

THE FUTURE IN THE INSTANT LIFEREADY INNOVATION

MCDONOUGH SCHOOL

IMPERATIVE

HOW CAN A SCHOOL CREATE THE MOST RELEVANT, INCLUSIVE PROGRAM PROMISING A CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY OF PURPOSE? How can a school leverage its liberal arts program—those elements that have “transcendent value”—such that the ways students learn, the skills they develop, and the competencies they master prepare them for an unknown, rapidly-transforming world? We believe we can do this by transforming the school into a thoroughgoing **CULTURE OF THINKING**; from this, students will, as a matter of course in their learning, develop dispositions for a world where innovation will be imperative.

IDEA

Our summit idea—the thing that we want everyone in the school to be able to talk about—is the **BELIEF THAT LEARNING IS A RESULT OF EXPERIENCES WHERE DEEP, SUSTAINED THINKING TAKES PLACE**. While McDonough is a school invested in preparing students with the core knowledge and disciplinary narratives of its liberal arts curriculum, it does so such that students’ thinking provides the pathway to learn for understanding as well as to develop the competencies, dispositions, and literacies that will likely be demanded of them in their lifetimes.

This idea might seem abstract and amorphous: a culture of thinking? Certainly, one might ask, we all believe that students should think. Yes, of course. But how does a school itself understand if real, deep thinking is the day-to-day mechanism of action that generates learners of the future?

McDonough took many “day hikes” in the last ten years. Individuals, teams, and cross-divisional groupings experimented with a variety of approaches to learning and to innovation. These day hikes, however, began to point the school to a deeper belief about learning—the anchor idea steering the variety of teaching and learning practices with which a McDonough sought to engage.

IMPLEMENTATION

Once McDonough developed clarity on its “summit” vision—a vision steered by its academic strategic plan, **LIFEREADY**—the school began to tell the story of this taxonomy, prioritizing a culture of thinking as the core driver to all our other decisions. At that point, the Director of Innovation & Learning steered financial resources, developed school-year and summer professional learning planning, and identified other professional development opportunities so that faculty could have ample opportunities to develop their own expertise in teaching and learning methods that would ensure our academic vision for the school.

We are certainly early in our implementation phase. The task was to take LifeReady and to develop a concrete vision of what a tactical plan would be: **WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING TO SUPPORT INNOVATION AT MCDONOUGH?** How should we do it? At the center of all this is the need to tell a **CLEAR, AUTHENTIC, and COMPELLING STORY** about what we truly believe is at the center of relevant & transcendent teaching and learning. At this point, we are “flooding the plain” with opportunities and resources so that teachers can find their way into this new phase in the school’s history. Eventually, though this must not be rushed, we will communicate expectations for evidence of a culture of thinking—and the kinds of teaching practices supporting these outcomes—and review this in our evaluation protocols.

What would we do differently? When we first developed LifeReady, our excitement and enthusiasm caused us to try out many different frameworks from project-based learning to team-based learning, etc. We were focused too much on the what and how and not enough on the **WHY**. As the Director conducted research on learning and the brain and began to identify the root driver of the vision for teaching and learning, which eventually led the school to the research and tools from Project Zero, it became clear that the why had to focus on the axiom that learning is a consequence of thinking. **PBL, TBL, TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING, DESIGN THINKING**, etc. all provide ways of engaging students’ thinking, but, to many teachers, all these frameworks look like different “fads” rather than useful pathways to thinking. If we were to do this over again, we would take more time establishing our story in order to mitigate any teacher anxiety about what progress can mean for them. **SLOW DOWN AND LET IDEAS TAKE ROOT.**

1. At the very center is the school’s core belief: that learning is a consequence of thinking (not of memorizing). “Memory,” Daniel Willingham states, “is the residue of thought,”¹ and this research guides our planning. We must first ensure that deep, regular thinking is always central to each student’s learning experience.

THESE INSIGHTS EVENTUALLY LED US TO CREATE THE FOLLOWING TAXONOMY, A GRAPHIC THAT HELPS TO ILLUSTRATE OUR BELIEFS ABOUT WHAT IS TRANSCENDENT AND WHAT IS CONTINGENT VALUE IN A SCHOOL.

3. The third, and final, ring indicates those ideas and, in some instances, practices that respond to the demands of the world in our current day. If, as futurist research indicates, a skill like virtual collaboration² will be useful, if not necessary, to people living in a global economy, then we may steer future “day hikes” to train teachers in approaches to develop such literacies in students. Whatever this outer ring points to at any given time, however, it is nevertheless shaped by the core belief and the pedagogical values indicated by the frameworks of the inner two circles.

2. The next ring refers to high-leverage teaching and learning frameworks and practices designed to ensure that students are thinking about what they’re learning and not merely memorizing facts and figures. What are those practices a school can use that ensure that thinking can be seen, nurtured, and encouraged? Such frameworks and practices, like Project Zero’s Teaching for Understanding structure and Visible Thinking practices, provide faculty with the means to sustain the summit idea that McDonough is a culture of thinking.

FOOTNOTES

1 Daniel Willingham, *Why Don’t Students Like School?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 61.

2 Cf. <http://actdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Future-Skills.pdf>

RESOURCES

SCHOOL WEBSITES
mcdonogh.org
curiosityshopmcdonogh.wordpress.com/
curiosityshopmcdonogh.org/

KEY READING
curiosityshopmd.org/reading-list