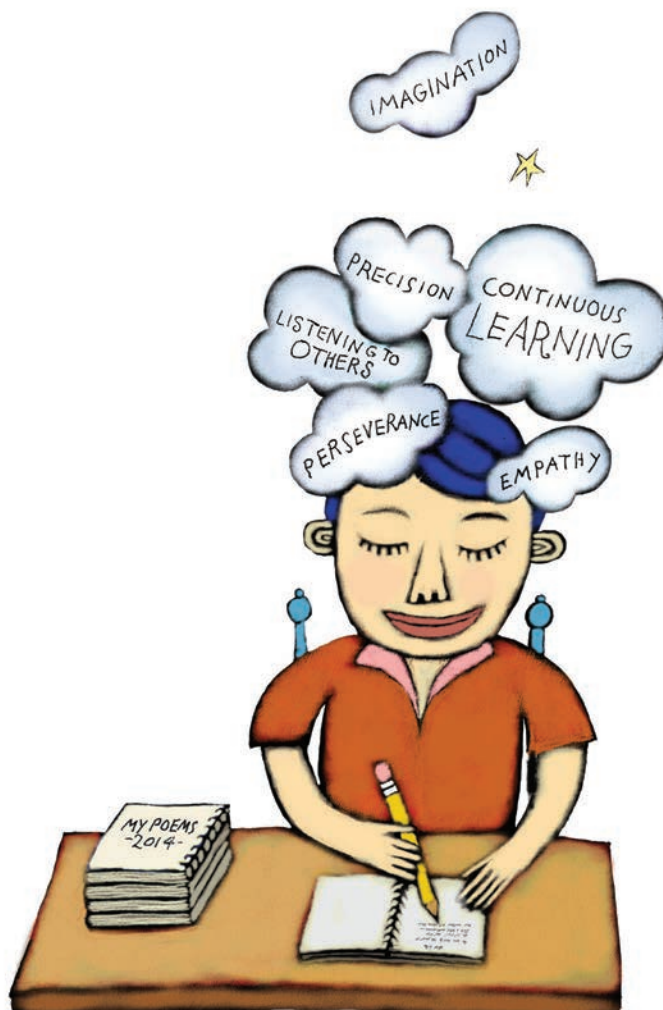




Habits of Mind: Forging University-School Partnerships to Bring a High-Quality Enrichment Curriculum to English Learners

AMY COURNOYER GOODEN AND KELLY CHASE

Boston University and the Malden, Massachusetts, school district worked with the community to support English learners and develop a curriculum around five “habits of mind.”

Take two kids from working-class families in Boston – and the granddaughter of immigrants from Portugal and Canada – and fast forward twenty plus years, when those kids with urban roots have grown into urban educators – a professor, a superintendent, and assistant superintendent. Bring them together on a phone call where they find they have a common dream,

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a willingness to learn from one another, and a commitment to and love of their students. The result is a successful proposal for the Massachusetts Gateway Cities English Language Learner Academies,¹ leading to the successful partnership between a university and an urban school district in Malden, Massachusetts, about six miles north of Boston.

A RELATIONSHIP FORGED, A PARTNERSHIP BORN

Educational partnerships between urban school districts and institutions of higher education provide a powerful means for enhancing student achievement and cultivating college-going cultures (Sandy & Holland 2006; Woloshyn, Chalmers & Bosacki 2005). Malden Public Schools (MPS) – where more than 45 percent of students have a first language other than English, and where approximately 60 percent of the student population is considered low-income – proved to be the perfect place to put a partnership to the test. The Boston University (BU) / Malden Public Schools partnership began with a conversation between Amy Cournoyer Gooden, lecturer at BU’s School of Education; MPS Superintendent Dave DeRuosi; and MPS Assistant Superintendent Kelly Chase.

