

PLAN FOR MAKING MEANING

It's hot. It's August, and in two more days, the building will be filled with kids. The four of us, plus intern Mitzi Parsons, are sitting in Marsha's classroom tossing out ideas about focus studies for the coming year. This is not our first meeting. We have already met several times over the summer: on the phone, through e-mail, and face-to-face, consulting our curriculum framework, state standards, and district pacing guide in order to map out general goals for curriculum this year. Armed with the knowledge of where we need to go, we can begin to think about how we can best guide our diverse population of kids. Using standards and content, coupled with the students' personal knowledge about multiple disciplines, we hope to inspire children to be lifelong learners.

Both Marsha and Vicki teach multi-age middle school classes with grades 6, 7, and 8 represented in each. Joe and Latosha teach grades 4–5. Mitzi is an intern in Marsha's classroom. We all have to think about age-appropriate instruction and take into account each student's learning styles,

abilities, strengths, and interests. We have to build differentiation into each aspect of any focused study, and we realize that we have a long way to travel.

Today's topic is the colonial period of American History. We are still in the early stages of planning this focus study and are trying to come up with a focusing question. That question will be broad enough to uncover the full depth of the topic, yet narrow enough for students to connect with personal interests and find authentic avenues of exploration.

"How can we get this started? It's more difficult this early without the input of the kids." Vicki says this almost as though she is thinking out loud. Many of our planning conversations are really just that—thinking out loud, bouncing ideas off someone else to see how they sound or if they go anywhere. We collaborate on a daily basis. We literally pick each other's brains, and over the course of the year, we invite our students into this process, as well. Listen in as we think this through and search for a focusing question.

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Finding a Focusing Question

"We need to get them to take an in-depth look, but we need to consider that many of our kids have some preconceived notions about American History." Almost as a unit, we nod in agreement. We are aware that many of our students will have conviction that they find various disciplines boring. It's another factor that we think about when we plan.

"Is there a way for them to make connections from the beginning . . . to get them engaged?"

"What if we think about comparing?" This comes from our student intern Mitzi Parsons.

"How do you mean?"

"Well . . . how *was* colonial life different from the lives of our kids today?"

"Wait a minute . . . hold on . . . Say that again?"

We are all immediately on the same page as we listen and revisit that question.

This idea seems to have some possibilities. We consider. Is this a good focusing question? Is it a big enough umbrella that, as we close it, will allow the sun to shine on and uncover the necessary content? Will it be colorful enough to engage the interests of our kids in research so that they take ownership of the learning?

Eventually, we decide that Mitzi's second query of explanation will be our focusing question: "How was colonial life different from today?"

"I don't know. It seems to be missing something, but I think we can get started with it. What do you think? Can we work across the curriculum with it and build some interesting invitations?"

"Let's back up and look at the initiating experience. What might really catch our students' interests?"

Initiating Experiences

Once we have a focusing question, the next step in our planning and in our conversa-

tion is to think about what initiating experiences we might plan. We are guided by Carolyn Burke's model for planning inquiry learning. An initiating experience is a way of jump-starting a focus study. These experiences might include a wide variety of presentations, such as guest speakers, connected field trips, group discussions, or read-alouds related to the topic. The key is to help students have experiences that raise questions for them and heighten their interest in the focus area, eventually leading them to the focusing question with enthusiasm. Our conversation continues.

"What sorts of ideas does anyone have for initiating experiences?"

"Do we want to take them out and about, have a field experience, visit a museum, or what?"

"We need to include some aspect of the colonial experience, something that will get them thinking about the big picture."

"Do you think we could role-play a colonial aspect of life, perhaps like in the one-room school house?"

"That's a great idea! We could do a 'day in the life' of colonial students."

We decide that we can run with this last idea and that it will be our initiating experience. Now we need to work on how this is going to look and how we will make it happen. We often find that when we plan together, our ideas are big and require lots of thinking through logistics to make them become a reality for our students.

"How did a one-room school house look?"

"Well, sometimes they taught the children in their own homes and took in neighborhood children as well."

"What kinds of materials did they use for teaching?"

"The old slate boards and chalk, benches, reciting lessons in unison."

"We could dress in colonial style to make it feel like a colonial school environment. It would help set the mood—make it more authentic."

We stop here to think about gathering the necessary materials to make the initiating experience a success for the students. We have to think about people we might need to call, places we might need to go to retrieve materials, and the time involved to do this.

In this study, we are fortunate because Marsha actually has some colonial dresses from a study that she did several years ago. Mitzi volunteers to make a simulated log fire from in-school materials, and we are able to borrow most of the chalkboards from our 2–3 classrooms. At CFI, being able to make what we need from borrowed and on-hand materials is a planning necessity because we have no budget for additional materials. This can be a real challenge, but it certainly brings out our creativity!

