



## **The Living Curriculum at Tremont School**

One of the hardest problems in education is the question of what to teach. There are so many concepts that could be taught but trying to teach too many ensures that students will not learn any of them deeply enough. Further, educators struggle to define what concepts will be empowering in the future. This struggle is evident in the on-going debates around the country about standards such as the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards.

### ***What is the Tremont Approach to curriculum and what makes it innovative?***

Tremont is combining two approaches to curriculum. First, it is building upon a “tried and true” approach called “Teaching for Understanding” or TfU. It is based upon “Generative Topics” that have the potential to further understanding beyond the topic taught and uses a technique called “Backward Design” that works from Understanding Goals and develops instruction aimed specifically at those goals. It is considered the current gold standard in instructional design.

Second, Tremont is pioneering a complementary, innovative approach called “Negotiated Curriculum” in which the students play an active role in developing, enacting, and assessing their particular version of the curriculum in ways that enable them to become life-long learners. Together, this blend of working towards important Understanding Goals and negotiating the steps and paths in learning, constitute Tremont’s Living Curriculum. The term “living” is used to underscore the way that the curriculum is flexible and constantly being revised and renegotiated—adapting to the needs of learners in a changing world—and to signal that it is not merely about doing well in school, but about serving students in life. Each component is elaborated below.

### ***Teaching for Understanding, Generative Topics, and Understanding Goals***

A solution to the question of what to teach is to choose topics that you can teach deeply that have broad reach. These are called Generative Topics because they encourage understanding beyond the concepts taught. They are most generative when teachers explicitly help students explore connections to other concepts. That is why you will often see concept maps or other assignments extending the concepts beyond the initial context in students’ work. It is also why Tremont holds “Celebrations of Learning.” They help learners to broaden the concepts by seeing many different applications.

In developing Generative Topics, teachers at Tremont build from concepts in the standards that are the focus of national discussions. However, they do not march through them in a didactic

way; rather, they select judiciously those that have the ability to advance deep understanding of the important generative concepts.

At Tremont, the generative topics chosen are big themes that are important to how we live in the world. For instance, “What are the sources of conflict?” or “How do you use experiments to answer questions?” Students’ exploration of these generative topics is guided by Understanding Goals that zero in on concepts needed to deeply understand the topic. For instance, a sample understanding goal for exploring the sources of conflict would include the role of differing perspectives and how they might evolve such as: “Our values are shaped by our experiences and they influence what we notice in any given situation.” The curriculum then enables the students to deeply explore these understandings in a variety of way and to build and reveal their understanding in the process and products of their work. There can be great variety in how students express these understandings. This invites differentiated curriculum and the opportunity to accommodate students’ interests in their learning.

### ***Negotiated Curriculum and the Development of Adaptive Expertise***

An important goal of a Tremont education is to develop learners with “adaptive expertise.” What does this mean? Classical expertise means knowing a subject and domain very deeply. In contrast, adaptive experts also know how to gain deep understanding of a domain. Learning how to be a skilled and adaptive learner is one of the most important things that we can help students to learn. There are so many sources of information and ways to gain knowledge. Helping them understand how to chart journeys towards understanding, to assess what they do and do not yet know, where there may be stumbling blocks, and how to pursue learning goals in the face of difficulty and frustration are all essential parts of developing adaptive expertise.

At Tremont, students negotiate their particular version of the curriculum and their journey through it with their teachers. They learn how to build routes to understanding and to assess where they are along those paths. They learn to be reflective, self-regulated learners who modify learning experiences to help them to get the most out of them. For instance, it is common to see learners at Tremont rearranging their learning space, re-reading the same book for deeper understanding, deciding that they need to take a mental break before resuming a task. These are essential skills for becoming a high performing adult expert who knows how to manage their own mental resources as well as when to change course and to try a new approach.

An important part of developing adaptive expertise is developing the capacity to work well with others; to manage in the context of those around you. Tremont uses an approach called Collaborative Problem Solving. It is a framework for helping students look beyond their own views and come to a deeper understanding and ability to collaborate with others in a group.

### ***The Living Curriculum and Assessment***

Given that the Living Curriculum is negotiated and flexible, a likely question is, “How are students assessed?” In order to help students achieve important understanding goals while developing adaptive expertise, assessment is a collaborative process between learner and teacher. They work together from a set of rubrics that are aligned with the understanding goals and adjusted to the specifics of that students’ learning path. By participating in the process,

assessment at Tremont is designed to build and reveal learning as learners are guided in discerning the next steps that can help them along their path to understanding. The rubrics are designed to offer an opportunity for students to see what the conceptual targets are and to work at showing that they have achieved them. Tremont is working at putting these rubrics on line to offer greater transparency to parents about how the Living Curriculum works and what their child is learning.

As parents look at the rubrics, they will see evidence of their child's progress and also see how the child is building their own understanding of what it means to learn and develop deeper understanding of a set of ideas. They will see the common themes of what their child is learning and also the individual elements that their child has negotiated in the context of the living curriculum.

