

School Project "Reveals the Wonder"

By Carol Ann Snodgrass and OliveAnn Slotta

Close your eyes and imagine Denver, Colorado. What do you see? The Rocky Mountains, the Broncos, Denver's brown cloud. What other images does the city give you? What ethnicities are represented? What is the history of the city and how does that affect the present, the future? What feelings do you have about Denver? What would you like to learn more about? How will you change your images of the city once you actively explore your beliefs about Denver? How will your experience of learning affect your future involvement in community activities?

These are some of the many questions that the full-time students at the Fred N. Thomas Career Education Center explored and experienced this year as part of the academic program's year long project, "Denver: Past, Present and Future." The Project Approach, based upon Imaginal Education curriculum development principles developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs allows students and teachers to explore the messages that soci-

ety gives them on a particular topic and strives to reinforce the image or, as appropriate, facilitate an "image shift." Imaginal Education believes students' images - of their city and the policies and groups within its structures, and of themselves - has everything to do with how they will feel about themselves and relate society as adults.

The Fred N. Thomas Career Education Center is an extended campus for the high schools in the Denver Public Schools. It offers over thirty career programs for 11th and 12th grade students. Students who have completed at least one semester of a career class can apply to be part of the fulltime academic program.

The Career Education Center conducts an interdisciplinary project each semester which integrates the four core academic subjects, the students' vocational or career skills and a process of problem solving. Last fall, the students studied the impact of several major economic initiatives in "Denver: Are We Indebting the Future?" The spring 1992 project, "Our Global Neighborhood," examined Denver's multi-cultural roots. The Project Approach was recognized in November, 1991 by the Disney Corporation American Teacher Award program when OliveAnn Slotta received the Outstanding Math Teacher of 1991 award.

Carol Ann Snodgrass is public relations specialist and OliveAnn Slotta is the math teacher for the academic program at the Fred N. Thomas Career Education Center, 2650 Elliot Street, Denver, Colorado 80211.

THE PROJECT APPROACH

The Project Approach began at the Fred N. Thomas Career Education Center in fall, 1987 as an integral component of the broader academic program begun at the CEC in January, 1986. The goals of the Project Approach are:

The Project Approach asserts that learning is a process and because of its "organic nature" it is different every time. It is curiosity based, student interest driven and centered on revealing the wonder of the topic. Because of its organic nature, progress is guided and monitored daily by a "Kaleidoscope of Learning" (figure a).

alize the topic and expand it into the more complex. At the heart of the kaleidoscope is the attitude change, "the image shift," in the way students perceive schooling, self, and even life itself. The Institute of Cultural Affairs believes that good curriculum addresses each of the circles of the kaleidoscope allowing students to direct their own learning and develop personal meaning.

