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# Designing effective extended learning episodes: The Alfriston College experience. A summary

This report summarises the research activities and findings of the TLRI-funded project, conducted at Alfriston College, entitled *A School for the 21st Century: Researching the impact of changing teaching practice on student learning*.

Alfriston College was founded in 2004. From its inception, the school has challenged itself to put into practice various recommendations for changing established teaching practice to transform student learning for a new century. Adapting the traditional timetable structure to try and make space for deeper learning was part of this "21st-century vision" (Locke, 2006) This was done through the use of 100-minute lessons and three-day episodes where the timetable for all students is suspended for three days each term, while students work on extended projects in cross-year level groups.

The TLRI project was a two-year long collaboration between key members of the teaching staff at Alfriston College and an experienced researcher from NZCER, collectively called the Professional Learning Group (PLG). The PLG investigated ways teachers understood and responded to innovative approaches to scheduling time for teaching and learning, and sought evidence that the innovations had a significant effect on student learning.

## Project objectives

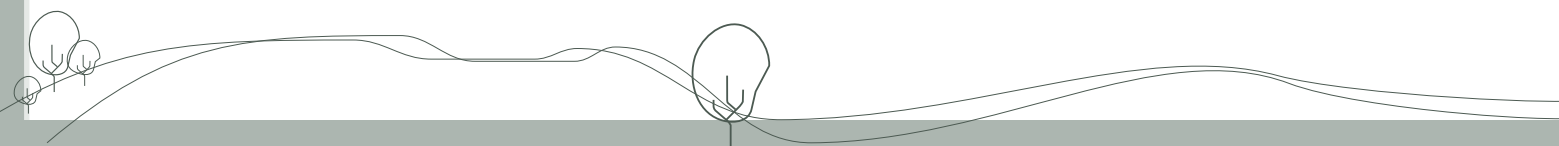
The project objectives were to:

- investigate whether the innovative approaches to scheduling time for teaching and learning at Alfriston College were having a significant effect on student learning
- identify best practice for use of the extended periods of learning time
- widen discussion about the nature of "evidence" of student learning.

## Research questions

The three research questions were:

1. How are extended periods of learning time (100-minute lessons, three-day episodes) being used to support learning?
2. What are the characteristics of successful three-day episodes, as seen by students and teachers?
3. What is the nature of evidence of successful learning in three-day episodes?





## Research methods

### Year 1 focus

The first year of the TLRI project (2007) set out to compare the use of learning time in 100-minute and 50-minute lessons. The PLG team designed a teacher survey composed of Likert-scale items that invited respondents to contrast aspects of practice in 50- and 100-minute lessons, and between either of these and three-day episodes. The items were designed to allow teachers to express their views about what, specifically, the longer periods of learning time enabled them to do differently. Forty-four teachers (71 percent of the staff at the time) responded to this survey. Participation was voluntary but the survey was completed during after-school staff meeting time to enhance the likelihood that busy teachers would take part.

A shorter student survey also contrasted aspects of practice in 50- and 100-minute lessons. This survey used identical or slightly adapted items from the teacher survey, as relevant. Participation was voluntary and

anonymous, and data were collected during tutor time. There were 312 responses from Year 10 and 12 students. Somewhat more respondents (58 percent) were in Year 10, and these students represented 68 percent of the whole Year 10 cohort. Forty percent of respondents were in Year 12 (71 percent of that year cohort). Slightly more female (54 percent) than male (44 percent) students responded.

One of the PLG teacher-researchers also carried out focus groups with students to elaborate on the patterns of student responses to the surveys, and conducted individual interviews with the foundation senior managers of the school to document their understandings of the original intent of the innovations (Shanks, 2007).

### Year 2 focus

The goal for 2008, the second year of the project, was to use the three-day episodes as a context for a school-wide conversation about learning, with a view to bringing to the surface tacit understandings that

