

## GTIP Nugget

### Be an Upstander: Explorations in Project-Based Learning

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I had just completed what I thought was a brilliant unit on human rights in my grade 7/8 classroom. Students had chosen topics, completed independent inquiry, written an essay and created exhibits to share with their parents and the school community. We were reflecting on the project as a class, when a student shared, “The world sucks, Mr. Lowes!” This was my Ah-Ha! moment. If students were leaving my class without recognizing that they have the power to change the world, then I have not achieved the ultimate goal of human rights education. Looking back, it is this moment that changed the trajectory of my teaching practice and led to my first attempt at an authentically student-led version of project-based learning.

This foray into project-based learning was the unknowing start of my teacher inquiry project a year before my formal participation in the Global Issues Teacher Inquiry Project (GTIP), during the 2017/18 school year. The human rights unit that my colleagues and I worked together to develop was the first iteration of what would become the Canadian Museum for Human Rights’ “Be an Upstander” resource. The work in my classroom became the foundation for my proposal, and subsequent secondment, as the Educator in Residence program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR). This secondment allowed me to work with other teachers in my division to refine and fully develop the “Be an Upstander” resource.

The “Be an Upstander” resource was developed in partnership with a group of middle years educators from the Louis Riel School Division. We met three times during the seven month development process to share ideas and develop the lessons. Those in the group who were classroom teachers also piloted the resources before we met to make final revisions.

#### Be an Upstander

The “Be an Upstander” resource is a project-based learning unit designed to complement the “Be an Upstander” school program at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The resource is intended for middle-years students, with the goal of encouraging inquiry and action on human rights issues. Students examine the characteristics of human rights “upstanders” and follow their example as they take tangible steps to becoming upstanders themselves. By the end of the project, students will have had the opportunity to explore an issue they are personally passionate about, share their knowledge and lead others toward action.

The “Be an Upstander” resource starts by building a foundational understanding of human rights and highlights the stories of human rights upstanders. Students are then asked to respond to the driving question; ***As an Upstander, how can I take a stand for ... (a cause or issue)?*** In this final phase of the project, upstanders are used as a model for students to collaboratively

develop a response to the driving question. Students use three interrelated elements: **KNOW – TELL – ACT**, in the development of this response.

**Know**— Students choose a topic that is personally interesting to them and develop an understanding of the effects, causes and the possible solutions through the inquiry process.

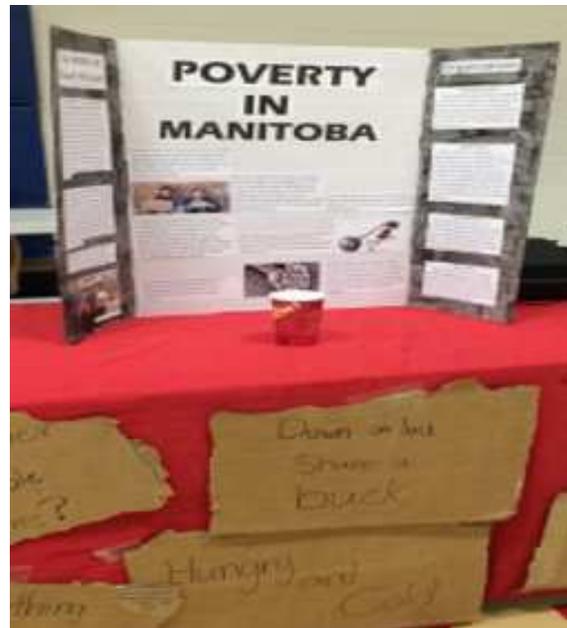
**Tell**—Students use the knowledge they develop about human rights and their personal strengths to creatively engage an audience of peers and community members. They will inform their audience of the key issues of their chosen topic and share how they are taking action.

**Act**— Using their knowledge and strengths, students develop and implement an action plan that makes a tangible difference for one person who is being affected by their chosen issue

### Student Stories

Each of the pilot classes hosted a community rights night to provide students with an audience of community and family members to share their learning. Students created exhibits similar to those they saw at the Museum.

For example, after some initial research, three grade 8 students met with their teacher to share their thesis, “People are homeless because they are lazy”. As it turns out, these students had not done any research, simply wrote down their preconceived ideas, and were looking for evidence to support their thesis. With the support and patience of their teacher, these students worked through the project and were able to identify root causes of homelessness, create an exhibit, and volunteer for an afternoon at a local homeless shelter. The true evidence of a transformation comes from the one of the student’s ongoing conversations with his grandmother about what he was learning about homelessness. This included exploring ways that he could continue to contribute to solutions to poverty on his own time.

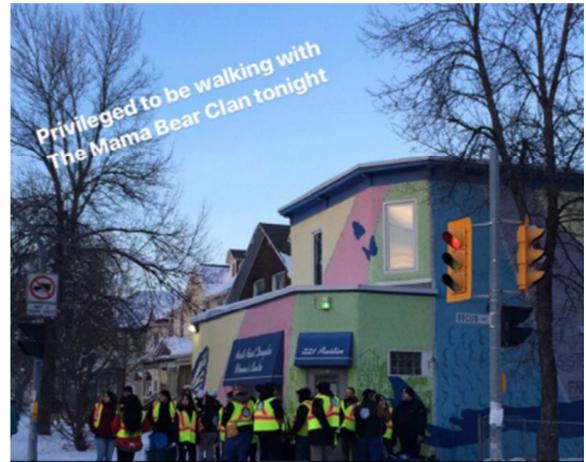


Another group of students focused on girls-education in Afghanistan, and raised \$300 by organizing a pizza fundraiser in order to send a girl to school for a year. Other students borrowed \$50.00 from their teacher and sold candy-grams. After paying back their loan, they

used proceeds to buy ingredients to make sandwiches, to help address issues of homelessness in Winnipeg. The students then took their action a step further when they handed out their sandwiches while walking with the Mama Bear Clan Community Patrol<sup>1</sup> on a Friday night. There were numerous other student-led projects and actions, such as building a model jail to highlight unfair detainment, and collecting over 600 pairs of socks for the needy.

### My Learning

If I were to sum up my learning from this experience it would be this: “Let go and let children go.” It is always inspiring to watch what can happen when we stop saying “yes, but ...” and simply ask children to “go for it.” Letting go is hard, it gets messy, it can be disorganized, it can be chaotic, the possibility of failure looms, and it is hard work. When the student projects are done, and there is time to reflect, it is clear that this chaotic and difficult process is transformative; the learning of the students and the impact that students had on the world makes it worth it. As one member of our pilot group remarked, “It was the hardest I had ever worked as a teacher, but I would do it again in an instant.”



### Next Steps

The initial development of this project came as a result of the willingness of my colleagues to collaborate, follow my lead on a partially developed idea, have open dialogue about our instructional practices, and accept feedback. The success in our school community led to my secondment at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. This role has given me the opportunity to articulate for and to others how this project can be implemented in their classrooms. It has also given me an opportunity to develop a similar resource for senior-years students. The resources that have been developed as a part of this project will be housed on the CMHR's website ([humanrights.ca](http://humanrights.ca)). Moving forward, in partnership with the Museum, the hope is to create a digital platform to guide students from across the country through this learning process, and to share their learning online and at the Museum.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bearclanpatrolinc.com/>