



How To Teach EVERYTHING

Preparing Students to Change the World

By Cristina Santiestevan '96

IF YOU WANT TO REALLY UNDERSTAND FOXCROFT, then you should stroll into Schoolhouse and stop by the Academic Office. It's on the first floor, across from the stairs and right next to the Day Student Lounge. Don't bother making an appointment. Don't worry about opening the door. You won't need to talk to a soul. Everything you need to know is written on the bronze plaque mounted about waist-height on the outside of the door:

In memory of Ann P. Leibrick
Scientist and
Dean Extraordinaire

"Everything we do is curriculum"

1990 - 2000

The Academic Office is home to the Academic Dean, and this was Leibrick's office for several years, until she retired in 2000. Although Ann Leibrick passed away in 2007, her influence is still felt in every classroom and helps guide the education of every student. *Everything we do is curriculum* is woven into the heart of the School, and is a part of every educator's vocabulary. It would not be a stretch to say that Ann Leibrick's legacy is Foxcroft's future, these students' futures.

Leibrick's old office is now occupied by Foxcroft's current Academic Dean, Alexander O. Northrup (above with Chelsea Dickson '09). If you do knock on his door, he'll gladly talk with you about the simple truths that can be defined by that engraved five-word message. What's more, he'll share with you his belief that this message is not the full story. It is only the beginning.

"I would say that this is exactly what she was thinking..." says Northrup. "That *everything* we do is curriculum and what that curriculum is, is everything." This may seem a grand statement — and it is — but it is also the basic philosophy that guides every lesson plan, homework assignment and final exam on Foxcroft's campus. As Northrup explains it, "curriculum is not only math and sciences and humanities, but it's what it means to be a person. How do we live morally? How do we make the world a better place? Those are really the essential questions. . . . Everything we do is, in some way, a response to these basic questions."

Ultimately, Northrup believes education is responsible for "the continuity of culture..." and that educators' most important task is "helping the next generation of humans understand what it is to

be human." This is no small responsibility. These are not simple questions to ask. And none of this is easily distilled into multiple-choice questions on a pop quiz.

Difficulties aside, these are the questions that guide every student's education here. It is what guides Northrup and his colleagues as they work together to present a curriculum that helps students shine both in the classroom and far beyond campus.

Everything, In the Classroom

Foxcroft students have a wide array of classes to choose from, many more than one might assume for a school of its small size. Beyond the expected, a girl might study Latin or Mandarin, International Relations and Nutritional Chemistry, Statistics or Multivariable Calculus. Students have some flexibility to take control of their own education.

This flexibility extends into the classroom, too, as teachers enjoy the freedom to build their lesson plans around their students' abilities or interests. "If something catches the whole class's interest, we can go off and study that," says Courtney Ulmer, Chair of the History Department. Ulmer recently did just that when a college-level book — *Eyewitness to Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* — proved to



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need more time than she had originally anticipated. Rather than stopping half-way through the book, Ulmer shifted her whole semester around to allow more time with this one difficult subject. “I wasn’t going to give up on it,” says Ulmer. “I didn’t want them to think you could just give up on something that is too hard.”

And that is really the point. Life lessons. Wanting students to find their passions. To pursue their strengths. To learn that giving up just because something is hard is never a good idea.

“Teaching history is not really about the subject. It’s about what the subject teaches you.”

— Courtney Ulmer

Julie Ervin, who holds the Eleanor B. Stevens Chair for Science, is the first to admit that her discipline can be hard and that this degree of difficulty can drive students away from the subject. But she does not let this limit her. By offering non-traditional electives such as Environ-

mental Science, Nutrition, Pharmacology and the Chemistry of Food, Ervin attracts students to her department who might otherwise prefer to never step into the Science Wing. Two years ago, for example, a talented artist took Anatomy to improve her understanding of the human body. She did wonderfully in the course. “They end up taking all these electives because they are interested in them,” says Ervin. “It opens up a whole new world for them.”

This is the reward a student earns when she challenges herself. She enrolls in a science class to improve her art skills, and ends up learning as much about the reach of her abilities as she does about human anatomy and creating realistic art.

“We’re trying to mold individuals,” says English teacher Glenn Kantz. “We’re trying to nurture them. We’re trying to help them find their goals and passions.” How do you help a 15-year-old girl find her goals and passions? Expose her to a world that is larger than she is. Kantz, for example, encourages his English 101 students to seek out and discuss current events in the classroom. Every student must find a news article for discussion every week, perhaps research some supporting materials, and share her findings with the class. “They love it,” says Kantz.

Ulmer, too, often pulls current events into her classroom, especially in the two electives she’s offered this year: International Relations and Middle Eastern History. These subjects are “so topical and so important...if you’re going to be a citizen of the world today,” explains Ulmer, who also oversees the largely student-driven Current Events Club. The students’ enthusiasm for studying what is going on in the world today is almost palpable, and Ulmer is clearly excited by the fact that many students consider these discussions “their favorite part of the class.” No wonder: By exploring current events, a student expands her education beyond the classroom. Her studies become relevant. She begins to better understand this world, and how she might fit into it.

Math class might seem an unlikely place for a student to explore this theme, but Susan Erba, Department Chair of Mathematics, would disagree. Erba challenges her students to apply their classroom lessons to the world beyond Schoolhouse, from calculating starting points for track and field events (geometry) to measuring the height of flagpoles (trigonometry), or analyzing Foxcroft’s admissions data (statistics). Soon, Erba will have even more opportunities for applied mathematics. Foxcroft’s math and science teachers are

joining forces to draft a new curriculum. Their goal? To present science and math as they really are: two disciplines that work best when used together. Erba and her colleagues expect that students who complete these combined courses will graduate with a better understanding of how math and science complement one another in order to expand our knowledge of the world.

