

Collaborate. Create. Learn. - Parkland School

Division's Digital Portfolio Initiative

As schools and school divisions progress, we at Parkland School Division believe it is imperative that we work towards providing different opportunities to further students' learning with a balance of opportunities, especially in Parkland School Division's priority areas:

- Developmentally Responsive Curriculum and Assessment
- Citizenship and Social Responsibility
- Transformational Education

Based on the idea of "[Collaborate, Learn, Create](#)," as created by the Future Planning Team, and the [Alberta Education Competency Wheel](#), I believe that it would be extremely beneficial to Parkland School Division to look at moving towards **creating digital portfolios for all students**. As seen in the project currently done by Forest Green School, it is imperative (other than hardware) to make use of the following cloud technologies:

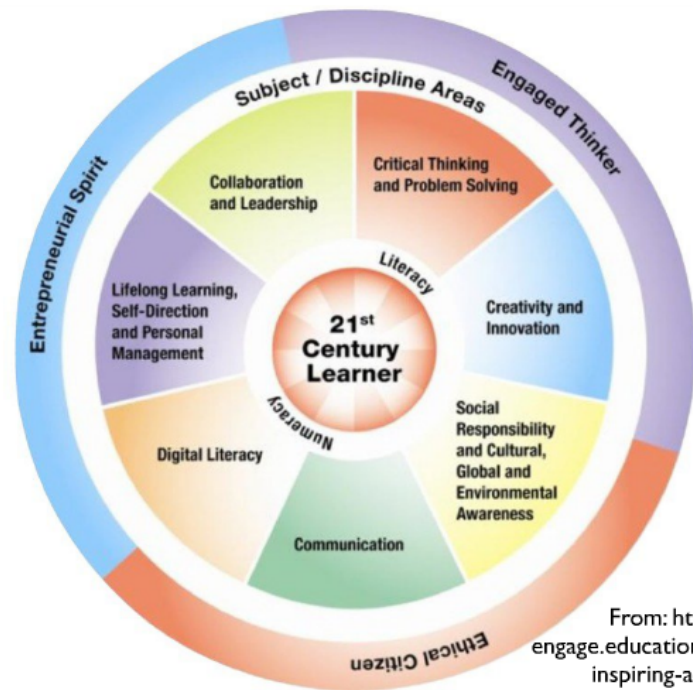
1. **Google Apps**
2. **Word Press-Multi User**

Google Apps is beneficial for many reasons that will deeply impact student learning, and is transformational in the way we teach and learn in Parkland School Division. Other than providing anywhere, anytime, anyplace access for our students at both home and school, the ease of use to **collaborate** with one another helps our students to develop the group skills that are so necessary in a team environment, while also ensuring that our students have the options of developing skills as an individual. Although the software is not extremely flashy, the focus is more on using the technology to drive deep understanding of pedagogy and creating an environment that gives the option of both synchronous and asynchronous opportunities. Using Google Apps for Education helps to ensure that we can create an environment that while beneficial to learning, is also controlled, to ensure safety for our students.

WordPress Multi-User gives the opportunity for Parkland students to **create** a portfolio of their work, while also giving opportunities to emphasize their own creativity. Although this again is maintained in a safe-secure environment that allows schools the option to open and close student work as they feel needed, it also gives students the opportunity to create and personalize their work to not only share their work, but to become active participants in their own assessment.

We believe that through this process we can facilitate students, staff, and stakeholders to be "*Ethical Citizens*" (**Collaborate**), have a strong "*Entrepreneurial Spirit*" (**Create**), while being "*Engaged Thinkers*" (**Learn**), To understand the process deeper, please refer to the [Alberta](#)

[Education Competency Wheel](#) below.



From: <http://engage.education.alberta.ca/inspiring-action/>

Discussing the dimensions of the 21st Century Learner as outlined above, here are the elements of the project that meet the criteria above:

The Foundation: Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy

As literacy is the basis of the 21st century learner, Parkland School Division is focused on ensuring that all students are able to read and write. This project will not only promote active writing and reading for our students, but it will give them an opportunity to connect with one another, while also increasing engagement in the writing process through writing for a larger audience.

