

## **November 5, 2009 Developing Inquisitive Articulate Thinkers Among I.U. Students (By Pam Mann)**

The I.U. high school administrators decided, during the summer, that they would divide the three classes of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade by ability. In the past, each class had the whole range of academic prowess represented. This policy change experiment was made in hope of producing a national laureate on the government exams, something I.U. has yet to achieve.

All three classes are named after famous 17<sup>th</sup> century French writers. Nicolas Boileau is the brightest class, Jean Racine average, and Pierre Corneille the slowest, no disrespect to J.R. and P. C. intended. I teach a core body of English material to all three classes plus extra review for J.R. and P.C. and enrichment for Boileau. Interesting dynamics are developing as a result. People who never had a chance to shine before now can shine in J.R. and P.C. Boileau has engaging discussions even outside regular class hours.

Several weeks ago after English class, the guys in Boileau were very animated. "Mrs. Mann, do you believe the world is round?" one asked.

"Yes," I answered cautiously. Seven to eight male students had gathered round the desk, all taller than me. Angelot held a battered globe in our midst. The others stared at him smirking. I figured some kind of joke was coming. "How do you know that for certain?" he asked.

"What?" I looked Angelot in the eyes, trying to read him. "You think the earth is flat?"

"No," he laughed. "It's probably round if scientists say it is but it seems flat."

"We just have to accept it on faith." This pronouncement came from Tisma, the devout Adventist who hopes to be a preacher.

"Faith?" I was amazed that Tisma was absolutely serious. "You don't need faith to believe the earth's round. We have satellite photos from space and the testimony of those who have sailed and flown around the planet."

"Then why does it seem flat?" Angelot wanted to know. All their faces stared at me, awaiting enlightenment.

"It's because we're so small in comparison to the curve of the planet's surface. We're too tiny and too close to comprehend its form." Listening to myself, I started to think maybe Tisma was right about it being a faith issue.

"When you flew from Cameroon to Europe," Angelot asked, "did you sense that the earth was round?" He ran his fingertip from Douala to Paris. "Did you feel the curve?"

"No."

"You see?" he said to the group.

"I was inside a plane," I protested. "Often you can't even see the earth for the clouds."

"Look at Haiti on the side of the globe," Valdy interjected. "Why don't we fall off?"

I stared at him for a moment, trying to remember, when in elementary school, my own kids had asked such questions. Have these students never had enough confidence in their science teachers to ask these questions earlier?

"Gravity," I answered. "It's what holds everything on to the earth or it would all float into space. We'd have no atmosphere without it."

"Why is there gravity? What causes it?" someone asked. "Well, I want to know why the sun rises and sets if the earth is revolving around the sun," said someone else. I looked at my watch. My next class was in three minutes. I had to excuse myself. They also needed to get down to the cafeteria for lunch. I congratulated them on their thirst for understanding, urged them to keep asking questions, and hurried downstairs to my next primary class. This is why the U.S.

has planetariums, science magazines, and the Discovery channel, I thought. At least these guys have the internet.

A week or so later, the same Boileau class told me that they were organizing an all-school debate, 9<sup>th</sup> grade and up. It would be on Sunday afternoons. Would I be a judge? Sure, I said, as long as there are other judges. I was nervous at the thought of having to state my judgment in French but decided the stress would be good for me. There were dates set and then cancelled. Finally last Sunday the first round actually happened. It was set for 2:30 and didn't begin until 3:30. Caleb, Evens and I were the three adults at the judges' table. To keep things easy at first, Boileau decided to allow the first round to be in Creole. I was relieved. I'm not shy about speaking Creole publicly. The first topic was the legality of cutting down trees in the countryside. Ninth grade Madiou argued for allowing it; thirteenth grade Descartes was opposed. Each team was a panel of four. There was no moderator but Angelot did inform us when the last argument was being presented. No debaters had note cards with quotes, nor any documentation. That was our biggest critique as judges. Their arguments were emotional pleas rather than logical reasoning. This also, we judges noted, was an area to improve. Caleb and Evens insisted that I be the one to announce our winner and give pointers for future debates. I tried to refuse but to no avail. *Ladies first*, Evens said. That convinced me. The judge who took the mike next time would have to speak probably in French. Madiou had actually the more passionate presenters. Since neither team did a good job with logical arguments, we gave the victory to Madiou. I was glad it was over, pleased to have been asked, and looking forward to future debates.

Evens thanked me twice for doing it, assuring me that it meant a lot to our students. I told him that I'm regularly frustrated that our students aren't more articulate, abstract thinkers. Activities like this will help them to value and develop those skills. If I'm going to complain about a deficiency, I ought to act as a part of the solution when the opportunity arises.

Now, I have one more Boileau specialty before me: their essays on "What is a Haitian?" I have chosen one essay by a hard-working Boileau student, Joseph Johndy. I have corrected his occasional spelling/grammatical errors. Please do not take offense that his French-trained mind produces sexist English.

#### *What is a Haitian?*

*First of all, a Haitian is a person who lives in his country. He is a precious human being. He loves his nation, his community and all nations all over the world. He loves God and not evil. He loves nature and all the environment around him. He values good character. Then he loves his flag, even unto death. That's why he fought hard to be free. And then he is a black man. He still likes to share everything he gets. He is a wise man and a strong fighter for what is right. He is a good patriot but sometimes he can be selfish. Therefore a Haitian is a real man of the world.*

It's a privilege to be involved in the shaping of a new generation of God-fearing Haitian patriots. Their opportunities may be few, resources scarce but their souls are deep, their vision vast. Another student, Michel Junior, wrote, "To be a Haitian is to have the courage of a lion."

*Let no one despise you for your youth,  
but set the believers an example  
in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.  
1 Timothy 4:12*