

WHAT WE TEACH, HOW WE TEACH, HOW WE ASSESS

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What could be more important to any school than trying to come to grips with the issues raised in the title of this article? In the Upper School this year, we are in the beginning stages of trying to tackle this monumental task. A committee of 11 faculty members has been formed to look at our curriculum and how we assess our students. With members from the departments of English, history, mathematics, science, foreign language, and fine arts, the committee has representation from a wide range of disciplines, curricular content, and methods of instruction and evaluation. As with any undertaking of this magnitude, our first few meetings have been filled with far more questions than answers. Most of our time has been spent in assessing where we are and trying to define what goals are reasonable to achieve.

What We Teach

The answer to this question is far more complicated than what is listed in our Upper School Curriculum Guide. A list of courses might be useful to the casual observer, but simply knowing that we teach a course entitled *Biology* does not begin to answer the question. Our Biology instructors have to first decide what content is most important in creating an Upper School Biology course - an incredibly complicated question given the explosion of scientific knowledge in recent years.

The content of a course - the list of topics to cover - is only the beginning. What has become increasingly important in the 21st century is the question of skills and values. What are the skills and values that are necessary for all students to possess as global citizens in the 21st century? Fortunately, there is no shortage of literature to help us make that decision. Here are three examples:

- From Tony Wagner's recent book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, his seven Seven Survival Skills:

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
Collaboration Across Networks and Leading by Influence
Agility and Adaptability
Initiative and Entrepreneurialism
Effective Oral and Written Communication
Accessing and Analyzing Information
Curiosity and Imagination

- From a recent article in *Independent School* magazine, a universal set of five essential skills - The 5 C's:

Collaboration
Creativity
Critical Comprehension
Communication
Character

- From another article in *Independent School* magazine, six skills and values created and agreed upon by a group of educational leaders which they entitle *The List*:

Character

Creativity
Real-World Problem Solving
Communication Skills
Teaming
Leadership

There are commonalities evident in every list. If we can all agree on a list that we believe aligns with our mission at Holland Hall, then the next question becomes crucial as we examine our curriculum.

HOW WE TEACH

How do we design our instruction to match what we all agree are the important skills and values that all students need to cultivate? Our discussions have led to look at examples in the Upper School of teaching that is already occurring that emphasizes problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, oral and written communication. Should we all be responsible for embedding these skills in every content area? Are they so valuable, so crucial, that any discussion about curriculum in the Upper School should focus on these skills above and beyond what content is taught? We are on our way to providing answers that make sense for us.

HOW WE ASSESS

And finally, does our current system of assigning letter grades allow to carefully and accurately assess the skills and values we all agree are important? I believe we all do the best we can with letter grades but we must ask whether we need additional tools or instruments that enable us to assess some of the skills we might identify as crucial in the Upper School. What do letter grades truly measure in my classroom? Should we expect one letter grade in each class to accurately convey how well students have progressed in acquiring such a complicated list of skills and values? Can we design an assessment tool that accurately reflects a student's creativity? How do we effectively evaluate whether or not a student has good collaboration skills? Can character be measured? Can we even define what the word means?

We believe we are asking the relevant and essential questions about our curriculum, our instruction, and our assessment in the Upper School. The committee is now ready to focus on how to strengthen what we teach, how we teach it, and how we assess it. Stay tuned for periodic updates about our progress as we continue to gather input from all faculty members about these important questions and as we offer answers that enhance the educational experience of every student in the Upper School.