All three of us shared humble beginnings that in some ways reflected a journey toward the American dream. Gooden’s immigrant grandparents made their way to Central Falls, Rhode Island – a city that recently received national attention for falling into bankruptcy – and made their living

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1 Through the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Office’s Gateway Cities Education Agenda, \$3 million in grants were awarded in 2013 and 2014 to address the English language development of immigrant and newcomer students in the Gateway Cities Summer English Language Enrichment Academies, held across twenty districts in Massachusetts.

by working in local mills and factories. DeRuosi and Chase were also products of working-class families, and through high school, college, and graduate programs, each worked multiple jobs while pursuing the education that would provide them with opportunities. Both ended up in the field of education, working closely with students in urban school districts. As educational leaders of one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse cities in the nation, both are advocates for enrichment learning experiences that benefit immigrant students.

Strongly identifying with the back-grounds of immigrant learners in Gateway Cities and deeply immersed in the field of language-teacher education, Gooden wanted to develop a program that would benefit English learners. She applied for funding from Governor Deval Patrick’s Gateway Cities Agenda, which would allow her to establish a partnership between BU’s School of Education and a school district, with a mission as outlined in the state’s request for proposals: to equip ELLs with essential knowledge and skills that will help them to navigate their way to success.

Gooden received the support of BU’s School of Education dean, Hardin Coleman, an advocate of urban education and champion of public school reforms, and guidance from BU’s dean of research, Scott Solberg, but she needed to find a school district administrator to embrace the plan. When she recognized the rich diversity of Malden’s schools and made that phone call to the Malden superintendent’s office, the dream began to feel like a reality. By the end of their first conversation, Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase knew that they had stumbled upon something special, and it was this personal connection that convinced each of them that their partnership could mean a great opportunity for students currently challenged by

learning a new language, adjusting to a new culture, and attending to the academic demands of middle school.

The three of us recognized from the beginning that the stakes are high for Malden ELL students – especially for those living in poverty and otherwise deemed “at-risk” – to achieve academically in school. We were disturbed by the evidence regarding the persistent achievement gap in K–12 schools and how ELLs represent a vulnerable segment of the student population that struggles to achieve academically compared to their native speaking peers due to their unique linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational circumstances. But we were also invigorated by the challenge to create a specialized enrichment program that could tap into and align with their unique backgrounds while mitigating some of the issues they faced.

DEVELOPING A MODEL

Appreciating one another’s backgrounds and planting the seeds for a positive relationship created a promising foundation, but was only one ingredient in a bigger context. This partnership had to grow while the team also tended to the practical task of planning a model for the Gateway English Learner Reach for the Stars Academy.

We recognized that ELLs lag behind in academic achievement and have dropout rates twice those of native speakers (Ross et al. 2012). Yet we candidly discussed that instead of looking at ELL learner failure, we needed to focus on how schools’ programming could be re-structured to promote ELL success. We agreed that a successful program would move far beyond double periods for literacy and math. It would instead mean creating meaningful, rich, varied, and transformative experiences that honor and acknowledge the backgrounds and gifts

of each learner; creating a safe learning environment where everyone feels welcome and challenged; and exposing students to critical thinking, creative thinking, character education, socio-emotional development, and intercultural competence – essential components of preparing future global leaders.

We also understood that this project was bigger than any individual component or person. We envisioned creating a community of learners where each participant, whether teacher or student or university representative, could not only teach but also learn from others in the program. Content experts from BU helped create lesson plans, but they also learned from Malden’s classroom teachers about the practical elements that needed to be in place to ensure those plans translated from theory into practice. Mentor students working in the program initially thought that they were teaching their ELL counterparts the ropes of succeeding in school, yet quickly learned that those same ELL students who struggled with language had a lot to teach about perseverance, resilience, and global issues. And teachers in the program, who were already strong in content, not only taught participants but also learned new ways to bring rigorous curriculum to students who had complex, profound thoughts but lacked the language and confidence to articulate those thoughts. In this way, a constant circle of teaching and learning allowed for growth on multiple levels.

