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Using Your Imagination Will Take You Places

by Dr. Patricia F. Schoonover

Parents are always on the lookout for programs or activities that will help their children learn to think more creatively or that will help the youngsters to discover and develop their talents. Destination ImagiNation® is an international, nonprofit program that many parents and educators have already discovered will help them to meet these goals. Destination ImagiNation® provides students from many settings (from public and private schools, home schooled, or through nonprofit community groups) with opportunities to explore, discover, and develop their creative potential through teamwork, cooperation, and mutual respect.

The activities involved in Destination ImagiNation® can take place in or out of school. The program encourages teams to apply creative problem solving to find unique solutions to challenges they select. Each year students and their parents and teachers can download five new challenges and guidebooks for them from the program's site on the Internet (www.destinationimagination.org), whether or not they join the program. These challenges, and guidebooks relating to them, can be downloaded by anyone without joining the program, and all are welcome to use the challenges however they wish. However, if teams wish to compete in the program's organized tournaments, they must acquire a membership in the program, and they may also need to register with an affiliate organization in their area.

The program is organized into three main levels for students: Elementary (no student reaching 12 years by June 15), Middle (no student reaching 15 years by June 15), and Secondary Level (no student reaching 19 years by June 15). There is also a special Primary Level component for students not older than nine (or Kindergarten through 3rd grade). The Primary Level is noncompetitive. There is also a college/military membership. Teams are made up of not more than seven students who select one of the current challenges and begin working towards a solution.

The students often begin working on their challenge in September and October, working collaboratively for several weeks. Depending upon the affiliate organization, the first tournament for member teams is generally a regional tournament (several areas located in close proximity). In many places the regional tournaments are held in February or March. From the regional tournament, teams may progress to an affiliate tournament. In Wisconsin, for example, there are 14 regional tournaments. The first-place winners of each challenge at each level advance to the affiliate finals, which are held in April. The first-place winners of each challenge and level at the affiliate tournament may advance to the Global Finals. The specific schedule for each affiliate varies; most affiliates have websites which are linked from the Destination ImagiNation® website.

The Destination ImagiNation® Challenges

Each year's challenges range from very technical, with some performance involved, to primarily performance with some technical aspects.

A challenge that focuses on performance is one in which students will spend more time developing a play or skit of about eight minutes in duration. The students write an original script and develop props, characters, and costumes. An example of a performance challenge for 2000-2001 is ³Anonymously Yours.² For this challenge the team selects a real work of art (pottery, poetry, folk tale, painting, sculpture, etc.) whose creator is \emptyset Unknown,¹ or \emptyset Anonymous.¹ Next, the team creates an original performance that tells the story of the unknown artist, "Anonymous," and the creation of that work of art. The anonymous artist must live or have lived in a country and culture other than where the team lives. In this way the team members learn about another culture and era. In addition to the performance, the team develops a technical element that uses only the technology available in the

time and place where the anonymous artist lived. The development and presentation of the performance are major parts of this challenge, and the technical element is a minor part. For all five challenges each year, improvisations are incorporated into the performance by giving the team a new item, just before beginning its performance, to incorporate into their solution.

An example of a technical challenge is ³TechEffects.² In this challenge the team researches, designs, and incorporates into its solution four special effects using technology (such as simple machines, electronics, mechanics, optics, or other complex systems) for creating special effects in movies, on stage, and at amusement parks. The team creates its own story, filled with special effects and one ³DIrect TechEffect² which is a special effect created by the team to affect the senses (except taste or touch).

Working on the Challenges. The challenges require a variety of skills and draw upon a number of talent areas, including writing, technology, artistic, or musical, so the teams need to be diverse in their makeup. Therefore, effective teams are not always made up of youngsters with established friendships; they are often arranged from within a school or community group by an adult who is willing to serve as a team manager. Team managers can be any adult who is willing to commit a great deal of time and energy to facilitate and manage a team's efforts for its chosen challenge.

In order for the teams to develop their solutions they need to meet together either at school or at someone's home, or perhaps in a community center. The teams can meet during the school day or after school and on weekends, depending on the organization in their area. During the first few meetings, the team manager usually does some team building exercises with the students and the students use these early meetings to learn more about each other and understand their talents and abilities both individually and collectively. Later, as the team's activities progress, the students select a challenge and the team manager acts as a facilitator while the team applies a creative problem-solving process and tools to develop options and work toward their solution.