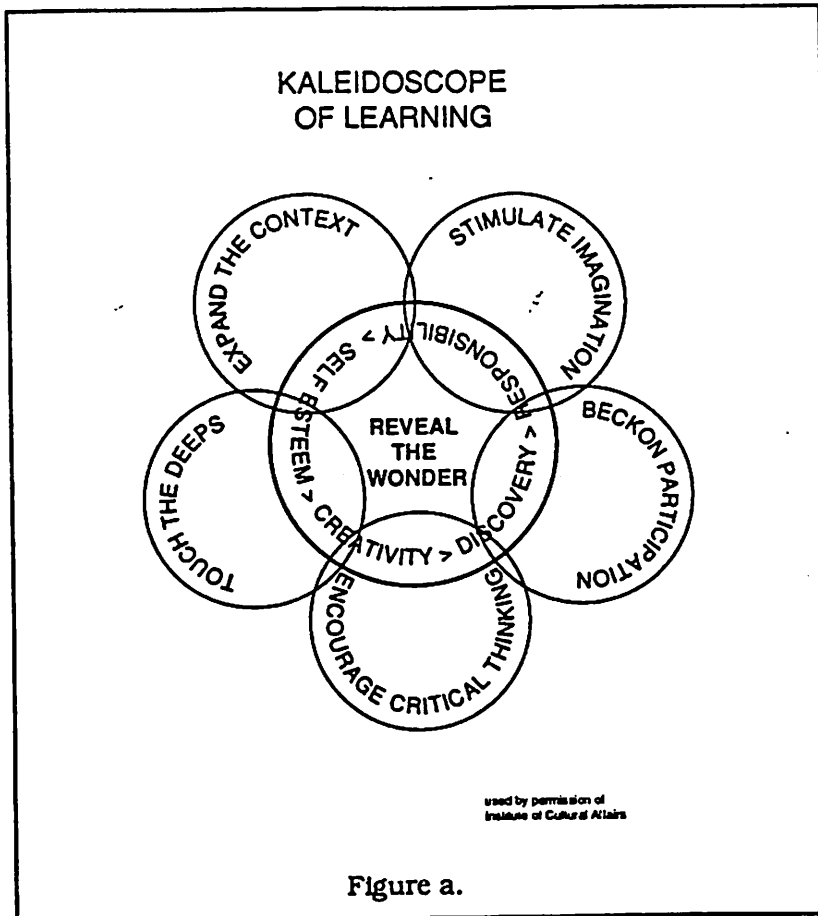


IMAGE CHANGES

In addition to shifting students' images on the special project topic each semester, the students are concerned with images of self, school and community (figure b.). During an orientation session at the beginning of each term, the teachers carefully consider each student to intentionally deliver succinct messages of acceptance and possibility. Here the personal image shift begins from what has been to what is possible. Students begin to see themselves as participants in society as opposed to bystanders.

During the academic seminars, students are prepared for the project by providing them with intense information related to the chosen topic. They also discover how they can integrate academic core competencies while focusing on the chosen community issue. As an example, when students studied Denver's multi-cultural roots, they assessed their images of eight ethnic groups in Denver. Personal interest driven research and application of career class skills is infused into the seminars as well.

During mid-semester, students devote two weeks to the community project. They become active problem-solvers and community activists who seek out solutions

- 1) to identify latent leadership skills in the student body by mandating practical team problem solving;
- 2) to model life-long learning by having students work with teachers and community leaders to master new concepts together; and
- 3) to signify the life of each student by providing an opportunity for each to contribute his/her particular skills and personal gifts to an important cause or topic.

KALEIDOSCOPE OF LEARNING

The first step in the Kaleidoscope is to stimulate the imagination by asking questions and providing statistical information essential to the subject. With curiosity peaked and relevant need established, students are beckoned to participate. Next, the demand for a solution encourages critical thinking. The final two outside circles person-

and initiate activities; they demonstrate image shifts and knowledge gained. During the multicultural roots project, the students worked in teams repre-

education program provided a laboratory to study the interactions of young children from differing groups. On the final day of the project, each student wrote a

book, *The Image*, published in 1956. he states the premise, "behavior depends upon image." What determines image is the central theme of Boulding's work.

