

## Learning While Vacationing: Not an Oxymoron

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Judy Dannenberg's book *Last Day Blues* provides a hysterically funny and not entirely fictitious look into the last few days of school. In the minds of the students, the teachers spend their final moments of the last day of school tearfully watching the buses pull away; their hearts filled with the sadness of a long and boring summer with nothing to keep them occupied until the students return in the fall. Classroom teachers and administrators reading this story are smiling quietly to themselves as they turn the final page. The last illustration says it all.



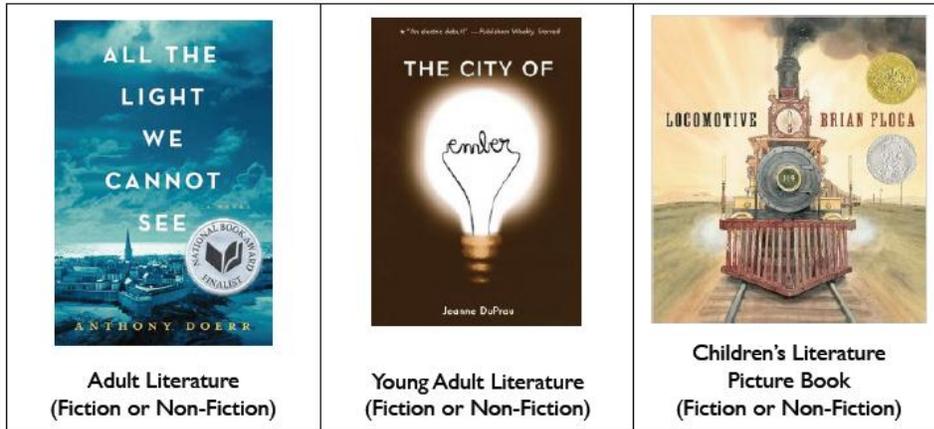
We love our jobs, our students, and our colleagues. However, when the final bell rings on the last day of school, we (like the characters portrayed in Julie Dannenberg's book) go running...leaping...jumping for joy...out the doors of the school and towards the start of our summer vacation. After we have spent a few days actually enjoying our morning coffee instead of balancing it in one hand while carrying final exams in another; after we have washed and folded the mounds of laundry that always seem to pile up during the last few weeks of school; and after we have had a few dinners with family and friends that do not involve talk about report cards. After all of that...when we finally settle into our summer vacation are we ready to entertain the notion that we can think critically and creatively for PLEASURE!

We tell our students that the skills we teach them in school – the skills of critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving exist all around us. They are there when we make decisions about what products to buy in the supermarket, when we determine where to vacation, and when we try and balance our household budgets. We tell our students that these skills are important, that they will use them in the real world as they navigate both academic and social situations. We stress to our students the need to practice these skills in various contexts and settings. But how often do we take the time to strategically and purposefully practice what we preach? How often do we intentionally engage in the practice of critical and creative thinking? The following activities are three quick yet purposeful ways that we, as adults, can engage our critical, creative, and problem-solving brains while simultaneously enjoying our summer vacation. These activities can be completed individually, with a group of friends, or with your children. You can write down your responses to these activities, discuss them in the car during a road trip, or simply think about them as you enjoy a lazy Tuesday afternoon in a hammock in your backyard. We encourage you to approach these divergent thinking activities with an open mind and a creative spirit. You may even discover that learning while on summer vacation can be fun and can serve as fodder for lesson planning in the fall (pause for audible gasp~!).

