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## A Breath of Fresh Air

Learning liberal arts by doing, students venture outside the walls of Curtis.

BY EVA SWIDLER

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Eva Swidler teaches classes about history, environmental studies, and food systems.

Since 1924, long before experiential learning became a catchphrase in education, Curtis's motto has been based on educational philosopher John Dewey's formulation of "learning by doing." Young musicians come to the conservatory for individual studio lessons and classroom instruction in musical studies, but become polished performers through the real-world practice of music: they play and sing in recitals, operas, and concerts as well as give workshops, teach master classes, and engage the community in projects. Learning by doing is a proud hallmark of the institution.

Educational offerings at Curtis go beyond the traditional conservatory model, however. Since 1940, the school has required academic work in the liberal arts from students pursuing a bachelor's degree. Incoming students often assume that these liberal arts classes will follow conventional ideas of the ivory tower's isolation from the larger world. On the contrary: Just as the musical faculty at Curtis support their students to learn by being musical practitioners, faculty in Curtis's department of liberal arts create connections between students' academic work and the larger world. Whether by holding poetry and fiction-writing contests, organizing outings to the theater, or attending museum exhibitions, liberal arts faculty ask students to put abstract learning to work. We ask them to create, we prompt them to analyze their experiences and daily lives using theory, and we invite them to think carefully about their civic responsibilities using ethics. In short, we ask them to learn literature, sociology, or philosophy by "doing" them.

As a member of Curtis's liberal arts faculty, I teach across the social science disciplines, including history, environmental studies, and food systems. Over the semesters, my students have attended a play re-imagining the American South on the brink of the Civil War, heard



Above: Students in the Nature in America course consider urban weeds collected on a walking “field trip.”

a soil scientist talk about lead pollution in Philadelphia neighborhoods, written “environmental biographies” of their instruments to place their musical artistry in a material context, and visited local museums to infer subtexts created by curators in displays.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Some of my most popular projects to bring academic learning to life are undoubtedly in my course Introduction to Food Studies. A visit to Curtis’s kitchen is a favorite “field trip,” helping students take the step from reading on a page about food systems to actually understanding what’s on their plate and how it got there. Activities like talking to the Gould Dining Hall chef about how he makes decisions about food supplies, or watching kitchen staff hard at work, create a foundation for classroom conversations about the economics and ethics of what we eat. One spring, a particularly enthusiastic class took up the chef’s invitation to learn knife skills in a special session in the Curtis kitchen.

In a mid-semester assignment for the course, I ask students to visit two food stores in different neighborhoods and compare what is sold, how it is packaged, and how it is marketed. Students build their own understanding of how food systems in America operate by interpreting what they see, using their newly acquired classroom learning. Although I’d originally imagined that this assignment would get students focusing on stores and cultures other than their own, I soon realized that students placed their own childhood food patterns into wider American ones as they compared their memories to the shops and neighborhoods they visited.

Food Studies is a course designed to fulfill Curtis’s citizenship and ethics requirement, so students also get the chance to choose and examine an existing project that works to end hunger, such as a food pantry, a soup kitchen, or a community garden. They ask what ideas about the causes of hunger animate the project, what principles are embodied in it, and whether they are satisfied with the approach.

Learning the liberal arts by doing them can be a challenge for Curtis’s busy student body. Just reading and writing becomes no longer enough, as it might be in a conventional college or university; to “do” history or environmental studies, students need to get out into the world. Making time to go for a walk and gather plants for a class session on urban weeds or to take a trip to the Philadelphia Waterworks isn’t easy in a schedule already full with practicing and performing, or while preoccupied with auditions and competitions. But even when reluctant at first, students often come back to the classroom after outings excited about having wielded new concepts and skills to make sense of both the everyday and the unusual outside the doors of Lenfest Hall. And a break from the discipline of music and a breath of fresh air can bring welcome balance to a demanding day.

Learning by doing is Curtis’s time-honored and proven approach to music. It is also an approach to the liberal arts that ensures that lessons in English literature, history, or philosophy won’t go the way of so much book learning—fading from memory—but will stay alive, shaping perceptions and bringing insights, as students make their way in the world. ♦

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