Finally, we believed that the larger community was essential to the success of the program. The outreach to and welcoming of parents, the lectures of celebrity guest speakers who had overcome adversity, and the participation of the larger community all contributed to a well-rounded education for students. The importance of this belief was validated regularly. In

one instance, the program’s bus driver took an interest in the students’ field trip adventures, learning about their backgrounds each week as he drove them throughout the Boston area. In turn, students considered him part of their group and made sure to include him in their lives, thinking of him when they made their lunch run and bringing back *cannolis* or snacks to the person who cheerfully brought them to their adventures in the city.

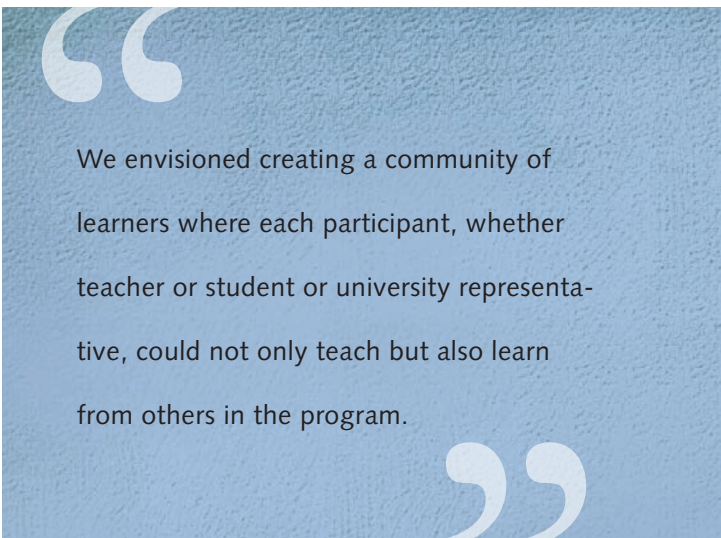
PROGRAM DESIGN
AND CURRICULUM

Leveraging the social, cultural, and educational capital of the partnership, we were able to include the expertise and input of university scholar-practitioners, university students, and Malden teachers, administrators, parents, and community members in all aspects of program planning. The design included innovative, research-based curriculum and instruction informed by Understanding by Design principles,² WIDA, and Common Core; an embedded professional development/coaching model that encouraged critical reflection of theory and practice and was comprised of blended learning opportunities as well as a co-teaching instructional model; and multilingual parent orientation and events aimed at increasing ELL parental involvement, student advocacy, awareness, and support.

The “Habits of Mind”

Rather than presenting our learners with watered-down curricula disconnected from their lives, Gooden built a curriculum that aimed to inspire higher order and critical thinking skills; linguistic development; academic learning; intercultural competence; and *habits of mind*, dispositions used

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2 See <http://www.ascd.org/research-a-topic/understanding-by-design-resources.aspx>.



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by highly successful individual and effective thinkers when confronted with a problem, especially one without an obvious solution (Costa & Kallick 2008).

Given the myriad learning and life challenges faced by middle school ELLs in Malden, coupled with the rigorous demands of schooling in a second language and new culture, Gooden infused the habits of mind into the curriculum as the overarching weekly objectives. Each of the academy’s five-week units of study featured a habit of mind (perseverance, empathy and listening to others, imagination, precision, or learning continuously) as the central, organizing theme. From there, all of the weekly readings, guest speakers, learning activities and experiences, and field trips built on that theme, and students were asked to draw connections between the materials as well as to their personal lives in order to increase their understanding of these dispositions. For example, students were able to read about perseverance; hear from Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier turned author, about how that habit of mind brought him from war-torn Sierra Leone to the United States, where he perseveres every day; and eventually demonstrate their own perseverance by telling their unique stories and performing on stage.

Integrated Curriculum

An integrated curriculum purposefully draws together knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values from within or across subject areas to develop a more powerful understanding of key ideas. In one integrated unit, for example, students were asked to examine and compare the examples of perseverance they learned about during the week which included a guest lecture by Ishmael Beah, United Nations Ambassador and author of *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*; readings from the works of Maya Angelou and Sandra Cisneros; and a field trip to the aquarium to explore this habit of mind in sea life. In one lesson plan within this unit, for example, students read the poem “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou. In addition to learning the English language arts content objectives of similes, metaphors, and figurative language and the social studies objectives of civil rights history, they simultaneously reached language objectives such as learning Tier 2 academic vocabulary (adversity, challenge, perseverance, success) as well as the rhythms and word stress patterns in spoken English.

