

## TEACHING SNAPSHOTS

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## Impact Projects

**Level:** Years 11-13**School:** [Albany Senior High School](#)**Teacher:** All teaching staff**Category:** Whole-school project-based learning[Download Pamphlet](#) (PDF, 125kb)

Founding a new school provides opportunity to look at different ways of delivering effective learning and the flexibility to build new ideas into a timetable. Albany Senior High School, the first state senior school in the country, opened in 2009 with a unique structure in which the whole school goes 'off timetable' every Wednesday. Every student spends the whole day working on what is called an Impact Project which, regardless of the subject matter, follows a process of development which has close links to Technology.

The development of an Impact Project programme was the responsibility of Deputy Principal Miranda Makin when the first staff of 18 teachers – appointed to the yet-to-be-built school in 2008 and accommodated in a rented house – started developing the school curriculum. The teachers had one term to determine the philosophy and values of the new school and construct their programmes for the first year. Albany Senior High (Years 11-13) would be an intermediate step between junior schooling and tertiary education or the workplace and, as far as possible, the students would get individual support to help them make the transition. The structure of the school building reflects this approach to teaching – instead of traditional classrooms the students work in open plan 'learning commons' for most of their specialist subjects. Students meet in small tutorial groups rather than form classes, which allows for input from parents and specialist teachers.

The Impact projects were devised to encourage students to think more independently and to pursue their interests, and also provide an opportunity to investigate areas not catered for by the everyday school subjects. Although they aren't all careers-focussed there is that underlying message, in that they allow students to discover what sorts of areas they might (or might not) be interested in as a career or life-long pursuit. Students can also take the skills and knowledge gained from an Impact Project into the workplace or tertiary education.

"Essentially, the Impact project is about students investigating their passions" says HOD Product Design Tim Cook "and it's driven by the students". He explains that the projects fit with the [Key Competencies](#) in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) – Thinking; Using Language, Symbols, and Texts; Managing Self; Relating to Others; Participating and Contributing. The students are expected to plan their project so that it benefits the community in some way. In 2010, for example, a group of students worked with the North Shore City Council to improve a local park by redesigning a skateboarding area. One aim behind the Impact Projects, explains Tim, is to get students used to working with and seeing themselves as part of the wider community.

The Impact Projects are also linked with the Technology curriculum. The technological process underpins the Impact Projects because all the students follow this in their work – developing a brief, planning for practice, consulting with stakeholders, evaluating their outcome, etc.

Because the projects are based on a very similar design process to Technology, Tim and TIC Food/Fabric Sharon Catchpole both took roles as cluster leaders. In the first year, with its intake of only Year 11s, the students were divided into four cluster groups, each led by a teacher knowledgeable about the technological process and therefore able to support those teachers who might feel "way outside their comfort zone". Tim adds that it has been a big learning curve for teachers to come on board and learn this process, but that by the second year the staff as a whole had become a lot better at facilitating the projects.



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The projects are based on teamwork – to reflect a workplace where people have to negotiate with team members and others to successfully complete a project, and a project leader assigns each member a particular role within the group. There are usually four students in a group but there is scope for smaller or larger groups if need be. One semester (two terms) is allocated for the projects to be started and completed. In the second semester students can change groups and create a new project or, if there is new learning that can be added on to it, choose to continue with their initial project.

The students can create a project around anything they are interested in, and can approach it in whichever way best suits them. Some groups will organise their own project while others might choose to work through an organised system such as a [CREST](#) project or a [Gateway](#) placement. The programme is flexible enough to allow for students who want to go down an individual pathway or focus on a particular academic area.

To inform students about the possibilities and help them with their decision-making, cluster group teachers set up 'bus stops' at the beginning of the semester. Students visit each 'stop' and listen to teachers talking about their specialist subjects and how they fit into Impact projects. The presentations vary according to the teacher or the semester so Tim, for example, might talk about Technology department projects in general, a specific technological development and its impact on society or focus on a particular area his team is keen to teach.

