

Implementing The Lab School Club Model at the Academy In Manayunk

by Chris Herman

(Chris Herman is a Club teacher at AIM in Philadelphia, PA.)

Central to The Lab School model is Sally Smith's Club Methodology, the full immersion of students into a time period where historical information is learned through multi-sensory activities. While immersed, through the use of costumes and elaborately decorated classrooms, students are engaged in project-based learning. As the student's language-based learning disabilities are remediated throughout their day, Club provides an avenue for access to history through the arts as opposed to the traditional mode of text.

At the Academy In Manayunk (AIM), not only have we embraced this methodology, but have made it the crux of our entire program, interweaving thematic concepts throughout our literature, writing, and enrichment activities. Traditional Social Studies programs begin with local history and then branch outward. Conversely, Club begins at the beginning of human history and takes students through time chronologically.

Cave Club, taught by The Wise Elder, is for the youngest students. In The Cave, 1st and 2nd grade students are dressed as cave men and they learn about the earliest man, dinosaurs, general science and anthropology through the replication of artifacts representative of that time period. Following the dawn of the civilization in the river valleys and in Mesopotamia, the students move on to the Gods and Goddesses Club.

In The Gods Club, 3rd grade students role-play the ancient gods and goddesses of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The students build pyramids, create cartouches, mummify objects, and construct sarcophagi. They learn of the great and very different societies of

Athens and Sparta and explore the foods, music, art, and literature of those cultures. Ending in Rome, the students learn of the greatest empire of all time, and draw intellectual parallels between that great society and ours through the analysis of government, architecture, and commerce on an age appropriate level.

After the fall of Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D., much of Europe descended into The Dark Ages. In The Knights and Ladies Club, our 4th graders take on the roles of epic medieval figures like Joan of Arc, King Henry, William the Conqueror, and Saladin. The students are seated at the Round Table and are led by their teacher Merlin the Wizard. He takes them on a great journey across one thousand years of history while students listen to grand tales of castles, damsels, war, and conquest. All the while, these students move through the ranks of the feudal social system, planting and harvesting real crops as serfs, building swords and armor as pages and squires, illuminating letters as monks, and constructing catapults as Knights and Kings.

As their teacher, Isabella d'Este recites each day, "from the darkness of the Middle Ages comes the light of the Renaissance." In The Renaissance Club, the 5th grade students take on the role of famous Florentine artists and thinkers who emerged from the Dark Ages. Ghiberti, Dante, and Galileo are just a few of the roles the students assume. These students recreate some of the greatest works of art from the Renaissance. While studying Da Vinci, each student paints their own Mona Lisa and while studying Ghiberti, each student makes a panel from the famed Gates of Paradise. While studying Brunelleschi, the students learn of the great architectural accomplishments of that era and build their own version of Florence's Duomo.

As the students enter the Upper School, they become the curators of The Museum Club. In the Museum Club, 6th grade students refresh their knowledge of human history while preparing a collection of works reflective of the world's greatest events from the beginning of time to the age of exploration. The students of the Museum Club open the doors of their museum several times throughout the year to rest of the school with expositions of religious iconography, great works of art, and ancient Chinese and Indian artifacts.

In our Upper School Clubs, role play and art continue to serve as the central point of the curriculum but in a more sophisticated and mature way. Students in these Clubs are exposed to textbooks and study skills, read relevant classic literature, and view age and content appropriate films that help build a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

In the 7th grade, our students learn of pre-Columbian North America and early American history in The Democracy Club I. Their introductory project is the construction of a full size teepee, bows and arrows made from all natural materials, and maps which detail the specific cultural aspects of life in different regions across North America. Through intense debates, battle reenactments, and early American Folk Art, the students of The Democracy Club I explore all of American history from the Revolution to the Civil War.

Our 8th Graders then follow up with the second half of American History in Democracy Club II. At this point, many of our students have had significant remediation in reading, math, and writing. As 8th Graders, the students are engaged not only in arts-based learning, but also write essays, work in literature circles, make their own films, learn the art of photography, and build large structures using real tools and equipment.