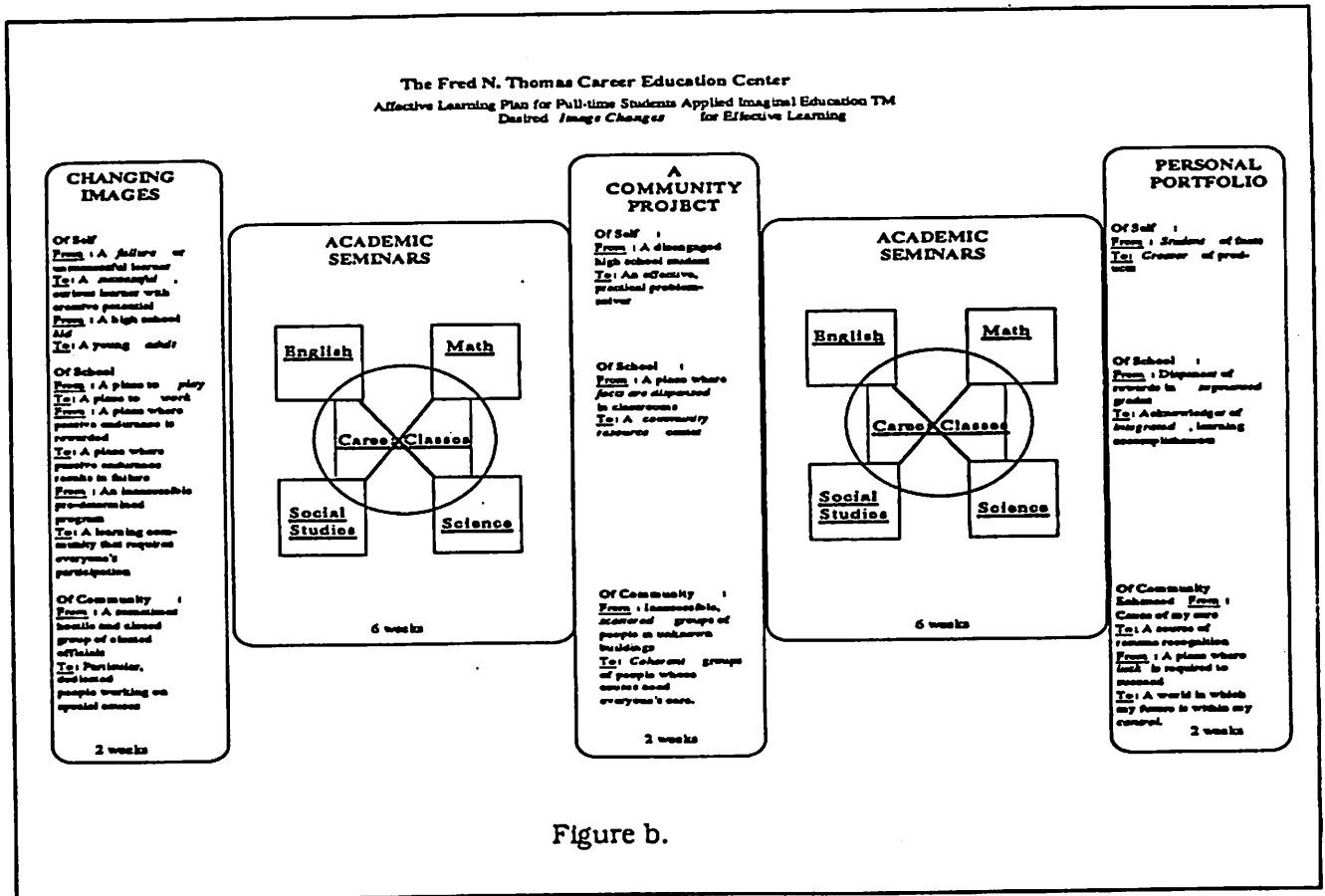


Figure b.

senting ethnic groups and identified "universals" commonly found in all cultures. This project culminated with a town meeting on an issue critical to Denver, with each team representing the perspective of the ethnic group they researched. Images shifted and expanded as students problem-solved while infusing their career skills into the project. Photography students documented events and law students used their knowledge to review important court cases relating to the subject. Students in restaurant arts provided foods representing different cultures and commercial art students portrayed events visually. Dance and theater students role played the cultures and the early childhood

three page evaluation reflecting on his/her own learning as well as that of each member of the team.

Following the project presentations, students again participated in academic seminars, focusing on how the knowledge gained can be personally applied. Students reflected their learning in a portfolio which became a living record of the personal and academic insights from the semester.

THE IMAGE

The basis of Imaginal Education comes from Kenneth Boulding, professor emeritus of economics at University of Colorado. In his

"The image is built up as a result of all the past experiences of the possessor of the image... From the moment of birth...there is a constant stream of messages... The conscious image has begun... as his image is changed his behavior patterns will be changed likewise." Boulding continues that we must distinguish between image and messages that reach us. He says, "the meaning of the message is the change which it produces in the image."

To put this into a learning perspective, one of three things can happen when a message hits an image. The image can remain static; the image can change in some well-defined way that it might be described as enhance-

ment. The third change possible is revolutionary change. In this case, a message causes radical reformulation of image of self in the world and is witnessed by others as a change in behavior.

STUDENT SUCCESS

Students knowledge retention has been great. Frequently in discussions, students will reference past projects and the knowledge gained. Past projects have focused on federal wilderness legislation, exploring third world nations, water conservation, the 1989 presidential election, Denver's air pollution, and high school drop-out prevention. A study of past graduates also indicates that students who participated in the projects had a greater voting percentage in the 1988 general election than other young adults of the same age. According to the Denver Election Bureau, only 3% of the Denver residents between 18-24 years old voted in 1988 whereas project students reported 38% of them had voted in the most recent election.

The Project Approach provides a meaningful framework for students by integrating community, school and career skills. "Revealing the wonder," the joy of learning is at the heart of it.

Kenneth Boulding. *The Image* (Ann Arbor Press, 1956).

Jo Nelson, "Connecting Mathematics and Life," *Edges*, Vol. 4. No. 4., May 1992. Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs.