

Head column, La Lettre Winter 09

The Value of Community and Diversity

This Head's column is adapted from a speech given by Jane Camblin to all faculty and staff during Inservice Day on March 16, 2009.

“The time’s come; there’s a terrific thundercloud upon us, a mighty storm is coming to freshen us up....it’s going to blow away all this idleness and indifference and prejudice.....”

Anton Chekhov “The Three Sisters”, 1901

“Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose. The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into a purposeless game, is not yet over. And yet, a weak light glimmers, like a tiny point in an enormous circle of blackness....”

Vassily Kandinsky “Concerning The Spiritual In Art”, 1912

Just last week, we earned some heartwarming praise from our Visiting Accreditation Team concerning both the quality of our academic programs and our serious engagement in discussions at all levels about what diversity means at our school.* As teachers, we are accustomed to thinking of learning as good in and of itself. But as we continue to refine and to promote our own special brand of bilingual and international pedagogy, I’d like to provide some thoughts first about education in general, and secondly about our institution in particular, in the times in which we live.

Almost 20 years ago, in 1990, environmentalist David Orr of Oberlin University warned us: “If today is a typical day on planet Earth, we will lose 116 square miles of rainforest, or about an acre a second. We will lose another 72 square miles to encroaching deserts, as a result of human mismanagement and overpopulation. We will lose 40 to 100 species, and no one knows whether the number is 40 or 100. Today the human population will increase by 250,000. And today we will add 2,700 tons of chlorofluorocarbons to the atmosphere and 15 million tons of carbon. Tonight the Earth will be a little hotter, its waters more acidic, the fabric of life more threadbare, and no-one is listening.”

The truth is that 20 years on, we haven’t yet listened all that much, or done much about it, and many things on which our present and future health and prosperity depend, are now in dire jeopardy: climate, eco-systems and biological diversity to be sure, but also economic survival, ethical leadership, and societal well-being, just to name a few. It is worth noting that our current dismal situation in 2009 is not the result of work by ignorant people. It is, rather, largely the result of actions and decisions by educated people, people with BAs, BSs, degrees in law and political sciences, MBAs, and PhDs. In other words, the cream of the academic crop. And before receiving their university diplomas, many of these leaders were graduates of private, independent schools like ours, many with award-winning top tier educational programs, highly regarded teachers, and

state of the art facilities. So, what went wrong? Perhaps, the kind of education these people received may have placed undue emphasis on academic theories at the expense of human values, on abstract concepts rather than on human beings, on pure abstraction rather than on mindfulness, and, most importantly, on scripted answers rather than on critical questions. Clearly, their educational backgrounds must not have emphasized the profoundly important notions of societal relevance, ethical reasoning, or authentic human empathy.

Many well-regarded educators consider that true education must come from the Greek concept of “paideia”. The goal of education here is not so much the mastery of subject matter, but the mastery of one’s own person. Subject matter is simply the tool. Much as one would use a hammer and chisel to carve a block of marble, students will use the knowledge and ideas we give them to craft and shape the sort of human being they will become. Sadly, many so-called educational systems (not in OUR school), are cobbled together under a confusion of ends and means, implying that the goal of education is to stuff all kinds of facts, techniques, methods, and information into the student’s mind, regardless of how it is interpreted and with what effect it will be used.

It follows, then, that we should not attempt to teach something without understanding the implications of this knowledge for each of the students in our school, whatever their background. University graduates in positions of leadership, educated in the tools of leveraged buyouts, tax breaks, and capital mobility, have done what no invading army could do: they have destroyed an economy with total impunity on behalf of something called corporate greed and the “bottom line.” But the bottom line for the rest of society also includes other costs, those of unemployment, crime, families split apart, child abuse, lost savings, and wrecked lives. Whatever our corporate leaders had learned at school did not apparently include the value of communities or the human costs of a narrow destructive economic rationality that valued material acquisition above people. As international educators, we MUST and we WILL continually impart the inherent value of human beings of all shapes, sizes, colors, genders, nationalities, socio-economic class, political persuasions and sexual orientations as a fundamental and intrinsic part of everything we teach and everything we model here at school.

Students in traditional national programs might hear a great deal about the notions of global responsibility and so-called “tolerance” (rather than a true celebration of difference) without ever truly experiencing an authentic engagement with “otherness”...not a recipe for educated leadership for the 21st century. That’s why schools like ours, which are based on these very core values of international-mindedness and diversity, which truly live these values every single day, which continually teach cross-cultural communication skills, critical thinking, service learning and an emphasis on a myriad different ways of thinking strategically, are of paramount importance. French American International School and International High School students will always be encouraged not only to be outstanding scholars, but also to be mindful, compassionate, caring and ethical individuals; truly informed, articulate, stewards of tomorrow’s world.

Jane Camblin

- Note that the full accreditation report, together with the recommended term of re-accreditation, will be sent to the school prior to the end of the 2008-09 academic year, when it will be shared with the entire community.