

Pedagogical Framework for the Learning Lab

CORE VALUES & SKILLS

The Learning Lab provides children and adolescents with an inclusive space to learn in a secular setting about what it means to be a moral citizen. Our goal is to create a safe environment for youth to explore their identities as critical thinkers and as compassionate, community-minded participants in our diverse world.

The Learning Lab will focus on teaching students the following core values and skills:

| Core Values Characteristics to live by... | Core Skills Actions that transfer into values... |
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| Compassion | Empathy |
| Integrity | Healthy Communication |
| Equality | Self Awareness |
| Reason | Social Awareness |
| Justice | Conflict Resolution |
| Dialogue | Analytic Reasoning |
| Creativity | Identity Exploration |
| Nature Appreciation | Perspective Taking |
| Diversity Appreciation | Religious Literacy |

Skills are actions that can be practiced and transferred into life-stance values. *Values* are attributes of moral character that become ingrained in an individual's approach to life. Each session of the Learning Lab will target one or more of the core values and skills. By the end of the year, students will have been thoroughly exposed to all of these values and skills.

THEMATIC UNITS

The Learning Lab curriculum has adopted a systems approach to the whole child¹ to structure each unit within the curriculum (and therefore each lesson). These cumulative units start the year with a focus on the individual and identity appreciation and conclude the year with a focus on the universe and what it means to be a member of that enormous ecology. While the units are scaffolded and undeniably interrelated, they can be taught in isolation and still be meaningful to the child. Thus, if a student misses October's lesson on family, they are still able to participate with ease in November's lesson on community. Here are the Thematic Units in order:

1. INDIVIDUAL (September) – *Who am I? What does it mean to be an individual? What is my identity? How am I different from others?*
2. FAMILY (October) – *Who are the people who contribute to my identity? What is the role of family? How do families differ?*
3. COMMUNITY (November) – *What types of communities am I familiar with? (e.g. school, sports team, peers, etc.) What does it mean to be part of a larger community?*
4. MEDIA & NEWS (December) – *How do the things we are exposed to in the news and on television affect our perspectives? How do these agencies affect the development of our identity and culture? How can we determine when sources are fact or fiction?*
5. DEMOCRACY (February) – *How are rules developed? Who decides what is fair? How do laws and state policies affect our community? How do they affect our family and our identities?*
6. CULTURES (March) – *What is a culture? How does our culture shape who we are? How do differing cultures contribute to our diverse community?*
7. EARTH & ENVIRONMENT (April) – *What role does our planet play in our lives? How can we respect our environment and contribute its health and nourishment?*
8. SOLAR SYSTEM & UNIVERSE (May) – *What is the solar system? What is the universe? How are they important to our planet's ecology?*

¹ This approach is influenced by the ecological model theories of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1986, 1992), the moral development theories of Kohlberg (1964, 1981, 1983), and the child perspective-taking theories of Selman (1971, 1974, 2003).

GENERAL LESSON STRUCTURE

There are six major components of all Learning Lab lessons. The general structure of each session—for all age ranges—is as follows:

- Each lesson begins with a **Community Opening** that allows the teacher and students to orient themselves to each other and any new events that are important in the students’ lives. (5–15 minutes)
- For each lesson, and therefore each thematic unit, a **Core Activity** designed to promote the Learning Lab’s skills and values is introduced. These core activities range from small-scale science experiments, to explorations of art and culture, to the reading of texts with ethical and prosocial themes. (85–90 minutes)
 - The Core Activity either concludes with or envelopes a student-centered **Discussion**² that promotes both social development and deep content comprehension by allowing students to question, challenge, and investigate various perspectives associated with the core content.
 - Each core activity includes an opportunity for students to create a **Tangible Product** to take home with them at the end of the lesson.
 - In addition to the weekly tangible products produced by the students, children in each class work on a **Culminating Activity** that is added to throughout the course of the year. This year’s activity is an Identity Tree: *Growing with the Learning Lab*.
- Each lesson concludes with a **Reflection Closure** where students are provided with the opportunity to freely reflect on what they learned, appreciated, and wonder about the thematic content of the day. (5–15 minutes)

² These activities are designed around research-based instructional moves, formats, and assessments proven to promote students’ social and academic development through child-centered engagement (Elizabeth, Snow, Ross, & Selman, 2012; Ronfard, Elizabeth, & Bempechat, 2014; Elizabeth, 2015).

CLUMINATING ACTIVITY

The Learning Lab’s Culminating Activity is an Identity Tree! In order to connect learning experiences across the eight themes of the Learning Lab, students spend time each month developing their own personalized tree. Each branch of the tree is dedicated to a theme from the curriculum. This activity provides students and families with a memory and record of the shared experiences and new understandings developed by children during their time at the Learning Lab. The project also offers students an opportunity to reflect and process the content that they are exposed to during each lesson. Finally, the culminating activity serves as a celebratory marker of the end of the year, empowering students with a tangible product to be proud of and present to their families.

MONTHLY BULLETIN

When the students leave the Learning Lab each month, they take with them a monthly bulletin to share with friends and family. This bulletin summarizes the thematic focus of the month, the content students were exposed to during the lesson, and fun facts others may like to know. The bulletin also provides suggested discussion questions and follow-up activities for guardians who may want to extend the conversation beyond their child’s experience at the Learning Lab. In addition to highlights from the current thematic unit, the bulletin foreshadows for families what content to expect in the coming month.

TEACHER SURVEY

In order to preserve a record of the content and activities introduced during the academic year, Learning Lab teachers take a brief survey at the conclusion of each lesson. This survey collects a range of qualitative and quantitative data, including how many students were present, how well the lesson was received, and any suggestions for future instructional development.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

Members of the Learning Lab’s Curriculum Committee routinely visit classrooms to learn more about how the structure of the curriculum is working. These observations provide the Learning Lab with a record of curricular content and inform future development of lesson plans, thematic structure, and core activities.