

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN THE URBAN IMAGINATION NETWORK

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What is Important?

That is a question the Urban Imagination Network asks. That is the question that teachers, parents, students, and principals need to answer thoughtfully if students are to learn effectively. The Network begins with one “given” importance – reading. But what should children read? What is important for them to learn as they read? These simple questions are central to the work of museums and schools, particularly in the Urban Imagination Network. The Urban Imagination Network, established by IMAGINE CHICAGO, links seven schools and six museums in a multi-year journey to answer those questions in meaningful ways that sustain and expand non-fiction reading at school and at home. The Center has worked collaboratively with IMAGINE CHICAGO in several projects, and the school-museum connection is an ongoing link between us to continue the work we do to increase learning in schools.

The Center for Urban Education at DePaul University provides a curriculum framework and instructional approach for the Network. The framework is a curricular calendar focusing on a different content area each quarter. Through workshops and materials, the Center has helped to build this framework into the ongoing work of the schools with a simple approach: teacher focuses the students on a topic; students report with graphic organizers and then with text on their learning. This structure addresses several educational objectives. It enables teachers to involve students in meeting the state goals in a way that makes sense to the students. It multiplies the learning as each class creates a display that educates other classes. Because each student uses graphic organizers to exhibit the content of the curriculum, it enables teachers to assess the learning and guide the students individually. For example, if a student is making a diagram of causes and effects of an event, the teacher can see at a glance if the student understands cause-effect relations. That’s what’s important. The particular event is an interesting context to develop that analytic ability.

The structure is built on the comprehensive curriculum framework developed through funding from the Joyce Foundation. That comprehensive framework correlates with the national standards and the state goals. Teachers do not have to play “bingo” with the Chicago Academic Framework. What’s the bingo reference? What’s 4-A-2? On many lesson plans, there are notations to numbers and letters that are as meaningful as a bingo call. Teachers can see what is important if it is in words, not numbers. It is not that the goals don’t make sense. It’s that if you restate them as numbers and letters, soon the connection

to what is important – the goals – disappears. The calendar of learning gives teachers a clear framework to exercise their own imagination.

An examination of one school's progress provides insights into the Network. Suder School is in its fourth year with the Urban Imagination Network. The first three years, Suder was in probation. It is out now, and the Urban Imagination Network is part of that progress. The Network increased the importance of reading and helped everyone learn more about reading with focus.

What is reading?

Suder just emerged from probation. How did they do it? Suder teachers expanded the curriculum. There is a large category of items on the ITBS test classified as “construct literal meaning”. Notice the verb. It is not *locate* literal information. It is *construct* literal meaning. That means to locate information and organize it in a meaningful understanding of a situation or topic. Students in Urban Imagination Network schools do not use a test-taking booklet to practice test-taking. They read texts to construct meaning, which they present in their own booklets about that topic. They construct their own test questions based on those texts. They go further than the limits of a test prep booklet.

While Suder School has a strong primary reading program, Suder has broken with a principle that has limited reading at the primary grades. In many schools – and some educational publishers – there is a principle that from kindergarten through second grade you “learn to read” and that from third grade and up you “read to learn”. Some programs even extend the “learn to read” through third grade. While there is a need to develop essential reading comprehension skills at the primary grades, a central purpose of reading is to expand knowledge. Yet many reading programs devote their pages to fiction through the primary grades. Small wonder that third many grade students fail to meet the 50th percentile level on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills where there is an increasing emphasis on non-fiction reading.

Focus-Act-Report – that is the structure for teaching and learning at Suder from primary through upper grades. The teacher sets the focus with a big question and students actively collect and organize information to respond to the question. Then they report — they share their learning in books they write, in exhibits they create. The teachers take the students through the steps of understanding that parallel Bloom's taxonomy: ***Get It Clear*** (analyze the information to clarify your answer to the question); ***Think More*** (make inferences – including that significant inference, “What's the main idea?”); and ***Think It Through*** (decide what is most important about what you have learned). If you allocate teaching time based on the *item* distribution on ITBS, your students won't spend time on inferring the main idea or evaluating. But those are macro questions – they require students to process an entire text. They are multi-step questions that not only exercise the other skills but also give students a reason to take those steps. Students can exercise all those abilities at a museum. Museums are full of windows into

what's important. Museums provide the opportunity to Get It, Get It Clear, Think More, and Think It Through.

Making Connections

So where does imagination fit? Effective teachers use their imagination and ask questions that stimulate wonder. And they are resourceful. For example, suppose you have a basal reader that includes some non-fiction but is scattered and disconnected. You have no social studies or science books. What do you do? If you are in the Urban Imagination Network, you learn to think like a museum. Each year, your school has a museum partner, a partner that provides an opportunity to focus on topics that engage students, parents, and teachers in a learning journey. The partner could be any one of six museums. A partner museum expands the way teachers think.