Journal writing is an element that is often used in many classrooms, but due to the lack of opportunity to easily share with others, the person that often writes the most in this process is the teacher. By using Google Apps and WordPress blogs, students are able to share their writing easily with one another, staff, stakeholders, and possibly a global community. Through the process of writing initial posts, commenting, responding, and sharing, the student continuously works on their literacy skills, as opposed to a simple back and forth from teacher and student. Both programs mentioned above give the opportunity to do this in a way that is meaningful to students and, if used properly, will increase “traditional” literacy skills.

*The greatest digital divide is between those who can **read** and **write with media**, and those who can't.*

Elizabeth Daly



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Although traditional literacy skills of reading and writing are imperative, it is important that we look at literacy in a more holistic fashion. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):

As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. (<http://www.ncte.org/governance/literacies>)

The NCTE also discusses some of the important “literacies” as society continuously changes:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally

- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments

Based on the above criteria and this narrowly focused initiative, all of these objectives can be obtained through this project.

Although many of these technologies will be new to both students and staff, the opportunity is there for both students, staff, as well as stakeholders, to become fully literate in the ever-evolving world that we live in.

Numeracy

When we give opportunities for students to learn math in [authentic and relevant way](#), students are able to solve problems in a meaningful way. Students do not only need to be able to solve problems, but they also need to take real life situations and *create* problems to further understanding. While students are often able to write problems using the blogging platform, it is also extremely helpful for students to be able to share their learning through media websites such as audio and video, to highlight the steps of the problem solving process in a way that is concrete as they learn. Students are able to create and share resources that will help them further understand their learning, from such places as the Alberta Education "[Math is Everywhere](#)" site. This gives them the opportunity to not only create and share their own learning, but to build resources of work that is influential in their own growth.

Skills of the 21st Century Learner

Collaboration and Leadership (Collaborate)

Through the use of collaborative technologies such as Google Documents, Google Presentations, and Google Spreadsheets, students are able to more readily share their learning with one another. Too often we see students that are limited in doing projects or presentations where we have one “leader” emerge and take the bulk of time using a technology that is not conducive to easy sharing. Through the use of the Google Apps suite, students are able to take part in either working together on one portion of a project, or else take leadership on different areas and best share their strengths. Google Apps also has the opportunity to ensure that the technology is either synchronous or asynchronous so students can share their gifts from any computer or mobile device in the world (provided they have Internet access) and do it in real time.

Through blogging on Wordpress, staff and students can not only share reflections of their learning, but through the transparency and openness of the platform, they can also share their work with others and get their feedback to improve learning objectives. No longer are we limited to the knowledge imparted *only* by a teacher, but we are limited to the knowledge of those to whom we open our site and with whom we are willing to collaborate. For example, through this post on [Cursive Writing](#), you will see in the comments that the breadth and depth of knowledge in this area helps us to all formulate and understand the learning in a way that is more meaningful through conversations. It is imperative that we shift schools into becoming a true and open community of learners.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (Learn)

Reflection is highly valuable in the process of problem solving and critical thinking. Take for example this student post on creating a [Spaghetti Bridge](#). The student, Susie, was able to break down the process in steps that would make it easier for her to have these valuable skills that she had gained through the process. She was also able to not only analyze and break it down into steps, but discuss how she would improve it next time:

One thing I would change in my bridge is I would raise it and make the top and sides thicker and more realistic.

What I like is how I decorated it, and I would definitely NOT change that.

