

November 13, 2007

Wow! It has been a long time since my very memorable week at Fort Ticonderoga in the company of fellow educators looking to draw upon the success and experiences of Joe Ryan and the Living History Education Foundation he established as his teaching legacy. I just browsed through my planner to see that it was August 19th through 24th that I learned so much by living outside the box - outside the walls of a classroom and beyond the pages of a textbook.

I am feeling guilty that this journal has taken so long to produce, but take comfort in knowing that time has distilled my memories so that only the significant ones remain. It seems that attending a course such as "Living History at Fort Ticonderoga" isn't so much about acquiring the details as it is about acquiring an attitude toward history and lighting (maybe, rekindling) a desire to get engaged with our past. Here are the most important lessons for me:

* Teaching living history requires that the educator surrender the often self-centered "need" to know with absolute certainty that the "answers" are correct. Teachers that use the traditional textbook, worksheet and paper test approach can typically take comfort in knowing that an answer key determines the achievement of their students. Living history lessons are much more fluid and by design allow the students and teacher (collectively - learners) to steer the experience into areas of uncertainty. As a teacher I am reminded that saying to a student, "I don't know if that was true" is: unacceptable (if I don't care enough and haven't spent the requisite time to know my content), okay (if I do care and will spend the time to learn new content) or great (if I do care deeply, seek new knowledge on an ongoing basis, and help my students appreciate that there is not always one definitive solution). I need to remind myself more regularly that a teacher should probably be more of a "guide by the side" than simply a source of knowledge. After all, if it was only facts kids needed, then schoolteachers would be replaced by encyclopedia sets.

* Collaboration offers opportunities that the most talented, energetic, and visionary teachers cannot realize as individuals. Not only does the synergy of collaborative models enrich the experience of the students, but it also makes the life of a teacher more exciting and fulfilling. I am fortunate to be a part of a strong and collegial team of educators. When this condition exists, time and motivation are two other factors that must be considered in overcoming the inertia of a curriculum at rest (a curriculum at rest tends to remain at rest unless acted upon by some force). Typically there is a lot of "mental heavy lifting" involved in redefining roles, expectations, etc. when getting started. However, I have found through experience that the inertia of a curriculum in motion (a curriculum in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by some force). Living history because of its varied nature (no two encampments, no two colonial days, etc. are the same) keeps teachers fresh. Parents and community are more likely to throw resources (time, supplies, etc.) against successful and popular activities than paper-and-pencil tasks.

* Don't let the requirement to publish numeric grades to administrators, parents, and others keep you from doing activities that are difficult to assess. With living history activities, the real learning that occurs will endure long after the grades have been issued, the report cards have been published, and the student has departed for the year. So, find some palatable way to evaluate the experiences as necessary and take comfort in knowing that the kids will benefit greatly from these rich experiences.

* You don't have to know everything, but you do need to know the group of people that collectively know "everything" (or at least closer to everything). The experts that addressed us during the week were a good reminder to use local resources (quilters, craftsmen, historians, etc.) to advance the knowledge of our own classes. Guest speakers offer a chance for students to see the network of knowledge that is possible and provides the most complete experience.

* Just like my recollections of this experience (only a little less than three months ago now) have been clarified by time, students will look back on their formative years and see clearly the activities that make a real impact, like living history lessons.

Thanks for a great week of fun and a lifetime of perspective.

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