

Co-curricular activity

Applied Learning Experience: Abbotsleigh Girls School

The Abbotsleigh Applied Learning Experience provides Year 10 students with the opportunity to participate in a student-directed project in an area of curriculum relevance and personal interest. The projects are proposed by students and members of staff and aim to develop students' problem-solving skills, collaborative skills and initiative. All projects incorporate a service element in keeping with the school's commitment to service learning as pedagogy. All projects also make use of technology in preparation for showcasing the project achievements to a public audience.

Year levels

Early Adolescence – Later Adolescence

Explicit values focus

- **Care and compassion:** The focus on the integration of an element of meaningful community service involves student exploring the potential in their project for active contribution to the wellbeing of the broader community. In so doing, the project encourages pro-social behaviours that are modelled inside each group dynamic and extend to the interactions the groups have with the community.
- **Doing your best:** Students have ownership of the project from the proposal stage right through to the final sharing of project outcomes and reflections. Students are assisted by a teacher-mentor who guides the group as they develop and implement their project. It is this sense of ownership that has seen students develop real-world problem-solving skills and an increased sense of self-efficacy that stands them in good stead as they enter the senior years of their secondary schooling.
- **Respect:** Students need to work as a team, and quickly come to realise that their skills in relating to others are a crucial ingredient for success
- **Responsibility:** The proposal stage requires that students consider their strengths and weaknesses as a group and identify skills sets that they may need to acquire and then to nominate areas of individual responsibility. The real-world nature of the projects helps students to see that their actions have consequences that impact on more than just their performance. We have been very impressed by how engaged and responsible students are when they see the relevance and importance of their projects to broader community needs.
- **Understanding, tolerance and inclusion:** Many projects have involved our students in situations that have challenged their assumptions about the world and have led them to a greater understanding of a more diverse range of cultures and viewpoints.

Key learning areas

Cross-Disciplinary: Students need to identify curriculum links in their proposals and reflect on the relevance of the skills acquired and developed through the semester-long process to their work in their curriculum subjects. These skills include problem solving, effective teamwork, relationship building, reflection, budgeting, project planning and implementation.

School profile

Abbotsleigh is a K–12 Anglican independent girls' school on Sydney's upper north shore. It has a student population of approximately 1,350 students. The senior school has 150 boarders from a variety of regional and international areas.

Reason for co-curricular activity

The concept initially arose from a growing concern about student engagement in Year 10 after the NSW School Certificate examinations were complete. This concern was coupled with a desire to provide students with an experiential curriculum activity which challenged them to work in self-directed teams to bring a project based on personal interest and community benefit to fruition.

Implementation and development

The project requires students to work over six months to propose, plan and enact the project with the assistance of a teacher–mentor. Students are invited to submit draft proposals to a staff committee for consideration and feedback. At this point, the feasibility and the integrity of the proposals are considered and projects are grouped under three headings according to their primary purpose: To Explore, To Create and To Serve. Students select three options that they would like to undertake and are then placed in project teams. We are careful to consider staff motivation, level of interest and expertise when matching mentors to teams.

Project planning is undertaken in weekly 30-minute blocks and the 80-minute fortnightly Friday afternoon Pastoral Care period. A week is set aside in late November for the implementation of the project and this allows for student projects that require off-site travel and accommodation.

The project culminates in a showcase that is open to the senior school, interested parents and community groups. Teams have to display their project, effectively communicating its outcomes and their group reflections. Students are encouraged to use a range of technologies to share their learning.

Informal and formal evaluation takes place with students, staff and community stakeholders, where appropriate, to assess the learning that has taken place as well as the meaningfulness of the contribution to the broader community. It is interesting to note that sometimes the most valuable learning comes from projects where outcomes are not achieved as they may have been proposed originally. The real-world environment necessitates compromise, modification and sometimes disappointment, and students gain a great deal of valuable understanding that may lead to greater resilience in the long term.

Outcomes

The Applied Learning Experience is about active rather than passive learning. The students must be engaged, self-motivated and responsible for their own learning. The Applied Learning Project is based on experiential learning principles that are essential for the development of active, reflective and passionate lifelong learners.

Project outcomes include:

- **Cooperation** – Students learn to work together towards a specific purpose. Teachers and mentors are seen as team members, and learning as practice and action.

- **Commitment** – Initiative, courage and dedication are essential to the success of the program. Girls take responsibility for the goals they set and work hard to achieve them.
- **Appreciation of Diversity** – Students learn to respect differences among community members through working with community agencies and people from backgrounds different to their own.
- **Responsibility** – Projects are frequently developed from student interest and this leads to an increased level of engagement in the project. In many cases, students have shown they really care about the outcome of their work and their group members.
- **Risk-taking** – There is a level of risk in all programs. There are plenty of occasions when plans/projects do not go as planned. The 'real' consequences and the unpredictability of each program provide a unique opportunity to take measured, scaffolded risks.
- **Reflection opportunities** – Reflection is an important component of the program. Using reflection journals, girls are given time to consider the dialogue with the community stakeholders in the project, their groups' planning processes, their effectiveness as team members and the outcomes of the project.