

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING
(Authentic Learning Context)

PRIMARY PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT

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Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge and thank TeachNZ, Glenbervie School Board of Trustees and the staff at Glenbervie School.

Thank you to all the schools that I visited as part of the sabbatical; to the educators I met, observed and spoke with at; Arrowtown School, Shotover Primary School, Seven Oaks School, Haumoana School, Richmond School and Matahui School.

Thank you for generously giving your time and sharing your amazing educational journey's with me. To see and experience experiential learning occurring in so many different contexts and environments; provided a basis and benchmark to organise my thoughts on.

Executive Summary / Area of study: Purpose

My area of study is based upon Experiential Learning with focus aspects associated with experiential learning activities that reflect authentic contexts for student learning and staff professional development perspectives along with the communication of experiential learning to stakeholders.

Particular focus will be on:

- * the opportunities provided by experiential Learning to enhance learner agency
- * the requirements on teacher pedagogy and the reporting process
- * the impact of communicating Experiential Learning to stakeholders including Kahui Ako (COL).

My intent was to engage and collect information from other schools, engage in professional readings and literature to develop a better understanding of our journey in relation to others' experiences to ensure we are "on the right track" in regards to assessing and reporting experiential learning in a primary school setting and the possible associated challenges that Kahui Ako are facing.

There were a variety of School sizes and types from newly established schools, a private school, full primary schools and a mixture of decile ratings involved in my visits and conversations.

When visiting schools, I talked with school leaders and classroom teachers about their Experiential Learning programmes, assessment tools and reporting systems. We discussed their planning and assessment practices and the impact upon each school's targeted priority learners and the benefits and impacts associated with Kahui Ako.

Definitions: What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential Learning was identified by Aristotle many years ago, but David Kolb finalised Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) in 1984 from the "experienced-based learning" work of

many educationalists such as William James, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. The experiential learning experience is stated by Kolb, 1984, as; *“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.”*

Kolb’s theory identified four phases of the experiential learning cycle where each phase or stage was necessary to acquire knowledge: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation.

The more recent work regarding Experiential Learning focuses upon carrying out an authentic learning activity, reflecting upon it and adapting the subsequent learning in other realms. The Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0 (KLSI 4.0) is the latest incarnation and is updated with many years of research to now focus upon nine styles of typology: Initiating, Experiencing, Imagining, Reflecting, Analysing, Thinking, Deciding, Acting and Balancing.

The KLSI 4.0 has an effective personal assessment that is flexible enough to accommodate the demands of learners as they change their experiential learning styles to cope with different learning situations.

Patrick Felicia, 2011, states that experiential learning is “Learning through reflection on doing.” It is the assessment of experiential learning that is the challenge for educators as they try to understand what individual students are actually learning in real time.

Play-based learning has also become an important factor in the early years of education to support effective learning habits for students. The similarities to play-based learning and experiential learning can be seen in the Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whariki strand 5 - Exploration / Mana Aoturoa. This strand reflects the importance upon active exploration of the environment; developing critical thinking and reasoning skills.

Experiential learning pedagogies can be seen within the New Zealand Curriculum. The Vision of the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) states that students will be; confident, connected, actively involved, and life-long learners. The Principles from the above document put the student at the centre of teaching and learning and therefore encouraging metacognition.

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) identifies innovation, inquiry and curiosity as essential values and these are supported by the Key Competencies of thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self; relating to others and participating and contributing. The Key Competencies are developed to occur in social contexts which support the philosophy of knowledge acquisition in experiential learning.

The concept of experiential learning experiences and the correlation to individual well-being of learners is underscored in ERO's resource: Wellbeing for Success: A Resource for Schools, March 2016. It states that: "Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state, characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimism and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences."

Background and Rationale:

Glenbervie School is a rural school that has an amazing environment that is utilised for student learning. Our effective use of this environment, supported by staff and community provides effective student learning in all curriculum areas that has essential links to our strategic plan.

Glenbervie School has recently updated our Strategic Plan to include experiential learning and hands-on activities to support our learning programmes. The review of the Strategic Plan was supported by the Spring Board Trust Strategic Leadership for Principals Programme and this has led to an enhanced awareness of the importance we put upon experiential learning and how this learning is shared. We have also revised our "Wheel of Purposeful Learning" and "Choices" programmes to support and align with the strategic plan goals.