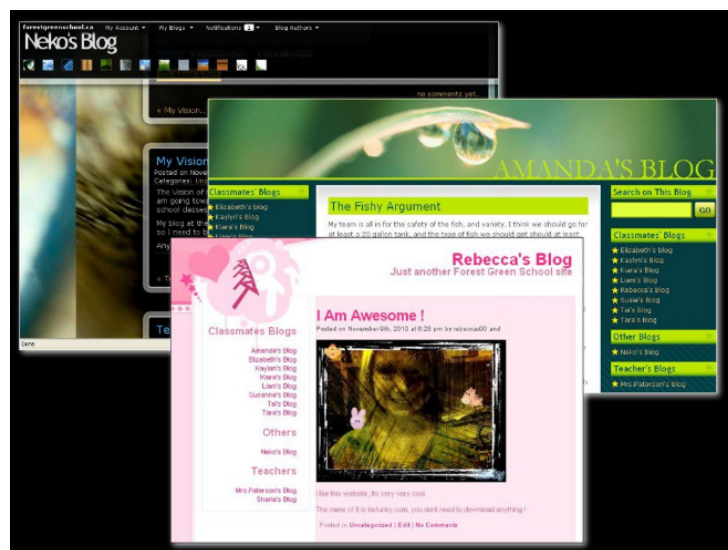
Reflection is imperative to the process of both critical thinking and problem solving, and many that use blogging as a tool to not only share their learning, but also connect (through hyperlinks) have a better and deeper understanding of their learning.

Creativity and Innovation (Create)

“When facts become so widely available and instantly accessible, each one becomes less valuable. What begins to matter more is the ability to place these facts in context and to deliver them with emotional impact.” Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind*

As the purpose of schools has changed with the abundance of information that all of us have instant access to, it is *necessary* that students are able to take content and create innovative products from the analysis and understanding of this information. This is essential that we give them the tools to be both creative and innovative.

Too often in schools we discuss the importance of creativity, and with an array of social media tools, the platforms we use often have the students create “cookie cutter” products that do not give them the opportunity to share their own creativity and footprint. Through the experience of Forest Green School, we have seen the value our students have in creating their own identity through the design and display of their blog/portfolios. This does not only give our students the opportunity to understand the importance of design but to create a “personality” for the work that each student is doing.



Sir Ken Robinson put it eloquently when he said the following:

My contention is that creativity now is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status.

Social Responsibility and Cultural, Global and Environment Awareness (Collaborate)

Having the opportunity to write for a global audience, ensures that our students are more aware of not only our own local area, but that the world is shared by many different people from many different cultures. Take for example this post by [grade 3 student Daniel](#), discussing Ramadan. Through the comments, you will see that people from all over the world, both locally and globally, discuss the work that the student has done. This was through another post where Jabiz Raisdana, a teacher from Indonesia, made a [connection to our grade 3 classroom to discuss Muslim culture](#). The students in that classroom were continuously inspired (while also being inspirational) to make change in both their local and global community, and [took on other projects in our school](#) to make an impact, both locally and globally.



If we want our students to have a better understanding of our world, we need to give them opportunities to immerse themselves in it.

Communication (Collaborate)

Communication is an essential 21st Century Skill as in no matter what business or career we enter into, it is essential that we not only are heard, but we are also willing to listen. Through the use of a blogging platform such as Wordpress, student learning is not “static” and simply shared, but they become cognizant of the feedback coming from (the possibility) of a wide ranging audience. Students learn to share in a positive yet critical way, while also learn that this feedback is meant to only push our growth mindset in order to get better.

The opportunities for communication in a written, auditory, and a visual form (or a mix) are all possible through this platform ensuring that we give students the opportunity to share *their* voice in a way that is not only meaningful, but strength based. Many bloggers use a video platform or even podcasts to share information with their audience. Using this type of platform is not limited in the areas of *how* we communicate, but it can definitely further strengthen *all* ways that we can communicate.

Digital Literacy (Create)

As discussed previously about the importance of [21st Century Literacies](#), it is essential that we

immerse our students in opportunities that not only provide them opportunities to consume and analyze digital content, but that we give them the opportunity to *create* as well. It is also essential that we teach them to safely and securely connect with others that are outside of the classroom and will push our learning forward.

In an age where “public” is the default for our students through mediums such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media tools, it is essential that we teach our students to ethically and thoughtfully create a positive digital footprint that shows them as innovative thinkers and learners. The importance of digital citizenship and understanding of how our actions can impact many in either a positive or negative way, is an idea and practice that needs to be embodied in our schools.

