

IMAGINEERING EDUCATION

A GUIDE TO CREATING THE
MOST MAGICAL SCHOOLS ON EARTH



THOMAS RIDDLE

Special Preview for School Leaders

Dear Colleague,

Every day, you step into one of the most important leadership roles there is: shaping the lives of students and influencing the future through your school. That is no small responsibility, and it is why I admire people like you who choose to lead in education.

When I wrote *Imagineering Education: A Guide to Creating the Most Magical Schools on Earth*, my goal was simple: to challenge the way we think about schools and inspire leaders to see what is possible. I believe that schools, like all great organizations, don't just run on systems; they thrive on vision, culture, and creativity.

The chapters you are about to read are just a glimpse of what happens when we borrow the imagination of Disney's Imagineers and apply it to our schools. You will see how story, design, and experience can transform a campus into a place where learning is alive, where students are engaged, and where teachers feel part of something bigger than themselves.

My hope is that as you read these sample pages, you will pause to reflect on your own leadership. What story does your school or district tell? What experiences are shaping your students every day? And most importantly, what bold steps could you take to create something extraordinary for those you serve?

With gratitude and belief in your leadership,

Thomas Riddle

Founder, Imagineering Education

thomas@imagineeringedu.com

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A GUIDE TO CREATING THE MOST MAGICAL
SCHOOLS ON EARTH

THOMAS RIDDLE



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DEDICATION

To Angela—

Your thoughtful insight, constant encouragement, and unwavering support have helped shape every step of this journey. Thank you for walking beside me—and for always believing in me—even when the path was long and uncertain.

To Ben, Nick, and Jon—

Your creativity, courage and passion for life have inspired me more than you'll ever know. You've each reminded me why imagination matters, and why dreams are always worth chasing.

And to my parents—

For introducing me to the power of stories—and for always encouraging me to tell my own.

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PREFACE

“To all who come to this happy place, welcome!

With those words, Walt Disney introduced the world to Disneyland, and with these same words, I introduce you to this long-time dream called *Imagineering Education: A Guide to Creating the Most Magical Schools on Earth*. It’s a vision that was born out of a visit to another of Walt’s happy places, Walt Disney World.

It was there in 2010, as I explored Tom Sawyer’s Island with my three young sons and stood watching them play in Scavenger’s Fort, that I began to recall how much fun our family had shared together over the previous three days, laughing and playing our way through EPCOT, Hollywood Studios, and Animal Kingdom.

It occurred to me that while we were being entertained, we were also learning a lot. On our visit to EPCOT, we were transported to Mexico, Italy, Germany, and France as part of World Showcase and explored various aspects of the cultures of each nation through several hands-on activities. At Conservation Station in Animal Kingdom, we learned about the importance of being good stewards of the

environment that we've been blessed with and gained a fresh appreciation of the work of conservationists. We even had the chance to learn from, and be moved by, the words of great leaders, like Abraham Lincoln, during a much-needed air-conditioning break in the Hall of Presidents. And these experiences are only scratching the surface of all that we were learning while we were also playing together as a family.

So, I began to ponder: *What would it be like to take all of my students on a field trip to Walt Disney World?* And then, I began to contemplate the logistics of that...as well as the cost! Since that wasn't very feasible, I wondered what it would look like if we designed schools like Disney designs theme parks? What if we created spaces and experiences that utilized the best techniques of design that were both educational *and* fun? Once we returned home, that thought remained...

For the next three years, I studied the techniques of the Imagineers in order to discover the ways in which they carefully design every space, sight, sound, and smell throughout all the Disney parks to create these incredibly immersive experiences that emotionally engage us, leaving powerful, long-lasting impressions on all who visit. As I was doing this research, I began to make connections between the work that I do as an educator and the work that they do as theme park designers. Suddenly it occurred to me that, as a teacher, I had been using similar techniques in my classroom for years without realizing it. The work of the Imagineers began to give language to what I intuitively knew worked to engage students.

Around this time, I was very blessed to have the opportunity to serve as acting principal during the design phase of a new STEM-based middle school. I intentionally began to include design elements and principles used by the Imagineers to help create engaging, exciting spaces that could be enjoyed by students, teachers, and the community as well.

The work I was doing to design the school culminated in 2013 with an invitation to speak at TEDx Greenville on the subject of designing immersive experiences and spaces within schools. That talk, entitled "Reimagining Education", became the spark of inspiration for sharing these ideas with others beyond the TED community.

But time passed, life happened, more important things took priority, and the dream of developing a platform from which to share these ideas with other educators took a back seat to everything else. However, with continued encouragement from my wife, who has always been there to help me through the ups and downs, the starts and stops, and the oh-so-close moments of making this dream a reality, it's time to heed my own advice from part of that TEDx talk.

It's time to stop dreaming and start doing. That's what this book is all about.

One of my favorite Disney characters is an imaginative purple dragon known as Figment. He and his creator, the Dreamfinder, are fond of saying, "One little spark of inspiration is at the heart of all creation—right at the start of everything that's new. One little spark lights up for you."

It's my desire that, here at the start of a new endeavor, this book will empower you with the tools you need to become a spark of inspiration for your students and all those around you, to encourage them, and help change their lives.

As we begin this journey of discovery, remember that we're here to dream, imagine, and create. I challenge you to tap into the power of your imagination to rediscover that child within, reconnect with those dreams that you've probably shelved for far too long, and design a future that you would like for yourself and those around you. I truly believe that the seeds that are planted within the content of this book will germinate into new ideas and revelations that can have a

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major impact on the students you teach, the communities in which you serve, and the world that we share.

As the Dreamfinder says, “A dream can be a dream come true with just a little spark from me and you.”

Now, let's get started!

INTRODUCTION

A BLUEPRINT FOR REIMAGINING SCHOOLS

Close your eyes and imagine a place filled with excitement, wonder, and a sense of boundless possibility; a place where stories come to life, where each step beckons you to new discoveries, and where every detail—down to the colors on the walls and the sounds in the air—is designed to immerse you in an experience so vivid that you forget the outside world for a while. Sounds a bit like a theme park, right? But what if I told you this could also be your school?

For years, theme park designers, like Disney's Imagineers or the creative minds behind Universal Studios, have been perfecting the art of immersion. They do more than build rides—they create entire worlds, where every guest becomes an active participant in the stories that are being told around them. The spaces they create aren't merely attractions; they are gateways to learning, growth, and inspiration, wrapped in the magic of a well-told story. What if we took these same principles—the meticulous design of space, the power of storytelling, and the fusion of imagination and experience—and applied them to schools? What if we ditched the status quo of education and dared to dream of something more meaningful for our students?

This book is an invitation to reimagine education through the lens of immersive experience design, like those found in theme parks and interactive museums. It's about taking the core practices of world-renowned designers—like the Imagineers—and using them to transform classrooms into dynamic spaces for learning. It's about creating environments where students do more than absorb information; they experience it, live it, and build their own stories through it. Just as guests at a theme park leave feeling inspired, energized, and enriched, our students can walk out of school each day feeling empowered by the knowledge they've gained and the experiences they've shared.

THE POWER OF STORYTELLING IN LEARNING

At the heart of any great theme park experience is a story. Whether you're soaring through Pandora's Hallelujah Mountains at Animal Kingdom, trekking through wind-swept grasslands on a safari at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, or walking the streets of Diagon Alley in the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, theme parks thrive on stories that draw people in. Stories create context and connection. They allow us to make sense of the world and our place within it. It's how we've always learned. Applied to education, storytelling can transform how students engage with the material that's being taught. When lessons are framed within a compelling narrative, students are no longer passive recipients of information; they become the hero embarking on their own learning adventure.

