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DEERFIELD MAGAZINE REPRINT
“The Experimentory”



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Remember when the threat of summer school struck fear into the most apathetic student's heart? Well, times have changed, and applications for The Experimentory, Deerfield's version of "summer school" for seventh and eighth graders, are steadily rolling in. It probably has something to do with the fact that in addition to top-notch educators, this program offers students the chance to be in charge of their intellectual destiny, and have fun along the way. The first question prospective Experimentory students must ask themselves is: **Am I curious?**



"We're looking for kids who are independent, empathetic, resilient, creative..." Academic Dean Peter Warsaw pauses and smiles as he ticks off a long list of ideal characteristics. "I absolutely believe that creativity is essential," he says. "The easy answers have been found; we're looking for students who want to go further—we're looking for students who are curious—who think learning is fun."

"Experiencing the joy of inquiry and discovery at this early age will empower students to approach novel situations and the unknown with confidence and skill," adds Head of School Margarita Curtis. Dr. Curtis believes The Experimentory is good for Deerfield, too: "It will provide a platform for curricular innovation, experimentation, and professional development for Academy faculty," she says. "Our decision to launch a summer program was inspired in part by these areas, and from a broader institutional commitment to remain relevant in an educational environment defined by constant change, disruption, and increasing global competition."



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It's a lofty goal, no doubt, to solidify curiosity and intrinsic motivation by inviting kids into a dynamic, experimental, and collaborative environment that demands continuous questioning, imagining, and learning, but Warsaw and his fellow "experi-MENTORS," Ivory Hills of the Academy's Science Department and Rebecca Sherburne of the History Department, along with Experimentory Director Jill Schaffer, have developed three key areas of study to fit the bill. Students will collaborate to create final projects that synthesize what they've learned; if Experimentory was a Venn diagram, those final projects would be the overlap, and what they look like isn't up to the adults guiding the process—it's all in the kids' hands—but one thing is for sure: every idea is potentially precious.

CODE

"We want students to pursue topics that are personally interesting and satisfying," explains Dr. Hills. "We'll provide them with constructive feedback, but in the end, the student who pushes that boulder of knowledge over the hill is the one who succeeds. It's up to us to define the hill and point out the path, but then it's up to the kids."

It's not just about pointing out the path, however; it's a matter of helping students create the passport they need to cross intellectual boundaries.

You could call what Dr. Hills will teach "coding," but he prefers to think of it as bridging the digital reality divide. "Coding is interactive in that it allows you to collaborate with other people," he says. "It's a form of communication; it's learning how to operate a computer in such a way that you move forward; it's the ability to build a digital community such as a website; it's also a form of communication—much like music or an essay."

The skills students hone to successfully bridge that digital reality divide will benefit them in other classrooms and in life, as well—skills such as attention to detail, iteration and systematic trouble-shooting, and the mastery of simple functions so that more elaborate structures can be achieved.

Dr. Hills is kind and soft-spoken, so it seems odd when he says he loves it when his students fail. Then he explains: "Failure invariably leads to learning, and learning leads to a better final product. When students progress through project iterations, they learn to see the possibilities that exist." And then he suggests materializing something from the digital world: "Imagine having students create a fantasy country that can be described with digitally-created media—maps, a governmental website, a video to promote tourism," says Dr. Hills. "Or we could fabricate an archeological dig somewhere on the Deerfield campus that can be studied with satellite imagery and is filled with 3-D printed artifacts . . . "

Or what about building robots that dance to music composed by students? Peter Warsaw loves this idea.



COMPOSE

"We're going to analyze compositions to discover why certain ones hold our attention," Mr. Warsaw says. "What is it that makes some music so beguiling? Why does a certain tune stick in your head? And then we'll see what original compositions we can come up with."

Unlocking music's secret code, which is directly connected to the rules that govern thought and perception in human beings, is the key to other discoveries, too. "Even if we just scratch the surface," says Mr. Warsaw, "There's great magic to



be discovered, and the further you get, the more there is to know. If you can analyze music," he adds, "then you're set up to understand other things; if you're in that innovative mind-set, and willing to observe, hypothesize, experiment, and develop evidence, the opportunities are endless."

Discovering intersections of music and science sets the stage to get to the heart of innovation, and puts creative minds in motion. Some possible projects include assembling real life sounds into music, juxtaposing a single image with different sounds and writing a narrative based on personal responses, or discovering just what does make a song a hit by exploring musical hooks, motifs, and those "earworms" that just won't get out of your head!

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COMMUNICATE

Rebecca Sherburne says the sky's the limit when it comes to what kids might accomplish during their four weeks on campus. “That’s the exciting part—working with students as they figure things out.”

Ms. Sherburne will serve as students’ guide on the side as they explore various communication formats. “Effective communication is not often taught,” she says, “but it is a critical skill in life. When innovating, forming ideas is only the beginning; you need to be able to share your ideas,” which may be an intimidating prospect for some kids. “An essential part of The Experimentory is finding new comfort and freedom in communicating with others,” she says. “That may not come naturally to everyone, but we’re going to work on

how to have a meaningful discussion, how to listen, how to interview someone, how to write, and how to present.” By the time final projects are completed, students will be ready to give a presentation and field questions from the audience.

“Generally speaking, middle schools kids have fewer inhibitions than teenagers do,” she says. “They’re more playful, and keep in mind that it’s still their summer, so it should be fun.” Outside of the classroom students can choose from a variety of co-curricular activities: soccer, tennis, swimming, theater, dance, and photography are just a few of the options.

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“Classes are an important place to learn, create, and play,” says Jill Schaffer, “but we think what goes on outside of Experimentory classrooms is equally as important, especially since we want to encourage kids to experience activities they may not be familiar with, visit places they’ve never been, and build character through leadership, teamwork, and exploration.”

To that end, some afternoons will be devoted to challenges that students will work on together. These could include ropes courses or problem-solving games or a delightfully difficult scavenger hunt around Historic Deerfield. “There will also be a weekly fieldtrip,” Ms. Schaffer says. “Some trips will be local, and for others we’ll venture further afield—think Boston.”

And time will also be set aside for moments of self-reflection—opportunities for students to internalize what they’ve learned and to think about their next move.

Positive psychology defines “flow” as complete immersion in an activity—where the concept of time slips away, and all that matters is the task at hand. It’s a joyful state, and one that Peter Warsaw hopes Experimentory students experience. “I want them to lose themselves in their projects,” he says. “I want them to realize they’re part of something vast and engaging; and to remember that feeling throughout their lives. For me, it’s not about teaching, it’s about inspiring.”

Ultimately, the hope is that students will leave The Experimentory confident in their ability to use digital tools to solve problems and express themselves creatively, and inspired by the benefits of interdisciplinary study. “The successful student will boldly explore new technology,” Ms. Schaffer says, “while remembering that these tools are no replacement for keen observation, clear communication, and personal resilience.” //





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