

Burnaby Mountain Secondary School



The Innovative Curriculum Design Course (ICD) was developed by a committee of teachers at Burnaby Mountain Secondary in 2009/2010. Studies, such as the ones highlighted in *Global Achievement Gap* by Tony Wagner, have shown that some students feel unprepared for post-secondary education, even after demonstrating success at the high school level. Oftentimes professors, too, have voiced concern that while most students are proficient at memorization of dates and names, recall and multiple choice, some post-secondary students lack in critical thinking, problem-solving, and written and verbal communication skills.

In keeping with this, ICD was created to address a potential area of need. A hundred years ago memorization was a requirement in schooling simply because few students had easy access to books/libraries and the internet did not exist. Today, however, we live in the ‘Age of Google’ and a knowledge economy, where we are bombarded with information incessantly and what we sometimes lack is the ability to filter, process, and critically analyze the information with which we are inundated.

Compounding this, courses are often crammed with content due to the Ministry of Education’s requirements found in the Prescribed Learning Outcomes. There is sometimes a sense of urgency to ‘get through the curriculum’ due to time constraints and looming provincial exams. What ICD hopes to offer is some ‘space’ and a bit of breathing room to learn in-depth and build/enhance skills that will prove useful for post-secondary academic careers. We want to take the focus off marks and achieving that ‘A’ and put it back into curiosity, exploration and the love of learning.

ICD combines coursework (60 credits of class work) with Learning in Depth (60 hours of online work). This was a way to ‘get’ Learning in Depth into the school and have it funded through the district as a locally developed course. The coursework portion focuses on skill-building specifically in the areas of critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, writing, researching, debate and public speaking and it is meant to complement their LiD learning. In class we look at how we think, what knowledge is, how we acquire knowledge and how we learn will be integrated with skill-building activities. In this way, we will be able to explore not just *what* we learn, but *how* we learn.

Learning in Depth:

As we explore our ‘relationship’ with knowledge, students have a unique chance to study a topic in-depth. We have had 85 students take the course so far and all their LiD topics have been varied. Students read Dr. Egan’s criteria suggestions about possible LiD topics and then, in consultation with their teacher, choose from their top three choices. We are also fortunate to have Dr. Egan and his Learning in Depth team come into our classroom to discuss topics choices and provide a workshop around LiD.

Learning in depth has an aim that “each student will have built genuine expertise about a topic. The expectation is that this process will transform for most students their relationship to, and understanding of the nature of, knowledge. It should also transform for each student the experience of schooling.”

To assist in gaining expertise and transforming learning, each week students are given time in the computer lab and library and/or work online researching about their LiD topic. During these tutorials teachers work with students as they research their topics and help them to find focus and direction. We also provide guest speakers to help them in their studies. For example, our students have had workshops to assist in their research, learning how to use EBCSO, Easybib, Boolean searches and GALE. Or, if students would like to

interview someone in the community who has expertise in the topic, the teacher helps students as the conduit or assists them in their interviewing skills. To help students look critically at their topic we look at critical thinking and have a workshop with a guest speaker who models the process and provides a framework of thought for students.

Students must report the process of their learning at regular intervals using a journal on the web-based program **Moodle** at www.togetherapart.com. A couple of times each term teachers and students have one-on-one chats, too, to ensure that LiD learning is on track. Where learning or stumbling blocks happen, teachers can help by providing suggestions, resources or sometimes simply offer a 'sounding board' for ideas. At the end of each term students will 'report out' what they have discovered to date, with a culminating presentation at the end of the school year. These presentations have been varied and amazing and have included movies, music, model mouths, robots, prezis, power points and interviews. Students are grouped in pods and presenters teach others what they have learned about their LiD so far. Presentations are self, peer, and teacher-assessed using a common rubric for consistency.

With Learning in Depth, the students take the initiative and teachers facilitate and 'make it happen' by supporting students down the path of learning that they choose. For every student this is a unique journey and it requires much skill and organization for a teacher to help facilitate this in a full classroom. However, it is also quite a rewarding process to see students gain in their academic confidence and become 'experts' in something that they then teach to others.