FIGURE 1. Design Principles for Three-Day Learning Episodes

DESIGN PRINCIPLE	POTENTIAL INDICATORS	
<b>Nature of Learning</b> The planned learning should provide opportunities to strengthen learners' capabilities, including "learning to learn" dimensions and provide for engaging, interactive learning experiences.	<i>Does the learning provide....?</i>	
	A range of experiences Opportunities for learners to demonstrate autonomy Opportunities for learners to reflect on their progress Opportunities for development of the key competencies and Alfriston College Independent Learner Qualities	Opportunities for learners to take risks and push personal boundaries Challenges (intellectual, physical, ethical, cultural, social, practical, and/or creative) Opportunities to build relationships (learner/learner, learner/teacher, learner/wider community).
<b>Ownership</b> The planned learning should foster autonomy by providing choice and flexibility within a supportive framework	Choice (context, process, outcome, and/or indicators of successful learning) Opportunities for co-construction	For the possibility of divergent pathways to emerge Opportunities for learners to participate in developing indicators of successful learning
	<i>Is the learning....?</i>	
<b>Connectedness, Authenticity, Relevance</b> The planned learning should help learners' make authentic and relevant connections between their learning experiences and the world they live in, in ways that expand their horizons.	Framed by a clearly defined big picture idea Related to a future focussed theme	Expansive (ideas, contexts, personal skills, connections, types of thinking) Relevant to learners' lives now or in the future
	<i>Which types of learning outcomes are anticipated and what might the evidence look like?</i>	
<b>Outcomes</b> The planned learning should conclude with an evaluation of the anticipated goals so that achievements can be celebrated.	Strengthening the independent learner attributes Positive relationships Mastery of a process	Production of an artefact A dispositional change
	<i>How and by whom will the learning be evaluated and celebrated?</i>	



Alfriston teachers have about the nature of learning and what is worth learning. A group of volunteer teachers worked with the researcher to develop a set of design principles (see Figure 1) that were then used by all staff for two rounds of three-day episodes, with each round evaluated by the research team.

## Findings

### Year 1

The survey results showed that many teachers and students like longer learning periods:

- Most staff thought that 100-minute learning periods were better for student learning than 50-minute lessons (82 percent agreed or strongly agreed).
- The students, however, were more equivocal. Just 43 percent agreed or strongly agreed, 22 percent were unsure and 31 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

This survey work and the conversations with teachers that followed the presentation of the results, however, suggested that longer traditional learning periods are likely to operate within an improvement paradigm of school change. In such a paradigm, present structures and ways of working are made better, but underpinning assumptions may not be examined closely. Thus timetabling longer learning periods may indeed lead to considerable improvements in relatively traditional teaching and learning activities and responsibilities—without necessarily questioning either the nature of learning or the nature of the outcomes sought. Such improvement per se will not necessarily help students to meet the ongoing learning challenges they will doubtless face in the 21st century.

Greater differences seemed to occur when 50- and 100-minute lessons were compared with learning that took place in the three-day learning episodes held once each term (Hipkins et al., 2008). On these days the timetable is suspended and students work on an extended project of their choice. Teachers work together in teams and students are mixed across year levels, depending on their choices and interests. Both teachers and students perceived greater engagement and more opportunities to foster students' Independent Learner Qualities<sup>1</sup> during three-day learning. These findings from the first year gave indications that transformative curriculum change would be more likely to happen if teachers are supported to rethink and reflect on their experiences when planning and leading three-day

<sup>1</sup> Alfriston College identifies ten independent learner qualities: caring, creative, collaborative, curious, enterprising, joyful, persevering, resilient, thinking, wise. These preceded but broadly align with the intent of the five key competencies identified for the New Zealand Curriculum: managing self; relating to others; thinking; using language symbols and texts, participating and contributing.

learning episodes. However, the survey results and associated conversations also suggested that some staff at Alfriston College, notwithstanding the clear benefits they could identify for three-day episodes, considered that these are really a pleasant diversion from the main learning agenda, which remains firmly traditional. Accordingly, other types of evidence of learning, and indeed the legitimacy of more informal or distributed learning as valued school learning, became the focus for the second year of the project.

The first-year findings are reported in detail in Hipkins, Shanks, and Denny, 2008.

### Year 2

The adjustment to the direction taken in the second year of the project was sparked by the realisation that deeper beliefs about teaching and learning will ultimately determine how learning time is used, regardless of how it is divided up (Hipkins et al., 2008). Obviously, some types of activities are more easily and practically achieved when a longer span of time is available, but if a teacher does not perceive valued outcomes from those sorts of activities they are unlikely to be achieved even when the necessary time is available. All this seems like commonsense in hindsight but a clear thread running through both years of the project is the challenge of making space for teachers to think in terms of principles and concerns beyond the immediate needs of the tasks at hand. Familiar tasks and learning settings pull teachers and students alike towards more traditional views of learning. However, disrupting both tasks and settings may not be sufficient to achieve a transformative reframing of teachers' and students' work.