It's not getting any cooler in our classroom, and we have spent about 3 hours brainstorming our plans for the colonial study. It's time to take a break mentally and physically, so we decide to reconvene in about a half-hour.

Invitations

When we return from our break, we launch into the next step: considering what invitations we want to plan during the study. Invitations are open-ended activities designed to invite students into uncovering perspectives on a topic that they may not otherwise consider. With these activities, we try to get students “living through” as many experiences as we can so that they become participants in what they are learning rather than passive spectators. This part of the planning conversation is always very exciting for us because we begin to have a vision for the really engaging work we will see our students do.

“Okay. Where are we?”

“Are we pretty well set on the initiating experience?”

“I think so. We seemed to have reached a pretty good consensus on that.

What's next?”

“I think the invitations will be key. If we can invite the kids in with some really good hands-on and first-hand experiences . . . let's see where it takes us.”

“Our invitations will really need to engage the students in such a way that they experience many aspects of colonial life and are encouraged to ask questions that will lead to their own further investigations.”

“Yes. We need to make them as authentic as possible—almost like a first-hand experience.”

“So . . . what types of things can we offer?”

Just as with the focusing question and the initiating experiences, invitations must arise from our objectives for the focus study: standards and content, student interest and ownership of the process. Just what is it that we want our kids to learn?

“I think, at this point, we need to break to do some of our own research so that we can come back together with fresh ideas and an idea of materials and time frames.”

We agree on this because we are all feeling the heat and recognize the need to step away and think. We set up the next meeting time for the following day. All of us get busy consulting Internet and textual resources, calling museums for guidance and ideas, and talking with other colleagues for their input.

When we come back together, it is with the realization that we must finish this up because we will all have our students tomorrow. We will not begin the focus study immediately, but we need to have the pieces in place; planning time becomes a very precious commodity once our kids arrive.

“About how many invitations will we need?”

“We have two classes and about 50 kids that will need to be engaged for several days.”

“I don't think that we really want more than about 4 kids working on any one

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invitation at a time, so that means around 12 or 13 invitations. Right?"

"So much of what was done in colonial times was really by hand—no running out to the store for butter or bread. The kids need to experience the time involved with daily necessities that they take for granted."

- **Make your own butter.**
During Colonial times, families couldn't go to the nearest grocery to buy butter. They had to make it from scratch. This is an invitation to show you how.
- **Make a rag rug.**
Nothing was ever wasted in Colonial times. When clothing was too worn out to mend, it would be torn or cut into strips and made into braided rugs.
- **Communicate about communication.**
Forget phone and e-mail! Explore this time period by investigating the art of letter writing and the postal service of the times.
- **How has technology changed?**
Compare and contrast technologies then and now, such as lanterns vs. electricity, or manufactured goods vs. homemade products (like soap and candles).
- **Make a tin lantern.**
Design a pattern and make a lantern from a tin can, comparing light from the candle in the can with light in the room from the electricity.
- **Weather**
Explore geographical features of the landscape.
- **Games**
Students played games such as Tic-Tac-Toe, Dried Corn, and Dot Game. Reproduce and play these games with classmates.
- **Indian legends**
After reading Indian stories and myths that were passed down from generation to generation, create your own legend.
- **Measurement**
Make math connections by measuring and then comparing the weight of dry ingredients of a common cornmeal recipe for that time period.
- **Medicines**
Browse through books on herbs, create a home remedy, and then draw a poster advertisement.
- **Dear America**
Explore this time period through Internet resources and then write and share the journal entries to document your research.
- **Quilting**
Design and make a quilt square.

Our conversation centers on this theme, and after about an hour of brainstorming ideas, we settle on 12 invitations that we feel will both engage our students and help lead to further inquiry (see Figure 1).

This early part of planning a focused study, i.e., determining the focus question and planning the initiating experience and the invitations, is really one of the most time-consuming aspects of a focused study. Thinking about conceptually related texts, organizational devices, systematic doings, culminating experiences, and assessment tools emanates from this early planning.

Conceptually Related Texts

Conceptually related texts are resources that go beyond the standard encyclopedia to include trade books, brochures, Internet Web sites, magazines, catalogues, maps, and other such sources. We realize that having a rich variety of texts is another way we can help students see varying perspectives on a topic. We put our collective knowledge of text resources together to create the most variety we can for any single study. Listen in again as we brainstorm possibilities for conceptually related texts about colonial life.

"We need to think fiction and nonfiction. Any ideas off the top of anyone's head?"

"Marsha, why don't you get onto the public library site and get some books there?"

"I will head down to our school library and check out what's available."

"Someone needs to get to looking at the IPS resources . . ."

". . . and all of us need to see what we might have personally—newspapers, magazines, videos, artifacts."

"What about the Children's Museum?"

"Right! They have the Teacher Resource Center."

Figure 1. Invitations generated for the colonial studies inquiry

“Good. Let’s say that we need to have the texts compiled by next Monday.”

