Core Practice 2

Designing Learning Expeditions

Learning expeditions are the signature Expeditionary Learning curricular structure. They make content standards come alive for students. These long-term, in-depth studies offer real-world connections that inspire students toward higher levels of academic achievement. Learning expeditions involve students in original research, critical thinking, and problem solving, and they build character along with academic skills. All learning expeditions explicitly focus on building literacy skills in students, particularly in the reading and writing of nonfiction text.

Learning expeditions take multiple, powerful elements of the EL model and join them together: guiding questions, kickoff experiences, case studies, projects, lessons, fieldwork, experts, service learning, and a culminating event featuring high-quality student work. All of these structures can also be used independently, outside of full learning expeditions.

A. Scope and Components of Learning Expeditions

1. Learning expeditions are usually 6-12 weeks in duration and comprise a significant portion of daily instructional time for students.
2. Teachers plan learning expeditions that include the following components: learning targets, guiding questions, a kickoff experience, case studies, projects, lessons, fieldwork, experts, service learning, and a culminating event.
3. Learning expeditions are interdisciplinary, but not necessarily with an equal balance of disciplines. On a secondary level they can be either co-led by a multi-disciplinary team or led by a single teacher who builds a learning expedition centered within his or her subject area that includes interdisciplinary features.
4. Learning expeditions integrate skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, numeracy, and research, as well as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Explicit literacy instruction, using appropriately challenging text, takes place in learning expeditions at all grade levels.
5. Learning expeditions are constructed or customized by individual teachers or teaching teams and are also refined and assessed for quality through school-wide structures that involve leadership and faculty in critique and support.

B. Flow of Learning Expeditions

1. Teachers plan backward, constructing calendars that begin with the end in mind. Whenever possible, students are brought into the process in class planning sessions during which they help choose and commit to deadlines. Teachers and students ensure that the planned components are realistic and that students will have time to complete projects and associated products and performances with quality.
2. Learning expeditions begin with a kickoff or immersion experience for students that ignites curiosity and sparks interest in a topic. Kickoffs build background knowledge in the learning expedition content, but are focused more on raising questions than answering them.
3. After the kickoff, learning expeditions shift toward deepening students' study and research, allowing them to become experts in the topic. Students often build significant background knowledge before they begin deeper work with experts and fieldwork, maximizing the value of those resources.
4. The learning expedition draws to a close with product creation, synthesis and reflection, and a culminating event that celebrates learning.

C. Choosing and Focusing the Compelling Topic

1. Learning expedition topics are centered on key standards identified in curriculum maps.
2. Topics are constructed 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.

Designing Learning Expeditions (continued)

3. Topics encourage curiosity and discovery and have rich potential for experiential, hands-on exploration.
4. Topics take a broad content unit (e.g., the Revolutionary War, Newtonian physics) and focus it with at least one case study that engages students and clarifies concepts (e.g., the role of a local city in the Revolutionary War, the physics of car accidents).
5. The topic offers opportunities for fieldwork, work with local experts, and the use of primary source material. It offers strong possibilities for original research and the creation of high-quality products for an authentic audience.
6. Community issues and resources focus the topic and require students to collect data, interview citizens and experts, and create products that meet a real community need.
7. The topic invites students to consider multiple perspectives.
8. Learning expeditions often involve issues of cultural diversity, equity, and social justice or environmental stewardship to engage students in compelling conversations about their ideas of right and wrong.