

Bringing Sally Smith's Vision to Manayunk

by Jackie Ford

(Jackie Ford, MA, studied with Sally Smith in the Masters program in Special Education: Learning Disabilities at American University then worked as one of Sally's Classroom Teachers in the Intermediate Program at The Lab School of Washington. She has been a member of the dissemination team, bringing The Lab School Approach to the Academy in Manayunk, PA.)

On the first day of my internship at The Lab School of Washington, I encountered a child intently studying a small booklet of archaeological findings. When I asked for her name, she paused to finish whatever brilliant thought was coming to her, looked up and asked me if I knew from which era the footprint had originated. I panicked, realizing I had no idea. "It came from the Mesozoic era," she plainly explained, "that came right before Cenozoic and right after the Paleozoic era." She continued to rattle off other creatures that lived during the period. I stood in quiet awe—as well as increasing alarm—as I realized the challenge I would face: how can I teach someone who knows so much?

I asked the child where she learned so much about archaeology, and she began to tell me about the archaeological dig that Lab had hosted during the spring of the previous year. I was staggered by the idea that through a single dynamic experience, this child had found what could be a lifelong passion and strength. This was my first exposure to the powerful effects of Sally's "Live It, Learn It" methodology. This approach, one that

inspired wonder in those that participate, is one that truly and maximally embodies both spirit and theory behind Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory.

After moving away from Washington, I began teaching at a new school in a new town, where I hoped to bring what I had learned at Lab to a school that would embrace the same kind of learning environment. It turned out that the difference between the two schools was great. The new school followed a more traditional model than Sally would have ever tolerated. I found myself longing to rediscover the excitement that I knew learning could be.

Determined that my new students could experience that same fascinated wonder I often saw on the faces of my students at Lab when they returned from club, I decided to implement Sally's "Live It, Learn It" methodology in my social studies class. Though I knew my classroom could never replicate the vibrant atmosphere of Lab's club rooms, I hung modest decorations and created simple costumes from construction paper and glue. I researched historical characters and assigned each of my students an explorer throughout the ages. As I explained to my students what I hoped to do with them, they looked back at me with uncertain looks. They were used to reading their textbooks and answering questions about the previous night's reading. As we went through the first week, they seemed to be cautious, exchanging incredulous looks with one another: *how long do you think she will let us do this?*

I persevered. I consulted Sally's *Live It, Learn It* (2005) book to help build the foundations of my class. Though we had meager decorations, I employed weekly passwords to facilitate vocabulary development, and our opening and closing ritual reviewed the big ideas of the age of exploration. Each child worked toward earning

coveted positions during our game-like reviews. A simple gold-plated medallion, indicating our present focus of exploration, was proudly displayed around the neck of the character currently highlighted. Our activities varied from fur trading to dramatic representations of explorer's conquests.

By the end of the year, my students were well versed in the motivations, discoveries and ramifications of the age of exploration. But more importantly, the members of my class discovered something invaluable about themselves and their classmates. The desire to learn and the value of their own abilities were re-ignited. Each student contributed aspects individually tailored to his or her own strengths, giving the class a life of its own.

Quickly, I began to find the success that Sally had found. My students were begging (yes, begging!) to have more time to learn about their explorers. I was delighted to see once-reluctant readers going home and printing pages all about their characters so they could challenge me on trivia they had independently learned.

I was reminded of my first day at Lab, when I wondered how could I teach a child who already knew so much. Now I realized that it was actually the knowledge I didn't have that pushed my students to learn even more. No, I didn't know that Amerigo Vespucci had worked for Lorenzo De Medici, or that Lewis and Clark had given a prairie dog to President Jefferson. My students' realization that they could become experts on something accelerated their desire and ability to learn.

When "Live It, Learn It" was working at its best, I never had to fight for attention and rarely encountered behavioral problems. I saw students who seldom spoke let their guard down—under the protective umbrella of the drama of our class, they could express

themselves freely and share experiences related to our topic. As an added bonus, I had more fun during that period than I had ever imagined.

During the same period, Sally contacted me about a new school following Lab Methodology that would be opening in Philadelphia. Needless to say, I was thrilled that the model was spreading—and spreading closer to me. I immediately jumped at the opportunity to be a part of building a new outpost of Sally’s extraordinary model, and as we continued to prepare for the school’s opening in July, I realized that I had the opportunity to teach a club class as it was meant to be taught. I was thrilled. I had already seen the effects that a diluted version of a club class had in my traditional social studies class.

As I look around in my bejeweled classroom, filled to the brim with artifacts of my artists’ investigations into the Renaissance, I feel I have truly realized the total effects of the “Live It, Learn It” methodology. It is an incredibly effective vehicle for delivering content to students who aren’t able to access it in traditional ways. The Club system embodies Sally’s understanding and dogged insistence for everyone to find and contribute to others the strengths that are both evident and hidden, waiting to be cultivated. I hope that I can pass on Sally’s ever-present mantra of “You can do it” to all the students I will continue to meet.

Reference

Smith, S.L. (2005). *Live it, learn it: The academic club methodology for students with learning disabilities and ADHD*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.