and local residents whose houses are affected by litter blown in to their yards. Link to Waste Busters projects from strategic plan, feedback results.

It was planned that students be involved in burying litter and comparing litter made from different materials to observe the effects over time. It is possible that this be a component of the 2007 program. The next year's students could dig up the litter buried by the 2007 students and observe the level of decomposition of each material. Reference material from the previous year's group, including photographs of what was buried, can be used in their comparisons.



Yacht building project

Continue the yacht building project. The project has the potential to provide a 'how to build a yacht' resource taking photographs at key stages and adding a brief description for each stage. The project could also focus on skill development identifying tools used and where their use is required. This could be a resource built on from term-to-term and year-to-year, providing a legacy at the end of each program to build on by the next students.

Students involved in this project also have an opportunity to develop a wide range of employability skills.

Catch a carp community project



This activity has great potential to be developed into an engaging, rich community project. To achieve this, the 'catch a carp' approach would move from a one-off activity day to a community day held on a day on a weekend.

The suggested approach is to use Term II for students to organise the 'Community day' event. This would include aspects negotiated such as:

- organising equipment including fishing equipment and bait
- advertising and marketing
- organising how to fish tutorials with posters
- organising for experts to attend

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- providing education type stands to explain why it is important to remove European carp from waterways
- contact relevant organisations to find out how carp can be used as fertiliser for gardens ie Charlie Carp products.

The event would be run in Term III with interested students running the event.

Community Gardening

Students help people out with their gardens.

They assist in planting and maintaining a garden in the local shopping centre.

Conclusion

The 2006 *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program provided students with a variety of relevant ways to connect with their community and develop their employability skills.

While Term 2 provided students with a highly flexible negotiated program, Term 3 by contrast was more teacher-directed.

Through implementation of the 2006 program and reflection on the program's achievements the organising teacher hoped for a balance between the two approaches.

The suggestions for implementation of the 2007 *Getting Down, Getting Dirty* program should enable students to realise the aims of the program and build on the successes of the 2006 program.