Imagine walking into a classroom that immediately transports students to ancient civilizations. Charts unfurl like treasure maps, artifacts brim with secrets—every sight and sound whisks you away to lost civilizations. Lessons learned in a space like this are not comprised of lectures and worksheets—they're an unfolding story where students become historians or archaeologists, discovering the mysteries of the past.

Or picture a science class where the study of ecosystems isn't simply limited to chapters in a textbook—instead, students are thrust into the role of conservationists tasked with saving an endangered habitat, caught up in a story that makes everything they learn feel urgent, relevant, and alive.

Stories invite students to ask questions, wrestle with possibilities, and make learning deeply personal. When a subject is framed as a compelling narrative within an immersive space, engagement with what they are learning is greatly enhanced. And when students see themselves as characters contributing to a larger story, one in which their choices, insights and actions truly matter, learning ceases to be an obligation and becomes an experience they will carry with them long after the final bell rings.

CRAFTING IMMERSIVE ENVIRONMENTS THAT INSPIRE CREATIVITY

Just as designers of immersive experiences carefully consider every element of their spaces to evoke certain feelings and reactions, we can design learning environments that spark creativity and curiosity. When you enter an experiential exhibit or a theme park attraction, nothing is left to chance—every detail, from the lighting to the textures on the walls, is intentional and contributes to the overall experience. In education, we can apply this same level of intentionality to the spaces where students learn.

In the world of immersive experience design, there is a concept known as "environmental storytelling", where the space itself tells part of the story. Video games often employ this technique to convey the narrative and immerse players in the story without relying on direct exposition. Clues in the setting—like scattered artifacts, intentional lighting, or architectural details—allow players to uncover the history and meaning of the world through exploration. We can apply this same concept in schools by designing classrooms and hallways

that aren't static but living spaces that reflect the learning happening inside. A well-designed classroom, like a well-crafted game environment, can guide students through an experience using intentional visual cues, interactive elements, and thematic design. When students are surrounded by environments that are vibrant, creative, and interactive, learning isn't merely a task; it's an experience, that invites curiosity, engagement, and deeper connection with the material.

THE ROLE OF IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES: LEARNING BY DOING

In theme parks, much like video games, immersion is everything. Guests aren't just visiting attractions; they're stepping into entire worlds designed to engage all their senses. Every element—the buildings, soundscapes, even the smells wafting through the air—is part of the story. This level of immersion helps visitors forget the outside world and become fully present in the moment. What would it look like to apply such immersion in schools?

In an immersive classroom, students don't just study literature—through the use of their imagination, supported by the physical space, they step into the settings of the books they're reading. They don't just learn random math equations and facts; they use those equations to solve real-world problems that impact their communities by designing and building scale models of cities, learning geometry, architecture, and economics as they work through the authentic challenges of urban planning. This is learning with a purpose and for life, not just to pass a test.

Immersion can be physical, through the design of the classroom space, or it can be intellectual, through the design of projects and lessons that allow students to engage deeply with the material. When students are given the opportunity to learn by doing—to immerse themselves fully in the subjects they are studying—they become

active learners who are meaningfully involved in the process of discovery. Learning moves beyond memorization; it becomes an experience that stays with them long after the lesson ends.

A CALL TO DREAM BIGGER

In 1955, Walt Disney introduced the world to Disneyland with a simple, powerful idea: “If you can dream it, you can do it.” This idea isn’t just a catchy slogan; it’s a call to action, an invitation to break free from limitations and reimagine what’s possible.

What I’ve learned over the course of my more than thirty years in education is that, too often, we focus on constraints—budgets, time, testing requirements—and forget to dream. But what if we gave ourselves permission to not only dream, but dream bigger? What if, instead of being limited by what education has always looked like, we asked ourselves, “What *could* it be?” What if we took the principles that make theme parks, immersive exhibits, and interactive experiences so powerful and used them to redesign our schools?

Together, we will explore how the practices of immersive experience design can revolutionize the way we think about education. We’ll dive into the principles of storytelling, environmental design, sensory engagement, and experiential learning, showing how these concepts can be applied to create schools that are as inspiring and immersive in their own right, just like any theme park.

Let’s imagine something greater for our students. How about creating schools where the learning environments are designed with the same creativity, attention to detail, and sense of wonder that captivate millions of people in immersive experiences worldwide. Our students deserve spaces that inspire, challenge, and bid them to become active participants in their own stories. Together, we can build a future where schools are no longer places of dull instruction but worlds of exploration, creativity, and learning for life.

THE IMAGINEERS AS A CASE STUDY IN IMMERSIVE DESIGN

In the world of entertainment, few organizations have mastered the creation of immersive experiences like Disney, and the team behind this success is the Imagineers. These creative collaborators have been crafting fully immersive worlds for decades, blending storytelling, technology, art, and innovation to produce environments that transport people to worlds of wonder. As educators, we can learn a great deal from the Imagineers' approach to design, creativity, and guest-centered thinking and then apply it to the development of our own immersive educational spaces and experiences.

WHO ARE THE IMAGINEERS?

The term “Imagineer” is a combination of the words “imagination” and “engineering”, which perfectly captures the interdisciplinary nature of their work. They are the masterminds who take an idea—often just a glimmer of inspiration—and transform it into a tangible experience for millions of visitors each year.

As Walt was planning the creation of Disneyland, he envisioned putting together a team that could combine creative storytelling with cutting-edge technology to create a new kind of entertainment experience—one that was fully immersive and could carry away guests to the fantastic worlds portrayed in his stories and beyond. This vision led to the formation of WED Enterprises (named after Walt's initials) the precursor to what we now know as Walt Disney Imagineering. Although the term “Imagineering” was first introduced in the 1940s by Alcoa aluminum company, it began to be used by members of WED Enterprises and Disney himself during the early days of the company to describe the work of this gifted team and would become forever synonymous with them.

Today, Imagineers come from a wide array of backgrounds, including architecture, art, engineering, design, writing, and more. In all, they comprise over a hundred disciplines working together to bring extraordinary ideas to life. This diversity is a key to their success, as it allows for a multidisciplinary approach to problem-solving and creativity. Whether they are designing a ride system, creating a character animatronic, developing a narrative, or perfecting the smallest details of a themed environment, each Imagineer brings a unique skill set and perspective to the table.

In education, teachers, administrators, and school designers can serve as their own type of Imagineer; perhaps we should call them “Edmagineers”—those who come from a variety of backgrounds who work together to create powerful learning environments that are imaginative and impactful. While the Imagineers focus on creating magic for the guests who visit Disney theme parks and resorts, we as Edmagineers can focus on creating schools and classrooms where students can thrive—spaces that invite engagement, curiosity, and meaningful learning.

THE IMAGINEERING PROCESS

The process used by Disney Imagineers can serve as a guide for creating immersive spaces for any setting, including schools. This process can be broken down into several key stages:

1. **Concept Development:** Everything begins with an idea. For Imagineers, a project might start with a sketch, a sentence, or even a fragment of a dream. The concept phase is about brainstorming, exploring possibilities, and shaping the core narrative. For educators, this phase is where we envision the type of learning environment we want to create. What do we want students to feel? What do we want them to take away? Just as Imagineers push the boundaries of what's possible in entertainment, we can think creatively about how to transform the school experience to make learning engaging and memorable.
2. **Design and Planning:** Once a concept is in place, Imagineers develop detailed plans that address both creative and practical considerations. This includes architectural design, flow of space, and guest interaction. In schools, design and planning are just as crucial. Whether it's the layout of a classroom or the physical arrangement of non-instructional gathering spaces, such as cafeterias and hallways, we must consider how our students will move through and engage with the learning environment. Every element—from the types of seating to the availability of technology—affects the overall experience.
3. **Engineering and Technology:** Many of Disney's most iconic attractions wouldn't exist without cutting-edge technology. Imagineers constantly innovate to bring their visions to life, whether it's through advanced animatronics, virtual reality, or interactive systems. As educators, we too should explore options for integrating technology that will

enhance learning. This doesn't mean adopting technology for technology's sake, but adapting tools like virtual reality, gamification, and digital resources as needed that can help transport students into new worlds. This can make abstract concepts tangible and create immersive experiences that enhance understanding.