The Glenbervie School Strategic Plan priority for 2017 was to: Revise the effectiveness of experiential learning activities and the associated assessment system.

The effectiveness or "how we are going?" is an integral part in planning for the future and to allow us to determine the curriculum support structures required. When assessing the experiential learning process, I would like to determine what other schools are doing in this regard and how they are reporting it.

The Glenbervie School Strategic Plan *direction* is identified as: *"Develop experiential learning activities involving hands-on learning experiences that have authentic contexts."*

The Glenbervie School Strategic Plan *priority* for 2018 is: *"Authentic experiential activities are integrated into curriculum planning. Teachers collaborate and reflect on effective practice."*

A revision of the experiential learning and reporting system will provide Glenbervie School with the confidence that we are "on track". We have recently joined a Kahui Ako and want to determine what benefits and impacts this can have on our philosophy.

Findings: What are other schools doing in regards to Experiential Learning?

When discussing Experiential Learning with the Schools I visited the common theme that prevailed was one that experiential learning did not occur in isolation and was of course a part of the larger picture of learning as a whole. The essential elements of a School's vision, culture, values, environment, pedagogical knowledge and curriculum base underpinned how, and to what extent, experiential learning was integrated into the ethos of the school.

Each school cited the importance of a complete curriculum, supported by the New Zealand Curriculum's Key Competencies, and reiterated the integration of experiential learning with individual student's learning styles.

Teachers in the schools visited promoted experiential learning by utilising local contexts, environments and pertinent challenging factors. For example, senior students were involved

in civic projects such as identifying the need to have a water fountain at a local skate park, organising river clean up events, operating their own in-school coffee shop, creating pamphlets to raise awareness about wetland areas, Harvest Food Table to share kai with the local community and a wide variety of engaging activities.

A large proportion of schools were developing team-teaching environments, variously called: Habitats, Teaming and Learning Pods (based upon Maori Realms i.e. Te Ao Marama). The team-teaching environments varied from school-to-school and region, but were primarily based upon the Modern Learning Environment (MLE).

Professional development for staff was an essential part of enhancing pedagogy capable of supporting and sustaining experiential education as a whole in schools. The various schools approached professional development in a variety of ways, but generally it was in-house staff meetings and opportunities that enabled staff to enhance school culture, learning styles and emotional and characteristic learning development. Professional development also focused upon leadership development, particularly in the first instance, with staff. Some of these included Joan Dalton's "Learning Talk: Build Capabilities" and Simon Sinek's leadership talks on Youtube. Generally, professional development occurred on the understanding that as the staff developed, so in turn, followed student development. Professional development opportunities specifically directed at experiential learning were very few and far between for the schools that I talked with.

Curriculum development in the schools visited stemmed from each school's journey to build values, learning beliefs, pedagogical processes and philosophies. Philosophies of learning were ratified and simplified to ensure a common and simple direction. The "why" of the journey, the "beliefs", were communicated in a clear manner for all to follow and lead with. These were portrayed in visual charts and posters distributed in classrooms and around the schools.

One school identified a *Learning Model*, *learning beliefs*, *values* and *capacities* to ensure planning and curriculum delivery occurred that supported experiential learning.

A private school was able to utilise the *Arrowsmith Program*, *Feuerstein Method* and the *Brilliant Curriculum* to enhance their journey to enhance experiential learning in authentic contexts.

Another school promoted *Learner Qualities* (aligned with key competencies), *values*, *beliefs* and *principles*, *graduate profiles*, a *learning process* and *real* and *local connections* to develop experiential learning outcomes.

The assessment of experiential learning was a specific interest to me and how it was being carried out in schools. I found that there was a variety of tools and methods being used.

One school utilised the Showbie App that allowed parents to see in "real" time what their children were achieving live via their mobile phone. Each achievement level and current learning activity could be commented upon by the parents as teachers and students uploaded them. This appeared to be working effectively and the immediate response of feedback seemed to encourage the students in their endeavours.

Another school was establishing “live” Google documents for individual students and their families to monitor real-time learning, especially in experiential learning in collaborative classroom settings.

Involvement in Kahui Ako (COL's) was evident in all schools I visited. Some of the schools found the clusters to be an “add-on extra” to their already busy workload, others had embraced the Community of Learning concept and found little benefit in regards of support for experiential learning and a very few had managed to utilised the COL to share their journey and philosophies involving experiential learning.

