



Middle School Developments
February



Greetings!

We are now in the thick of admissions season! Our first cohort continues to take shape, and each week brings a clearer picture of what's in store: students coming from various schools, with diverse family cultures, and a wide array of passions!

As you've all heard me say, it's your interests and backgrounds— whether in animal care, carpentry, wildlife management, mosaics, advertising, ceramics or archery— that will keep our farm running, our campus beautiful, and our community engaged.

On that note, these newsletters will soon shift to more practical matters around campus. For this month, I will unpack a frequently asked question: what, specifically, is a Plan of Study and Work, and why do we put these projects at the center of our educational programming?

Calendar

- **Feb 10:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **Feb 24:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **March 9:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **March 30:** Middle School Campus Tour
- **April 13:** Middle School Campus Tour

[Learn More & Schedule Your Tour](#)

Plans of Study & Work

Let's start with an overview. Each Plan of Study and Work:

- Lasts between 20-30 school days
- Combines individual and group learning (groups of 3 to 8 students)
- Is rooted in the needs of our community and land
- Results in a report, object, trip, or proposal for further action (e.g. a product to sell, an improvement to our campus)
- Is filled with choice, while structured around a series of lessons that teach students key concepts and skills
- Consists of a three-period learning cycle:
 - 1st- Invitation (adult introduces the project)
 - 2nd- Exploration (students work and experiment)
 - 3rd- Sharing (assessment, demonstration of work)

Now for a concrete example, a Plan of Study & Work around cartography.

Cartography

What is the community need?

In this case, the community in need is us, as new occupants and stewards of our Milwaukie Campus. We need to orient ourselves to our new campus, and map the surrounding land. We will build an understanding of the physical, biological, and cultural layout of our new campus. This knowledge will be foundational to subsequent Plans of Study & Work.

First period

This is the shortest of the three periods. It consists of direct and concise instruction from the adult. This is when students learn about the concepts and definitions that are fundamental to the project, so the language used by adults must be precise. At the same time, this initial lesson must be engaging, even seductive. The lesson will likely engage multiple of a student's senses; it might be theatrical, involve a trip off campus, or a visiting practitioner.

For our cartography project, this first period will involve a conceptual and historical look at mapmaking: What were the initial purposes of maps? How did the ancient Greeks use maps? How did Ptolemy devise a way to map the globe? How is triangulation used in surveying? How can we measure topography? How do we map biological or cultural diversity? What roles do satellites play, and what is GIS?

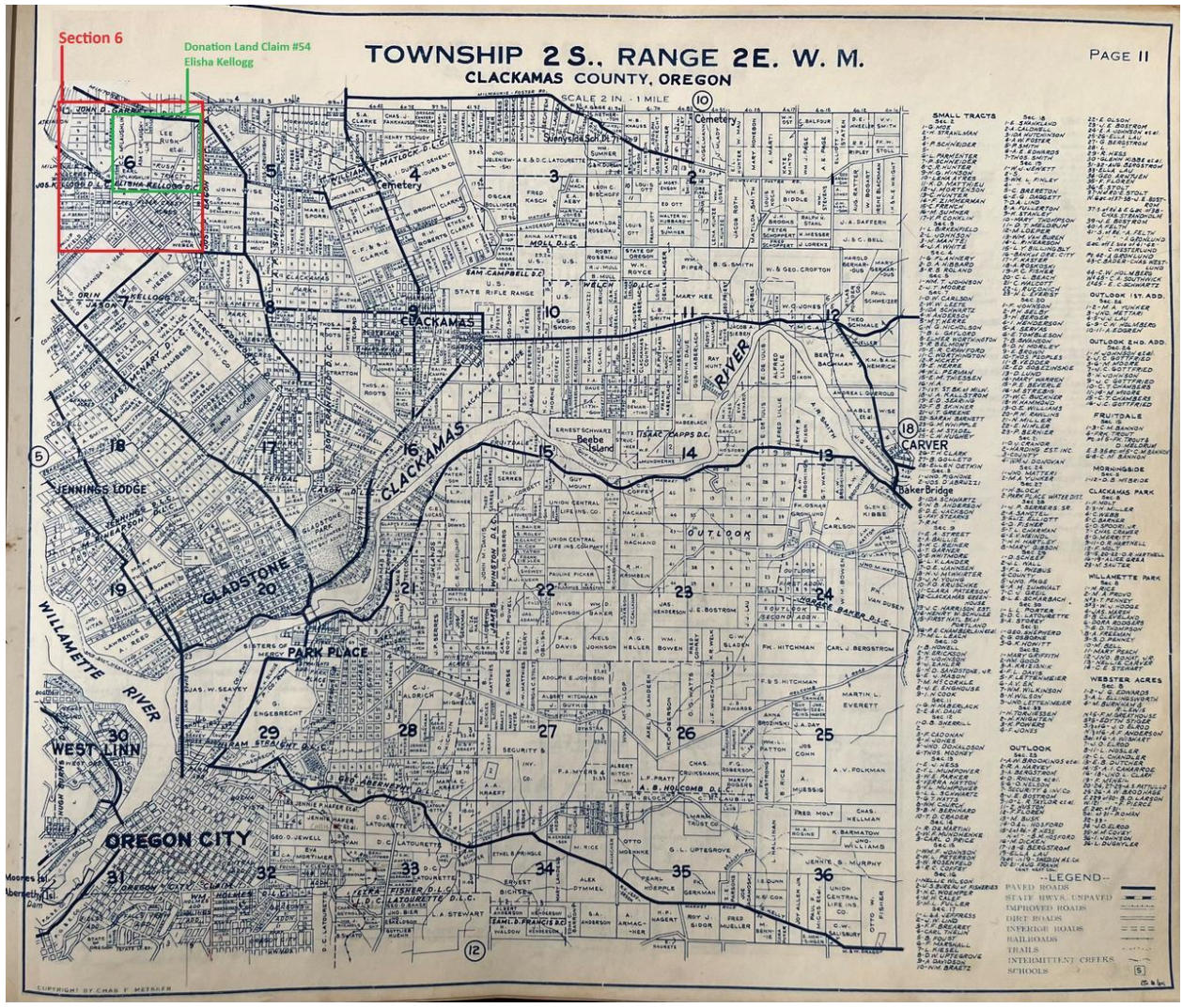
To seduce students into this topic, and engage their senses, we might go to a corner of our campus and practice geodesic triangulation. We may count trees, and estimate their age, as a starting point for mapping biodiversity.

