

— IMPLEMENTING THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS —

A Proven Solution through Blended and Project-Based Learning

Educurious is a nonprofit organization whose integrated learning solution uses blended and project-based learning, rich technology, and connections with real-world experts to capture the imagination and interest of today's students. This case study describes the Educurious solution and the learning results from a one-year pilot in a 10th-grade humanities classroom. It provides a model of how schools can deliver on 21st Century Skills and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

THE CHALLENGE

The CCSS for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Science and Technical Subjects are intended to ensure that all students are ready for college and careers. In order to reach those high expectations, teachers, schools, and districts are seeking solutions that will engage students in new ways. Blended and project-based learning offers students the opportunity to read, write, listen and speak about nonfiction and narrative texts related to contemporary problems. The physical classroom becomes just one of many learning venues; new possibilities engage students in content that meets their skill development needs while also addressing diverse learning styles and allowing them to dig deeper into areas of interest.

“As in all revolutions, opportunities and problems present themselves in equal measure...[T]hree forces, each of which has had an independent history over the last 50 years, must come together. One is technology...; the second is pedagogy...; and the third is change knowledge... For revolutionary learning results, we need to combine how we learn with how to ensure engagement, with how to make change easier.

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EDUCURIUS: AN INTEGRATED SOLUTION IN PRACTICE

Like many urban schools, Opal High School has a diverse student body with diverse learning needs. Roughly 77 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and 6.7 percent are transitional bilingual. Another 13 percent of the students require special education. The student population is 37 percent Black/African American, 41 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 11 percent Hispanic, six percent White and three percent Biracial. The committed staff at Opal High School works long and hard to support the wide range of student needs and interests at their school. Many students struggle with reading and writing there.

In seeking a solution to low student performance and declining enrollment, Opal High School was redesigned into two smaller schools in 2010. The Opal High School described in this case study focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). The school has an academy structure and uses a project-based learning approach. This change in structure and approach, together with the addition of one-to-one computing as a resource tool, helped to reshape the school's identity and began to attract new students. Still, too many students were not reaching the academic levels that teachers and school leadership hoped for.



Ms. Corum, an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at the school, offered her classroom as an enactment site to test the Educurious approach to blended and project-based learning. The Educurious approach includes four major components:

- Authentic projects built to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)
- A comprehensive system for professional development
- A social network that connects students and career experts (The Educurious Expert Network™)
- A blended learning environment with rich technology applications

Ms. Corum: *I love project-based learning (PBL) because of the authenticity and student voice and choice that enable students to get deeply engaged in content, but was concerned that skill building in reading and writing would get short shrift, especially since my 10th-grade students face the High School Proficiency Exam for Reading and Writing, a high-stakes test with passage necessary for high school graduation. I was looking for a blended learning model designed to be rigorous, Common Core aligned, highly engaging and project-based.*

During the 2012-2013 school year, Ms. Corum used a full year of Educurious English Language Arts units. She also participated in the blended professional development offered through Educurious Partner Teachers Network across the U.S. This collaborative professional development experience includes face-to-face (f2f) gatherings where teachers and school leaders work together to learn the integrated solution and design adaptations to fit local contexts; a twice-monthly facilitated Professional Learning Network (ePLN) to support implementation; weekly news briefs; and virtual coaching support.

Below, Ms. Corum describes her experience with the Educurious Blended Project-Based Learning unit Picking Up the Clues. The unit focuses on the anchor standards for Key Ideas and Details.

Ms. Corum: *As we all know by now, the CCSS sets the expectation that we include challenging canonical texts in our language arts repertoire. "Picking Up the Clues" engages students in an inquiry through the genre of mystery, horror and suspense, and challenges them to unpack how writers and film directors create suspense in books and movies. Leading with a suspense thriller young adult novel got them hooked. Online lessons introduced my students to a deep reading strategy to look for evidence of the elements of suspense. Students are scaffolded into reading stories from Edgar Allan Poe using the same deep reading strategy. A real advantage to blended learning in my mind is how students can access all types of reading support as they work through skill development. One example is CAST, an online reading support that allows students to click on and define unfamiliar words, and offers various other meaning-checking tools useful for decoding complex and challenging texts. Using this support, all of my students were able to access the text of Edgar Allen Poe.*

In this unit, the project was a film production of the mystery that the students had written. Through the Educurious Expert Network, mystery writers were assigned to Ms. Corum's students to support their mystery writing. Next, screenwriters supported them as they revised their writing from text to screenplay to film. This exchange of work between experts and students is managed through discussion boards in a safe, and secure network. The Educurious Expert Network offers a vision of how blended learning can happen, as experts connect with schools and students gain a window into possible careers from interacting with successful professionals in diverse fields. Generally, the network assigns one expert for every eight students.

Ms. Corum: *Using collaboration tools enhanced teamwork in my classroom, and approximates adult working conditions.*

My students learned and applied technology in an authentic way. For example, screenwriters use Celtx to format screenplays. My students used this same tool and were required to use the same online formatting that professional screenwriters use.

Valentina (student): *What I liked the best about this unit was getting to work with professional writers and being able to get messages from them and share my writing with them.*

Teachers may also connect with each other in new ways. Ms. Corum collaborated with the digital media teacher at Opal High School on the students' digital products. With his help, students gained the technical skills to complete high-quality digital products that were shared with authentic audiences — often through social media. The digital media teacher was brought into the CCSS in a way that made sense, tapping into his expertise as a Career and Technical Education (CTE) teacher.

In order to assess whether Educurious content and instructional methods influenced student performance in Language Arts, Educurious students' exam outcomes were compared to statewide student exam outcomes. The academic progress of the Educurious classroom was also compared with the academic progress of the other ELA classrooms at Opal High School that were not using the Educurious solution. The Washington State High School Proficiency Exam for reading and writing was used to make the comparisons.

RESULTS

The Educurious students outperformed state, district and within-school trajectories for 10th graders in ELA. Educurious students with a full year of coursework had a 92 percent passing rate in both reading and writing. Comparison classrooms at the same school had passing rates of 78 percent in reading and 83 percent in writing. These comparison percentages were roughly the same the previous year, with 78 percent and 86 percent of students passing the state assessment in reading and writing, respectively. During the previous year, the passing rates for the Educurious teacher were approximately 10 percent lower in reading and approximately the same for writing, which provides an adequate measure of effectiveness for both the change in teacher practice and impact on student's learning.

Implementing a blended and project-based learning model has the power to provide a more personalized, relevant, engaging and effective learning experience for students. It can also invigorate teachers. Combining blended and project-based learning is an opportunity to address a key motivator of the CCSS — to prepare students for success in college and careers — by reengaging students and teachers.

REFERENCE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Chadsey is the vice president of School Solutions at Educurious, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating solutions to today's toughest education challenges (www.educurious.org). At Educurious, Jane has designed a Professional Development System for Educurious teachers using a blended learning model of face-to-face and virtual learning experiences that supports teachers in implementing the Educurious instructional model. Prior to joining Educurious, she was the director of curriculum and instruction in Seattle Public Schools and the Renton School District in Washington State.