4. **Construction and Production:** After design comes execution. For Imagineers, this means building the attractions and spaces, overseeing construction, and ensuring every detail aligns with the original vision. For those of us in education, this phase might involve setting up a classroom, curating learning materials or preparing resources that will facilitate immersive experiences. Imagineers frequently work with specialists from a variety of fields to lean on their expertise to help optimize an attraction or experience. Likewise, educators should be willing to embrace collaboration—working with instructional technology specialists, local designers, and perhaps most importantly, their fellow teachers—to help bring their vision to life.
5. **Storytelling and Theming:** At the heart of every Imagineering project is a story. Storytelling is central to creating immersive experiences, and Imagineers use every aspect of design—from visuals to sound and space—to tell a story. In schools, storytelling can be just as powerful. By framing lessons, units, or even entire learning environments around compelling narratives, educators can make learning more engaging and meaningful.
6. **Innovation and Problem-Solving:** Imagineers are known as trailblazers, constantly looking for creative solutions to challenges. As educational leaders (if you're reading this book, yes, you are a leader!) we must also be active problem-solvers, continually adapting to meet the needs of our students and finding new ways to engage them.

Innovation in the classroom doesn't always require advanced technology; it could be as simple as rethinking the way content is delivered or designing original, hands-on activities that immerse students in the subject matter and inspire them to see the world in ways they never have considered before.

THE LEGACY OF IMAGINEERING

Over the years, the work of Disney's Imagineers has left an indelible mark on popular culture. They have created some of the most iconic and beloved attractions in the world, from the original Disneyland in California to the sprawling Walt Disney World Resort in Florida and beyond to the parks in Paris, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Each of these destinations is a testament to the power of imagination and the skill of the Imagineers who brought them to life.

Yet Imagineering is about more than creating theme parks; it's about crafting experiences that resonate with people on a deep, emotional level—whether it's the thrill of a roller coaster, the excitement of a dark ride, or the simple joy of walking down Main Street, U.S.A.—every element of a Disney park is designed to evoke a sense of wonder and delight. This is the true magic of Imagineering: the ability to take dreams and make them real in ways that touch the hearts and minds of people all around the world.

And that is exactly what great teachers do as well. Every day, in schools and classrooms around the world, educators are touching the hearts and minds of students and empowering them with the knowledge and skills required to realize their dreams. At first glance, the roles of the Imagineers and classroom teachers may seem worlds apart—one group crafting magical experiences in theme parks, the other shaping young minds in schools. However, a closer look reveals a striking parallel between the two professions. As a teacher or principal, you're closer to being an Imagineer than you may think; there's a

shared artistry and dedication that defines both fields. Throughout this book, we'll be exploring these parallels in depth and discovering how many of the best practices of Imagineering can be used to enhance and improve our classrooms and our schools.

Before we move on, however, let's look for a moment at the core purpose behind Imagineering, its driving force and fundamental reason to exist. According to legendary Imagineer John Hench, it all comes down to serving the guests. In his book *Designing Disney: Imagineering and the Art of the Show*, Hench explains, "Liking the guest is the key to everything we do." He goes on to explain that Walt Disney had a genuine concern for his guests, always prioritizing their experience, taking their interests to heart, even when others might have dismissed it as unimportant.

Walt himself often disguised his appearance, tousling his hair and donning sunglasses, to walk through Disneyland unnoticed. He quietly mingled with guests, stood in line with them, and listened to their conversations, gathering invaluable insights that he would later share with his team of Imagineers in order to improve the products they were providing. To truly understand the guests, Imagineers must step into their shoes and see the world from their perspective. That's exactly what Walt was doing—walking through the park and experiencing it as a guest.

"LIKING THE GUEST": A STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACH

To Imagineers, it's not just the rides that are important. The design considerations for the parks have to go beyond the attractions themselves to the service and operations staff, transportation, restaurants, restrooms...even the trash cans. All aspects of the park need to be designed thoughtfully to create an exceedingly rich experience. Imagineers understand that, even with their wealth of knowledge and vast experience, the guests can teach them so much more than they would

know on their own. So, at the heart of it all, Imagineering is really about serving their guests with excellence.

Think about that for a moment. How might we as educators demonstrate this same concept of "liking the guest" when it comes to our students? How much time do we spend seeking to understand them fully—their backgrounds and their point of view—in order to better meet their needs? What actions can be taken to begin or strengthen this process?

When I was a classroom teacher, I always sought to get to know my students as much as possible. Of course, it's incumbent upon us to identify our students' academic strengths and weaknesses, but I'm talking about getting to know who they are beyond simply being a student. The more you can know about a child's background, the better prepared you are to help meet their needs. That said, I would ask questions about their family, pets, friends, and dreams for the future, as well as their interests outside of school. I always looked for ways to connect. If I saw a student who was drawing, I'd encourage them to use that talent and even ask them to illustrate or create something for me that was related to what we were learning in class and then use it in my lessons if I could.

And if I had students that were athletes at our school, I would frequently go to their games and let them know, "Hey, you may not have seen me, but I was at the game last Friday, and you did a great job. Tough game, though. I can tell you guys played your hearts out, and I was impressed with that catch you made!" I never had a student not light up, if even just a little, when they realized that I genuinely cared about them and their success enough to encourage them in areas of interest beyond the classroom walls. Over the course of my career in education, I've discovered that the old saying is true: "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

Demonstrating interest in students as the unique individuals that they are goes a long way toward building a relationship of trust. Once

that trust is built, they will begin to open up more, listen more, and apply themselves more in your class. Significant learning rarely occurs without the establishment of a significant relationship.

In Imagineering terms, this is a powerful example of “liking the guest”—serving them in such a way that they feel safe, seen, heard, and appreciated. Whether they’re guests at a theme park or customers of any business, the more appreciated people feel, the more exceptional the service they receive, the more loyal and dedicated they will become to that organization. The same applies to any student in any school. Regardless of who they are, if we treat others as we would like to be treated, if we serve others as we would like to be served, then we move beyond simply “liking the guest” and move closer to demonstrating care and compassion. And what student wouldn’t want that?

So, consider this: How well do you know your students? How often do you step into their shoes and consider their experiences? Do they feel supported? What challenges may they be facing?

When we take the time to understand our students as individuals—their backgrounds, interests, and needs—we can design learning experiences that are not only more engaging but also more meaningful. Whether it’s incorporating their passions into the curriculum, creating a flexible learning environment that accommodates different learning styles, or simply showing that we care about them as individuals, demonstrating “liking the guest” in education means placing students at the center of everything we do.

APPLYING THE IMAGINEERS’ LEGACY TO EDUCATION

The Imagineers’ commitment to creativity, innovation, and guest-centered design has left an enduring mark on the world of entertainment. But their legacy can serve as an inspiration for those of us in

education as well. The immersive worlds they create by combining experiences of imagination, storytelling, and technology, engage people on a deep emotional level, moving them to see new possibilities of what could be. What teacher or principal wouldn't want the same for their students?

For educators, the challenge is to bring this same level of creativity and intentionality to our schools and classrooms. By thinking and dreaming like Imagineers, we can design learning environments that go beyond traditional teaching methods and offer students truly immersive educational experiences. Whether it's through storytelling, innovative use of space, or thoughtful incorporation of technology, we have the opportunity to create places where students don't just learn—they thrive, explore, and discover.