As the teams work over several weeks, they evaluate their work by testing their devices or structures for technical challenges, or by practicing their lines if it is a performance challenge. The team members must do the work themselves. This is perhaps the hardest part of being a team manager. Team managers often feel the urge to tell the team what he or she believes they should do, but they cannot. Team managers can teach a skill (e.g. sewing, welding, building, etc.) or see that resources (human, video, books, Internet, etc.) are available for the team members in order to acquire the skills. For example, if the team decides to saw some materials, they can be taught how to use a saw. But they cannot be given any part of their solution.

Teams are not obligated to compete with other teams. However, after working so long on their solution to a challenge, most teams choose to compete. Successful participation in the program requires commitment from all team members, the team manager, and many parents.

Encouraging Parent Involvement

Surveys of our affiliates informed us that about half of all our team managers are parents. Parents who are not team managers can be involved in many other ways, too, including finding out what the team manager may need in the way of help, providing transportation, or providing snacks. Parents can also assist the team managers and teams in ways that relate to the creative problem-solving process, too; these possibilities include:

- Helping students learn how to generate options and how to focus their thinking effectively.
- Teaching teams how to defer judgment and how to apply affirmative judgment when working on their challenges.
- Supporting the students' thinking while remaining apart from the team solution, by directing the students back to their goal(s) and by helping the students develop their questions as open-ended, invitational challenge statements.
- Assisting in various roles at a regional or affiliate tournament. For examples, parents can be appraisers (judges, or people who watch the teams perform their solution and then score them).

Benefits of Participation

Our participants tell us clearly that the Destination ImagiNation® experience is an intense, yet highly fulfilling experience. Why do teams and their team managers and parents continue year after year? Many students, when

interviewed about why they have stayed with the program, have told us that they loved the competition. They stated that they would work all year as a team knowing that they would be performing and would be evaluated by appraisers seeing other teams in the same challenge and same level. Knowing that, they said, made them work harder to develop the best solution and the best performance they could. Students who worked on more technical challenges reported that they learned to be more innovative and risk-taking when developing their solutions. Even though the chance for their solution to fall apart or ³fail² might have been very high, they were willing to take the chance. They also learned how to compete fairly, and how to win (or how to lose) gracefully.

The program can also enhance and enrich learning experiences for students. Through participation, students can discover and develop their own talents. The program often attracts high-potential students because of the opportunities for challenge and engagement in active, creative learning. A number of high-ability students reported that their experience with this program was the only challenge they had in school! Individual team members also acquire knowledge and learn skills for locating and organizing information from their research on a challenge. Their considerable investment of time and effort in research, practice, and presentation helps them learn about disciplined inquiry and time management.

Destination ImagiNation® has also been a boon to many students who might be termed ³twice exceptional.² The experience of participation in the program has been very valuable and rewarding for a number of students who were identified as both high ability and as having specific learning disabilities. Parents of these students reported that the students¹ experience in the program was essential to the academic success for the students. One parent spoke for many. Her son was identified with severe dyslexia and determined to have very high ability scores when he was 6 years old. She said that ³It was like he knew what he was supposed to learn, but couldn't open the door to get to it.² His parents helped him become involved in Destination ImagiNation®. They wanted him to feel some success. They believe that his participation in the program helped him grow and gain confidence in himself. Last year, when he was in eighth grade, he was able to attain high grades in his advanced classes while receiving no extra help.

Students have consistently stated they loved the competition, and that they enjoyed seeing how their solution compared to the solutions developed by other teams who worked on the same challenge. The team members learned from each other at tournaments by watching other teams perform and by talking and sharing their experiences.

There are also social and interpersonal benefits, as the students learn to collaborate and work together over a sustained period of time, even though their strengths, talents, interests, and styles may differ considerably. Often, the greatest fulfillment and sense of accomplishment come from having surmounted difficulties, solved sticky issues, and made it through good times and difficult times to the end of the season. Success is not measured by trophies or medals for most teams. It is measured by having stayed together, learned what their individual and team strengths are and taking advantage of those to create the best possible solution they can and taking it to a tournament. But most of all, they have fun! Fun is the one part of this experience and of learning that is overlooked. There is always room for outrageous ideas, silly moments, lots of pizza, and just having fun together.

