



GARDEN SCHOOL NEWSLETTER



Richard Marotta, Ph. D., Headmaster

Volume 92 Number: XVIII

"Academic Excellence Since 1923"

Friday, February 6, 2015

Thoughts for the week



By Richard Marotta, Ph.D., Headmaster



One of the most productive discussions that has taken place among educators recently has centered on the idea of experiential rather than academic learning. In many cases and in many practices, experiential learning takes on the substance of academic learning and simply alters the approach to the material. For many students, experiential learning tends to enforce the value of the meaning of the education experience.

When I think about all of the discussions that have taken place around this idea, going back to the mid 1800's when Henry David Thoreau took his students out into a field to study how grass grows and is rooted to the earth (he called this *huckleberrying*), I can identify so many areas of learning that have truly been enhanced by experiential learning.

We tend to think that science is the most 'hands-on' of the academic subject, and it is true that there are many opportunities for experiential learning in science through the practice of experimentation. Students of all ages benefit from the direct experience of how science works through observation, manipulation and creation of environments that demonstrate the very precise way in which science, or perhaps, we should call it nature, functions.

However, there are other areas too that can benefit from this experiential focus. In literature, for example, Garden students were treated recently to a Macbeth acting workshop from visiting actors. In history, our Garden students traveled to the Morgan Library earlier this year to recreate illuminated medieval scripts using original techniques. And, it is entirely possible to understand the past or the present by conducting interviews with family members about the past. I have read oral histories in which students have interviewed grandparents about life when they themselves were children. In some of these interviews, grandparents talked about their experiences during World War Two or about their experience of school. From these more experiential activities, it became clear that the living quality of history was just as important as the academic analysis.

There are some examples of writing workshops in which the actual experience of putting together a piece of work takes on the direct practice of working with a peer group, which functions as the editor for each student-writer. Here students receive the hands-on experience of interacting with several readers rather than simply with a single teacher reader.

In a broader sense, travel can become a very substantial element in experiential learning, because there students encounter directly many of the places and environments that have studied. Including the trip leaving next week for England and Iceland, Garden students and faculty have taken nearly fifty trips overseas over the past twenty years. Because, it's one thing to read about the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror; it's another more powerful experience to stand in the Place de la Concorde where so much of that history took place.

Experiential learning is vital; experiential learning humanizes knowledge.