REFLECTING ON OUR OWN PRACTICES

As we've noted, Disney parks are famous for the excellent level of service to their guests. The expectation is that every cast member, from transportation drivers to restaurant workers, and the attraction attendants that run the rides, all are working together to provide an unforgettable experience.

In schools, this would mean that teachers are not the only ones who play an important role in supporting students but also administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers, guidance counselors—anyone who's engaging with students at all, in a positive and supportive way, can really have a lasting impact on a student's life. Therefore, we need to consider thoughtfully all of those interactions amongst the entire staff.

With this in mind, on a scale of 1-10, where would you currently rate your school in the practice of having every staff member—from the cafeteria manager to each custodian, the guidance counselors, the principal, and you—intentionally focused on providing support to all

students? How would you rank your staff as being “all in” on providing the most excellent quality of service for your students? Now, consider what steps can be taken to increase this score.

Important considerations of the guest experience at every Disney park is cleanliness, attractiveness, and functionality of all areas. Cast members are taught that every task is important and that everyone should work together to ensure these goals are met. For instance, no one is above picking up trash; it’s everyone’s responsibility.

When thinking of the school in which you work, to what extent are all areas clean, attractive, and functional? Like before, on a scale of 1-10, how would you currently rate your school in these areas? What could you do to improve this score, and how might you include others in the process as well? You may think, “*This isn’t my responsibility.*” Yet if you identify an area that needs improvement, then why isn’t it your responsibility? Don’t feel that you can’t or shouldn’t attempt to make a difference by handling matters yourself or reaching out for assistance to those whose actual job responsibility it may be. It may just be your action or your voice that ignites the process needed to implement positive change for the entire learning environment.

If not you, then who? If not now, then when?

Just as Imagineers constantly seek to improve and innovate, so too can we as educators strive to create environments that are truly inspirational for our students. After all, in both Imagineering and education the ultimate goal is to take people on a magical journey—to transport them to new places, expand their minds, and inspire them to imagine new possibilities.

REFLECT AND REIMAGINE:

1. **Understanding and Serving the "Guest":** Reflect on the concept of "liking the guest" as practiced by Walt Disney and the Imagineers. How can educators apply this principle to better understand and serve their students' needs in the classroom?
2. **Immersive Learning Environments:** Discuss how the skills and tasks of Imagineers—such as storytelling, design, and engineering—can be integrated into creating immersive and engaging educational experiences. What specific techniques can be adopted to enhance learning environments?
3. **Holistic Approach to Education:** Evaluate the importance of every role in the school environment—from teachers to custodians—in contributing to a positive and supportive student experience. How can schools foster a culture where all staff members are invested in the well-being and success of students?
4. **Continuous Improvement in Education:** Inspired by the Imagineers' commitment to constant improvement and guest feedback, discuss ways in which educators and schools can continuously seek and utilize student feedback to improve teaching methods, facilities, and overall educational experiences.
5. **Maintaining High Standards:** Analyze the emphasis on cleanliness, attractiveness, and functionality in Disney parks. How can schools ensure that their physical environments are well-maintained and conducive to learning? What practical steps can be taken to improve the school's appearance and functionality, enhancing the overall student experience?

THE ART OF THE SHOW

At this point, we need to consider why all of this matters. Why is it important to give thought and intention to the spaces and experiences found within schools? Marshall McLuhan, a leading figure in media theory, argued that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message being conveyed, creating a symbiotic relationship where the medium influences how the message is perceived. In other words, the manner in which a message is delivered, greatly impacts how it is received. This principle applies not only to communication platforms such as film, television, books, or music, but also to physical spaces as well, including learning environments. Our schools and classrooms send specific messages the same as any song does. While it may be unspoken, their message is just as strong.

Take for example a visit to Notre Dame Cathedral. The architecture, grand scale, and intricate design elements are intentionally crafted to convey spiritual reverence, drawing visitors' attention upwards toward the great arches that support the ceiling. This places them in a posture that fixes their gaze toward heaven, fostering a sense of awe and wonder. Cathedrals such as this are

practical demonstrations of how space can communicate powerful messages. The same is true in theme parks and other experiential spaces. Designers understand that every aspect of the environment—from layout to color choices—shapes the experience and communicates its own story.

For instance, the team behind *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* at Universal Studios had the same goal as the Disney Imagineers: to translate a two-dimensional story (books and films) into an immersive, three-dimensional world. When you step into Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, every element—from the cobblestones beneath your feet to the interactive wand experiences—is designed to pull you deeper into the narrative. The architecture mirrors that of medieval European villages, transporting visitors into J.K. Rowling’s magical world. The success of this space isn’t just in its visual appeal but in how it uses design to evoke a specific mood and feeling that align with the narrative.

Another great example comes from *Super Nintendo World* in Universal Studios Japan, where the creators designed an environment that immerses guests inside a video game. In this case, the experience is interactive, combining augmented reality, physical space, and gamified experiences. Guests interact with their surroundings, use power-up bands to score points, “jump” like Mario on blocks, and explore the Mushroom Kingdom, all of which create a playful, high-energy environment. The space is a testament to how designers can craft experiences where guests are active participants rather than passive observers.

In a similar way, Meow Wolf, an experiential art collective, crafts interactive and narrative-driven spaces like *Omega Mart* and *House of Eternal Return*. These immersive spaces use mystery, exploration, and artistic elements to engage visitors in a nonlinear narrative, inviting them to discover hidden stories as they interact with the space. Visitors explore multiple dimensions, unraveling the story at

their own pace. This mirrors how students engage with learning—each one discovering content in their own way.

All of these examples, whether from Disneyland, Universal Studios or Meow Wolf, illustrate the power of intentional space design to communicate a message and evoke an emotional response. When we apply these principles to educational spaces, it becomes clear that the design of a classroom or school can profoundly impact the learning experience.

CRAFTING THE NARRATIVE

Understanding that the environment—whether built or natural—conveys specific messages, is an important step in designing impactful, out of the norm learning spaces. However, innovative environments do not guarantee innovative learning. You might have walls of windows in your classroom that let in ample natural light and your furniture might be on casters so that there is flexibility when it comes to reconfiguring the space, both of which are fantastic for students. But just because you have a sleek, modern, research-designed classroom, doesn't mean that you're guaranteed to have a positive impact on student learning. That requires intentional planning and attention to detail. It's something the Imagineers refer to as "The Art of the Show".

When planning Disneyland, Walt once said, "Disneyland should be a place where adults and children can experience together some of the wonders of life and adventure and feel better having used their imaginations while attending, so that they leave feeling more self-assured, stronger, alert, and much more alive." To accomplish this, Walt and the Imagineers approached the design of Disneyland with the same mindset of creating a show—a living, breathing story that could be experienced. The park, therefore, became a stage on which a wide variety of stories would be played out. With great intentionality, they created themed environments to support the narrative; each space

was carefully curated so that everything the guests would interact with within those spaces would help support the story.

While stories were the driving force behind each area and every attraction of Disneyland, at the heart of it all was an understanding of the immense value of play, both for children and for adults, so that ample opportunities to engage in playful ways were built into every experience. Disneyland would indeed become a living show and a very playful one at that! These same design principles can be applied to education as well. If so, then what would that look like? It would begin with keeping these four categories in mind: *themed environments*, *narrative spaces*, *curated spaces*, and *play spaces*. Throughout this book, we'll explore ways to create or enhance each of these types of spaces.