Students are given a timeline for deciding on their project and the expectation is made clear that they will bring their proposal to the teachers and will not be chased up for it. Time is allowed for everyone to think about what they would like to do before they form groups to plan a project. This stage is something Tim describes as "a state of flux which, during the proposal process, will become a well-organised programme", with appropriate learning targets and other project outcomes agreed between the Impact Project mentor, cluster leader and the group. These are agreed in discussions following the presentation of a formal proposal of their plan. Impact Project mentors and cluster leaders will look at aspects such as:

- is the project feasible?
- is it authentic?
- does it have strong community links?
- what specialist subject(s) does it link with?
- the deep learning involved in the project
- can they achieve their aims in the time available?

Every teacher acts as a facilitator/mentor for individual groups which, Tim says, can put pressure on them to upskill if they need to help students with particular techniques, etc. Sometimes they will try to find somebody in the community with the requisite skills and expertise, which might involve facilitating meetings or a lecture at school or sending students out to meet an expert. Several groups with an interest in cars, for example, have worked with mechanics at local garages where they have received advice and learnt skills which have helped with their project. Students can also make their own links within the community to facilitate their projects.

A lot of groups will use one of the Technology workrooms, for all or part of their project. A group might create a product in the Food Technology room, for example, and then video it and finish working on their project in the Media Studies area. Tim says that the Product Design department tries to support students' individual and group interests and will do their best to fund specialist equipment needed for particular projects – recent examples include equipment for the robotics team and the jewellery-making group. More often, the equipment needed is already contained within the department.

After submitting their proposal and starting work, students often realise after three or four weeks that their final outcome is going to be significantly different. Teachers are ready to reassure them that a change in direction is perfectly acceptable in an Impact Project (as also in a Technology project) and that, in consultation with their mentor, they just need to ensure that any change is reflected in the planning. Students keep all their documentation in e-portfolios which their mentor will look at regularly. They also make a small presentation on their progress to their cluster group every week, as another skill underpinning the programme is the ability to present ideas.

On completion of their project the group makes a formal presentation, often using PowerPoint, to their cluster group and answers any questions put to them by their mentor or the group. The students are assessed on the quality of their presentation, to underline that this is the sort of thing they may have to do in the workplace or higher education, so watching others is helpful in showing them the elements and

styles that make a successful presentation.

Although the Impact Projects aren't necessarily based on the curriculum, teachers investigate how students might be able to submit work for NCEA assessment or in competitions such as Trash to Fashion, Young Designers Awards or Vex Robotics Competition.

The Impact Projects have also led to some cross-curricular work. A group developing a trebuchet, for example, worked with Richard Mackrory (HOD Maths) during the design phase of their project and then with Tim in the workshop when they made a scale model. Following the success of this project (and the students were so enthusiastic that they now want to make a full-size trebuchet) Tim and Richard have discussed further collaboration. They are looking at possibilities in their specialist subjects – perhaps a new maths course with a practical element or a Technology course with a bigger maths component.

By the second year, the Impact Projects were firmly established in the school curriculum and any little "glitches" dealt with as they arose. There will obviously be some teething problems when a new school begins a new programme with a cohort of students at one level only. The new Year 11s had to adjust to their senior status and increased autonomy without any guidance from older students which, Tim says, "was a bit of a roller coaster to start with". However, with protocols in place and students now familiar with expectations, there has been a smooth transition as these students move into Year 12 and the new intake of Year 11s is looking at and learning from the older students. Intermingling between the Year 11s and 12s is encouraged in the Impact Projects so that students pass on the ethos and method of doing things across year groups.

A lot of students come from Albany Junior High School, and by the second year were already arriving with an awareness of how things are done at the senior school. A growing relationship between the two schools has helped that transition and Year 10 teachers now have an understanding of what their students will move on to, while Year 11 teachers know what experience and knowledge their students will bring with them.

The school is also creating links with Massey University, which is just down the road, and hopes to create strong links with other institutions.

Working with outside experts is important for the Impact Projects and the support they provide means that students aren't limited in the scope of their work. The school is in the process of creating a database with details of people and organisations willing to assist students with their projects in some way.

Consideration and support is given to students who, having worked in a Technology area and gained experience in the technological process, wish to continue on to Product Design subjects (Hard and Soft Materials, Food Technology, Graphics and Digital Technology). There is no prerequisite although the specialist teacher will interview students about their needs and future plans before deciding whether to accept them.

Read about Albany Senior High School's facilities in the Facilities Snapshot [Designing New Technology Facilities](#).

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