How do the students learn what is important? In the Urban Imagination Network, they make focused field trips to the museum to learn about the topic they are exploring. They read and listen to texts about the topic, create their own booklets and displays. Visit an Urban Imagination Network school and you will know what museum they are partnered with for the year. You will see that the students have taken it back from the galleries. The content of the museum now is a dynamic exhibit in progress at the school.

Every year, thousands of students visit Chicago museums, but the students don't all have a focus. The teachers, students, and parents of Suder learned through workshops at museums and the creation of in-school exhibits about organizing the content of those museums with a **Focus, Act, Report** (FAR) structure. For example, upper grade students at Suder focused on the question: What caused the Civil War? They actively collected answers through reading museum exhibits and original source documents from the Chicago Historical Society. Students read the documents, messages from the past, and illustrated the situations communicated in those documents. History became personal. Then they reported their findings in an exhibit about one significant event that embodied the conflicts. Everyone who walked in the hall on the second floor had the opportunity to read history since the students proudly displayed their insights in the hallway.

This past school year, Suder worked with the Chicago Botanic Garden and the whole school connected vitally with that museum. The school decided to focus on two environments – woodlands and prairie. Each quarter there was one clear focus. Everyone in the school searched for answers to one big question: What's a Prairie? A visitor to Suder knew immediately that students were figuring out answers to the question because students' exhibits were everywhere. Just as with the history exhibits the previous year, the visitor would learn from what the students learned. An important point of this approach is that students validate their own learning by sharing it with others. So the learning multiplies.

Making it Work

Schools make progress when teachers use their imaginations to create an atmosphere of inquiry. The challenge most Chicago teachers face is how to increase reading abilities when students lack some essential skills and background knowledge. Allied to that is the question of how to develop meaningful outcomes for reading. The imaginative teachers of Suder have established a climate of inquiry that leads to meaningful reading. First, they choose a topic that relates to the area of inquiry of the museum partner. They survey the materials they have, check the school library, and now the Internet. Then they frame a question that students can answer through reading.

Having focused the students' inquiry with a question, teachers ask themselves critical questions. How will I develop students' reading skills as they learn about the topic? Here are ready opportunities for phonics. Make a word list about any topic and there are multisyllabic words, initial consonants, digraphs, and all the other elements of phonics. To pronounce *deciduous*, one needs to know the sound of a soft c. Why does prairie end with *ie* not *y*? That is one of the mysteries of our language. But what is *important*? What a prairie is, how plants interrelate, how they relate to animals. So you see phonics on the way to what is important. Think of the opportunities to reinforce phonics with the one word 'pioneer'. More importantly, consider how students can understand more about their own lives as they visit the Pioneer Gallery at the Historical Society and figure out what kinds of problems the pioneers solved and how they used their imaginations to solve them.

How does a school compensate for a limited content collection? One way is to focus on one content area each year. Visit the library at an Urban Imagination Network school, and you will find some vital resources for learning – books purchased through grants to the schools to expand their non-fiction collection in topic areas relating to the museum partner of the year.

At Suder, you are likely to find exhibits by parents as well as by students. The focus on meaningful reading is not limited to students. The Urban Imagination Network has made parent learning central to the work in progress. A remarkably successful parent education program links parents directly to the content of the core curriculum. Parents also are going FAR, with focus, related reading, and reporting at monthly parent workshops conducted by Imagine Chicago. Last year, Suder School had the greatest number of parents who completed a rigorous series of monthly workshops on the core curriculum. They, too, went far.

An Ongoing Structure

This is a year of integration for all the schools in the Network. Alfred North Whitehead wrote that there is a natural rhythm of learning. It starts with a stage he called "romance", in which the learner is interested in a topic and explores it informally. As interest expands, the learner moves into a stage Whitehead calls

“precision” in which the students acquire and organize information to clarify ideas. Then the learner completes a learning cycle with a stage of “generalization” – a stage of pulling it all together. From the initial question, “What problems did pioneers solve?” through the trip to the Historical Society, to the in-school exhibit on how people solve problems, students are learning important concepts and significant vocabulary and developing essential skills.

There is much more to the Urban Imagination Network. In fact, this structure is based on a comprehensive approach to school *development* (not reform). The Urban Imagination Network is a creation consistent with the essential goals of Imagine Chicago, an organization established by Bliss Browne to enable individuals in Chicago to connect across generations and cultures. That’s an ideal approach for a school, where inter-generational meetings take place daily. In the Urban Imagination Network, the same basic steps liberate teachers from limiting approaches to instruction. **Understand – Imagine – Create** -- that is the sequence. Understand your students. Determine what is important to learn. Imagine ways to engage them in learning by asking good questions. Create the learning opportunity. Students get engaged as they **focus, act, and report**. This ongoing cycle of learning progress becomes standard practice at imaginative schools.