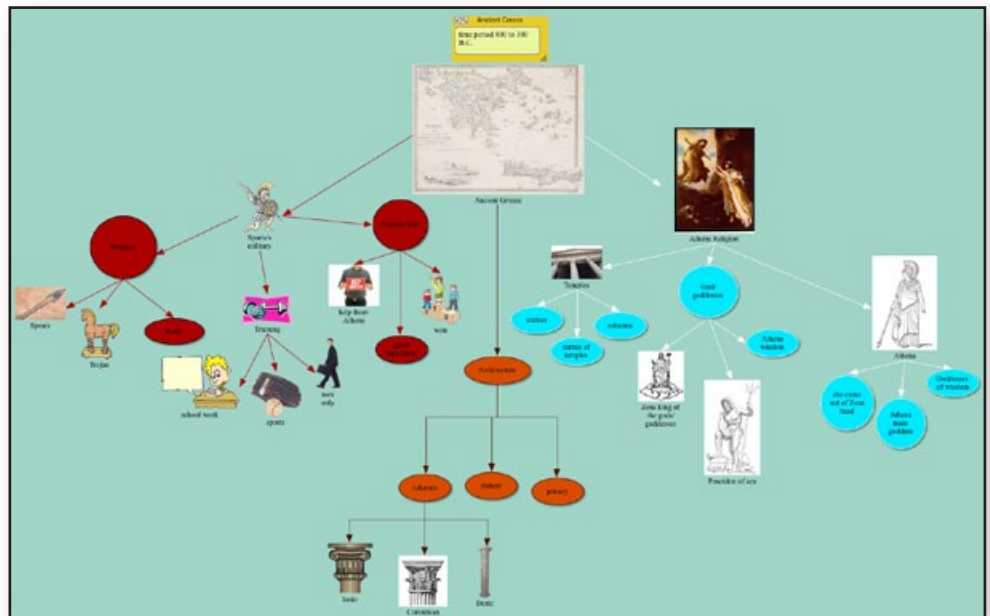


West Chicago Middle School Students Build 21st Century Thinking and Writing Skills With Inspiration®

In the past, students assigned a research paper may have found themselves in a state of confusion, sifting through Web sites, books and periodicals, scrawling out notecards and searching for ways to compile and organize their ideas and data into a written report. When library media center teacher Vicky Richter came to Benjamin Middle School in West Chicago, Ill., three years ago, she introduced students to Inspiration®, the ultimate thinking and learning tool to comprehend, create, communicate and achieve more, from Inspiration® Software, Inc., and there was no turning back to their former ways.

With Inspiration, Richter's students are developing 21st century thinking skills—creating and organizing information, analyzing and identifying relationships, building understanding, and communicating what they've learned. The projects they create are thoughtful, organized and polished—a reflection of the higher level writing skills they're gaining. "Inspiration turns writing into such a positive experience—there isn't a comparable tool," said Richter, who had previously used Inspiration when teaching in Texas. "Students are very visual, with all the games they play, and it makes sense to help them learn in a visual way, too."

Richter works with classroom teachers at all grade levels at Benjamin Middle School to help them integrate visual learning into instruction. Using Inspiration, which is designed for learners grade 6 to adult, students build graphic organizers—including



Vicky Richter was an Inspiration Software 2009 Best Project Winner for this Inspiration social studies concept map of ancient Greece created by her students.

concept maps, webs, mind maps and idea maps—to brainstorm, plan, organize, think, outline and present their ideas. Whether she's helping sixth graders who are studying animal species or eighth graders learning about Black History Month, Richter said she finds herself turning to Inspiration.

When the school's seventh graders began a research project on national parks, they used Inspiration in their pre-writing process to take notes and break down the project into manageable pieces of information. As they explored the history of the parks, they organized the facts they found, arranging them in "bubbles" in their graphic organizers. Capturing this information with Inspiration allowed them to visually group data so they could identify the relevant information and pre-writing process. "They just plugged in all the pieces and then cut and pasted and turned them into outlines—it's so easy with Inspiration," said Richter.

An eighth-grade class found Inspiration a helpful way to guide them through a project examining the historical and cultural events that transpired during the

1960s. The students were able to gather information, explore it in detail, and then analyze, identify and interpret the significant events that defined the decade. "They love being able to begin with something simple and end with something very complex," Richter explained.

While Benjamin Middle School serves a relatively small English Language Learner (ELL) population, it has seen a recent influx of students native to India and Vietnam. Richter said the ELL students appreciate Inspiration's Listen and Record Sound tools, which allow them to hear their work read aloud or record their own words, aiding in their comprehension.

When she's working with students on research projects, Richter stresses the importance of "spending time on the front end," reading, analyzing and applying critical-thinking skills while organizing facts. When the students follow these steps in Inspiration, not only do they have a well-thought-out project when they're finished with the writing, "but their bibliography is right there, too," she noted.

When pulling information from various sources, some students may make others' words theirs, either inadvertently or purposefully, so Richter gives them a lesson in plagiarism. She notes that Inspiration is helpful with this concept, as it helps students see the difference between a phrase they've written and one they've pulled from another document.

Richter appreciates the ease of moving content in Inspiration from graphic organizer to outline to a finished product—whether it's a document or a presentation—and that everything is transparent. "When all their research is in the outline, they can go to the paper, and the teacher can see where everything came from—to see whether they understood," she said.

The classroom teachers are very receptive to Richter's work with the students on Inspiration projects, she said. "They see how Inspiration helps organize their thoughts and visualize where they're going," she

explained. Some teachers make use of it themselves, including a math teacher who used Inspiration at the school's open house to give parents a visual tour of how the year would progress.

Richter not only has her students use Inspiration for writing projects, but for other subjects as well, such as reading comprehension. Benjamin Middle School's sixth-grade students are some of the school's most enthusiastic users of Inspiration, she said, and they put it to use every chance they get. When they studied the novel "The Tree," Inspiration was a useful tool for comprehending the story as they analyzed the plot, setting and characters, and demonstrated what they learned.

Richter was an Inspiration Software 2009 Best Project winner for her social studies project, in which students created a concept map of ancient Greece, incorporating four or five main ideas and branching off to smaller ideas. The project allowed students to share their thoughts with others visually, using Inspiration and an interactive whiteboard, encouraging collaborative learning in the classroom.

Project after project, the students are gaining familiarity with all that Inspiration has to offer, stepping up their use of the wide variety of features, said Richter. When they move on to high school, they'll continue down this path, "creating some amazing things with Inspiration," she said.

Richter's goal is to have the students at Benjamin Middle School use Inspiration at the start of every research and writing project. "It's the very best way to 'dump' information where you want it," she explained. "With Inspiration, the students go through the proper process, which means they're able to create something that's meaty. The teachers find it a great learning tool and the students love using it, so it's a win-win for everyone."



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