THEMED ENVIRONMENTS

Themed environments in a school would include classrooms, hallways, outdoor spaces—every area on a campus can be designed in such a way that the individual parts contribute to the greater whole, supporting the theme, the mission, or the vision—the message that the school wants to send to the students and the community. Just as Adventureland at Disneyland immerses guests in a world of exploration and discovery through its architecture, props, and landscaping, a history classroom can be transformed into an archaeological expedition. Maps, artifacts (real or replicated), and ambient sounds of distant civilizations can make students feel as if they are uncovering the past instead of just reading about it. Hallways, too, can extend the theme—student-created murals of historical sites or interactive exhibits with QR codes linking to their research can turn a simple walk between classes into a journey through time.

MOVING HEARTS, FUELING MINDS

Incorporating engagement, immersion, and emotional connection into your teaching practices can transform your classroom into a dynamic, interactive, and memorable learning environment. Just as the Imagineers create unforgettable experiences for park guests, those of us in education can craft powerful learning moments that move students' hearts and minds. After all, if you can move their hearts, the learning will follow.

Now that we've explored the foundational elements of crafting meaningful experiences, let's delve into specific tools and techniques that can help you design these moments in your classroom.

REFLECT AND REIMAGINE:

1. **Engagement Strategies:** Reflect on your most engaging lesson, one in which your students are really dialed into what you're teaching. What specific techniques or strategies do you use to draw them in? How does this impact their learning experience and retention of the material?
2. **Creating Immersive Environments:** Consider the idea of transforming your classroom into a themed environment. What subject or topic would you choose to immerse your students in, and what elements (decor, music, activities) would you incorporate to enhance the experience?
3. **Emotional Connections:** Discuss the role of emotion in learning. How can you create lessons that evoke emotional responses in your students? Share an example of a lesson that successfully connected students' emotions to the content.
4. **Collaborative Learning Experiences:** Explore the concept of role-play and interactive projects. What are some

ways you can encourage collaboration among students in your classroom to deepen their understanding of complex topics?

5. **Implementation of Technology:** Reflect on the potential of VR/AR technologies in your teaching. How might you integrate these tools to create immersive learning experiences? What specific content or concepts could benefit from this approach?

CREATING IMPACTFUL LESSONS AND LEARNING

Let's talk about how to craft lessons that go beyond the standard "sit-and-get" lecture. Most of us have endured way too many passive learning experiences like this, where information is simply delivered without much engagement or interaction. We need to shift our mindset as educators, moving away from the "sage on the stage" model to being more like a "guide on the side", helping students engage with content through inquiry-based learning. One of the best ways that I've discovered to do this is by using real-world design challenges. Let me share a personal story that exemplifies this approach.

THE PALLET HOUSE PROJECT: A REAL-WORLD DESIGN CHALLENGE

Picture this: a cold January day in South Carolina, temperatures in the 30s with a bitter wind that made it feel like it was in the teens. Despite the conditions, my middle school students were outside, bundled up and fully engaged in a project. They were moving and hammering a large number of shipping pallets into place, not for fun but for a purpose. We were building a 250-square-foot house using

the shipping pallets, and students were busy measuring the precise angles for cutting the lumber using the math skills they had recently acquired in their Geometry class.

While I was helping some students lift a heavy section of wall that had just been completed, a seventh grader named Luca looked up at me with wide eyes and said, "Mr. Riddle, I never thought I'd be building a house, especially one to help the homeless. This is amazing!" It was a transformative moment for him. He felt empowered, realizing that even as a kid, he could make a real difference in the world.

The cold weather made the experience even more impactful for us all. As the students worked, they gained a deeper empathy for the homeless in our community as they realized that there were many of them who slept outside in these conditions at night just a few miles from our school. Instead of reading about the plight of homelessness from a textbook or journal articles, these sixth-through-eighth graders were applying their study of the impact of poverty in a meaningful way through what we called the Pallet House Project. It was a prime example of inquiry based, design thinking in action.

UNDERSTANDING DESIGN THINKING IN EDUCATION

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to problem-solving that emphasizes empathy, creativity, and collaboration. In education, it allows students to take on real-world challenges, move through iterative processes of prototyping, and develop solutions with direct impact. More than just a methodology, design thinking fosters a mindset that encourages students to develop empathy for others while also cultivating resilience by learning to "fail forward"—an idea that it's okay to make mistakes as long as you learn and improve through them.

Our goal with the Pallet House Project wasn't just to teach students the design thinking process, but to help them develop a deeper understanding of others, especially those less fortunate than themselves. By tackling real-world problems, the students were able to connect their classroom learning with a tangible, meaningful outcome.

THE POWER OF IMMERSIVE LEARNING

Immersive learning experiences like this one can transform students from passive recipients of information to active problem-solvers. In this middle school where I was serving as principal, we decided to dedicate two weeks in January to a special, immersive experience. We ditched the regular schedule, organized our students into multi-grade teams, and gave them meaningful design challenges to solve. Every teacher served as a mentor to a particular group of students, guiding the teams as they worked through the design thinking process to develop solutions to a wide variety of challenges.

One of our challenges was redesigning the school's cafeteria experience. Another was creating the "perfect classroom". These smaller challenges prepared students for the larger, more complex issue they would tackle next—designing solutions for poverty.

To help them understand poverty on a deeper level, we brought in local experts, journalists who had written extensively on the plight of the homeless in our community, service providers, and individuals who had experienced homelessness or extreme poverty. Empathy develops through listening to real stories of real people, especially when you can hear those stories as you look that person in the eyes.

Motivated by what they had learned and empowered by the belief that they really could make a difference (because we told them they could), our students decided to tackle the issue of homelessness by constructing a dwelling from reclaimed shipping pallets as a model for transitional housing. Along with building the house, each team

also created a plan for an entire transitional housing community based on precedent studies of other successful communities of this type nationwide.

Once completed, all their plans for these transitional housing communities were submitted to a local development group that was, at that time, working on the design of a mixed-income community for our city. This team volunteered to review our students' work, judge the strength of each design, and provide feedback on each plan. In the end, they identified the winning design from a team that was primarily made up of sixth graders, even though we had multi-grade teams (we had some teams that were heavy one way or the other). These sixth graders had the strongest overall plan, and our judges stated that it was the most viable, practical model and contained a very viable combination of elements that are frequently found in successful transitional housing communities nationwide.

The big takeaway for our judges is that they were absolutely amazed that all of this work had been accomplished by children. That's what we wanted the kids to walk away with: a belief that they could do something authentic and make a difference in the world. At the end of our two-week design challenge, one of our sixth-grade parents approached me to discuss her son's work. I remember it very well; I was standing in front of the school during afternoon pickup. She walked up to me looking a bit serious and said, "What kind of crazy school sends your kids home excited about learning and believing that they can actually make a difference in the world?" Then, she got this big smile on her face and added, "The kind of school that I'm thrilled to have my kid attend!" Talk about validation. It means a lot when we receive validation from our students, but to have a parent witness the enthusiasm and love of learning bubbling over into conversations around the dinner table and excitedly share it with you, that's pretty special, too.

Two weeks, that was it. We took two weeks out of our school year to open these kids' minds and really change their views about how they can impact the world through tapping into the learning potential of design thinking. Our students received more education in those two weeks than they would have ever gotten in a "sit-and-get" experience in their classroom.

That said, think about this: You may not be able to implement a project like this in your school, but imagine what could happen if you did. What could you and your colleagues do with two dedicated weeks like this? Imagine the impact that you could make if you broke the mold, made the time, and empowered kids to believe and know that they could change the world. That's the type of emotional engagement and immersive learning that we're talking about, and it's the kind of thing that can really change lives.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

When you're creating interactive lessons for your students, plan on opportunities that allow them to explore learning for themselves, like we did with the Pallet House Project. This allows them to "choose your own adventure", if you will. Going into the project, we identified different aspects of poverty that we wanted students to be familiar with—from homelessness to educational attainment, food deserts, and access to clean drinking water—just to name a few. We then allowed the student teams to decide for themselves which avenue of poverty-related issues they wanted to explore in depth. Providing them with a choice resulted in buy-in right away because they felt that they had some measure of control over their learning.