Perhaps the most essential notion in substantial and useful historical knowledge is the ability to recognize cause and effect. In traditional history classes, time periods are explored in bubbles, devoid of this concept, and therefore no logical connection between events is developed. If the links that bind history together are not secured, students will not be able to apply their knowledge of history as they assess the events that will take place in their own lives as adults.

Club creates an atmosphere of intellectual endeavor and helps to create well informed citizens who will go on to realize that all actions have a reaction and no political decision is made without long lasting positive and negative effects. Club also helps to create young voters who know how their government works and understand the process of political enterprise at a level superior to many of their peers.

In implementing the Academic Club Methodology at The Academy In Manayunk, there were some clear obstacles to overcome. Finding teachers who are willing, creative, and flexible enough to teach in this manner was not the easiest impediment to overcome. What works for a group of students one year, will not necessarily work for the group to follow. Implementing Lab's Club curriculum required the special touch of many talented educators who needed to adjust each aspect of the class for the particular students who would take part in it.

Even if teaching a Club is an educator's dream come true, which it is for all of our Club leaders, there is the delicate balance of managing behaviors in an engaging and free thinking environment. We quickly discovered that the most effective behavior management came straight out of the curriculum itself. The more the students were immersed, the more detached from unwanted behaviors they became. In developing

behavior plans, we simply tied them directly to curriculum based positive support systems.

Since positive behavior support is one of the foundations of The Academy In Manayunk, this was an essential aspect that needed to be fleshed out if the use of Club Methodology was to be successful. For instance, the students of the Knights and Ladies Club earn magic stones from Merlin that are exchanged for secret missions and quests as knights. In the Renaissance Club, students earn florins that can be exchanged for special roles as benefactors to the other artists or for feasts that feature food from the period. In the Democracy Club, students earn colonial money that becomes an instructional tool as well as a positive behavior support system. In all classes, students can earn time working with curriculum-based teacher made games which are developed as tools of instruction and assessment.

As we broached Club in our nascent stages as a school, we also needed to find ways to adjust the sequence in which Lab delivers instruction. At Lab, Clubs end before the students move on to Middle and Upper School. At AIM, we completely restructured our Upper school social studies plans to accommodate additional years in Club. However, we also needed to restructure our notion of Club to accommodate the maturation and interests of older students who were no longer attracted to dressing up and role playing each day.

In order to be completely immersed, some art media are excluded in Lower School Clubs, whereas in the Upper School, our students are working with many modern technologies and tools that were obviously not available in the time periods they study.

For all the obstacles we encountered, implementing the special Club Methodology at The Academy In Manayunk was not as challenging as one might think. Through enlisting the help of parents and local organizations, we were able to bring costs down and prepare our Club rooms more quickly. By capitalizing on the skills, interests and industries of The Academy In Manayunk's many friends and families, we were able to create an entire community devoted to this new way of teaching. Through partnerships with local universities, we also have been able to seek out the kinds of teachers that a program like ours requires at a time in their careers when they still carry with them a grand vision of the potential for rich and meaningful education.

The element most essential to the successful implementation of Club Methodology at The Academy In Manayunk has been the consistent support and guidance of our Lab School partners. Before opening our doors, all of our Club instructors were thoroughly educated in the benefits, supporting research, and potential pitfalls of using this kind of curriculum.

The Lab School provided a series of in-service trainings that helped all of our teachers develop a deeper understanding of the structure of the curriculum. During these trainings we were taught how to mirror the success of both the Lab School's instruction and assessment. By providing a vetted model of successful implementation, we were able to open our school with three Clubs. In our second year, as we expanded our programs to younger and older students, The Lab School continued an equal level of support and walked us through the introduction of three additional Clubs. As we have grown, we have developed a healthy exchange of ideas that had been mutually beneficial.