



They go to Björklunden and are changed

By Gordon Brown

“Lawrence invites each student to come openly to Björklunden and be changed. That is a powerful expectation, but those who have been to a seminar at Björklunden will provide testimony of its fulfillment. As a place of refuge and peace, where spiritual values and aesthetic sensibilities can be explored, Björklunden provides a unique setting for personal growth, embracing the liberal education ideal of connecting thought and reflection.”

— Björklunden Student Programs description

Thoreau had Walden, presidents of the United States have Camp David, and Lawrence students and faculty members have Björklunden vid Sjön — and a program of weekend seminars that is more innovative and more successful with each passing year.

When the original lodge at Lawrence's northern campus was destroyed by fire in 1993, the Board of Trustees faced a to-build or not-to-build decision. A key factor in the board's eventual decision to construct a new lodge was President Richard Warch's conviction that Björklunden could become a useful and effective adjunct to a student's Lawrence education. The new building was completed in 1996, and the first weekend seminars for undergraduates were held in the fall of that year. The program began under the tutelage of Dean Charles Lauter and continues under his successor, Andrew Law, director of international and off-campus programs.

During the 2001-02 academic year, more than 1,000 students and nearly 100 faculty members are taking part in weekend seminars that range from language-immersion to field work in natural-science and social-science disciplines (*Lawrence Today*, Fall '01) to intensive practice and performance opportunities for musical studios and ensembles to an impressive variety of others.

Here are a few examples.

The Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures holds an annual weekend for its Chinese-language students, who are joined at Björklunden by three or four Chinese American families from the Fox Valley area. Activities include games in Chinese, Chinese films, calligraphy practice, and lessons in Chinese knotmaking taught by a local Chinese woman who is an expert in the craft.

"The Lawrence students," says Associate Professor Jane Parish Yang, "are able to try out their Chinese in small discussion groups with the families; they especially enjoy speaking Chinese with the children.

"The highlight of these weekends," she continues, "has been a competition between the children, who were born in America but learned Chinese in the Chinese Saturday school in Appleton, and our language students in which the object is to write sentences with characters rhyming with certain sounds."

Departmental *esprit de corps* is another beneficiary of Björklunden. The Department of Physics holds an annual retreat early in the Winter Term. David Cook, professor of physics and the Philetus E. Sawyer Professor of Science, reports that the event involves some 35 to 45 people: upper-class physics majors and minors; freshman prospective majors, who at the time of the weekend are only one or two weeks into their first Lawrence physics course; and the members of the physics faculty.

"We include some academic activities," Cook says, "such as seniors telling about their capstone projects and faculty members describing their research, and we disseminate

literature about graduate schools and summer research possibilities, but the main objective is to provide an opportunity for students and faculty to interact with one another in a non-classroom context."

The schedule deliberately makes time for interpersonal interaction: games of Trivial Pursuit or chess, discussion of special interests or of short articles on timely physics topics, group reading of plays, and — thanks to the Björklunden locale — snowshoeing or cross country skiing. Also, Cook says, "time is allowed for some studying, so that students who won't or don't want to take an *entire* weekend off can still feel comfortable participating.

"We are convinced," he says, "that after a Björklunden weekend, prospective majors among the freshmen have a fuller sense of association with the department and interact more freely and frequently with one another and with the faculty.

"We cannot imagine a more appropriate environment for the nurturing of this sort of departmental attachment," Cook adds.

Interaction between students and alumni forms the basis for some other departmental seminars. Brigetta Miller, C '89, assistant professor of music and chair of the music education department of the Conservatory of Music, organizes an annual retreat that brings music education students together with Lawrence alumni who are active music educators.

"As one who cares passionately about improving teacher education," Miller says, "I believe that bringing together Lawrence undergraduates, faculty members, alumni, and other veteran teachers from around the state is a great place to start."

This year's weekend schedule included student research mini-sessions with topics such as "Advocacy and Funding for the Arts" and "Understanding the ADHD Student in Your Classroom"; a student panel, "The Benefits of Studying Abroad While at Lawrence"; and a New Teacher/Student Teacher Panel, "What I Wish They Would Have Told Me in College." A popular moment in the weekend is Professor Miller's Saturday-evening Fireside Chat: "Can One Person Change the World?"

Music education students are not the only ones learning from interaction with professionals in their chosen field. Professor of Biology Nicholas Maravolo's "Medical Muses" weekend is in its third year of bringing Lawrence students who are interested in pursuing medical education and careers together with alumni who are practicing physicians.