The more you can provide students with opportunities to direct their own learning, the more likely they will be engaged, perhaps even passionately so. You can provide a menu of options for them, put up parameters, but whenever possible, turn them loose and let them learn. Think of it as giving them a map to Disneyland and letting

them pick which attraction they want to ride and in what order; they're staying within the bounds of the park, but they get to explore what they're drawn to the most.

PASSION-BASED LEARNING: IGNITING CURIOSITY AND ENGAGEMENT

The Pallet House Project is a perfect example of what I would call **passion-based learning**. Our students weren't just completing an assignment; they were pursuing something they truly cared about, and that made all the difference. It demonstrated how providing opportunities for students to pursue their interests can foster profound engagement and creativity.

At first, our students were not particularly passionate about the task. However, as they became more involved, their enthusiasm grew. This progression highlights a critical aspect of passion-based learning: It's not always about starting with passion but creating an environment where passion can develop. Passion-based learning is a student-centered approach that encourages learners to explore topics that resonate with their interests, fostering deeper understanding and creativity in the process.

BENEFITS OF PASSION-BASED LEARNING

The benefits of passion-based learning are numerous and transformative. Among the most significant are increased engagement, personalized learning experiences, and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation. When students are passionate about what they're learning, they are more likely to retain information and achieve a profound understanding of the material. Moreover, passion-based learning empowers students to take ownership of their educational journey, boosting confidence and resilience as they become experts in their chosen subjects.

ENHANCED ENGAGEMENT

One of the foremost advantages of passion-based learning is the remarkable increase in student engagement. By allowing students to delve into topics that genuinely captivate their interests, teachers spark an enthusiasm for learning that goes beyond the classroom. For instance, a student who is passionate about animals might channel their curiosity into wildlife conservation efforts, researching endangered species or volunteering at local animal shelters. Such experiences extend learning beyond the confines of school, demonstrating the real-world impact of their studies.

This heightened engagement not only deepens students' commitment to learning but also instills a sense of ownership over their education. They feel more connected to the process, which can lead to a lifelong love of learning.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Passion-based learning champions personalized education by empowering students to tailor their paths according to their interests, learning styles, and preferred pace. For example, a student fascinated by history might explore the lives of historical figures, analyze major events, and investigate their lasting impacts. This personalized approach ensures a richer and more meaningful understanding of the subject matter, accommodating the diverse needs of students.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Intrinsic motivation is a cornerstone of passion-based learning. When students are driven by an internal desire to learn, rather than by external rewards like grades or stickers, they engage with their studies more deeply. This self-driven approach nurtures a love for learning

that extends beyond academic requirements, fostering habits of curiosity and exploration.

CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

Passion-based learning also enhances creativity and critical thinking. Encouraged to think outside the box, students explore innovative approaches to their interests. For example, a student passionate about environmental issues might create a campaign to raise awareness, utilizing art, videos, or interactive exhibits to effectively communicate their message. Such endeavors develop not only subject-specific skills but also broader problem-solving abilities.

REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

Another significant benefit of passion-based learning is its emphasis on real-world application. In classrooms that use this approach, students are provided opportunities to apply their knowledge in practical settings, bridging the gap between theoretical concepts and tangible outcomes. For example, in the Pallet House Project, students translated what they learned about homelessness in our community into action by designing and building sustainable structures. Similarly, a tech-savvy student might develop a mobile app or website to address real-world challenges, gaining technical and entrepreneurial skills in the process.

PASSION, MEMORY, AND RESILIENCE

As we mentioned earlier, there is a powerful connection between memory and emotion. When students are passionate about a topic, they are more likely to retain information and integrate it into their existing knowledge. This meaningful connection surpasses rote memorization and promotes a comprehensive grasp of the subject matter.

Additionally, pursuing passions fosters confidence and resilience. As students explore their interests, they encounter challenges that require persistence and problem-solving. A student passionate about public speaking, for instance, might initially struggle with nerves but gradually build confidence through practice, debates, or even starting a podcast. This process not only strengthens their skills but also teaches them to embrace failure as a step toward growth.

When we allow our students to pursue their interests, we create an environment that fosters engagement, creativity, and a deeper understanding of the material. Whether it's through a collaborative project like the Pallet House, personalized research, or real-world applications, passion-based learning equips students with the skills, motivation, and confidence to excel. Ultimately, it's about giving students the opportunity to shine in areas they care about, turning education into a meaningful and transformative experience.

Let me give you an example.

Once, when I was the principal of our school's Freshman Academy, a "school-within-a-school" model designed to help ninth graders make a successful transition to high school, I had a student named Quentin who was really struggling in the first few weeks of his freshman year. I would often get called to any given teacher's class because Quentin would not participate; he'd put his head down on his desk, and the teacher would call me in because she couldn't do anything with him. He wasn't belligerent or anything like that; he just didn't want to be at school nor did he want to participate. He was bored out of his mind.

One day I was called to the geography class because Quentin had his head on his desk. I walked into the class, made my way over to him, and noticed under his arms was a piece of paper with a sketch on it, a drawing that was really quite good. I tapped Quentin on the shoulder and said, "Come outside with me, and grab that paper." So, Quentin went outside with me in the hall. He thought he was in

trouble and of course, I wasn't happy that he wasn't cooperating with the teacher.

I said, "Quentin, did you draw this?"

"Yeah," he replied.

I continued, "Man, this is really good. Do you draw a lot?"

"I don't know, maybe," he said.

"Okay, well, can I keep this?"

"I don't care." In his eyes I could see a kid who had almost given up.

"Great, I appreciate it!" Then I asked, "Quentin, what's your elective class you're in this year?"

"Music."

I knew what he meant was chorus. So, I had this kid who already had a chip on his shoulder going in, and despite the fact we had an amazing chorus teacher, I could see already he probably wasn't interested in making a connection with her or that class.

I thought about it for a moment and had an idea. "Okay, Quentin," I said, "I need you to pay attention in class. Go back in and sit down, and don't lay your head on your desk please." At that moment I was more concerned with finding something that Quentin was interested in and how I could best reach him, than his lack of attention in class.

I took Quentin's drawing to our art teacher and said, "Hey, look at this. I've got a ninth-grade kid who doesn't want to be in music class but he can draw pretty well. Can you make room for him in an Art I?" She looked at the drawing and said, "Sure, I'll take him." So, I changed his schedule that day, and the next day, Quentin went to art class.

This was early in the school year, when schedules were still being changed due to conflicts and such, so I talked with Quentin to let him

know what I'd done. "Hey, man, I changed you over to art class; are you good with that? After looking at your drawing, I thought you might enjoy it more than chorus. I want you to go in there and do well because I think you've got some talent here!" Quentin sort of shrugged but gave a half smile. There was the crack in the armor I'd hoped for.

After a few weeks in art class, we discovered Quentin was like a fish in water; he took to it and thrived.

In the Freshman Academy, we all worked very closely to help support our students as much as possible. When I placed Quentin in art class, I was aware he was struggling in all of his core academic classes. Art I became the class in which he found success and each of his teachers encouraged him in his drawing. When he saw the interest that they had in him and what he was passionate about, he began to show interest in them and what they were teaching. Steadily, his grades improved across the board.

Quentin went on to pass ninth grade. The next year, he took Art II and excelled. The year after that it was Art III, and by the time he was a senior he was doing graphic design.

