EL Education

Long Term Curriculum Planning in EL Schools

EL Education recommends particular structures and priorities for curricular and instructional planning. The purpose of this document is to describe four types of long-term plans that EL teachers create: curriculum maps, learning expeditions, projects, and standards-targets-assessments (STAs).

Planning templates are available on Google Drive here and EL Commons to support detailed long-term planning of curriculum and assessments aligned to EL's Core Practices and state content and literacy standards:

- Curriculum Map Template
- Learning Expedition Overview Template
- Project Plan Template
- Standards-Targets-Assessment Template
- Scaffolding Plan Template
- Text Plan Template

A lesson plan template supports shorter-term planning, which should be driven by the longer-term plan.

A Note on Process

There is not one "right way" to approach planning in an EL setting. Ideally all curriculum will flow from a school's content standards and priorities. Sometimes teachers begin by creating an expedition overview and then craft STA plans. Other teachers might select their standards, develop a project idea, complete full STA plans, and then design and sequence lessons. The purpose of this document is to clarify the different types of planning, not to indicate a linear process.

Year-Long Curriculum Mapping

Schools with strong curriculum documentation can refine the quality of expeditions and projects from year to year, staying true to thoughtfully created maps and standards-targets-assessment plans while making small adjustments based on student assessment data and feedback from expedition reflection protocols. By minimizing the amount of time spent on building and refining curriculum each year, schools can shift their professional learning time from conversations centered on what we are teaching to conversations about what students are learning. In addition, in schools with significant annual teacher turnover, having a well-documented curriculum can ease the transition for incoming teachers and reduce the impact of the transition on students. See the separate document, "Curriculum Mapping within and beyond Expeditions" for detail.

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Learning Expeditions and Case Studies

Learning Expeditions are the signature EL curricular structure, combining multiple elements of the EL approach: guiding questions, kickoff experiences, projects, fieldwork, experts, service learning, and a culminating event that features high-quality student work. Learning expeditions are interdisciplinary studies based on standards, usually lasting 6-12 weeks, planned and led by a teacher or teaching team. All learning expeditions are rich with literacy skills, and all require research, critical thinking and collaboration by students. Additionally, math skills are embedded whenever they align well with expedition content.

Learning expeditions feature one or more case studies, which narrow the topic and make it concrete and relevant for students. Sometimes the term "case study" is used exactly as it is in law or medicine, to refer to an investigation of a unique person, place, institution or event (e.g. as part of a U.S. history study of the Civil Rights movement, students investigate a local civil rights hero). Other times, the term case study is used more loosely, to refer to a narrowed subtopic that allows students to focus their research on a particular example that animates and clarifies the broader topic (e.g. in a study of the Civil War, students may do a case study of women's roles in the war).

- Teachers plan learning expeditions to address standards from national, state, district, and school sources, as appropriate. Expeditions are driven by essential content and skills.
- Teachers identify case studies that narrow the topic of the expedition to make it clear and compelling. Ideally, case studies connect students to a nearby natural or residential community to provide a local window on national or global concepts.
- Teachers include the following key components: one or more embedded projects that address important skills; one or more experts used to inspire, support and critique student work; interesting local fieldwork to conduct original research; and an authentic audience for student products.
- Teachers create a calendar for the expedition that is shared, critiqued and revised by colleagues and students, and used publicly to keep students on track.
- Particularly in middle and high school (where the pressure to cover academic content is greatest) some content may be taught through expeditions, while other standards may be taught most strategically and efficiently through ongoing routines or shorter strategic units, case studies, or projects.

Projects

In EL schools, projects are a core structure for learning essential skills and content during the school day. Projects may be a component of an expedition and can also serve as a stand-alone structure. Project plans typically consist of a sequence of 2-6 weeks of lessons and experiences (e.g. fieldwork research) that result in a student product and/or performance for an audience beyond the classroom. During the project, students typically work together toward mastery of a real-world product format (e.g. field guide; website).

- Teachers plan projects that help students address important questions (sometimes a guiding question, other times a narrower inquiry question), connect academic concepts to real-world work, and drive motivation to learn.
- Teachers choose projects and product formats that address the important skills and concepts required by standards. While the product genre is usually the same across the class, the structure often allows for creative student choice within that format (e.g. every student creates a blueprint for proposed museum, but the designs are all unique).

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- When possible, teachers and students meet an authentic need beyond their classroom through the project, creating a compelling purpose for learning (e.g. a scientific study of a local health concern).
- Teachers support high-quality work through the use of exemplars and models, multiple drafts or rehearsals, and peer and expert critique. Projects are "backward-planned", with students involved in calendar decisions, to ensure enough time at the end to polish work to display quality.
- Projects typically require both individual student work and teamwork. Group or whole-class projects are planned so that the work of each individual student can be identified and evaluated.
- Student products often have a number of discrete components – with some identified as mandatory for all and others as optional extensions. This supports differentiation of the project for a range of learners.

Standards, Targets, and Assessments (STAs)

All EL teachers create STA plans. The number and scope of these plans varies based on whether a teacher is planning for a series of lessons, a project, or an expedition.

- Before instruction, teachers determine what standards they will assess when teaching a series of lessons, project, or learning expedition. They use standards from national, state, district, and school sources.
- Teachers create long-term targets based on a "bundle" of standards (grouped together because they are synergistic or complementary). They identify a realistic number of long-term targets that are assessable in a given instructional/grading period (For many teachers, a good guideline is 5-8 targets per discipline, per semester. In order to keep the total number of long-term targets manageable, some long-term targets represent a combination of several important standards).
- Teachers develop a realistic number of corresponding supporting targets that name the discrete learning necessary for students to reach each long-term target (e.g. 3-5 supporting targets per long-term target).
- Teachers identify assessments for sets of targets before instruction begins.

The Relationship between an Expedition, Case Studies, and Projects: An Example

In the 7-8th grade expedition "Feast or Famine: A Life Science Expedition on Obesity, Body Systems, and Healthy Choices,"* students explored three case studies. The first involved studying how the digestive, respiratory, and circulatory systems interact, focusing on how the human body makes energy from food. Next, they studied homeostasis by analyzing how food is used by the body. Their third case study zoomed in on personal health plans as a lens for looking at behavior and nutrition.

There were two projects associated with this expedition. The first project involved multiple components: collecting data about key health indicators; creating a concept map showing how food turns into energy; comparing and contrasting carbohydrates, fats, and proteins; collecting data about what students ate; and creating and following a personal health plan. The final product was a nutritional journal that documented the week the students tried to follow their personal health plans.

The second project involved researching and recommending a lunch program for the school. The final product was a formal business letter to one of three major stakeholders in the school community: the Family Council, Board of Directors, or School Director, advocating for one of two lunch programs. Ultimately, the school did select a different lunch program, based on the input of the students.

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** This expedition was written by Liza Eaton, with support from Laurie Wretling. Liza works at The Odyssey School in Denver, CO, and her expedition was written up as a model expedition by EL Education staff. A PDF version of the expedition can be found in EL Commons in the library, and it is also a shared expedition in the Planner.*

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