Further findings:

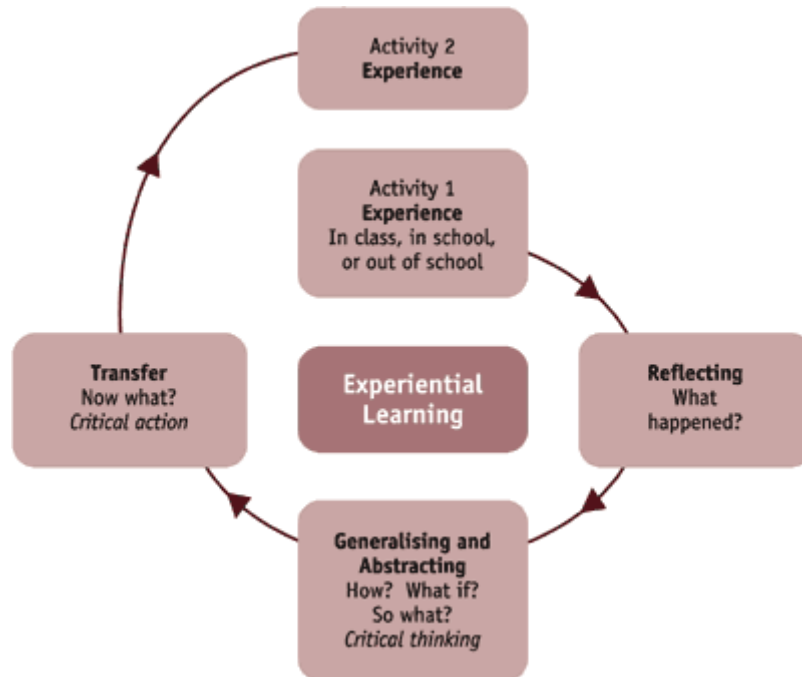
The Experiential Learning cycle:

The experiential learning cycle is broken into four phases that Henton states "begins with activity, moves through reflection, then to generalizing and abstracting and finally to transfer" (Henton, 1996, page 39) – basically David Kolb's 1984 summary.

- Teachers create and identify activities or experiences that demonstrate a concept or raise questions. The experience provides students with opportunities to engage with the topic in a variety of ways.
- The reflection phase encourages students to query and review what they have done. The students should ask questions that begin with "what" and more importantly “why”, thereby examining different answers and developing skills for critical thinking (analysing, synthesising and evaluating).
- The generalising and abstracting phases enable the students to examine the experience at a deeper level. Students gain meaning from the information they interpreted from the questions utilised in the reflecting phase and are then encouraged to examine abstract concepts and make connections between ideas and their actual experience. Identifying the next steps and asking 'how', 'what if', and 'so what' questions should then follow.
- The transferring phase is the stage where students now apply the knowledge they have learnt to another activity or to their daily lives using questions such as 'now what'. This phase generally involves student ownership and critical action as a result. An outcome with effective measures such as a community based project, where both students and the community benefit from the outcome, would be a great end result.

(Adapted from Henton, 1996).

The Experiential Learning Cycle.



Student learning styles:

Student learning styles are an important aspect in regards to experiential learning. Kolb identifies four learning styles; diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating.

Diverging (feeling and watching – Concrete Experience/Reflective Observation)

These people are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive. They prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations from several different viewpoints.

Kolb called this style 'diverging' because these people perform better in situations that require ideas-generation, for example, brainstorming. People with a diverging learning style have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, and tend to be strong in the arts. People with the diverging style prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback.

Assimilating (watching and thinking – Abstract Conceptualisation/ Reflective Observation)

The Assimilating learning preference involves a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important than people. These people require good clear explanation rather than a practical opportunity. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organizing it in a clear, logical format. People with an assimilating learning style are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts. People with this style are more attracted to logically sound theories than approaches based on practical value. This learning style is important for effectiveness in information and science careers. In formal learning situations, people with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through.

