

English Classes Offer Interactive Learning, Traditional Skills, and SAT Skill-Building

Looking for students in English class at the Priory? Although you will find some at desks in a traditional classroom setting, you also will see students in English class walking on one of the Portola Valley town trails, copies of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in hand. Others may be conducting a mock trial as part their study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. While studying Shakespeare's plays, Priory English students often stage swashbuckling scenes to better understand the meaning and appreciate the rhythm of the Bard's words.

These examples of "interactive learning" are the wave of the future in the Priory's English curriculum. Teachers joining the faculty this year—Kindra Briggs, Patricia Rush, Andrew Daniel and Kate Dunlop—bring some terrific ideas and skills in this teaching style, says Cory Olcott, English Department Chair.

"Our creative students also have come up with some brilliant ideas," Mr. Olcott says. He points to Jonathon Mathon's own *Canterbury Tale*, Charles Munger's essay on masculinity, and the Sixth Grade Core Class's recent Internationalism Project on History, Geography and Culture.

The sixth graders' work involved creating beautiful Olympic Villages, including one for Russia by Nicholas Lamkin, one for the United States of America by Alexandra Smith and one for Australia by Maddie Pierson. Students researched areas of history, geography, and culture with the help of librarian Susan Falaschi. Students went on to celebrate the countries in class with text and photo displays, discussions, foods, and updates from the real Olympic village.

There is also a place for the more traditional skill-building in Priory teachers' lesson plans. That style is particularly evident in freshman year, when Allison Statsny and Sue Koppett bring everyone up to speed on the basics of grammar and writing for college prep level work.

"The priority is to prepare students for college and life," Cory explains. "We focus on building essential critical thinking skills such as analytical reading and writing."

English curriculum has been 'vertically integrated' this year (a recurring task), meaning that teachers have coordinated the lessons to build continuously on the core skills learned in previous grades, resulting in continuity from sixth through twelfth grades. Teachers take this framework and tailor their personal lesson plans to create the best fit with their individual classes and students.

"Growing our students' vocabulary is an integral part of this plan," Cory continues. "In addition to the vocabulary books and weekly quizzes—the traditional method—teachers highlight words from the students' reading and employ them frequently in class discussions so that students develop a better sense of context and usage." From Middle School through the end of the junior year, this approach to vocabulary, together with timed writing assignments, helps to prepare students for the SAT exams.

Finding avenues for students to connect what they are studying in English with all aspects of their lives, not just tests, is one of Mr. Olcott's goals for his department and his own classes. "Students come up with provocative and insightful ideas as we discuss Faulkner, the soccer game or the Andes trip," he says. "They keep me honest by calling me on an inconsistency or contradiction. Rarely does someone get to spend days working with such bright, funny, energetic and talented people."

Reprinted from Priory Parent March-April 2006