Some Björklunden seminars provide an opportunity to do things that simply would not be possible on campus. Michael Orr, associate professor of art history, presents a hands-on introduction to medieval book illumination that includes practical instruction in gilding and painting.

"I can't imagine trying to do that in a regular class," Orr says. "A great advantage of Björklunden is that it allows

faculty to supplement their teaching with things they might not otherwise do.”

Not all Björklunden weekends are conventionally academic. The Lawrence University Community Council (LUCC), for example, organizes its year around an annual retreat for incoming and outgoing officers.

“The Björklunden setting has been invaluable for this,” says Paul Shrode, associate dean of students for activities. “It provides a nice blend of meeting time and space without distractions or the draw of events on campus, as well as space and solitude for personal reflection and recreation.”

In a tightly structured weekend, the retiring LUCC cabinet has time for reflection on their year of service, while the new officers begin the process of team-building, establishing ground rules for their working relationships and articulating expectations of each other. The two cabinets also have time together, and each individual spends time with his or her counterpart in the other cabinet.

“There is no question in my mind,” Shrode says, “that our retreats are more productive because of the Björklunden facility.”

Whatever the purpose of the specific weekend they attend, the seminar program at Björklunden provides for both students and faculty some valuable and valued experiences.

Yet, no student ever has to pay extra to learn, relax, and rejuvenate at Björklunden.

“They are expected, however, to put in a little work,” says Björklunden’s resident director, Mark Breseman, ’78. “The students take turns serving meals, and, prior to departure, undertake a major, building-wide cleaning of the lodge.”

And that’s part of the experience, too.

◆ <http://www.lawrence.edu/about/bjork/students.shtml>

“It’s wanting to know . . .”

The quotation above is from Hannah in Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*, a play that depicts a contemporary generation searching for information about ancestors from a previous century (who also appear in the play). *Arcadia* was the basis for a student seminar at Björklunden that brought together students from the mathematics, theatre and drama, and classics departments, as well as math professor Eugénie Hunsicker; classics professor Randall McNeill; Keith Howard, a guest mathematician from Kenyon College; and myself.

Arcadia contains references to chaos theory, entropy, and fractals and mirrors these math theories in its structure. Math-poor as I am, I knew of the connections because I played Hannah while obtaining my doctorate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Understanding the math is crucial to understanding that role.

The weekend at Björklunden, titled “*Et in Arcadia ego: The Intersection of Math and Drama*,” was the fruitful and collegial mixing of the two disciplines, with vital support from classics. Nineteen students voluntarily attended, and, as one would hope at a liberal arts institution, the groups never segregated themselves but truly embraced the opportunity to make new connections.

We began with presentations on math history to explain allusions in the script, followed by an examination of classical influences on estate gardening through the 19th century (an integral conflict in the story). We staged a scene in which the two generations appear together in a very “entropic” conclusion to the play. Keith Howard’s presentation on fractals encapsulated the weekend, as he combined math formulas with aesthetic choices to create a landscape that changed according to the seasons. We hiked around Björklunden, noting examples of fractals in nature and evidence of formal gardening techniques. By the time I offered my analysis of the script’s structure, noting the parallels with math theory, several students had already begun to discern those same



Close-up of a Björklunden seminar

Assistant Professor of Mathematics Eugénie Hunsicker explains the wave equation in her lecture on how advances in math and physics through history have changed people’s ideas about determinism and free will.

conclusions for themselves.

All this was possible because Björklunden exists. We used its quiet and solitude to allow us to focus together. Björklunden became our *Arcadia* — a place set apart from the usual demands. Where else would I have the privilege of sharing a math student’s breakthrough on a homework challenge? Where else would theatre students see math students choose to fill their free time with collaborative efforts at descriptive equations? Where else would math students share the stage with theatre students for an impromptu scene?

In *Arcadia*, Hannah contends: “It’s wanting to know that makes us matter. Otherwise we’re going out the way we came in.” At Björklunden, I discovered that, at the intersection of math and drama, our fields definitely have something in common: we’re both trying to describe phenomena so we can better understand our world and ourselves. Dramatists use plays; mathematicians use equations — but we both focus on the process, not just on an answer. Björklunden gave us the time, place, and mental space to ask the questions and indulge in that oh-so-liberal-arts desire: wanting to know.

— Katherine Privatt, assistant professor of theatre and drama