The socio-emotional objectives for this lesson were self-awareness and self-expression. Weaving creative thinking and the arts into this lesson, students were asked to write and recite their own poems about resilience or identity, and they were invited to then work with internationally acclaimed hip hop/reggae artist Delie Red X on the refinement, recitation, and rehearsal of their poems, which they presented at a poetry slam in the final performance for teachers, parents, and community members.

In terms of intercultural objectives, students were able to practice their critical thinking skills while examining issues of racism and sexism in the U.S. and in their own countries, discussing

all of the cross-cultural norms and values represented in the room – Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Haitian, Brazilian, and Syrian. In the afternoon dance class, the arts teacher helped students put together a step-dance choreography to the poem, which they also would perform at the final celebration of learning. Although challenging to create, we believe that an integrated curriculum leads to more profound and effective learning outcomes.

Socio-emotional Learning: Building Successful Character

Social-emotional learning is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zins et al. 2004). It doesn’t matter how excellent language and content instruction is – if the social and emotional needs of learners are not met, success in the classroom is difficult to achieve.

To equip students for challenges of cultural transitions and prejudice, self-awareness was taught through opportunities to learn about examples of strong and courageous peer models with great ethnic pride. They were given opportunities to celebrate and appreciate their own and each other’s differences. Some ELLs face tremendous extracurricular stress, including adjustment, missing family members, and financial concerns. The curriculum provided them with opportunities to learn about how to deal with anger and problem solving skills. Given these extracurricular demands and the added cognitive and linguistic demands faced by the learners in this academy, self-management – such as setting and achieving goals – was included as an objective in this area.

Malden is a highly diverse setting. Learning how to solve problems and work with others, especially those from vastly different backgrounds, is paramount to learning success – and was included in the curricular weave. Some of the life obstacles faced by Malden middle school ELLs are overwhelming – losing family members due to manmade or natural disaster, or not seeing parents or loved ones because of transnational migration of some family members and not others. The power of positive thinking was included as an additional socio-emotional learning objective. Participants were able to focus on the development of these social-emotional skills with role models – guest speakers and teachers with whom they could identify as sources of inspiration and tangible examples of personal success.

Intercultural Awareness and Competence Development

Researchers in the fields of second-language teacher education and multicultural education recognize the critical role that intercultural learning plays in facilitating language development and academic success for linguistically and culturally diverse students (Banks & Banks 2010; Kramsch 2004; Nieto 2002). Intercultural learning objectives were woven into the curriculum and explicitly taught to help equip our learners with the awareness and competence they will need for current and future cross-cultural success. The content and activities were designed to provide students with an understanding of identity and how it shapes us all; an awareness of how stereotyping, prejudice, and ethnocentrism stifles us all; and a critical review of diverse learning and communication styles and implications for learning.

The curriculum offered an opening to discussions aimed at developing students’ understanding of norms and expectations for participation in U.S. classrooms while validating their prior learning experiences. The uniquely diverse learner context allowed students to learn from each other’s rich cultural histories and perspectives.

Integration of the Arts

ELLs can benefit from a rich arts education experience, presenting opportunities to develop their language, literacy, and writing skills by interacting with different forms of art and media such as drama, film, visual and graphic arts, music, and dance (Latta & Chan 2010). We purposefully attended to enhancing learning through the arts both in language and literacy classes as well as by including after-noon theater, dance, and music classes that were also content-based and tied to the overarching weekly themes. The academy began with a kickoff performance by teaching artists from the Center for Arts in Education in Boston³ that helped students to start to interpret the academy theme and habits of mind and served as a model of the type of artistic performance that students would do for their final capstone performance of learning.

