



Progressive Goals

BY EMILY JONES

What is the future of progressive education and what does this mean for Putney?

“Every great advance in science has issued from an audacity of the imagination.”

—John Dewey

Putney is an independent school. Only a small number of the 1,500-odd independent schools in the U.S. actually use that independence. Most stick quite closely to the traditional models of classroom learning, departmental structures, credits for graduation based on time spent in class, a September to June school year, and a curriculum largely geared to information processing and college admissions requirements. Putney is a progressive school, but like all progressive schools we must discover for ourselves in what directions this should take us. Dewey’s charge to create an educational program in the service of a democratic society is just as relevant as ever, but he does not provide us with a roadmap about how to do this in this century.

Putney has great “density of purpose.” We embrace most of the traditionally progressive goals: that education is about creating good citizens and should be an engine for social betterment, that it should foster personal initiative and adaptability, that it must engage the whole child, not just the academic child. We also have some goals that are particular to Putney. We aim, as Mrs. Hinton said, “to make school life a more real, less sheltered, less self-centered venture,” to make the arts part of everyday life, and to teach stewardship of the land both by the way we live and in a curriculum designed for that purpose.

We believe that everything we do—in class, on the land, in the dorms, individually and collectively—is all a part of the curriculum. That being said, we are currently much more progressive outside the classroom than within it. Partly because Putney began with a fairly traditional academic structure, and partly because other schools have become more like us in approaches to teaching, our academic program is not as unusual as many assume.

Since Dewey's time, technology has fundamentally changed both our society and the imperatives of education. Information is now available at the touch of a button. The teacher need not provide it, but must teach how it can be evaluated, organized, analyzed and presented. Memory is now something you buy at Radio Shack. But working memory, the ability to hold a complex system in your head while analyzing it, is crucial and must be cultivated. Writing well remains a vital skill, but students also must learn how to present information visually in a variety of media. The linear formatting that the printing press imposed on the transmission of thought, and therefore on thought itself, no longer has a monopoly, and technology can illuminate "right brain" thinking as well as left.

Today's students don't distinguish as adults do between the virtual world and the "real" world—for them these are seamless. They are used to learning new things by trial and error, and they can handle—and handle fast—much more complex sensory input than adults can. As teachers we can bemoan the fact that lessons which appeal to only one sense are thought boring, or we can learn to take advantage of that. Figuring out how to use technology without becoming lost in it is an enormous challenge.

New understandings of the brain and of cognition mean that we can design teaching more carefully. Our interactions with our students are literally changing the structure of their brains and, although many of the tried and true methods have been vindicated by science, many have not. We've known intuitively for years that teaching skills is a fundamentally different process from teaching content, but most schools still put skills courses and content courses into the same daily

schedule, in the same kinds of spaces, with the same kinds of homework requirements, and often using the same basic teaching methods. Some of what goes on in Putney's classrooms is brilliant, but our teachers still have to fit their work into a structure familiar in schools of 1900.

We have created a genuinely international community on the hill, with students from 13 nations. Our graduates must be culturally fluent and able to work easily with those different from themselves, or they will be irrelevant to the world in which they will live. We must not only bless the students from abroad with the benefits of a Putney education, but ensure that all Putney students have international experience and the cast of mind to learn from it. That will mean deciding what we can let go of in order to add.

All of this possibility is very hard for a school that is steeped in tradition, even if that tradition is progressive. We will preserve what is great here, those things that make Putney unique. These multi-tasking, virtual world dwellers who come here still talk at breakfast about the beauty of the mist when they brought the cows in. They still create music, rather than just listen to it. They still play outdoors in the twilight after dinner. They still believe in manual labor, they treasure the hard stretching of themselves, and they certainly wish to live adventurously. We owe it to them to think hard about what the ends and the means of their academic education should be, and to use the independence that Putney School has to take a look at what questions we are asking, what goals we set, and what purposes we serve.

I do not claim to have all the answers. I am greatly looking forward to engaging in the debates with this talented faculty, and with those working in universities where there is a resurgence of interest in progressive theory, and with Putney alumni who can help us translate the experience they had into the experience they would like for their grandchildren. The mainstream schools have already adopted much of what Putney was in the 1930s, and they will be looking again to the few truly progressive schools for insights. We should be ready!
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—Carmelita Hinton