Second period

This is the longest of the three periods. It's when students get to work! Students experiment, and work iteratively, as they conceive and test ideas. Guides provide support and structure so that students can realize what they had in mind. Guides will give lessons on specific concepts and skills, while helping students acquire resources— be they physical materials, trips off campus, interviews with experts, and so on.

At this point, students have been introduced to this broad topic of cartography. What, specifically, will they choose to do? Three students might turn to land tenure, and ask about the previous landowners of our campus. This would spur a lesson on how our Milwaukie campus was the

traditional homeland of the Upper Chinook, before the Homestead Acts and the parceling of land by the U.S. Government.



agriculture augments or diminishes biodiversity. This, in turn, might lead to additional skill lessons on how we can identify and count the species on our campus.

Finally, we may actually make a map! This might involve a skill lesson on making papyrus, or how to accurately plot points on a two-dimensional field. We might veer into a lesson on how to make a Cassini map! Or decide to go off campus to shadow a land surveyor, or interview a professional who works with GIS.

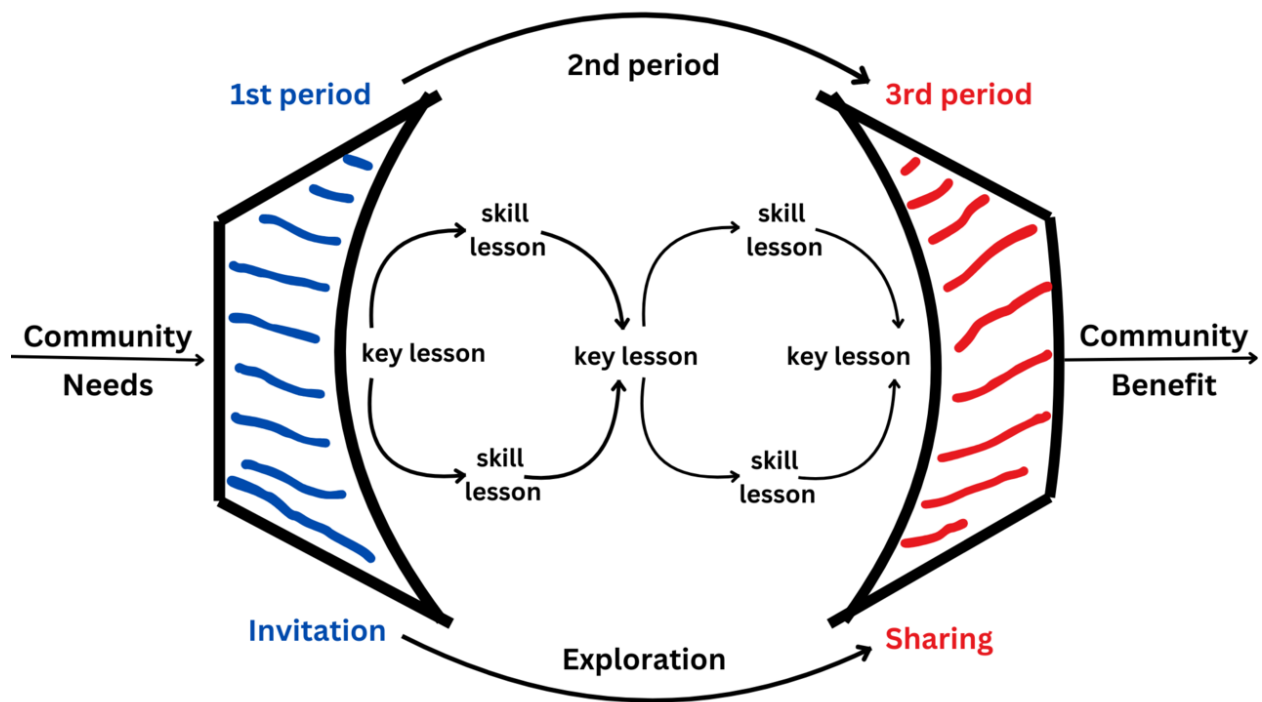
As you can imagine, a guide needs to have a lot in their “back pocket.” We adults can anticipate many directions in which a cartography project might go, and our job is to prepare for this. However, we can’t anticipate everything! This is when we work and learn with students, “side-by-side.” Adolescents are well aware when this happens, and they respect the humility that adults must exercise to pull it off.