### ***Social Emotional Learning at Tremont***

In addition to this innovative curriculum approach, Tremont recognizes the important relationship between cognition and affect. Increasingly, neuroscience is illuminating how affect drives cognition. Tremont focuses on social and emotional learning as a key part of the curriculum. Students participate in the Collaborative Problem-Solving Process and other approaches to social and emotional learning woven through the curriculum and the school day. This is one more way that the curriculum is intended to be alive and to function within students' everyday lives.

## **Frequently Asked Questions About The Living Curriculum**

### ***What about the teaching of skills at Tremont?***

At Tremont, skills are learned in the service of important concepts. The learning of grade level skills is charted and then monitored throughout the year as students work on the generative topics. While most of the curriculum is interdisciplinary, some subjects are also focused on as disciplinary strands. For instance, math is taught with a strong focus on concepts as they build upon one another and the computational aspects are taught within the context of the concepts. The assessment rubrics (will) enable students, teachers, and parents to see what specific skills and concepts students are learning.

### ***How will I know if my child is behind?***

This is a question that many parents at non-traditional schools ask. First and foremost, it is important to consider "behind what"? The question assumes that the more traditional march through the curriculum that so many schools undertake is somehow meaningful to students in the real world and in their lives beyond school. And yet, so often students leave school with a sense that they have not really learned anything that they can use.

However, they have learned things that help on the "march" beyond high school into college and how they will fare on tests that enable entry to college is an important question to ask. Non-traditional schools typically find that their students perform very well of the standardized tests

that other schools take. This is because their learning is deeper, because they understand themselves as learners, and having developed good learning and thinking skills, they have a good sense of how to negotiate the tests. Further, research shows that the kind of negotiated learning and support that happens at Tremont and often happens in tutoring situations has the capacity to accelerate learning.

Tremont holds classes to encourage students to learn test-taking skills and encourages parents to seek opportunities to take standardized tests available to them. School personnel are happy to support parents in identifying these and negotiating the process.



### ***How can Tremont meet the needs of such a wide range of students?***

Students at Tremont hold many different learning profiles. The diversity of the student body is intentional and building upon the promise of this diversity is one of the schools greatest strengths. The big, essential questions that guide the curriculum are accordion-like—making room for different types and levels of learning. Negotiated, living curriculum makes it possible for each student to work at an appropriate level of challenge for them in each of the topics and subjects that they study. Students who were not challenged in other settings are able to push at the edge of their competence to build new understandings. Students who have an uneven profile of strengths and weaknesses are able to find support for what it most difficult while not sacrificing the opportunity to push hardest in the areas in which they excel. All students are able to find the areas in which they could grow and to receive support in doing so.

### ***What about “specials” such as art, music, and so forth?***

Unlike many schools in which specials are relegated to an hour or two a week at a scheduled time, time exploring art music, movement, and so on, are integrated into topics of study and are an aspect of what learners negotiate as they move through their day. For example, students commonly spend time in the Da Vinci room (part art room, part innovation lab) exploring ways to integrate creative expression into their projects or they might compose song lyrics or musical notation while in their classrooms. In addition, Tremont students partake in afterschool activities that include skiing, hiking, movie-making, musical endeavors and so forth.

### **Pictures of Practice: What will I see in the classroom that reflects the “Living Curriculum”?**

Generative Topics have reach beyond the concepts taught:

- Teachers help students to connect back to topics that they have learned before and see how they apply to the current topic. You will hear things like, “Remember when we talked about..., how is that important for what we are learning now?”
- Student work will include reflections on ideas that they learned and what it means to them in their everyday lives.
- Evident in student work are concept maps connecting ideas to other ideas.
- There is an evolving strand to the generative topics taught each year.

Learners negotiate their path through the curriculum with guidance for their teacher.

- Learners conference with their teacher to discuss their learning interests and goals and this results in a plan for that individual student.
- Learners are encouraged to work with their teacher to seek the appropriate level of challenge in their work. It should be challenging and failure viewed as steps along the path towards mastery. You will see learners asking for harder concepts in math or to rework a paper or for support learning a literature concept.

The focus is on understanding not coverage.

- You will notice students reading books or sections of books again to help them understand the ideas more deeply and to revisit the concepts after they have achieved other understandings.
- Learners are encouraged to reflect on the nature of their understanding, when it feels fragile or fuzzy as compared to when it feels empowering.

Learners are encouraged to self-regulate and to manage their cognitive and emotional resources.

- Students take breaks as they need them.
- Students set up spaces to work in and receive support in managing who is sitting near them.
- Students have flexibility in when they work on particular tasks

The focus is on connecting the curriculum to the real world and to life-long learning.

- Students are asked to make connections to real-world content.
- As students move into the upper grades, increasingly their learning takes place away from campus and out in the world.

Note: This document is a work in progress. It is a collaborative effort between members of the Tremont School learning community who are developing an innovative approach to teaching and learning and educators at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who are helping them to explicate and refine that approach.



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