If we do not prepare them in a proactive way to use these digital literacies to create a positive footprint, who will?

Lifelong Learning, Self-Direction and Personal Management (Learn)

Initiatives such as Parkland School Division’s “Action on Assessment” and Comprehensive Reporting have shown a major shift in education where students have a significant amount of ownership over not only the process, but the direction of learning. The shift to passion-based and personalized education is prevalent in many school divisions, knowing the impact that interest and strength-based learning has on the long term success of both children and adults. Although this initiative helps to support the Alberta Education Program of Studies, it is also gives students the opportunities to focus on areas that they are interested in. As discussed in Chris Anderson’s Ted Talk on “[How Web Video Powers Global Innovation](#)”, he discusses how media gives the opportunity for people to share and learn from others with similar interests and passions. At no time in history, have we had more power to learn from anyone and anywhere in the world. What we are seeing is that when we can easily share and learn from each other based on what we are interested in, “crowd innovation” increases, pushing us all to be better. Students will learn to not only work with each other, but to eventually have the power to create personalized learning environments that directly empower them in their own learning.

When we can share our interest and passions openly, many believe that we can learn and push our students to heights that we have never seen before:

*“Crowd Accelerated Innovation -- a self-fueling cycle of learning that could be as significant as the invention of print. But to tap into its power, organizations will need to embrace radical openness.” **Chris Anderson***

Logistics

To ensure that capacity is built within the school division, it is essential that any participating schools identify “Portfolio Leads” that will ensure we do not overstretch an IT department that is currently working on several initiatives. These “Leads” would work directly with the Division Principal and other personnel as identified by Central Office to build a solid understanding of how to maintain the portfolio program for their school. Although we want to build capacity, it is also essential that those working in the program are also supported by the Division Principal and those directly involved in the project from central office.

As students may move from different schools in Parkland School Division, it is essential that we have a process where the transfer or work is quick and easy for all participating schools. To alleviate this, the site <http://psdblogs.ca> was purchased. Each student would have their own unique URL to identify their portfolio, but the openness of the site would be determined with consultation of the school, family, and student. Each student’s URL would be based on the following: First name, last 4 digits of Alberta Student ID.

For example, the student “John Winter” with Alberta Student ID 12345678, would have the following URL:

<http://psdblogs.ca/john5678>

Schools are also more than welcome to participate and would have a URL based on the name of their school. For example, Seba Beach, would have the following URL:

<http://psdblogs.ca/sebabeach>

Grade and subject area blogs could also be created from this site. As all of these blogs/portfolios would be hosted on an outside server, they would not take up any “space” on local servers. Schools working with this project would be able to back up this project through the selected “Server” company.

For the Google Apps portion of the work, to make it simpler for those involved, the naming structure would be similar. A student email (and Google Apps Suite) would be the following:

john5678@psdblogs.ca

A staff member would have the following (based on PSD naming structure):

gcouros@psdblogs.ca

As we have run a similar project to this in Forest Green, the total cost to host all of these blogs would be approximately \$100 a year, although more security measures could be placed through Google Apps products.

Having seen Edmonton Public School Board run a similar program with Google Apps, we know that we could have a strong partnership working with their school board.

Conclusion

As Parkland School Division believes in the importance and power of becoming a true “community of learners”, the use of these tools helps us to easily *collaborate, create, and learn* with each other in our schools, division, and the world. Through this process, with a clear focus on initiatives with powerful impact in the area of technology innovation, we build learning together. With so many tools that are available, it is essential that we narrow our focus and build capacity with this powerful divisional program.

In this initiative, we have a tremendous opportunity to connect and learn from others in an environment that meets the needs of today’s learners. To improve as a division, it is essential that we can easily share the learning and best practices of not only our staff, but also our students. This opportunity gives us the opportunity to grow our students, but as a learning organization. If we all grow together, we all get better and share our *best ideas* in the name of doing what is best for kids.