By integrating the arts into daily instructional activities, we believed students would be able to focus on building confidence, content understanding, and expressive skills in English while learning more deeply about related content. We believed that the integration of the arts would empower participants to fluently and confidently express who they were, what their goals were, and what they learned. Activities included theatrical and dance performances of short stories, making visual collages of

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3 See <http://www.bostonartsacademy.org/center>.

learning, and other opportunities to demonstrate their learning through the arts (e.g., role plays, visual interpretation of readings, and creating short movies). Students were welcome to include cultural artistic knowledge; one young student who immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic taught the entire class the history and art of the music genre *bachata* and helped the teacher co-choreograph students' final performance. For one of our field trips, the students went to Boston Improv Asylum to receive professional performance training from real actors.

Role Models

We believed that role models help ELLs stay motivated. Given the adversity that many of the learners face, we wanted to include inspirational guest speakers, teachers, and authors with whom they could identify to share their stories about overcoming the odds and navigating their way to success. In Malden, the majority of teachers who work with the ELL population are White females. To ensure that students had a variety of cultural role models, we also hired BU international graduate students from China and Brazil, as well as arts teachers of Haitian, Barbadian, and Jamaican descent so that students felt they had individuals with whom they could identify.

The academy also featured an inspirational line-up of guest speakers with immigrant backgrounds who could connect to the habits of mind themes. The guests included Moise Fokou, a Cameroonian-born National Football League linebacker; Mayor James Diossa, Central Falls, Rhode Island's youngest and first Latino mayor; and Pras Michel of The Fugees, a Haitian American hip hop icon, activist, and entrepreneur.

CHALLENGES: WHEN DREAMS AND REALITY COLLIDE

There was much success in the program, but there were a number of reality checks along the way.

Although both content experts and teachers were highly knowledgeable and committed to the program, that alone did not ensure that everything would go smoothly. Unlike Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase, who shared an immediate connection, other staff members in the program needed more time to cultivate a relationship. BU content experts, wanting to be helpful, immediately went to work providing lessons that looked great on paper. Teachers, wanting to be polite, held back on informing the content experts that lesson plans as they were written might need tweaking to fit the needs of the learners in front of them. And as each group was sensing a disconnect, students were filtering into the classrooms, leaving the adults with feelings that needed to be aired and no time to do so. Clearly these researchers and practitioners had a lot to offer each other, but as we communicated with staff in the program, it became evident that the group needed time to work through this partnership.

We gathered the group early on to hear concerns, validate feelings, and point out that despite the differences and struggles among staff, students in the program were extraordinarily happy coming to the program each day. This made a significant difference and helped staff focus on the shared vision – helping ELL students thrive. Students never felt the “growing pains” of the program – a true testament to the dedication and professionalism of the staff. Lesson learned: Adults in the program were learners, too, and needed dedicated time to work through their learning. Building in adequate time and opportunities to establish strong relationships well in advance of

students walking through the doors would have aided the process.

At times, joining practitioners with theoretical experts presented challenges. With any new program, there are bound to be logistical glitches, and this program was no different. The program's classroom teachers experienced such challenges as scheduling issues or not knowing whom to contact for a discipline issue. The challenge of delivering a unique experience never attempted before was daunting, and they were bold enough to take it on; however, to tackle a new program *and* face logistical glitches had the potential to be overwhelming. It is important to dream and create a quality program, but it is also important to create a strong structure and establish stability within a new environment. When the down-to-earth details are taken care of, teachers are better able to focus on delivering quality instruction.

Throughout the program, we were constantly reminded of the importance of open communication among the administrators of the program that would flow to the district and university level. We expected that Malden staff would share their concerns and issues with Malden administrators, and that BU employees would feel a level of comfort with sharing their thoughts and exasperations with BU coordinators. But leaving the communication at that level had the potential to divide, rather than unite, the two groups, thereby eliminating the opportunity of creating real synergy.

To counter this threat to the university-district partnership took considerable time on the part of program administrators. Each had to resist the urge to take sides or assign blame. Instead, as occasional issues arose, administrators needed to work together to address the issue. Observing the administrators work together to resolve issues reminded staff that we were committed to the partnership. What could not be seen

was the often daily communication that occurred among the program's creators. While the time devoted to keeping the lines of communication open was considerable, it was essential for the survival of the partnership.

