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Teaching Humanities as a Life Skill

* Disadvantaged students find that understanding Aristotle and art may be just as valuable as learning a vocation when it comes to getting ahead in the world.

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"There is only one good, knowledge, and only one evil, ignorance."

--Socrates, circa 400 BC

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Hungry for knowledge, they come, many of them, an hour before class. They are poor and working poor. They are immigrants, ex-gang members, high school dropouts, victims of political unrest, unwed mothers.

Despite their concerns--the relentless worry about rent or grocery money, the neighborhood violence--they have managed to come faithfully to a community center in Santa Monica every Tuesday and Thursday nights for the last nine months to talk about philosophy, literature, art and history.

They've discussed the ideas of Socrates, Aristotle and Rousseau, reconsidered their lives in the terms of such feminists as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, and studied the paintings of Claude Monet and Jackson Pollock.

On June 16, the charter class of 20 students will complete Antioch University's Community Humanities Education Program, or CHE (pronounced "chay").

Inspired by an earlier, similar program, CHE was founded on the belief that teaching humanities to those who are economically and educationally disadvantaged can give them the "cultural capital" necessary to improve their lives, said Martin Kempner. Kempner is a philosopher and national director of the Clemente Course, the original humanities program affiliated with Bard College in New York.

"It's been quite a ride," said CHE's director, David Tripp, who recruited students by sending information to community service centers throughout the area. Both the course and the students exceeded his expectations, he said. "Most efforts to help this population involve training them in a vocation. But what's missing from the lives of the poor and marginalized is a place at the table of public discourse." A humanities education, Tripp and others believe, could change that.

"We study art history and philosophy not for its own sake, but to enhance critical thinking and to find our own voice and a sense of agency in the world," Tripp said, explaining that "agency" is the ability to act with purpose.

In most academic circles, the humanities include the study of literature and poetry, history, art, music and philosophy, said Elizabeth Brooks, head of humanities and social sciences for UCLA Extension.

"As a whole, they provide insight into the shared human experience and into our value system, into what it means to be human," she said.

If taught well, a humanities education improves critical thinking, said Barry Bortnick, the extension's coordinator for special programs in the humanities.

"The idea is to look behind the work and question the assumptions of the artist or writer," he said. "To ask about the values and ethics of this person's version of truth and how that fits with your views. If done right, it forces people to consider the major issues of the human condition."

And it's their human condition that these students are trying to change.

"Poor people are trapped," Kempner said. "They don't know how to get around the forces that surround them--the poverty, drugs, crime and race barriers. They don't know how to get going and are intimidated. Giving them an opportunity with no financial barriers gives them a start.

"Besides, there's a lot of brilliance in these communities. How else would we tap into that?" he asked.

To eliminate financial barriers, CHE not only paid students' tuition, but also the cost of books, child care and transportation, using about \$45,000 provided by the program's founder, Antioch graduate Shari Fooks. Tripp hired a few teachers but used Antioch faculty members to teach most

of the classes.

To qualify for the program, students must be at least 18, be able to read a newspaper in English and have a household income that is less than 200% of federal poverty guidelines. (For example, the poverty guideline for an individual is \$8,050 a year, so a person would have to earn less than \$16,100. For a family of four, the line is \$16,450 so the household would have to earn less than a total of \$32,900 for a family member to qualify.)

Certificate of Completion

Students can receive a certificate of completion, based on their attendance, workshop participation and the execution of a final project. Others can choose to do extra course work throughout the program to earn college credit from Antioch. Of the 20 pending graduates, half will qualify for college credit, Tripp said.

But beyond certificates and credits, Tripp's hope is that the program will be a bridge to continued education. Nearly all the students in the course say they plan to continue their education, and Tripp, who plans to track the graduates, bets that most will.

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"To admit poverty is no disgrace for a man; but to make no effort to escape it is indeed disgraceful."

Thucydides, circa 413 BC

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On this particular night, the subject is modern art, specifically the transition between the realistic art of the Renaissance and the abstract works of the Impressionists. The instructor, pointing to one of Georges Seurat's paintings done in his pointillistic style, all in dots, says, "What we see here is the breaking down of how we see things." The comment could be a metaphor for the class.

Griselda Garces of Santa Monica is listening intently. Garces didn't graduate from high school, because, she said, she preferred partying to studying, and because her mom, who was 13 when she had her, didn't set much of an example.

Garces had her first child at 19, and afterward, school just wasn't an option. Now 25 and the mother of two, she is a warm, outgoing young

woman. Garces said she has come to terms with her past, her future and her mother.

"We learned about the 'American family myth': the mother, father, two kids, dog and a white picket fence. . . . CHE taught me that my reality is OK because there is no perfect family."

The course has changed the way Garces looks at a lot of things.

"Now I go through every day thinking, questioning, speaking up and making my own decisions," she said. "As a woman, I've learned to think critically for myself. As a mother, I've learned the profound importance of teaching [my boys] how to treat women, in light of how women have been treated for years."

Garces' mind "practically caught on fire" during the nights they discussed feminist writers, Tripp said, and she is starting a support group for neighborhood Latinas to share her epiphany with others. Latinas in Action, which received funding from the city of Santa Monica's Proyecto Adelante, will meet at a local church "where these women can feel safe, share their concerns and grow--through speakers, readings and training courses," Garces said.

Meanwhile, Garces and her husband, Francisco Garces, who also attends the CHE course, are making their college educations a priority. She'll go to college first, then he'll go.

"That's the long-range plan," said Francisco Garces, 25, who used to be involved in gang life but now hopes to become an architect.

Soft-spoken and articulate, Francisco Garces said philosophy and history were his favorite subjects.