“If you can’t risk being wrong — or risk being right — then you will never know the power that your voice has.”

— Stewart Herbert

Stewart Chapman Herbert ’77, a 14-year veteran of the English Department and holder of the H. Laurence Achilles Chair, focuses on her students’ many possible futures as she guides them through their Senior Thesis projects. Her goal is twofold. First, she wants every senior who completes a thesis to feel a sense of pride, to hold a belief that she is “a bit of an expert” on a certain book. More importantly, she wants every graduating senior to be comfortable in the research environment, both online and offline. The thesis process is largely independent; the students are given the freedom to choose their own books — ranging from *Mein Kampf* to *The Poisonwood Bible* this year — and to pursue their own sets of questions. This independence and self-confidence is important to Herbert, who believes that “if you can’t risk being wrong — or risk being right — then you will never know the power that your voice has.”

Herbert has led classroom discussions comparing the language of *Huckleberry Finn* to contemporary rap music. Janice Brown, Department Chair of Foreign Languages, incorporates murals, songs, and videos from around the French-speaking world into her classes, and has invited such guests as a French concentra-

tion camp survivor. Librarian and English teacher Steve Matthews, who holds the Anna Greenway Griswold Chair for Educational Leadership, believes “you have to share your own enthusiasms [with the students]...and also your own disappointments.” True to his beliefs, Matthews always admits to his students that he “hated” Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* the first time he read it. Then, he helps them discover the many reasons he has since come to love her writing. This might not seem like a typical high school education, but it’s perfectly normal for Foxcroft.

Everything, Beyond the Classroom

The Foxcroft experience does not end when the last class is dismissed. “We are so lucky to have a residential community where we can interact with students outside the classroom as well as inside,” says Northrup. “The interaction that takes place outside the classroom is as important, or more important, than what happens in the classroom.”

This sentiment is shared by educators throughout the community. “Everything is valued,” says Brown. “Dorm life is an essential part of the curriculum. And so is learning how to use the library. And doing community service. And being an excellent math and science student. Every aspect of life.” Brown believes that this sense of community and awareness is a vital part of the educational experience at Foxcroft. “Expressing gratitude to the dining staff is just as important as getting to your class on time.”

On-campus opportunities for students and teachers to interact abound. A dedicated runner, Herbert challenges girls to join in charity road races. Ulmer holds frequent TV nights in her apartment — to watch *Law & Order* or election returns. Ervin loves to chaperone shopping trips to Tyson’s Corner. Some of the resulting exchanges are light and casual; others include more significant themes.

English teacher Mia Noffsinger is faculty advisor for *Chimera*, the student literary and arts publication. She encourages her

student-editors to find beauty in words and illustrations that differ from their own. As sophomore class advisor, dorm team member, and Interim course creator, and in the original poetry she writes, Noffsinger discusses subjects that, she hopes, will inspire students to “listen to the voices that are often silent,” both in school and throughout their lives.

Matthews is a near-constant presence and resource in the library, and admits to “love it when there’s a big mess in the stacks,” because that means students have been eagerly seeking some book or piece of knowledge. And Kantz admits to having coached nearly every sport at one point or another, an activity he believes helps him and his students get to know each other better than they would if they only met in the classroom.

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Learning at Foxcroft often extends far beyond campus. Brown has developed an annual exchange program with a girls’ school outside Paris and Riding Director Nelly Sheehan started one with an English school a decade ago. Kantz has traveled through Vietnam and completed a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) program with students, two trips that he views as complete successes. “It was amazing to see some of the girls’ personal growth on those trips.” Of course, the outside world often comes to Foxcroft in the form of international students from around the world and across the political

and cultural spectrum, as well as visiting speakers and performers. And, when the French girls come to visit the School as part of the exchange program, they leave “transformed by [their] two weeks at Foxcroft,” according to numerous reports from parents that have been shared with Brown by her French counterpart.

From the barn to the dormitory, and France to Vietnam, Foxcroft’s students enjoy an educational experience that extends far beyond the time and space of a single class. “Education is a 24-hour endeavor,” explains Matthews. “It’s the whole life experience.”

Everything, and How to Measure It

Not a single Foxcroft teacher, when asked to define his or her vision of success with a student, mentions grades. Not one. “We’re really trying to put the kid in charge of who she is,” says Matthews, who wants his students to focus less on answers, more on questions, and “to always look towards the next thing.”

Erba hopes her students graduate with “the ability to think through a problem, and the willingness to take some risks. . . . It’s not just about teaching them mathematics. It’s about teaching them character. It’s about teaching them right and wrong.”

Ulmer doesn’t worry much about her students memorizing names or dates. Instead, she wants her students “to be aware of the world around them . . . aware of different people and different cultures.” Herbert wants them to be “independent thinkers.” Ask any teacher at Foxcroft, and you will hear some variation of these answers. You will hear words like confidence, passion, risk, and creativity.

“Our role is to create the environment for growth to take place, and help guide students as they make their own way,” says Northrup, “Ultimately, we want to see these girls go out and change the world.” ■



“Expressing gratitude to the dining staff is just as important as getting to your class on time.”

— Janice Brown



Everything is curriculum, including (clockwise from top left) cooking in the kitchen with Dining Services Director Mike Brown, exchanging a high-five with Erba or a hug with Assistant Head of School Sheila McKibbin, having a classroom discussion with Kantz, and backpacking with him during an Interim Trip to Utah.