Converging (doing and thinking - Abstract Conceptualisation /Active Experimentation)

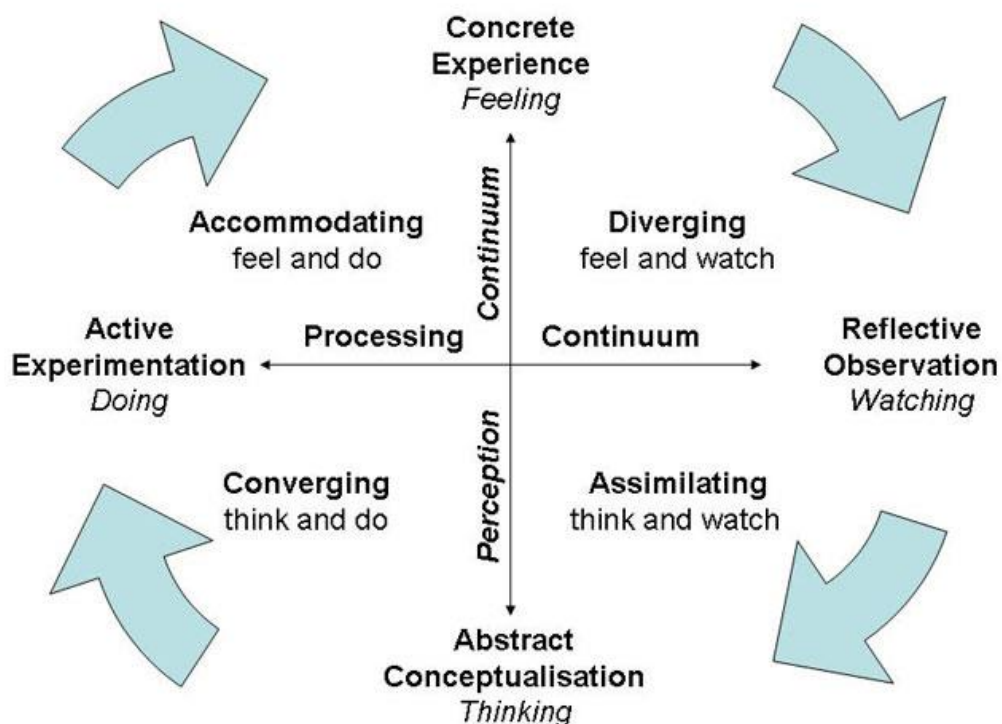
People with a converging learning style can solve problems and will use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks, and are less concerned with people

and interpersonal aspects. People with a converging learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. They can solve problems and make decisions by finding solutions to questions and problems. People with a converging learning style are more attracted to technical tasks and problems than social or interpersonal issues. A converging learning style enables specialist and technology abilities. People with a converging style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.

Accommodating (doing and feeling - Concrete Experience / Active Experimentation)
 The Accommodating learning style is 'hands-on,' and relies on intuition rather than logic. These people use other people's analysis, and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach. They are attracted to new challenges and experiences, and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on 'gut' instinct rather than logical analysis. People with an accommodating learning style will tend to rely on others for information than carry out their own analysis. This learning style is prevalent within the general population, (McLeod, S. A. 2017).

