*Report and reflection on TABS presentation of December 2015*

*Title: Addressing gender learning differences in the classroom*

*Presenter: Kevin Miller*

At the annual conference of The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) in Boston in December 2015, I gave an hour-long presentation on addressing gender learning differences in co-ed classrooms. Our purpose in presenting on this topic was to start raising consciousness among a wider spread of schools (and possible referral sources) of Blue Ridge School as thoughtful practitioners in the teaching of boys. As the vast majority of TABS members are co-educational, approaches to both genders were included to increase the likelihood of the presentation getting approved, as it was.

Roughly 20 teachers and administrators attended this session, which included frequent breaks for questions as well as interaction among the audience to critique particular ideas or techniques. Overall, the reception of the session was positive; participants filled out evaluations of the session just before they left, and the average rating for the session was 4, on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Participants gave highest ratings to the handouts that spelled out best techniques for instructing girls and boys; the most common critique was that the presentation itself was too heavy on theory, and the theory of differences in learning between the genders is fraught with controversy.

That controversy raised itself in a few questions toward the end of the session from the moderator assigned by TABS, who rather stridently argued that all gender differences were social constructions rather than genuine neurological variations. This argument does hold some currency in research circles and is one we will need to be ready to address in any presentation to a general audience about the best ways to teach boys. My current response is to sidestep this debate by pointing out that whatever the cause of these differences – which we agree we do see between adolescent males and females – we have these students for three or four years at most and in that time need to teach them well within our subject area, and not worry about trying to re-engineer a difference that may have already been fourteen years in the making.

*Reflection*: I am considering submitting a variation of this presentation to either VAIS or IECA (the educational consultants’ association). If I do, I will trim the background on theory (which is where the controversy begins) and instead turn the session into more of a group discussion/critique of the methods that most research indicates work best with boys or with girls, and how we might blend those methods in a co-educational classroom – or, as “brother” and “sister” single-gender schools often do with a few courses, in a “coordinate education” environment (mostly single-gender, but co-ed for select courses or experiences).