Organizational Devices and Assessment

With our collection of text resources on its way, next we think together about the organizational devices we will need for the study and what kinds of assessment will make sense in the context of what we have planned. When we think of organizational devices, we are really thinking of the tools the students will use during the study to capture the learning that is taking place. Organizational devices are designed to help students be responsible and accountable for their learning. For this reason, these devices work together as assessment, for as the kids are learning, they will track their learning and progress in one or more of several possible ways: a discovery or learning log, journal, wonder books, audio cassettes, or audit trails. These kinds of documents and artifacts allow us to evaluate their learning. We will work together to develop a rubric based on standards, completeness, content understanding demonstrated, and creativity.

Through conversation, we all agree that our students’ purposes would be best served through the use of a learning log and a personal journal. We will use bubble maps and webbing to help visualize comparisons, devices that have proved successful in the past. We have also learned that learning logs and journals are easily adapted for differentiation.

Systematic Doings

Next, we think through what we call “systematic doings.” Systematic doings are designed to engage students in authentic forms of information gathering such as interviews, surveys, and discovering artifacts. Using these tools, students are encouraged to focus on a personal inquiry

(within the larger focused study) based on individual questions or interests that surfaced during the course of invitations and initiating experiences. Listen in as we brainstorm about systematic doings our students might engage in.

“Let’s take a look to the next step of systematic doings.”

“Alright. We need a couple of whole-class engagements to help the kids connect what they are learning to the big picture of colonial life and the differences from their lives today.”

“I really think, at this point, that we need to get them out and into the community in some way.”

“There are one or two one-room schools near here that are preserved from Indiana’s early history. If we can arrange to go there, we could also connect it to Indiana history and bring the whole experience closer to their familiarity in our own area.”

Marsha and Mitzi decide to make arrangements for this field trip. This trip will have a price tag attached, so anything else we do as a whole class will need to take place at CFI.

“What about storytelling? It’s not as if the children in colonial times could head out to a movie, or play video games. The oral tradition was a huge part of the lifestyle.”

“We could sit around the ‘campfire’ that Mitzi made and tell a progressive tale.”

“I like that. Let’s do that and maybe do something where everyone builds a replica or model of a log cabin or colonial style home.”

“But, then, are we getting into appropriate and workable materials?”

“I know of a group who did this with pretzel logs and chocolate.”

“Do you really think that will work with our group?”

“Well, we won’t know until we try.”

“You know, I do believe that we are going to have to revisit this one and see

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whether or not it works and if we will want to do something like it again!”

Culminating Experiences

Everyone takes a deep breath. We have reached the point where we need a culminating experience. This will take some thought. Culminating experiences help students to extend their understandings and to reflect upon what they have learned. For example, a class might present an exhibition, a drama, or a living history museum. These experiences incorporate higher order thinking skills requiring students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply their learning. These culminations are in and of themselves a bridge to new avenues of inquiry. A culminating experience provides an opportunity for students to share what they have learned in a study, even if there are still unanswered questions.

Whatever we choose must be at once engaging and reflective of what the students have learned. It must be adaptable to different learning styles. At its best, it should open further avenues of inquiry, while offering closure to the focused study as a whole. All of us are aware of these requirements, even as we contemplate possibilities.

“We could think about a play or drama . . .”

“Last year, in my grade 2–3 class, we did a “living museum” during our multicultural study. The kids each chose to research a famous person for an individual inquiry and then made a life-sized likeness of that person. Each student “became” that person for our museum. We invited parents and the rest of the school. As parents and students approached, the students would each talk in character about what they had learned.”

“I like that idea. We could use it for colonial things or artifacts as well as people,

as a sort of living wax museum.”

“They will need to create a visual representation of their choice and gather background information to present.”

“Does this do what we need it to do for the students?”

“It seems to meet the criteria. I think it’s a go.”

“Can we reach a consensus on this? Are we done for now?”

We are all ready to call it a day and begin to get everything we will need together.

In this way, we have worked our way through the process of a focused study. There is still much more to do. We will continue to meet and discuss and collaborate. We will revisit what works and what doesn’t. Sometimes, ideas just don’t look in practice the way we think they will during planning; this, too, is part of the process. For example, the systematic doing of building the log cabin with pretzel logs and chocolate was, indeed, one that needed revising and revisiting. We had a great deal more chocolate and pretzels in people’s tummies than in our housing construction! It was messy and sticky and the true objective of the engagement was lost in the sheer logistics. When we met after school that day, it was worth a good laugh, but the reflection on why it didn’t work and what we might do differently was, and always is, invaluable.

When something doesn’t work, it is often as valuable a learning experience for us as the ideas that take off and fly on their own. Inquiry teaching with focused studies takes time, patience, and support, but it offers rewarding new potentials in learning for our students and for teachers as well. We find that we all grow together, and that is always exciting and fulfilling.