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Linking a City's Culture to Students' Learning

Richard Allen Chase
and William G. Durden

The aquarium, the theater, and the zoo are some of the possible "classrooms" in The Baltimore Learning Network's model learning community.

Every year, Center Stage, Baltimore's principal repertory theater, conducts a "Young Playwrights" competition. A summer intern program sponsored by the Baltimore Zoo offers children the chance to learn animal caretaking. The Lady Maryland Foundation combines job training with restoration of historic sailing vessels.

These are just a few ways the Baltimore community is helping meet the educational needs of its children. Many communities abound with such programs, but, as in Baltimore, the activities are rarely coordinated or linked. The Baltimore Learning Network proposes to establish such links to expand opportunities for learning and provide area children with a variety of educational experiences through courses, workshops,

special events, club memberships, and apprenticeships.

The Baltimore Learning Network

The Baltimore Learning Network is a community-based coalition that includes the aquarium, science center, and zoo; museums; libraries; theaters; businesses; government agencies; voluntary organizations; and individuals.¹ We started the Network in early 1991 with a commitment by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth (CTY) to host a conversation among potential participants. CTY has 10 years of experience identifying academically talented youth and supports the belief that every young person has interests and talents that should be identified early in life and nurtured for lifelong learning. This conviction was a foun-

ation for the Network's concept document (Chase 1991), which was distributed to leaders in the city's schools and cultural institutions.

We know that museums serving children have grown in number, sophistication, and commitment to education in the past two decades (Alexander 1979). As museums have become more involved in the delivery of educational services, their alliances with schools have increased. However, we discovered in our conversations with local groups that schools in the

Children collect specimens during an Aquarium-sponsored field trip to a Delaware beach.

Baltimore area use cultural institutions primarily through class visits. Schools are not always taking advantage of educational programs that are available.

Too much diversity in learning objectives and methods can compromise schools' effectiveness. While the museum environment is well suited to provide diversity in learning experiences (Chase 1975), museums find it hard to provide the sustained learning opportunities needed to achieve enduring gains in knowledge and skills. It became clear to us that integration of school and museum experiences would have a powerful potential for teaching and learning.

Program Integration

The Baltimore Learning Network hopes to foster such integration between schoolwork and museum programs. Though plans for the Network are still being developed, we anticipate that a curriculum development group will be formed to serve all of the participating institutions. The group will work to increase the number, quality, and diversity of learning experiences in the community, but at first it will probably give greater exposure to learning opportunities already available. In our discussions so far, we have learned that many institutions are engaged in partnership activities of one kind or another. A priority right now is the development of a catalog of learning

opportunities that already exist in the community.

We expect new curriculum ideas will emerge over time. New learning environments might include student-run businesses; service programs for the dependent young, elderly, and handicapped; programs to protect the environment; and specialized "learning laboratories" such as a "Life Story Laboratory" for biographical research.

The idea for the Life Story Laboratory is rooted in the belief that young people show keen interest in stories of all kinds (Egan 1986) and particular interest in the lives of individuals with whom they can identify. The Life Story Laboratory would support the study of existing life stories and the creation of new stories based on independent research. Relevant sources in the city of Baltimore would include collections of biographical materials in the public library, genealogical research materials in the Peabody Institute Library, newspaper obituary files, artifacts in local museums, storytellers, theater groups, and the research skills of history professors and their graduate students. How the laboratory will actually take shape will depend on each participant. Local newspapers might shape the laboratory one way; participation by a museum might shape it in another direction. We see the Life Story Laboratory as an example of new ways to weave existing resources into new learning opportunities.

Learning "Maps"

Another important idea for the Network is a computer system to provide students with "maps" of learning opportunities and the knowledge and skills they can acquire. We believe opportunities for learning should be clearly outlined in a continuously updated catalog, available in print and electronic formats. This

CTY supports the belief that every young person has interests and talents that should be identified early in life and nurtured for lifelong learning.



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catalog should contain information on subject area, format,

recommended preparation, expected outcomes, costs, and time and place of meetings.

These maps are also central to our plan to track learning experiences and their outcomes for all participants throughout their learning careers. An education research group will be organized to study the learning process,

individual learning careers, learning environments, and learning networks. Research will be an ongoing, well-integrated part of practice, and, in time, practice will be constantly informed by measures of performance.

We look to assessment to be embedded in the learning experience itself. The computer system linking the participating institutions will also allow students to chart their own progress. We will encourage students to set standards for their own academic progress with the same enthusiasm they now bring to performance in sports or music. Individual records of student achievement, called "accessory diplomas," will help students obtain jobs and gain access to higher education.

Practical Matters

Other plans for the Network include an office for volunteer recruitment and training. This office will work to increase the number, diversity, and skills of volunteer workers supporting Network activities.

We have also discovered that many institutions are, to some degree, in competition with one another for members, dues, private gifts, and grants. Their education budgets are inadequate to support proven programs. The Network's funding options should be explored with the help of experts to ensure that there is a sustainable economic base making the best possible use of local and regional resources. Also, funding should reflect the faith and commitment of the community in the Network's mission.

In addition to funding, we will also need to address issues such as transportation, liability for the safety of students, and staffing.

Network Growth

Although CTY is hosting these initial discussions, the Baltimore Learning Network will one day operate as its own entity. We are setting no deadlines for our growth. We envision that the Network will grow from the bottom up, through participation of

various groups. Explorations of Network ideas are fairly advanced, though, and some collaborations are already emerging.

We are eager to see these collaborations grow. By providing a panorama of learning opportunities, learning networks can lift children from the limitations that occur in burdened families, communities, and schools. Many businesses and universities have already formed successful partnerships with schools to provide such opportunities. The special compatibility between museums and schools will allow them to shape their relationships into equally powerful opportunities for teaching and learning. ■

¹At this time, discussion of the network idea has involved representatives of The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore County Public Schools, Baltimore City Public Schools, The Greater Baltimore Committee, The Abel Foundation, The Baltimore Community Foundation, The Lady Maryland Foundation, The Enoch Pratt Free Library, Center Stage, The National Aquarium, The Baltimore Zoo, The Walters Art Gallery, The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Baltimore City Life Museums, and The Museum of Visionary Art. As our discussions move forward, we plan to include other groups with an interest in our mission.

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