"Philosophy stirs the mind and starts you thinking about everything. When we were studying U.S. history, the teacher made us question everything we read. He made us ask who wrote it? What were the writer's views? That's taught me not to accept everything I read," he said.

Finding her voice was the best part of the program for Sue Benistant, 46, of Culver City, who plans to go back to school to become a psychotherapist for the deaf.

"I have found that I do have something to say and people will listen. Before I felt I had to make a joke to be heard," she said.

Openly lesbian and ardently feminist, Benistant said her passion won't

change after she graduates from the program, "but the way I express myself and the words I choose will."

Beato Roblero, 35, was teaching grade school in Guatemala until revolutionaries took him for the wrong guy, put him on a two-week death march and, at one point, stuck a gun in his mouth. In 1992, he fled and now works in Los Angeles as a plumber.

As he talks, his hands, callused and stained from work, nervously tap the table. He'd like to go to school and become an engineer, he said.

"I feel I might be able to contribute more to my community now because I understand better how it works," he said.

It was a prison interview that sparked the idea for the Clemente program and, later, the CHE course.

Earl Shorris, who was wrapping up research on a book about poverty, met with Viniece Walker, a tough woman in her early 20s who was serving time in a maximum-security prison 50 miles north of New York City. He later described her as "speaking rapidly, clipping out the street sounds as they came into her speech. . . . Her mouth was set in the beginning of a sneer." He asked her, presuming she wouldn't tell him anything that he didn't already know, why she thought people were poor.

"You got to teach them the moral life of downtown," she said. "Take them to plays, the museums, concerts, lectures. They need a moral alternative to the street."

Until then, Shorris said, he had assumed the answer to poverty lay in politics. But Walker's comment made him see that the poor first had to learn how to reflect. The study of humanities would teach that and provide an entrance to the political life that could be the way out of poverty. Indeed, it could be what separates the rich from the poor.

So Shorris gathered his notes, his thoughts, his resources and a few friends in high places and in 1995 started a free humanities program for the poor at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center on New York City's Lower East Side. By year's end, Bard College had agreed to provide college credits.

Shorris convinced Kempner to run the Bard program, which now has 12 sites and plans for 50 by 2005. In addition to the CHE program, there are other Clemente-inspired courses, including one in the Yucatan, two in Canada, one for Eskimos in Alaska and one on an Oklahoma Indian reservation.

Shorris wrote about the Clemente program in the September 1997 issue of Harper's magazine, prompting Shari Foos to call him. The 46-year-old Santa Monica psychotherapist is a board member of Antioch University, a 150-year-old institution that primarily caters to adults returning to school, and has five U.S. campuses, including one in Marina del Rey.

After visiting the Clemente course and meeting with Shorris and Kempner, Foos got the Antioch faculty to support a similar venture and the Venice Family Clinic to provide a meeting place.

The CHE program will begin again this fall, and Foos hopes to raise enough money for others throughout Los Angeles. But for the moment, she's celebrating the graduation of this first class.

"I feel very strongly that the greatest gift you can give someone is education," she said. "To be able to give to deserving strangers the gift of the mind and the confidence that comes from that is chilling, and personally, very exciting."

Still, it's the students' stories that touch Foos most. Stories like that of Estela de la Torre, 33, of Los Angeles.

The single mother of a 1-year-old son, de la Torre said she never was a good student.

"I never finished high school because I wanted to get out from under my parents' roof and get things going my own way," she said.

She tried the CHE program on the off chance that she'd been wrong about education. And this summer, after she completes the program, de la Torre plans to take the General Education Diploma examination and then enroll at a community college, with the ultimate goal of becoming a social worker.

"I see myself in a new way. Before, I saw myself as just a single parent," de la Torre said. "Now I'm a single parent, a working mother and a student with ambition that I didn't have before. I had to stop and look at my life and ask, 'Where am I, and where am I going?'"

"Like Socrates said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' And he's so right."

Famous Names and Works

Philosophy

Socrates

Plato

Aristotle

Rene Descartes

Thomas Hobbes

Kant

John Locke

J.J. Rousseau

Hegel

Karl Marx

Simone de Beauvoir

Gloria Anzaldua

Cornel West

Audre Lorde

Literature

Homer, "The Odyssey"

Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass"

Langston Hughs

Allen Ginsberg

Diane di Prima

LeRoi Jones

Harlem Renaissance

The Beats

Art History

Ancient fescos

Byzantine mosaics

Giotto

El Greco

Michelangelo

Leonardo da Vinci

Albrecht Durer

Hans Holbein

Edouard Manet

Georges Seurat

Matisse

Cezanne

Picasso

Umberto Boccioni

Thomas Hart Benton

Diego Rivera

Jackson Pollock

Willem de Kooning

Faith Ringgold

Frida Kahlo

Diego Rivera

Judy Chicago

PHOTO: (2 photos), At top, Levon Leigh, left, gets help from instructor Laura Rittenberg on an essay about morality. At right, David Tripp and Karen Offitzer lead a humanities class at Santa Monica center.

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PHOTO: (2 photos), At top, Levon Leigh, left, gets help from instructor Laura Rittenberg on an essay about morality. At right, David Tripp and Karen Offitzer lead a humanities class at Santa Monica center.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: CAROLYN COLE / Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: Rene Descartes

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0003

PHOTOGRAPHER: International Portrait Gallery

PHOTO: Simone de Beauvoir

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0004

PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

PHOTO: Walt Whitman

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0005

PHOTOGRAPHER: Museum of City of New York

PHOTO: El Greco

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0006

PHOTOGRAPHER: National Gallery of Art

PHOTO: Faith Ringgold

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0007

PHOTOGRAPHER: C. LOVE

PHOTO: Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

ID NUMBER: 20000606hcl0008

PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

Descriptors: COLLEGE COURSES
COMMUNITY RELATIONS
PHILOSOPHY