

LEARNING THROUGH INNOVATION & INVENTION: A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

With Karen Garland

6th, 7th & 8th Grade Teacher at Grove City Area Middle School

How did you come to teach the Inventionland Institute curriculum?

Our assistant superintendent discovered Inventionland Institute, a wonderful invention and innovation curriculum for me to teach. To be honest, I wasn't ready to say goodbye to the 8th-grade entrepreneurship program that I was teaching at the time. However, it did not take long for my apprehension to turn to joy and excitement as I realized that my future students and I were about to discover . . . Inventionland!

As a classroom teacher with a full plate, how did you learn the new curriculum and how to teach it?

Inventionland Institute provided the instructors who worked with our middle school a three-day professional development period. Admittedly, I assumed that I was going to learn how to "teach" this new Inventionland curriculum to my students. Boy, was I wrong! I became a student.

Learning this curriculum as a student was enlightening and very beneficial. It allowed me to truly experience and explore the program as I developed specific lesson plans. More importantly, it highlighted the success and failures my students might experience so that I could plan for and navigate their trials and errors.





How are you using the Inventionland curriculum at Grove City Middle School?

Our utilization of the Inventionland Institute curriculum has evolved as we adapt to fit the needs of our students. At Grove City Middle School, we teach a vertically-aligned exploratory curriculum. We begin with Introduction to Business during sixth grade, followed by Careers at the seventh grade, all delivered during a trimester rotation schedule. We teach the Inventionland Institute curriculum to our eighth graders for an entire semester.

There are two of us teaching the Inventionland course in our school. My colleague is our “tech ed wizard” and I am our “business guru.” Students flow between our classrooms when they are in need of particular expertise. For example, if students need assistance in the fabrication of a model, they might go to the tech ed lab or if they need help creating a target marketing plan or ad copy, they most likely will be in my room.

What are some of the non-traditional classroom benefits that you are seeing your students experience or demonstrate while implementing the Inventionland curriculum?

My middle school students are learning to manage a wide range of emotions as they imagine, develop, and manage their proposed invention. Throughout the semester, through trial and error, my students are engaged in real learning. They experience pride, elation, and satisfaction as well as the frustration, failure, and uncertainty that comes with inventing and innovating.

One of the best parts of this real-world experience is that every student comes to recognize this lesson or outcome: their personal journey as a learner, inventor, or innovator will be filled with ups and downs on their own. To witness this gift of self-discovery in each of my students is one of the greatest gifts a teacher can see.



Are you seeing any benefits to using the curriculum outside of your classroom?

Officially, there are two Inventionland teachers at Grove City Middle. However, the innovative curriculum and our energized students have spontaneously drawn other teachers into the learning process. Our ELA teachers help students with their writing or their presentation skills. Our math teachers are showing students how to calculate the cost and determining markup to create profit margins. Our science teachers are assisting with chemistry and physics analyses. Our computer teachers are helping to explain technology components and applications and our social studies teachers offer how the world and economists might view the student's invention or innovation. Our art teachers are demonstrating and critiquing students' sketches and blueprints, while our music teachers encourage invention jingles. Finally, the guidance counselors provide encouragement to our students in addition to all of the other teachers and staff who are simply curious and excited about the potential student inventions. Our investment in the Inventionland curriculum has turned invention and innovation at Grove City Middle School into a school-wide endeavor. As stated in the 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, "If you build it..."

At the end of the day, how do you as the teacher, bring this all together to see if the students really benefited from using the Inventionland Institute curriculum?

It is clear that academics are not the only lessons learned while using the Inventionland Institute curriculum. Our students work as a team, usually three students per team. This group dynamic ensures that students will practice and improve, not just their academic skills, but also also the soft skills necessary to succeed in life: talking and listening, situational leadership, conflict resolution, time management, dependability, empathy, and teamwork. Students learn to offer and accept kind, practical, and actionable feedback. They learn to organize their ideas and communicate them across a variety of modalities. Our students conquer the art of public speaking, which is not always easy for many middle school students.

At the end of each semester, we have an Inventionland Institute Contest held in the school auditorium. Students have seven to ten minutes to pitch their invention/innovation to three outside judges. These judges typically include a school board member. Students dress the part, demonstrate their product, show their model and design, and market/pitch their idea. They are doing this all while explaining to the judges the lessons they have learned and why their invention is the best. The contest is the talk of the school. Students can actually feel, hear, and see the support from the entire school.



Ms. Garland, great classroom teachers like yourself often have special moments in the classroom. Can you highlight a moment that stands out as you taught the Inventionland curriculum?

Each student faces his/her own challenges. Our implementation of the Inventionland curriculum has yielded remarkable stories of student achievement and perseverance. Lessons literally come to life. As students progress through the Inventionland nine-step courseware, the infamous question of "Why are we doing this?" is naturally answered. Teachers know the "why" but sometimes struggle to make it relevant to their students. As my students work, think, and communicate with one another, I have literally witnessed the connection being made and I have grinned to myself and quietly shouted, "yes!"

Let me share a few of my favorite Inventionland success stories. The first one is about a student who never smiled. I knew she was struggling with



very serious circumstances at home. She missed a lot of classes, but rarely her Inventionland class. Through the flexibility of the Inventionland curriculum, she was able to express her true feelings via her invention. She was able to release some of her emotions through this creative outlet. Also, during her presentation she mentioned that a percentage of her invention's profits would be donated to a non-profit organization. She expressed that this organization, had it been better funded, could have helped her situation at home. This student later learned that she had placed in our school contest. She privately told me that some people had made fun of her invention. When I asked if there was a lesson in there, she smiled and said, "I should do what I think is best and not pay attention to the negative." Her words were not nearly as important as her smile.

My second student story is much more lighthearted. A student in our special education program had an individual goal for his Inventionland presentation. His goal was to not use the word "crap" during his presentation. It was a word he often used not as an insult but as a filler. Teachers and associates across the school campus worked with him practicing his pitch without using any inappropriate language. When the day of our Inventionland contest arrived - he succeeded! The judges could not have known, but all of us exploded with joy, perhaps me most of all when he completed his pitch without falling back on his old verbal crutch.



As we wrap up this interview, is there anything more you would like to share with share with your colleagues and teachers from across the country, what would that be?

There is without doubt a time and place for traditional teaching. There is also a time for students to expand their creativity and, dare I say, let their imaginations run free. Let them imagine for a second for a second that their idea of how to make something better might turn into reality. Thinking outside of the box, outside of the classroom, outside of a textbook or a screen is exactly what Inventionland Institute creates. Students are allowed to have a blank slate in front of them. In inventing and innovating there are no limitations limitations and there should be no fears that stop them.

I see and hear the power of the Inventionland Institute curriculum nearly every day. I know it when I hear students conversing in the hallways and in the cafeteria about it. I see it when sixth graders seek me out to tell me about the idea they hope to pursue in my class in two years. I see it parents, who I rarely speak with, tell me in-depth and with great detail about their child's invention. I see it when judges plead to be involved in our Inventionland Institute Contest year after year.



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