F Education

Structure and Elements of a Learning Expedition

Guiding Questions

Guiding questions are open-ended essential questions that synthesize the "so what" of the topic students are studying and link all elements of a learning expedition or unit of study. Typically, 1-3 guiding questions frame an expedition; they are posted in the classroom and referenced regularly. Guiding questions often represent key concepts of a discipline. For example, "Where does history come from?" or "What conditions are necessary for a species to survive?"

Case Studies

Case studies are concrete, often local, studies of subtopics within a discipline. They are used to make the major concepts of a discipline or broad topic come alive for students. Sometimes, a case study means investigating a unique person, place, institution or event (e.g. as part of a U.S. history study of the Civil Rights movement, students investigate a local civil rights hero). Other times, a case study refers to a narrowed subtopic, allowing students to focus their research on one aspect that animates and clarifies the topic (e.g. in a study of the Civil War, students are involved in a case study of women's roles in the war). Learning expeditions include one or more case studies; ideally they connect students to a local natural or residential community to provide a window on national or global concepts.

Projects and Products

Projects are a primary structure for in-school learning, teaching core skills and content through classroom lessons, discussions, labs, and work sessions, as well as through student research and fieldwork. Projects are used to teach literacy and math skills, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem solving. Projects result in products that are modeled on real-world documents and artifacts, with professional models guiding student work. Ideally, products are critiqued by professionals and contribute to a real-world audience (e.g., a whole-class scientific study of a local pond, resulting in a water-quality report for the city board of health).

Focused Topic

Learning expedition topics are centered on key standards identified in content maps. Topics are selected to engage student curiosity and passion. They provide opportunities to connect historic, scientific, and other disciplinary concepts to specific case studies that make learning concrete and relevant. Literacy is integrated in every learning expedition to build skills in context and as a means for engaging deeply with content.

Guiding Questions

Case Study

Project and and Product

Culminating Event

Culminating Event

Focused Topic

Learning Targets

Case Study

A culminating event is the celebration and presentation of learning at the end of a learning expedition. It often takes place as an exhibition or formal performance/presentation. Families, community members, and school partners participate in a culminating event to act as an authentic audience, learn about the work of the students and the school as a whole, and honor student learning.

Learning Targets

Learning targets are goals or objectives for lessons, projects, and courses derived from state and local standards. What sets them apart is that they are written in concrete, student-friendly language, used regularly with students, and tracked carefully by students and teachers during the process of learning. For example, if a required 5th grade state standard is, "Students will articulate multiple perspectives on the various factors catalyzing the American Revolution," a learning target might read, "I can explain how a number of different concerns and events led to the start of the American Revolution."

Fieldwork, Experts and Service Learning

Fieldwork, experts and service learning are used throughout an expedition. Fieldwork allows students to use the natural and social environments of their communities as sites for purposeful learning. As opposed to field trips, in which students are often passive spectators, during fieldwork, students are active investigators, applying research tools, techniques of inquiry, and standards of presentation used by professionals in the field. In addition to having students conduct research outside the school, teachers bring professional experts and citizens with firsthand knowledge of events and issues into the classroom. They collaborate with students on projects, teach them skills from their field, and critique their work using professional standards, increasing the accuracy, integrity, and quality of their work. Service in EL schools goes beyond charitable acts, such as cleaning up a city park, and extends to complex academic tasks that provide a service for the community, such as conducting energy audits of city buildings to help a city save money and reduce its carbon footprint. Older students may participate in internships and apprenticeships.