Parents and other adult team managers have said that they also learned a great deal from working with the students, guiding them through the year, helping them solve interpersonal issues, and facilitating students through a process to help them find a solution to their challenge. But the ³big moment² was often when the teams performed their solution for the first time, whether at a school function, or a regional tournament. For adults it was a highly intense experience not unlike working with highly motivated adult professionals.

We have learned that students work year after year, whether they win a trophy or not, to keep participating and entering a tournament. Our interviews with many teams involved in the program have helped us to summarize several factors that motivate teams to continue participating; these include:

Pride in their own accomplishments. The team members are proud to have developed the solution, built the props, vehicle, structure, whatever the challenge called for, on their own. The adults or people outside of the team did not interfere. The pride that team members feel was clearly evident when they were interviewed. They glowed and grinned and were eager to show you everything they did and to talk about it as long as you were willing to listen.

Discovering their own capabilities. The team members discovered that they were able to do things they never thought they could do or would ever do. A second grader learned to sew so he could sew the team's costumes that

the team designed. A team of sixth-grade girls signed up for woodshop so they could learn to handle power tools in order to construct their own props. A team of fourth graders wanted to have a type of robotic vehicle, so one member of the team learned how to solder a motherboard and learned about all of the components.

Opportunities to learn and conduct research. Team members learned how to do effective research using a variety of human resources, computer skills, library skills, and a variety of media and research tools.

Developing and demonstrating resourcefulness. Both individually and as a team, the team members became very resourceful. They often learned how to use the phone correctly and effectively (how to talk to people on a phone to get the information they need), for example. They were able to go into hardware, surplus supply, or discount stores and ³source out² what they need. They also learned how to discover new uses for items scrounged from home that no one would have considered using in the way it was used.

Becoming effective time and money managers. Many team members learned valuable life skills. To encourage the students to become resourceful and use what they already have available for no cost, there is a limit to the amount of money a team can spend on its final solution. There are deadlines for tournaments, and time limits for performances and demonstrations. The students discovered that they needed to plan and manage their time effectively and efficiently, for example, and how to create a budget and stay within it.

Learning to deal with interpersonal issues. The team members learned how to deal with and resolve their own interpersonal issues. It did not matter whether the team was initially built among friends or strangers; any group of people working together for 7 to 8 months will likely experience some conflicts. Even though some conflicts persisted, the teams continued to win and advance to the next level of competition. One team member said, ³you learn how to work together even if you don't like each other.²

Learning and applying process tools and methods. The team members learned specific tools for generating ideas, for focusing their thinking, and for creative problem solving. These are process skills they will be able to apply to all areas of their life. Teachers reported that they can usually tell the students in their classes who have been part of the program because they ask more questions, tackle challenges in a different way than other students, and accomplish their goals effectively.

Finding and developing one's strengths and talents takes time, and it is not an easy challenge. While the program is not a comprehensive ³gifted and talent program² in itself, and should not be thought of in that way, many parents have told us that Destination ImagiNation® makes a very important contribution to talent development for their children. It helps students to discover and develop their interests and talents through active involvement in a variety of inquiry, problem solving, and performance or technical challenges. Many students have stated that through their experiences with Destination ImagiNation® they discovered interests they had never considered. Talents such as music, engineering, architecture, and acting have been discovered and developed through students' involvement in the program.

Using Destination ImagiNation® challenges, parents can help their students discover what truly interests them and what unique talents may lie dormant ready for awakening. Elementary students might discover Shakespeare and incorporate his work into their solution along with music they wrote themselves. Students of all ages discover the fun and hard work of developing a skit complete with original costumes and props. Others find they have a talent for structure building and mechanical engineering. And yet others, perhaps very quiet students, astound even their parents with their ability to improvise with humor. Everyone discovers the hard work and fun of finding and solving problems creatively.

Dr. Patricia F. Schoonover is Program director for Destination ImagiNation® and director of the Wisconsin Destination ImagiNation® program.