

In a Heartbeat

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, looking at a painting of the heart created by a local heart surgeon, listening to an improvised saxophone melody by one of my students, accompanied by an interpretive dance performed by a professional dancer. I was not alone. I was with my students and they, like me, were trying to find the words to describe this interdisciplinary experience. The art inspired the music, and the music inspired the dance, and all together this inspired us into reflection and grappling with language. In a strange way I felt as though I was called to write the libretto for an opera—it already had visual art, music, and dance but not yet the words. All this spontaneity occurred, like most things in my life, with plenty of planning.

The students were enrolled in a course called “Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies for Talented and Gifted Students: Enrichment and Independent Studies 11/12” or “AIS” as we called it. This course was developed by Dr. Meredith Greene at Bridgetown Regional High School as a locally developed course for the Annapolis Valley Regional School Board. Later, when Dr. Greene assumed a consultancy position at the school board, I continued the course at my school. One of my students claimed that, “This is the most enriching, engaging, and diverse course I’ve ever taken!”

Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies met the educational needs of selected gifted and/or talented high school students. These students from Grades 11 and 12 were clustered together for interdisciplinary studies. Students did not need an Honours status to enrol in the course. They needed to demonstrate task commitment, above average ability, and creativity in a field of interest. Their talent could have been in performance arts, visual arts, leadership, or in a specific academic field. Students in Grades 10-12 were nominated in the spring for enrolment in the next year’s class. I had students who were talented in playing the saxophone, environmental action, sign language, photography, writing, as well as talents in leadership and change. As one student put it, “This course allows me to focus my energy on things I’m passionate about.”

AIS was a chance for students to take control of their own learning. Much responsibility was placed upon the learner to assume leadership roles, work with mentors, and volunteer their services to

the school and community. The responsibility for an interesting and fulfilling course rested with each AIS student. A commitment to excellence and personal success, a curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, a cooperative and creative spirit, along with a desire for personal growth, were the essential elements for a great year in Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies.

The result was that students organized guest speakers with expertise in the topics of global and local agricultural issues, macrobiotics, social justice and human rights, local theatre, Thai culture, introduction to psychology, depression, the creative process, volunteerism, entrepreneurship, equestrian enterprise, DJ-ing as a career, the benefits of yoga, neurobiology, and establishing internet companies. These were topics that were of interest not to me as their teacher, but to the students as individual learners. One student reflected, “I liked how we saw different perspectives and learned about a wide variety of topics and how everyday was never the same.”

Students created and facilitated seminars for each other based on their particular learning interests. These topics included an introduction to Hinduism, media violence, rodeos, rhythm in music and math, post-high school cooking, martial arts, phi and the golden ratio, topology, ballroom dancing, Shakespeare, reading music, the effects of clear cutting, and environmental action. Again, it was student interest that determined the focus of these seminars. As one student explained, “I love this course because it encourages curiosity! It allows me to research anything I want, however I want to, and then share it with the class however I choose.” Importantly, the role of the

teacher was one of a facilitator who encouraged individual learning while creating a collaborative learning culture, made obvious by this student comment: “I liked how everyone was open to everything and you felt that no matter what you were presenting, the people in your class were always eager to learn.”

Beyond the classroom, students planned class trips; first to visit other classes within our school (such as Vocal Music, another course I was teaching at the time), and then to meet with Dr. Greene’s AIS class from Bridgetown Regional High School at Acadia University. There, we attended a psychology lecture, visited the art gallery, toured the Atlantic Theatre Festival and the university campus, and attended a performance of Handel’s “Messiah.” Later in the year, we visited Mermaid Theatre in Windsor, a horse farm, a sheep farm, and a llama farm. One student noted, “I learned that learning can happen outside the classroom.”

Students in AIS were also expected to participate in school and/or community service, conduct and present research, and complete an Independent Project. The Independent Project was the main work of the second semester, although it was started early in the first semester. The project reflected in-depth and long-term study, advanced research, and originality of product/performance. A mere research paper was not sufficient. Students were expected to plan an appropriate type of original product/performance for an appropriate audience. For example, one student created an all-day environmental conference for local elementary students. Three students combined their talents to create an artistic showcase one evening at our school. This involved the display of original jewellery, a dramatic presentation, as well as a musical performance. Another student, who was interested in leadership and the role of the individual instigating change, created a public speaking game-and-competition. These events were the means of showcasing students’ talents in ways that students found engaging and meaningful. One student told me that, “The best thing

about AIS is the utter flexibility, the total originality, the way it comes together to create something that is all your own, but, at the same time, something you can share with this class that is more than a class.”

I like to think that my best professional work is yet to come and I acknowledge that we are largely unaware of our influence on students. Yet, when I encounter previous graduates who were part of AIS, there is this “knowing twinkle” in their eyes; we participated in something special. Being a steward of students’ talents is important and challenging work for educators, especially in times of educational cuts and increased demands. When I think of how inspiring these students were (not only to each other but also to me), I become re-energized to support enrichment opportunities for our students. In some ways, the memories of AIS have become a professional heartbeat to me, carrying me forward in my career.

The memories reaffirm the value of education not only in students’ current lives, but also in their future lives. This year, one AIS graduate was a guest speaker in my classroom. She had just returned from serving in Afghanistan. While she offered my students insight and compassion about her experiences in Afghanistan, she also advised them to take advantage of their current educational opportunities. It was apparent to me, that her memories of AIS remained vivid and as I listened to her address my current students, I was transported back to that AIS experience in the art gallery seven years ago.

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