### **Activity #1 – A String of Books**

Skills Targeted: Critical Thinking

The purpose of the activity is twofold: (a) to practice connecting multiple texts to a central theme, universal concept, or set of criteria, and (b) to explore the myriad of seminal and contemporary children’s and young adult literature available for use in the classroom. The activity is simple in concept. Select three books that you are **interested** in reading. Book number one must be a piece of adult literature that you have always wanted to read but could never seem to find the time during the school year. This book can be a non-fiction piece such as *Dead Wake* by Erik Larson or a fictional story such as *All the Light We See Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. Book number two can fall into any genre of your choice but must be classified as Young Adult Literature. Take some time to research your choice. You can select one book from a recent series such as Jeanne DuPrau’s *City of Ember*, or a classic text like Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*. Your final book (book three) must be a picture book or a piece of children’s literature. The content of the book can rest in any genre of your choosing but must contain illustrations. For example, you could select *Tuesday*, a wordless picture book by David Wiesner, or the critically acclaimed *Locomotive* by Brian Floca (it should be noted that both books are Caldecott Medal winners). Many of the books mentioned above currently sit on my own nightstand in anticipation of this activity. My first string of books will include:



Once you have selected your three books, it is time to “string” them together. Read the books in any order that you wish. Start to make connections, threads, or “strings” between the pieces of literature using any or all of the following criteria: plot, context, setting, character analysis, ethical issues, personal or societal impact, central theme, message, or universal concept such as power, conflict, change etc. Add as many books to your “string” as you would like. Share your “string” with family and friends. Invite them to add their books to your “string.” As you move from book to book over the course of your summer vacation, answer the following questions.

- How are the literary elements of the text related?
- What connections can I make between these texts and others I have already read?
- What additional books would I add to this “string” because they share something in common?
- How can I use the strategy “stringing” books in the classroom to generate student interest and find companion pieces to our district text?

### ***Activity #2 -- Postcards Home***

Skills Targeted: Creative Thinking

The purpose of this activity is to practice viewing objects and ideas in new and different ways; to develop the art of appreciation for the world around us and to see the various ways that objects and people in that world make us think and feel. This activity focuses on the development of sensory experiences and how sensory language can be used as a means of making writing more realistic and descriptive. Integrating the five senses within a writing piece can be used in strategic and purposeful ways to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the text and a feeling of first-hand experience. This activity helps us practice how to use our senses as the tools to analyze situations and contexts and move beyond basic

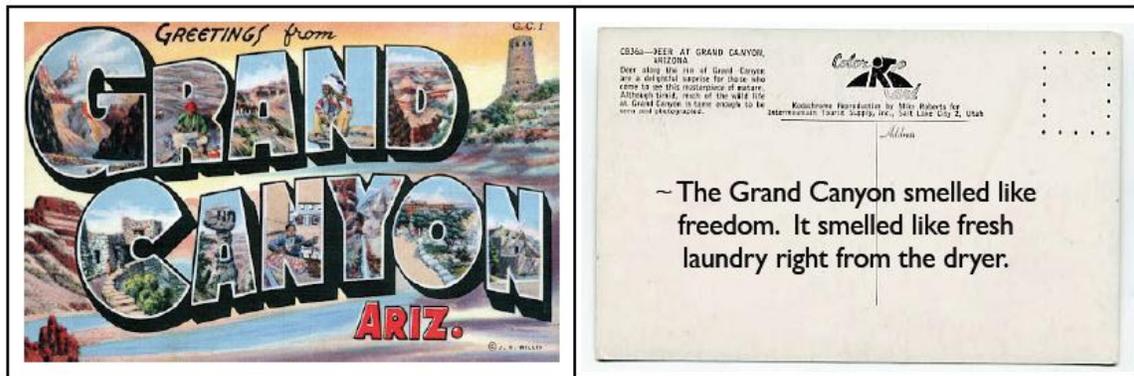
descriptions. As you travel to various locations during your summer vacation (parks, museums, famous landmarks, etc.) gather postcards from each stop. On the back of the postcard, write your responses to one or more of the following creative thinking, sensory-based questions. The goal of the exercise is to describe the location in the postcard to others using sensory details so that they can engage in an emotional connection with the location.

- How does [insert location] smell and sound?
- What would [insert location] have looked like 10, 50, or 100 years ago? What will it look like 10, 50, or 100 years in the future?
- How did [insert location] change or alter your mood?
- What memory did [insert location] make me think of?
- What food would pair well with [insert location]?