One of the happiest days of my life as a principal was the day that I called out Quentin's name at graduation. That unhappy freshman who stood all of five feet nothing the first day I met him, had grown into a 6'1" young man who strode confidently across the stage. He took his diploma, smiled and gave me a huge hug. That fall, Quentin enrolled in graphic design school in Atlanta, Georgia, turning his passion for art into a career, all because he had teachers who saw his potential and refused to give up on him.

I wish every story like that had a happy ending, but you never know if the ending will be happy unless you try. Always encourage your students in the passions they have, because you never know just how far it's going to take them.

That's the beautiful thing about being an educator. We have the awesome power, and responsibility, to change lives. If you can help kids find their passion, you can help to change their lives.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

Passion-based and immersive learning tap into one of the most important aspects of education: emotional engagement. When students are emotionally invested in their learning, they retain more information, connect that information to prior knowledge, and develop a deeper understanding of the material. It's the difference between memorizing facts for a test and truly learning something because it matters to you.

Incorporating real-world challenges, emotional connections, and student-driven inquiry can transform your classroom. The key is finding what your students care about, then designing learning experiences around those interests. Whether through design thinking, project-based learning, or passion-driven inquiry, the goal is to create environments where students are active participants in their learning journey.

In the end, it's not just about the content we teach but the experiences we craft. When students feel empowered to make a difference, like Luca and Quentin, they become lifelong learners who believe in their ability to change the world.

REFLECT AND REIMAGINE:

1. **Creating Authentic Learning Experiences for Students:** How can you incorporate real-world design challenges into your lessons to make learning more engaging and impactful for your students? Consider how these

challenges can connect to the curriculum and provide hands-on, meaningful experiences.

2. **Developing an Inquiry-based Approach:** Reflecting on the idea of "guide on the side" instead of "sage on the stage", how can you adjust your role in the classroom to foster a more inquiry-based, student-driven approach? What support and guidance do you need to offer while encouraging student independence?
3. **Cultivating Immersive Experiences:** How might you create an immersive learning experience that allows students to connect with real-world issues, like homelessness or poverty, in a way that promotes empathy and social awareness? What local resources or experts could you bring in to enhance the experience?
4. **Passion-based Learning in Your Classroom:** In what ways can you provide students with opportunities to explore their passions and interests within your classroom? How can you incorporate choice-based learning, where students have more control over their learning journey, to boost engagement and motivation?
5. **Teaching to the Heart:** Think about a student like Quentin in your own classroom. How can you identify and nurture the passions and talents of students who may not initially seem engaged with traditional academic subjects? What steps can you take to create personalized learning experiences that allow every student to thrive?

DESIGN, BUILD, BELIEVE

EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH PBL AND
MAKER ED

Now, it's time to wrap up our discussion on immersive and emotionally involved learning by diving deeper into the broader concept of what is traditionally known as the “real” PBL and that's Project-Based Learning. While you may already be familiar with PBL, this chapter will examine how it can have a transformative impact on education by immersing students in authentic challenges.

WHAT IS PROJECT-BASED LEARNING (PBL)?

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching approach that immerses students in hands-on, collaborative projects, challenging them to explore real-world problems, develop solutions, and put them into action.

The main distinction between traditional classroom learning and Project-Based Learning (PBL) is its focus on active, student-driven engagement. Instead of passively receiving information, students take on the roles of researchers, creators, and problem-solvers.

Take, for example, a science class exploring environmental sustainability. Instead of reading about sustainable practices, students could be tasked with designing an eco-friendly solution for their school, such as reducing energy use or creating a composting program. Through this project, they'd explore scientific principles, engineering design, environmental ethics, and communication skills as they present their findings to school administrators.

IMMERSIVE LEARNING THROUGH REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

The beauty of PBL lies in its real-world relevance. Whether it's designing a water filtration system for a community with unsafe drinking water or creating a multimedia campaign to raise awareness about mental health, PBL bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. When students see the real-world relevance of their work, they are far more likely to be engaged and motivated. They understand that their projects have tangible implications beyond the classroom.

This means designing experiences where our students feel like they're contributing to something beyond their own development. Once when I was serving as our school district's Social Studies Coordinator, I trained groups of middle school teachers to lead their students in digital storytelling projects. When teaching a certain era such as the 1960s, students were taught to use digital cameras to record interviews of a family member or friend who was over sixty-five years old, while asking them to recall certain memories or aspects of their life during that time. Students then worked in teams to edit the interviews and compile them into a mini documentary. The project culminated by inviting those who were interviewed to view the students' work during class. By applying what they'd learned to real-world contexts, students not only deepened their knowledge but also contributed to their community in a meaningful way.

COLLABORATION AS A CORNERSTONE OF PBL

Collaboration is another hallmark of PBL. In any field—whether it’s business, healthcare, or the arts—teamwork is essential. The Imagineers at Disney, for example, often work in interdisciplinary, collaborative teams to design and build unforgettable attractions, like *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Spaceship Earth*. This dynamic collaboration allows each team member’s expertise to shine while ensuring that the project remains cohesive. In PBL, students mirror this collaborative process by working in teams, dividing tasks, and contributing to a common goal. Students must communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and ensure everyone contributes equally—skills that mirror the dynamics they will encounter in their future careers.

An example of collaboration in PBL can be found in a high school science class where students work together to design a sustainable water filtration system for a community in need. This would involve students having to research different filtration methods, analyze water quality data, and prototype their designs using available materials. Each student takes on a specific role, such as materials engineer, data analyst, or project manager, ensuring that their contributions align with the overall goal. Through this process, students practice effective communication, problem-solving, and teamwork—skills essential for success in scientific, engineering, and creative fields.

CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING IN PBL

In PBL, students must analyze, evaluate, and apply information to solve problems—skills that are essential in today’s complex world. For instance, a math class could engage in a project to redesign a school cafeteria, where students must calculate costs, determine floor layouts, and optimize space for efficiency and safety. These real-world scenarios demand critical thinking as students navigate the

constraints and requirements of each problem, fostering an ability to think deeply and creatively.

The immersive nature of these projects leads students to think laterally, asking them to explore multiple solutions instead of searching for the "right" answer. This fosters flexible thinking, which is invaluable in the modern world.

MAKER EDUCATION: THE ULTIMATE PBL EXPERIENCE

While PBL emphasizes solving real-world problems, Maker Education takes this approach a step further by incorporating tools and materials into the learning process. Students aren't just solving problems on paper—they're building, creating, and tinkering with their hands to develop physical solutions. This form of learning is incredibly immersive, allowing students to engage with their projects in tangible, authentic ways.

Makerspaces are often equipped with 3D printers, design software like Scratch or Tinkercad, and other assorted tools designed for students to engage in hands-on learning. However, makerspaces can just as easily be filled with cardboard, duct tape, construction paper, Popsicle sticks, glue, yarn, pipe cleaners and egg cartons. The first can produce what would be considered "high resolution" models while the second provides "low res" models. Depending on what you hope to accomplish with your students, either type of space will do. Not every school can afford high tech tools, but don't let that stand in the way of allowing your students to learn through hands-on problem solving. Cardboard can be just as powerful as PLA (a type of filament used for 3D printers).

As a principal, I saw firsthand how transformative maker education can be when we established a makerspace for our lower school (elementary) students. We already had 3D printers for our upper school

students, but I wanted younger students to experience the possibilities as well. However, setting up this space wasn't easy. We needed to raise funds for tools, equipment, and materials. Through private donations and grants, we were able to establish a fully functional makerspace that included not only 3D printers and woodworking tools, but plenty of cardboard, construction, and duct tape as well.