JOURNEY'S END AND LOOKING FORWARD

In the end, building a strong collaborative relationship between higher education and the K–12 level was but one highlight of the partnership. Data collected from students, staff, and parents provided validation that a strong partnership paved the way for success at multiple levels:

Students

Of the students who participated in the academy, 92 percent had perfect attendance for the five-week program. Academy students showed overall improvement in English language and literacy gains. Of the 46 students who had pre- and post-test scores on the W-APT – an assessment that uses a scale of six proficiency levels to measure learners' overall reading, writing, and speaking skills – 34 improved one point and 11 earned the same score. For a student to improve one whole proficiency level in such a short period reflects the intensive learning that took place in the program. In addition, student data from the portfolios and grading rubrics from in-class assignments revealed considerable gains in vocabulary and fluency for 89 percent of participating students. These results suggest that the twenty-five-day Academy did promote language and literacy gains for most participants.

- 99 percent of students said the Academy was “very important” in helping them learn English language speaking and listening skills.

- 97 percent of students said the Academy was “very important” in making them more motivated to attend college.
- 90 percent of students said the Academy was “very effective” in preparing them academically for the new school year (with the balance saying “somewhat effective”).
- 89 percent of students reported increased confidence in their ability to succeed.

Teachers

Data from interviews, observations, and focus groups with teachers showed positive outcomes for teachers.

- 90 percent of the teachers reported that they increased their curricular knowledge.
- 95 percent of the teachers said the experience helped to develop their pedagogical knowledge.
- 95 percent of the teachers reported gains in their intercultural awareness and competence

Several themes regarding teacher learning emerged from the data. Teachers felt they had gained: a sense of the importance of creating culturally responsive curricula; a stronger awareness of differentiating instruction; a greater knowledge of integrating standards and technology; and an understanding of the need to promote critical thinking. One teacher, for example, commented that students did not usually get a chance to discuss the habits of mind in class and felt that addressing these skills during the summer program would give students more confidence going into the regular school year. Another reported that her interest had grown in working with learners from different cultural backgrounds. Teachers generally felt that working with high school student

volunteers and English language learners in their classrooms helped them increase their leadership skills, hone their ability to establish routines, and build their capacity for grouping students for instruction. Finally, teachers stated that they had increased their skill at having professional conversations – a skill that they would carry with them going forward.

Parents

Efforts were made throughout the program’s duration to include parents in the educational process. We developed a parent breakfast program that provided information to help caretakers identify ways to become partners with the school; these events were all well attended, and we heard the following learning outcomes from parent focus groups:

- 93 percent of attendees revealed that they learned more ideas about supporting their child’s language development.
- 89 percent reported gaining confidence and ability to help their children navigate the educational system in the U.S.
- 95 percent increased their knowledge about and planning for college and career readiness.

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIPS

Creating a successful partnership was never easy, yet the rewards have kept these partners connected even though the grant funding was not available for 2015. For example, since the summer 2014 program ended, Gooden, DeRuosi, and Chase have collaborated on a number of professional development projects in the district. Though significantly smaller in scale and targeting teachers rather than direct instruction for students, these professional development projects are an

important step to keeping the collaborative relationship alive so that we are in a strong position when other, larger-scale opportunities to work together arise.

In the end, the habits of mind transcended the student curriculum and became part of the learning for the adults in the program: imagination to conjure up a program with promise and few limitations; perseverance to keep going when things weren't moving along perfectly; empathy when working hard to understand not only the students' experience, but also the point of view of other adults in the program; precision when developing

lessons that would inspire students; and learning continuously when reflecting each day on how to make the following day better.

In implementing a program that focused on teaching students, the adults in the partnership experienced the struggles, tension, challenges, and, ultimately, the profound joy of learning and growing professionally. And the ability to recognize and feel that joy in the work has made us see the value in partnerships for students and adults alike, ultimately leading us to a willingness to take a leap of faith into additional partnerships in the future.

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