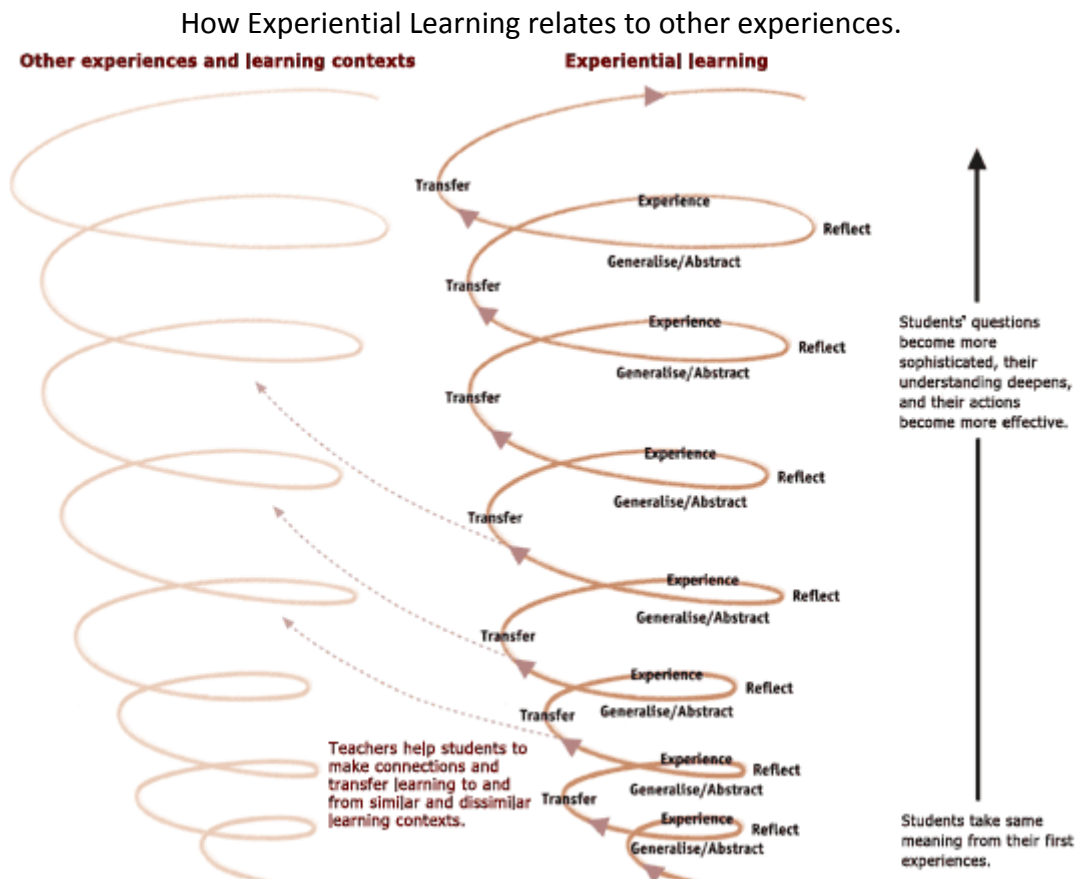
Kolb refers to two variables or choices that influence the preferred learning style that students use on their learning journey in the experiential realm. They are reflected by two continuums; processing (how we approach the task) and perception (how we think or feel about it). The continuums can be seen below interacting with the various learning styles.

Learning Style variable Continuums.



Assessing Experiential Learning:

The challenge of identifying "what to" and "how to" assess when considering the experiential learning cycle, involves separating and aligning what Henton describes as the spiral of context and the experiential spiral "*The conscious attention to processing learning develops in an upward or outwardly expanding spiral, so that with each new experience, the student not only develops greater ability to generalize, abstract and transfer learning, but also recognizes how each level is linked and interconnected to the other.*" Henton, 1996, pg 46.



To assist in assessing the experiential learning process teachers are required to observe their students closely during each activity and identify the gaps in their knowledge base or skills in order to adjust the activity and their own teaching accordingly, Henton, 1996.

Studies have shown that an effective plan, generally a school-wide focus, allows teachers the mechanism to consider the contextual spiral with the learning spiral when assessing students.

The process in the experiential learning cycle is just as important as the final outcome; and as such when assessing the learning process, formative assessment strategies must be considered. Self-assessment in the form of reflection is an integral part of assessment in experiential learning and the student must take some form of responsibility in the process with guidance from the teacher.

Examples of strategies that can be used to assess experiential learning:

- * Allowing students to define how their work will be assessed: co-constructing what criteria will be used to assess their work; possibly creating a simple assessment rubric.
- * Creating a reflective journal or a portfolio.
- * Reflection on critical events that took place during the experience.
- * Essay, report, or presentation (could be arts-based, multimedia or oral) on what has been learnt.
- * Self-awareness tools and exercises (e.g. questionnaires about learning patterns).
- * Short answers to questions of a 'why' or 'explain' nature (e.g., "What did you learn during this project? What did you not learn that you would like to?")
- * One-on-one oral assessments with the teacher.
- * A project that develops ideas further (individually or in small groups)
- * Self-evaluation and/or group evaluation of a task performed.

Integrated Curriculum and Experiential Learning:

An integrated curriculum is an essential element when considering experiential learning.

