

# DECONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL DIG: EXAMINING RYERSON'S REAL INSTITUTE SPEAKING PROJECT

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## Abstract

The Cultural Dig project, which is in its fourth year, has been the opportunity for students of the REAL Institute to showcase their work. The focus of this project has been for students to make connections to what they have learned throughout the year. These cultural “digs” give students the opportunity to reflect on their learning as well as their future educational and professional path while engaging with the Ryerson’s general student body. Examining how this project was conceived, along with the rationale, the triumphs, and the struggles, for both students and teachers will be part of the discussion.

It is the final days of school, and students are getting ready for their final project. Dressed in business attire and with professionally designed posters in-hand, they march into the largest Ryerson building on Yonge St. and are about to complete their final assignment of the school year. They are nervous, yet they are ready to face their future peers, professors, and other community members.

Ryerson’s Real Institute (RRI) EAP program has recently completed its 6th year and like many programs, there are certain challenges that were faced. The program is an academic preparation program for English language learners,

which runs for 8 months. The goal is to prepare students linguistically for their post-secondary studies. Like many programs, there has been a fair share of success and setbacks. Since the first cohort, RRI has been following its graduates and their progress over the course of their undergraduate degrees. The Real Institute invites the RRI alumni back to discuss their journey in post-secondary studies in Canada. There is also a follow-up with the departments that the students will enter once they have graduated from RRI. What emerged from these conversations was a concern with the students' ability to connect with the Ryerson community at large.

At the RRI, students are given a safe space to grow into the Canadian academic culture, but the difficulty is connecting them to the main campus. This is due to the nature of the EAP program and the location of the school, which is off the main campus. Like many EAP classes, there are 18-20 students who study together for 8 months at a time. Our goal is to help students explore the expectations of the university and to prepare them for what is to come. However, once they have graduated, they enter into their programs like any other first year students.

## **What is the 'Cultural Dig'?**

The question we asked ourselves was, how can we bridge the gap between our EAP community and the general student population at Ryerson? Professors from other departments were concerned with the EAP graduates' ability to communicate with them even for the most basic exchanges. From their experience, the students had a difficult time engaging with their professors. There was difficulty with eye contact, and the encounters that did occur were often short and awkward.

When following up with our alumni, they also mentioned the difficulty they had with their professors and with their peers. They found group work and meeting people in their program who did not have the same L1 extremely challenging. The undergraduate experience was very lonely for them. Students felt ill-prepared to network, which they felt was a skill necessary for survival in both their studies and beyond.

My colleague Scott Eason and I came up with the idea of the Cultural Dig as the RRI's final project when we were looking to have our students engage more with their learning. We were working on the project from several angles. First, we wanted to connect the Ryerson community with our students. Our students had very little connection to their future programs except for a few who got the chance to take some credit courses, but this was not offered or accessible to all students. Second, we wanted to expose our students to what Ryerson had to offer and to give them an opportunity to engage with others outside of our program. Third, we wanted to showcase the abilities of our students to the Ryerson community at large in a space that would push our students to network but to do so in a somewhat controlled and safe environment.

The idea of the project was simple. Students were to present one aspect of a unit theme in a 'science fair' type event and highlight what they had learned throughout the course of the year. They were asked to connect what they had learned in a way in which this aspect might impact their lives in the future.

In our EAP program, we have curricular units that are content-based. Students would pick one aspect of one unit that they would research and use this as a platform to engage with the audience. We asked students to use their research as a way to connect with the audience. We emphasized that the Cultural Dig was NOT a presentation, but its focus was on networking. Students were taught presentation skills and networking skills to prepare for the event. The goal was to learn how to make connections with Ryerson community members who could become their future peers and professors.

## Research and the Dig

When the Dig was first conceived, the project was not approached theoretically, but more from meeting an observed need at the time. In our EAP program, the workshops were divided into two separate courses: reading and writing, and listening and speaking. We found that students were not taking the listening and speaking workshops seriously. We also found that there was a lack of reflective practices especially in the listening and speaking curriculum. Most of our curriculum in speaking was focused on smaller tasks without a larger project. It was from there that we started the planning process of the Cultural Dig.

