

Assessing Experiential Learning

by Dr. Karen Strobel, Director of the Partnership for 21st Century Assessment

I believe students are taking skills they are honing in the classroom and practicing them in authentic situations. Through these experiences, they are gaining the courage to trust their own judgment and act with intention and courage. However, we want to do more than “believe” our instincts. We want to get it right because we need our students to lead—our collective future is relying on them.

—Stacey Kertsman, ACE Center Director,
describing students’ experiences beyond the Circle

Castilleja School’s Partnership for 21st Century Assessment collaborates with faculty to capture and measure students’ growth in the essential attitudes and skills needed to become effective learners and leaders in today’s world. These assessment tools we are developing will allow teachers to measure the **initiative** and self-knowledge students need to pursue intellectual and social challenge, the **agility** required to engage in creative problem solving, and the sense of **purpose** needed to join, support, and lead others to effect change now and in the future.

The first phase of the partnership is focused centrally on the Castilleja curriculum. During this first year, teachers and program directors have been co-thinkers helping to identify 21st century skills across grade-levels and subject areas. For example, the AP British Literature class requires students to take initiative and reflect on strategies that work best in an innovative, college-style seminar; the 1:1 iPad Pilot is an example of a multi-grade effort to promote agility, and the ability to adapt to new technologies; and Global Investigator trips provide opportunities for students to develop and enhance their sense of purpose and the skills needed to effect change in the world.

In January, English Department Chair **Rebecca Sherouse** introduced a new approach to her AP 20th Century British Literature course. Using a blended learning model, Ms. Sherouse redesigned her course “to reside in the virtual world [more] than in a typical AP senior seminar.” At the beginning of the semester, the students met regularly in the classroom and by the end of the semester, they were

only meeting together as a full class one or two times a week. Time normally spent in class, was now dedicated to individual work on-line, small group work, or tutorial-style discussions with Ms. Sherouse. According to Ms. Sherouse, “this blended course provides students with an excellent sense of how literature is most often studied at the collegiate level: not in thirty page increments with daily discussion, but in larger sections (or even holistically) with less frequent discussions.” As is the case with college seminars, this course required students to take on more responsibility to drive and manage their own learning.

In collaboration with Ms. Sherouse, we are working to translate the new skills her course develops into skills that we can measure. As one example, we are looking at students’ ability to contribute effectively to an on-line discussion forum. In contrast to whole class discussions, as participants in an on-line discussion, the girls cannot rely on their teacher for immediate guidance and feedback. Instead, they need to pursue their own inquiries and analyses, learn how to meaningfully respond to their classmates’ comments and manage their time to ensure apt and relevant contributions to the discussion. Through our assessment, we can learn about student growth over the course of the semester as the girls become more independent and increasingly self-aware of how they implement different strategies in a college-style course. With additional student input, we can also reflect on the assignments that work best to equip the girls with the confidence and skills needed to drive their own learning. We can then use these insights to inform



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a tool that can be used to assess students' initiative and self-awareness in other classroom settings.

Castilleja is currently piloting a 1:1 iPad program providing all students in grades 6 through 9 with a school-issued iPad. In collaboration with **Jennifer Gaspar-Santos**, Director of Academic Technology, we are investigating ways in which iPads support student learning and help the girls become agile thinkers who can adapt to new technologies. As a first step, we surveyed students, teachers and parents to gain insights into perceptions of iPads as a learning tool. In addition, we systematically gathered examples of the ways teachers use the iPads in their classrooms. Through this initial investigation, we learned that teachers at all grade levels thought iPads would be easy for students to use, while at least half of the students at all grade levels explicitly stated that the iPad is not easy to use for educational tasks. With a better understanding of the girls' needs from a "user-perspective," the Academic Technology team can work with teachers to support the girls' ability to engage more effectively with the iPad as a learning tool. In this way, our assessment is being used to inform professional development for Castilleja teachers.

Global Investigator trips are commonly referred to as "transformative" experiences. The junior class returns from their destinations excited to share examples of the ways the trip, "pushed them out of their comfort zone" and "changed their lives." In collaboration with **Stacey Kertsman**, ACE Center Director, we are developing tools that can help us better define, document and track the transformations students experience through their global travel. During each trip, Castilleja students meet girls their age and learn about their home lives, educational experiences and perspectives on the world. Castilleja students also meet community leaders tackling a range of issues and advocating for change. Our new tools will help us assess the girls' increasing capacity to work collaboratively and inclusively with youth and adults representing different cultures and diverse perspectives. In addition, linking the Global Investigator experience to the ways the Castilleja



core curriculum intentionally and thoughtfully prepares the girls during their junior year, and in earlier years as well, will offer a more complete picture of the skills Castilleja students develop that equip them to be leaders and agents of change.

Castilleja teachers are the initial and core set of partners who are helping develop and test these new tools. Working together we can ensure that these new assessment tools provide meaningful information and genuinely serve teachers' and the school's needs. In the second phase of the Partnership we will reach out to other schools to share resources and help validate the utility of these new assessments.

Dr. Karen Strobel joined Castilleja in 2013 as Director of the Partnership for 21st Century Assessment. Previously she was with the John W. Gardner Center at Stanford, where she led research projects focused on adolescent development. She received a BA in Social Sciences from the University of Michigan and a PhD in Child and Adolescent Development from Stanford University's Graduate School of Education.