Third period

During the third period, students demonstrate their knowledge and have their work assessed. While the first two periods follow set structures, the third period can vary quite a lot. Students might demonstrate their knowledge in the form of a written report, a performance, a map, or a proposal to the community. To have their work assessed, students may present to and receive feedback from an expert (typically with whom they consulted), they may accomplish what they set out to do (sell a product, or arrange a trip), or they may simply have a conversation with their advisor on next steps.

As these projects begin with a community need (perhaps related to our land, our student body, our campus economy, or a surrounding community), we can often turn to that initial need when evaluating the success of a project, and determining where to go next.

For those minds that crave a diagram, here’s one way to depict a Plan of Study and Work:



For those who prefer a simple table:

1st period - Invitation	2nd period- Exploration	3rd period- Sharing
Direct instruction	Research	Complete report
Lesson in classroom	Visit experts or spaces off campus	Proposal to community
Precise language	Experiment	Present to expert
Directed experience	Design & build	Sell product or service
Engage multiple senses	Repetition / various iterations	Conference with advisor

The Rest of Our Educational Program

Plans of Study & Work are critical in building executive function, confidence and adaptability.

However, they do not make up a complete educational program. We supplement these projects with seminars where students learn and practice basic concepts in math, the sciences and the language arts. Quite often the material covered in these seminars will apply to Plans of Study & Work, but not always. Seminar is a time for students to build up skills around worksheets, problem sets, testing, and all those other skills needed in a traditional high school.

To be clear, if our aim was simply to cover *all* the units in a reputable 7th and 8th grade standard curriculum, Plans of Study & Work would not be an efficient method. While we hit these academic marks, our priority as a school lies elsewhere. We guide adolescents, and provide them with a nurturing and challenging environment, so they can build adult identities that are sincere and stable. Adolescents leave Montessori middle schools with the wherewithal and skills necessary to learn whatever they need to, when they need to. Such adaptability is critical in our (turbulent) contemporary world.

On that note, peace to all!

Until March,

Peter

Stay Tuned!

This newsletter is written by our Middle School Program Director Peter Oviatt. You can find archived newsletters [here](#).

Your thoughts on this newsletter are welcomed: What do you like about it? How could it be more helpful? Please [contact](#) Peter with any thoughts or concerns.

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Our Vision:

Our vision is a community of intellectually curious, independent, and compassionate lifelong learners.

Our Mission:

Sunstone Montessori School develops the whole child by providing an academically strong, emotionally nurturing and, socially supportive environment in accordance with AMI guidelines for Montessori education.

Commitment to Diversity:

Sunstone Montessori School welcomes students and staff of any race, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity, color, nationality and ethnicity, religion, and family constellation, to all programs and activities at the school. The school does not discriminate in its educational hiring, admission, or school-administered policies. It is our goal that Sunstone Montessori School reflects the rich diversity of our community, including varied cultures, economic status, and individual or special educational needs.

www.sunstonemontessori.org

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