As time has passed, we have attempted to understand the project from a theoretical standpoint. Experiential learning has played a significant role in the curriculum at RRI. The Dig is based on Project-based Learning (PBL), an experiential approach based on ‘learning by doing’, where student experience has a significant impact on their learning process (Efstratia, 2014; Kolb, 1984). It is through this meaningful experience that students are using and developing their ability to problem solve, critique, analyze, assess, collaborate, and communicate amongst other skills (Barron, et. al., 1998; Lee & Lim, 2012; Moss & Van Duzer, 1998). However, most of the research to date has looked at the effect that PBL has had on students at the elementary school and high school level, but fewer studies have researched the effects that PBL could have on adult learners. The argument for PBL in adult learners stems from the fact that it encourages and gives students an opportunity to strengthen themselves in their preferred learning style (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998).

The Cultural Dig aligns with the PBL approach in that it is student-driven, realistic, and collaborative between students, teachers and administration (Thomas, 2000). Also, learning is scaffolded with skills and strategies, and what is produced through this learning are artifacts to be shown and shared (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005).

## Barriers to the Dig

The first year of the Dig, we had no idea how it was going to appear. The idea seemed like a simple one. Students were to have a poster presentation on what they had learned over the course of the semester. The idea was taken from the science fairs that we had experienced as elementary school students. As the Dig was being planned, we realized that there was much more planning needed in order for it to be effective, polished, and experiential for our students.

The Dig itself had many moving parts. In the beginning, it had taken more than a semester to set up and required the involvement of both the administration, coordinators, and all of the instructors in the program. Also, what was needed was a budget for rudimentary marketing material. Another issue with the Dig was the logistics of evaluating students. The nature of the Dig made it challenging to

have evaluations of students on the day of the event. There was a finite amount of time to evaluate many students, and the interactive nature of the event made it problematic if feedback was to be given in detail, especially considering how close to the university deadline grade submissions align with the day of the Dig. A third issue involved the audience. We wanted to ensure that participants would show up for our students. An integral part was to have students present in an interactive environment, so traffic was necessary on the day of the Dig.

## **Trouble-shooting the Dig**

The project required coordination from both the administration and the teaching staff. The planning started at the beginning of the semester, and the Dig itself took place at the end. Students were asked to complete various tasks. First, they were asked to design a professional poster that represented their topic at the Dig. Though students were put into groups based on their topic, the Dig itself was done individually. Each aspect the student had chosen was unique as was their perspective.

In order to create a more streamlined process, the students had to plan the Dig in stages. The first stage involved a proposal. Students were put into groups based on the aspect of the module they had chosen, and they were asked to create a proposal that outlined how and what students were to present at the Dig. Once it was approved, students worked on several items: a group poster, an individual poster, and a pitch.

As a group, students had to create a poster that represented their group's unit theme. We gave students a session on how to build their posters and how to present themselves professionally. Individually, students had to create a visual that represented their aspect. The students had free range for their individual visual, which ranged from videos to infographics to objects, which were to be used as an aide. The only visuals students were not permitted to use were PPT or Prezi since students had ineffectively used those programs in the past during the Dig. In the weeks leading up to the Dig, the instructors had conferences with students individually and as a group, giving them feedback on their process. Several dry runs focusing on specific aspects of the Dig were held in class,

including a final practice with other classes acting as audience members. It is in that primary instance where teachers had the chance to assess the students. This was the opportunity for instructors to listen and watch the interaction in detail focusing on language points and varying aspects of presentation skills. On the day of the Dig, students were evaluated more holistically. Instructors looked to see that the students had come prepared, and that they were ready to engage with their audience.