The concepts and skills inherent in this activity can also be translated into the classroom. For example, classroom teachers can create a learning center that contains a series of postcards from various locations (locally and around the world). The teacher can supply the postcards for the learning center or can enlist the help of the students, parents, and community members to submit postcards from their favorite vacation destinations. Students can engage in the following experiences within the learning center to practice the skill of applying sensory details to familiar and unknown contexts.

- Activity #1: Imagination Vacation -- Students select a postcard from the stack that they find interesting. Students engage in fantasy play to imagine that they are taking an upcoming trip to their selected location. Students will use sensory details to describe all of the wonderful things that they will see, touch, smell, taste, and hear on their imagined trip. Students can use their prior knowledge of the location if they have been before, can research the location if it is new to them, or they can make up the details based on their imagination and what they see visible in the postcard.
- Activity #2: Where am I? -- Students select a partner to work with at the learning center. One student randomly selects a postcard from the stack, but does not show it to their partner. The student uses sensory language to describe the location to their partner -- providing as many and as varied means describing the location as possible. The partner tries to guess the location depicted on the postcard based on the description. Students trade roles and continue the game so that each person has a turn as “describer” and “guesser.” Students discuss how the use of sensory details facilitated their ability to determine the location of the postcard and any additional details that would have been beneficial to them.

- **Activity #3: Story Swap** -- Students select a postcard from the stack (either purposefully or randomly). The location depicted in the postcard becomes the basis for the story they will write. Students can use their postcard location to write their story in one of more of the following ways: (a) students can use the postcard as the setting or environment in which the story takes place, (b) students can take a character from another story and “place” them in the setting or location depicted on the postcard, (c) students can use the postcard location across one or more time periods (past, present, and future), and (d) students can impose people, objects, or animals from different locations and time periods into their postcard location. Students can publish their sensory-based stories in a class book or website for peers and parents to read and enjoy.



### **Activity #3 – Tourist in My Hometown**

Skills Targeted: Problem Solving

The purpose of this activity is to analyze the local context in which one works and lives. Context is defined as the time, the location (environment), the people, and the philosophical beliefs operating within a structure. For the purposes of this activity, a “structure” could represent an area as small as a neighborhood, or one as large as a town or city. Take some time to research the context of the structure where **you** (and your students) live and work. Consider the following points of reference as examples or key questions to research the context of your school and/or home.

- **Time** – What institutions exist in your area that are seminal or have been a part of the fabric of the community over time? What institutions exist in your area that have been recently developed or in the process of being developed? How has the concept of “time” impacted your neighborhood, town, or city?

- Location – Where is your location in relation to other cities, towns, and/or cultural centers? What natural resources exist in your location? What are the important or significant landmarks in your location? How does your location distinguish itself from others in the area?
- People – Who are the key decision makers in your area? What motivates their decision-making? Where in your location are there places for people to come together? What sub-structures exist in the area (churches, temples, mosques, soup kitchens, etc.) that provide support and resources to people?
- Philosophical Beliefs – What are the political beliefs or ideologies of the people who live and work in your area? What are the major political, social, and economic concerns and interests of the people in your area? How are conflicts resolved in your area?

There are two major outcomes for this activity: (a) the recognition of the impact of context (time, location, people, and philosophical belief) on the structure of education in your location, and (b) the research of local attractions and resources available in your area that can provide fodder for classroom and content connections.

### ***Ready...Set...Vacation...***

Seminal theorist and educator John Dewey stated that “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” Dewey’s quote reminds us that the skills we teach our students have applications that extend well beyond the walls of our classrooms. The skills of critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving permeate our lives, and yes, even find their way into our summer vacation. Whether we spend the summer sitting on the beach, kayaking the Everglades, or cleaning out the garage, we are still life-long learners and educators. We want to be engaged, we want to be stimulated, and we want to be inspired. We hope that these ideas serve as fodder for interesting discussions with friends, springboards for self-engagement, and a means of rejuvenation for the next school year. Enjoy your summer. Thank you for everything that you do to enhance the lives of the students in your classrooms and schools. Feel free to send us your thoughts or reflections on any of the activities.