Once the makerspace was up and running, it became a hub of creativity and problem-solving. The space allowed the students to develop a deeper understanding of STEM concepts and sparked their imaginations in ways traditional classrooms couldn't. The success of this makerspace demonstrated that you don't need a huge budget to bring hands-on learning to your students. Whether it's coding software like Scratch or simple materials like cardboard and tape, creating opportunities for students to build and experiment can turn any classroom into a makerspace.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH MAKING

One of the most powerful lessons students learn in maker education is how to embrace failure as part of the learning process. When students are working with their hands—whether building a robot, designing a video game, or constructing a model—they inevitably encounter obstacles. Things break. Designs fail. Ideas don't work out as planned. But these setbacks are essential in fostering a growth mindset. Students learn that mistakes are part of the process, not the end. This realization builds resilience and encourages them to iterate, reflect, and improve.

For example, one of our makerspace projects involved designing solar-powered cars. When the students tested their first prototypes, many of the cars didn't move as expected. Yet instead of giving up, the students analyzed what went wrong—whether it was an issue with weight distribution or solar panel placement—and worked through each problem. These moments of failure led to break-

throughs and gave the students a deeper understanding of physics, engineering, and renewable energy.

BRINGING MAKER EDUCATION INTO EVERY CLASSROOM

Maker education isn't just for STEM subjects. It can be woven into nearly every discipline. For instance, in an English class, students might build models of settings from the novels they're reading. In an art class, they might use coding to create digital art or animations. The key is to give students the freedom to create, build, and solve problems in tangible ways.

Remember, even if your school doesn't have the resources for a dedicated makerspace, you can still bring a maker mindset into your classroom. The act of making is what's most important, not the sophistication of the tools or space.

As we continue to explore immersive educational spaces and practices, remember that these experiences aren't just about the projects or tools—they're about empowering students to become creators, innovators, and problem-solvers in their own right. If you're more concerned about how to integrate the latest and greatest educational gadget into your lessons without being concerned about whether or not it actually supports what you're teaching in a positive way, then the tool has become more important than the student.

While project- or passion-based lessons can be highly engaging and have a powerful impact on learning, there's an art to knowing when and how often to use them.

RIDING THE BANSHEE: WHEN AND WHERE TO USE THE “THRILL RIDE” LESSON

One of the most immersive and exhilarating attractions of all in Disney parks is *Flight of Passage* in Animal Kingdom. From the moment guests step into the queue, they are transported into the world of Pandora. The ride itself delivers a breathtaking experience, simulating the sensation of flying on the back of a banshee. This kind of attraction falls into the category of a “thrill ride”—an experience that is extraordinary, exhilarating, and designed to leave a lasting impression.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN NOVELTY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Thrill rides captivate us because they offer something out of the ordinary—an adrenaline rush, a sense of awe, and a unique experience that leaves us wanting more. However, if we were to ride the same attraction over and over again without pause, its novelty would wear off. Worse still, it could become exhausting, even nauseating, rather than enjoyable.

The same principle applies to teaching. A “thrill ride” lesson is any lesson that breaks the mold of everyday instruction. These could include passion-based or project-based lessons like we discussed, outdoor explorations, field trips, or any other highly interactive activities. These lessons create excitement, not only for students but for teachers as well. However, just as a theme park isn’t built entirely on thrill rides, a classroom cannot be sustained by these high-energy lessons alone.

POST-HOLING VS. PLOWING: A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO LESSON PLANNING

When I was a young teacher, I once had a wise classroom veteran, Mrs. Satterfield, provide sage advice on how to teach a class with an extreme amount of content (like the history I was teaching). She told me a story about her time growing up as a young girl on her parents' farm. One of her jobs was to help her dad put up barbed wire fences. She said that she would dig a hole for one of the fence posts, then walk a specific number of steps that covered a set distance, then dig the next hole. Once that was dug, she'd walk off the same number of steps and dig another hole. She said that a wise way to teach history (or really any content) would be to identify the most important content for the course—or the content that would take the longest to teach—then space those lessons out as much as possible. These lessons, the ones in which you go deep into the material, are your post-hole lessons. After going deep into your content, you'll then move faster while covering the next parts of the curriculum, skimming the surface if you will, until you get to your next time-consuming lesson. She suggested continuing this process of covering the curriculum throughout the year, spacing out your high-impact lessons from those that can be covered in less time. Too many teachers, she told me, try to plow through the curriculum instead, treating all of their course content equally, going into great depth and detail for all the material. In the end, those teachers were rarely able to cover all of the required standards for the course.

In our theme park scenario, a post-hole lesson is the thrill ride. It takes more time to plan, more energy to teach, and usually more resources since you're going deeper into the content, like you would with a project-based unit. To have time for this, consider moving faster through some of the other lessons that you teach. Just look carefully into where you can make up the time. The "thrill ride" lessons can be great fun and very impactful, yet if you try exclusively

teaching like this, it can lead to burnout for both you and your students. A more effective approach is to think strategically, much like how a theme park balances high-energy attractions with immersive yet lower-intensity experiences.

Consider any one of the Disney parks: While guests may be excited for the thrill rides, they actually spend much more time walking between attractions, waiting in queues, and experiencing themed environments outside of a ride. These in-between moments are carefully designed to sustain engagement and anticipation. Similarly in education, everyday lessons should be thoughtfully structured to maintain student interest, even when they are not as high-intensity as a “thrill ride” lesson. Routine instruction can still be immersive, meaningful, and engaging—it may just need a different kind of energy.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

“Thrill ride” lessons work best when planned intentionally rather than used spontaneously or excessively. To maximize their impact:

- **Schedule them in advance.** At the beginning of the year, map out when these high-energy experiences will take place. This allows for thoughtful pacing and ensures that these lessons remain fresh and exciting.
- **Balance them with regular instruction.** Just as Disney Imagineers design every part of a guest’s journey for engagement, we should ensure that even regular lessons are dynamic and compelling.
- **Space them out.** A well-placed “thrill ride” lesson can serve as a motivational milestone for students, something to look forward to each quarter or semester.

By thoughtfully incorporating high-energy lessons while maintaining engaging daily instruction, educators can create a learning environment that is both dynamic and sustainable. Just like a well-designed theme park, a well-planned curriculum offers moments of exhilaration while ensuring that every step of the journey is immersive and meaningful.

REFLECT AND REIMAGINE:

1. **Engagement and Relevance:** Reflect on the role of real-world problems in Project-Based Learning. How do you think immersing students in authentic challenges enhances their engagement and motivation? Can you share examples from your own experience where students demonstrated a deeper understanding of concepts through hands-on projects?
2. **Collaboration in Action:** Collaboration is a cornerstone of PBL. Discuss how you facilitate collaboration among your students during project-based activities. What strategies do you use to ensure that every student's voice is heard and that they contribute equally to the group's success?
3. **Ownership and Passion:** Consider the impact of allowing students to pursue projects aligned with their passions. How do you cultivate an environment that encourages student ownership of their learning? Share any specific projects or lessons where you noticed a significant increase in student engagement due to their personal investment in the work.
4. **Maker Education Integration:** Maker education enhances PBL by providing hands-on opportunities for students to create and innovate. How have you incorporated maker education into your curriculum? What tools or

Conclusion & Next Steps

The chapters you have just read are a small window into what is possible when imagination and leadership come together. Schools, like all great organizations, thrive when leaders embrace vision, culture, and creativity.

As a colleague in education, you know the influence you carry. Every choice you make has the potential to shape lives, create stories, and build experiences that last well beyond the classroom. That is the power of leadership, and it is a privilege we share.

If these ideas have encouraged or inspired you, I would welcome the opportunity to continue the conversation. Together, we can explore practical ways to reimagine classrooms, design engaging learning spaces, and ignite a sense of wonder in students and teachers alike.

With gratitude,

Thomas Riddle

Founder, Imagineering Education

thomas@imagineeringedu.com

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