A good integrated curriculum has features of transdisciplinary learning including: real life context, student questions and concerns as starting places for inquiries, teachers as co-planners, co-learners, and general and/or specialist interdisciplinary skills and concepts applied in a real-life context. Transferrable concepts provide a good foundation for organising curriculum in integrated curriculum. These transferrable concepts have an explicit transdisciplinary dimension through students' experiential learning, where first-hand experience leads to observation, experimentation, reflection and implications for new actions. The recurrent higher-level concepts are social and emotional intelligence, academic learning in real world contexts, physical and mental resilience, and physical skills experience.

Implications for our School:

The result of my investigations into experiential learning within the New Zealand educational context leads me to believe that Glenbervie School needs to continue on the journey we have started that effectively engages our students in meaningful, hands-on, authentic experiential learning.

The current focus of using a school wide inquiry, our community and our environment to provide authentic contexts for learning; has been seen as successful and motivating for students.

The Education Review Office external evaluation of Glenbervie School in term one, 2018 commented upon the School conditions for equity and excellence – processes and practices, 2.1: What school processes and practices are effective in enabling achievement of equity and excellence, and acceleration of learning?

“Children experience an extensive and innovative curriculum that engages them and contributes to their high levels of achievement. The active playground space is thoughtfully designed to provide children with opportunities for physical challenge, problem solving, creative thinking and fun. Children make links to their learning in real world contexts through the integrated inquiry learning model and experiential learning opportunities.”

The Glenbervie School Values (Respect, Resilience, Integrity, Perseverance and Self-Discipline, *RRIPS*) are an important aspect in developing a strong base to build learning on. One of the suggested goals of education in the Government’s 2016 revision of the Education Act states that: "... the goals of the education system should be to foster qualities such as resilience, determination, confidence, creativity and critical thinking in students on the basis that these are essential for people to live happy, useful lives."

This statement supports Glenbervie School’s belief that the values, skills, attitudes and experiences that children need to grow and develop, are supported and enhanced through the experiential learning experience.

Developing teacher pedagogy in and around experiential learning is a priority and the continual monitoring of staff acquisition of knowledge, particularly as new staff members are employed, is paramount.

Staff professional developmental opportunities for experiential learning and assessment in New Zealand are very scarce and as such internal (in-house) opportunities are required. Staff meetings and personal professional reading would be required to allow knowledge development.

The senior leadership team would be required to build their professional knowledge and capabilities as part of a structured approach to their new learning. This approach requires support through time, access to professional learning opportunities and networking with others on a similar path for these skills to grow, so learning can be shared with teams and staff.

Ensuring that the experiential learning curriculum develops deeper learning, or metacognition, as students’ progress through the year levels, was an area identified in the 2018 term one ERO review: “Leaders could consider further ways to be assured that the inquiry and experiential learning curriculum builds cognitive challenge and deeper learning for children as they move through the school. Identifying expectations at different year levels, and tracking the outcomes for children of programmes that heighten critical and creative thinking and problem solving, may be useful.”

Therefore creating accurate indicators and tracking student progress and achievement is an important developmental area to focus upon in the immediate future.

Glenbervie School needs to continue, and to enhance, the concept of students engaging with, and interacting with, our community to support, lead and manage authentic experiential learning activities that have purpose and meaning. These activities would produce benefits for our environment and the community, whilst building knowledge and skills and developing collective intrinsic satisfaction and pride.

We need to share our direction (kaupapa) with the community and ensure we have ownership from staff, students and community for experiential learning to be fully realised.

We believe that our positive and effective curriculum developments and philosophy fits well with the kaupapa that our Kahui Ako is aiming for and that our focus improves learner confidence, agency and learning (COL strategic challenge 2 - "Facilitate student learning and development through provision of an environment that fosters authentic and meaningful learning"). Glenbervie School staff could lead in this area, if given the opportunity.

Heading into next year our 2019 charter and strategic plan priority is stated below.

1.2.1 Authentic experiential activities are included in curriculum overview planning that identifies whole school inquiry topic concepts that make connections to our environment, community, environmental education and Glenbervie School learning programs.

Conclusions:

Information gained through research, observation, discussion and interviews during the sabbatical increased my own knowledge and provided me with an enhanced pedagogical understanding from which to lead a review of Glenbervie School's current assessment practice of experiential learning and the communication of this learning to stakeholders. The sabbatical has therefore enabled me to identify aspects of good practice, lead and support teachers in the implementation, enhancement and consolidation of these programmes and also enable me to make informed decisions regarding future strategic direction.

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