**Examining Theory in Practice**  
PME 832-001 ● Fall 2017 ● Michael Carter

Introduction:

Two case studies that I will be examining have different pedagogical approaches, yet both connect students to their learning beyond the classroom. The “Environmental School Project” in Maple Ridge, B.C. involves students learning about the environment outside of the classroom and among nature. The second case study on the other hand involves the VIPKids company (http://blog.vipkid.com.cn/) that allows students from China to learn English through one-on-one mentoring using Web-conferencing software such as Skype.

Learning Theories and Skills Learned:

The Environmental School Project uses a variety of learning theories to engage students. This project had students explore and learn from their environment and community outside of the classroom This method of teaching dates back to before schooling was mandatory. Students learned from the local community, parents, and the environment around them. The Environmental School Project intends to bring this back by having students spend “extensive time immersed in the outdoors, dialoguing with a diversity of people connected to these places” (https://hollyhocklife.org/place-based-imaginative-and-ecological-education-in-maple-ridge-bc/, 2013). This is an example of placed-based learning as students interact, explore, and have discussions about the environment around them (http://www.uvm.edu/place/community/index.php). The Environmental School Project also engages students in their learning by using project-based learning. Students learn about how to use natural materials from the environment to build and design drums (Environmental School Project, 2017). Another example would be when older students learn how salmon operate by performing dissections on salmon at various times of the year, giving the students an opportunity to knowledge build throughout the project (V. Lock, 2015). Students learn by participating in the context of the lesson and are asked to reflect on their learning as well, which is an example of experiential learning (Schwartz, p.8) Lastly, students also take what they learn from the environment and apply it to different parts of the curriculum subjects such as language arts, and sciences (<http://es.sd42.ca/principles-and-values/>).

The VIPKids company on the other hand uses technology to engage students through one-on-one tutoring sessions with a teacher in a different part of the world. Students in China learn English through a video and presentation software program that is facilitated by a teacher in North America. This is an example of networked learning which can be defined as “learning through participation in communities of learners where meaning is both negotiated and created through collaborative dialog” (Dircknick et al, 2009). The company takes advantage of technology to create one-on-one tutoring sessions that move at the learner’s pace while they can interact with the instructor and the screen by drawing, typing, or by speaking to the instructor. Students can also work with a variety of instructors, which allows them to network with more people outside of their own culture. The hidden learning skill is not just learning the English language, but interacting and learning with others online. By interacting with a teacher one-on-one, the students practice conversational English, as well as written English, ameliorating the student’s learning experience.

The Top Challenges for the Environmental School Project

1. **How can the teachers foster an inclusive classroom in this setting for students with disabilities?**

The Environmental School Project states on its website that it adheres to principles of inclusion, yet they fail to demonstrate how a child with a physical disability would be able to partake in their demonstrated activities.

A solution to this problem might be to allow for modifications and accommodations for this type of learning. Perhaps an educational assistant could help with this problem by aiding and navigating a student with a physical disability in areas that are unaccommodating or inaccessible to the student.

1. **How will this program tailor itself to meet the rigid requirements listed in the provincial curriculum?**

Teachers need to follow their provincial curriculum guidelines to ensure that students are learning their required material at each grade level. This might be difficult for teachers in this program who are inexperienced with connecting outdoor learning activities to school skills required in subjects such as math and language arts.

This could be solved by having an activity guide for teachers that helps them to integrate outdoor activities to grade level subjects and skills. Teachers can attend a few Project Wild workshops that are hosted by the Canadian Wildlife Federation in multiple locations in Canada (<http://cwf-fcf.org/en/explore-our-work/education/for-educators/wild-education-faqs.html#length>) to learn how to integrate outdoor activities with the provincial curriculum.

1. **How could school boards and teachers receive funding for projects like the Environmental School Project?**

Teachers may need to rely on funding from community fundraisers and apply for grants to raise money for field trips or activities that involve experts in the field as guest speakers.

An example of this may be applying for a grant from organizations such as the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation (<https://hctfeducation.ca/go-grants/apply-for-grants/>). Teachers can also reach out to the community for donations.

The Challenges for VIPKids

1. **How can VIPKids add more pedagogical approaches into their teaching practices?**

VIPKids does not use a variety of pedagogies that provide authentic connections outside of the classroom. It seems that different teachers teach one-off activities that don’t help the students engage in knowledge building by using on-going projects (V. Lock, 2015).

To move past this, the company should try using on-going projects with their teachers that ask the students to build from what they learned in a previous class instead of learning a new skill that might not be connected to the last activity they completed. The students might also benefit from project-based learning by collaborating with their teachers to create a product to be shared online with other students in the program (Hutchinson, 2015). An example of this might be to create a presentation to be shared online that reflects on what they have learned in the program.

1. **How can the company allow for teacher creativity and innovation?**

Teachers are provided with the presentations and lesson plans needed for each lesson which eliminates the need for prep time for teachers. The negative part of this is that the teacher has very little control to alter the lesson based on their own experiences with the material.

A way to improve this would be to offer the teacher choices in student activities and lessons. To be hired by VIPKids, one must have previous teaching experience. Teachers should be able to create their own lesson plans that still cover the required skills to create a more genuine connection with their students. The company could allow teachers to submit their lesson plans to be reviewed and critiqued.

**How can the teacher adapt lessons to individual student challenges and needs?**

It seems that students are given a “one size fits all” lesson plan without considering the varying need of individual students.

Lesson plans should consider possible variations to meet the individual learning styles and needs for each student. A student with dyslexia for example should be given accommodations that suit their learning.

**How can the platform help students with learning disabilities?**

The program online only teaches a certain way. What about learners with challenges or disabilities? The learning would be hard to alter for the teacher if lessons are being provided.

Suggestions for the Environmental School Project and VIPKids company:

These two case studies use different pedagogical approaches to engage students. The Environmental School Project allows students to connect with their community and environment but does not incorporate technology like VIPKids does. Students could share their experiences in the Environmental School Project through blogs or social media to enrich community connections. Whereas the VIPKids company could foster more of a student community through collaborative assignments and on-going projects like the Environmental School Project does.

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