In order to secure an audience, several measures were taken. The student support staff created an invitation/flyer that was sent out to all the departments at Ryerson. One to two days prior to the Dig, students were asked to canvas the campus and pitch to the community about coming to the Dig. The students were to create an elevator speech that would get the attention of a potential audience. Though students found this challenging, it reinforced skills that instructors had highlighted as being important for networking. Instructors emphasized the importance of body language (not only theirs but those of the people that they approached). Students were asked to think about who they should approach, what kinds of body language to look for, and how to deal with potential rejection. Students had to use the skills and strategies we had reviewed in class to approach strangers and to present themselves at the event.

To facilitate the event, the Student Learning Centre (SLC) was chosen as the location for the Dig. The SLC was ideal because it was located in the heart of downtown Toronto. Also, it contained the library, and connected various student services, which made it a building with heavy foot traffic. We had some incentives for potential participants, including complimentary refreshments and a chance to win one of the door prizes. During the Dig itself, classes had to rotate at times when they were presenting the Dig. Students who were not presenting were canvassing for the event. An MC also helped bring in more traffic. Students were required to dress professionally on the day. When they were brought an audience, students were asked to engage by presenting what they had learned over the course of the semester, while engaging with their audience members. The discussion revolved around where each participant came from, their particular position on the topic, and why their audience was at Ryerson.

At present, four iterations of the Cultural Dig have been curated, and responses from the audience and students have been overwhelmingly positive. Many of the audience members had never heard of the Real Institute and reported that they were impressed by the professionalism of the students. The faculty who attended the Dig found that it was a great opportunity for them to understand the mission of the Real Institute. For the students, they also felt this experience was rewarding. They enjoyed the process of reflection over the course of the year planning this process. Though they were nervous about presenting in front of such an audience, they felt they had learned from the experience. Some of the students reported that they could tell the difference between an audience member who was truly engaged and one who was there simply for the food or the potential to win a prize. They felt honoured that their future professors and the President of Ryerson were present at the Dig; the prospect of entering their regular programs in the fall seemed less intimidating. What was most surprising was how this event brought together individual classes, instructors, and administration. Though the process had its challenges, the Dig created a community working together for one purpose. It is for these reasons why the Real Institute continues to push for this project every year.

## Implications for Future Digs

Like every project we have at the Real Institute, there is consistent development in ways to make the Dig more productive and more effective. At the end of each year, the Dig is reviewed by the instructors on how it can be improved.

Improvements can be made in several ways. First, it is important that concrete feedback from our students and our participants is considered. Due to the timing of the Dig, it has been a challenge, which we hope to change in the future with student and audience surveys. Second, we hope to continuously create a process that is simpler than the one we have currently. After the second Cultural Dig, it was understood that it is most effective to have a teacher and administrator who acted as lead to help facilitate any communication or deadlines that needed to be met. This was due to the size of the program and the amount of coordination a project like this requires. Third, though it was emphasized throughout the preparation process that networking and making connections with the audience

were the goals, it was a challenge to have them move away from a presentation to having a conversation with an audience member. For the future, the idea of networking should be addressed much earlier in the semester so that students can become more comfortable with this skill. It is important for teachers to reinforce the networking aspect by moving away from materials that are more presentation-based.

## Final Thoughts

When we initially created this project, we had no idea the impact that it would have on our program. We went from making it a small project to embedding the skills and strategies for the Dig as being central to our curriculum. We are pleased that the project has grown and evolved, and we hope to continue to create similar projects that give students the confidence for their future studies and careers.

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### Author Bio

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Catrina Ascenuik has been in the field of education for over 10 years. It was her travels that brought her into the field. She has taught overseas in China and Japan and at various types of schools in Canada. She has worked with immigrant centres and at post-secondary institutions across Ontario. Though most of her teaching has been dedicated to ESL and EAP, she has also taught Communications at colleges across Toronto. She is currently working at Ryerson University and the University of Toronto. She is interested in bringing various types of community projects to the field of ESL and EAP.