The first-year surveys gave clear indications that both teachers and students felt at some level that three-day episodes had the potential to allow transformative learning to unfold—more so than 100-minute learning periods in a traditional timetable structure. Developing the design principles was a considered first step in an evolving response to the need to redirect attention to the intent and potential of the three-day episodes, and to do so in a manner that drew as many of the school's teachers as possible into an ongoing conversation and experience of their transformative potential.

The evaluation drew on students' perceptions of their learning in three-day episodes. Most students made comments that were direct statements about some concrete aspect of learning: "I learnt about ...." However, some made comments which suggested that as a result of their experiences in the three-day episode, they were seeing themselves or the world "with new eyes", which suggested that for these students at least, transformative learning had occurred. Students notice what teachers value. Where teachers had a clear sense



of the “big picture” goals, students were more likely to comment on these.

Experience becomes conscious with the act of noticing and in many ways our efforts in the second year of the project were directed towards refocusing what was noticed, when and why. For example, the first year findings showed that three-day episodes were perceived as more enjoyable because there was “no assessment” even though teachers could clearly evaluate the comparative worth of the different episodes enacted. Could teachers be assisted to notice, and then value, the different types of outcomes that can be achieved in three days but not so easily in traditional lessons? The findings suggest the answer is a cautious “yes”, but that it takes a willingness to play and take risks, and the space and time needed to do so, as well as carefully structured supports for reflection on what has been achieved. While some teachers were ready to shift to a more transformative thinking frame, and were in the process of doing so at least some of the time, others still saw the assessment challenges through a more traditionally acquisitive frame of reference.

## Where to from here?

To what extent did the activities associated with research, and specifically the creation and use of the design principles, contribute to the richer conversations about learning in the school? Using design principles to refocus three-day episodes may be a necessary stimulus, but this was not sufficient to affect shifts in what some teachers notice and value. Again, given the extent of the transformative shifts in thinking needed, it seems obvious that this would be so. What is perhaps more challenging is the realisation by some of the actively participating teachers that they were not yet ready to transfer what they had learned during this project to their traditional lessons. Deep change is hard. It takes careful support and time. Having embarked on this

journey, we hope the actively involved teachers will be able to keep up the momentum but time will tell. For now, at least, the three-day episodes have consolidated their intended place in the overall structure of the school’s learning programme. The benefits for students’ learning have been made more apparent to more of the school’s community and the episodes seem set to stay.

The underpinning focus of the design principles is about quality teaching and learning experiences. At the time of writing, the principles are being used by teachers when planning other learning experiences in the school such as the Year 9 integrated projects and the modules. As part of the school’s professional development programme, there are plans to revisit the design principles and look at how they can be used to guide more of the learning at Alfriston College, not just three-day episodes. The design principles are also evolving; the outcomes principle has been altered to include a specific focus on one of the school’s Independent Learner Qualities, as these are central to the school’s big ideas about learning and what it values, and the research so far has indicated that three-day episodes include learning experiences which help strengthen the Independent Learner Qualities. By altering the principle, it is hoped teachers will model, make explicit and enhance learners’ awareness of particular Independent Learner Qualities and also expand their understanding of the bigger purpose of learning.

## References

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- Shanks, L. (2007). *The Missing voice: Learner perceptions of 10-minute lessons*. Unpublished Master of Education research project, Massey University, Palmerston North.

*The full report of this TLRI project is published on the TLRI website ([www.tlri.org.nz](http://www.tlri.org.nz)).*

## Research team

**Michal Denny:** Throughout the project Michal was a teacher at Alfriston College, with leadership responsibilities in science/biology and in research of school practice. She coordinated the PLG team.

**Lynda Shanks:** Lynda is a deputy-principal at Alfriston College. During the first year of the project she was on study leave and completed her master’s thesis in conjunction with the TLRI research.

**Karyn White:** Karyn is a Whānau Leader and teacher at Alfriston College. She joined the PLG team in the second year, in her capacity as the school coordinator of three-day learning episodes.

**Rosemary Hipkins:** Rosemary is a chief researcher at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, with specific responsibilities for building links between research and practice. Her current work includes ongoing research in a range of aspects of curriculum implementation.