

The Boston Globe

January 26, 2003

Dubois program sets out to help the older get wiser

By Bill Kirtz

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The topics bounce from Socrates to Thoreau to political satirist Jimmy Tingle, from slavery to taxation to civil disobedience.

On a frosty Wednesday night, the conversation and fluorescent lights crackle in a stark fourth-floor Roxbury Community College classroom where 14 adult learners eagerly debate issues of leadership, conscience, and expediency. As a philosophy teacher defends Thoreau's refusal to pay taxes, several students voice their support. "Too bad he's not here today," one interjects.

These adult learners, in the words of one participant, are jump-starting their brains with the help of the W.E.B. DuBois Program in the Humanities, which Northeastern University began in October with a three-year, \$150,000 US Department of Education grant.

The eight-month courses in philosophy, literature, writing, art history, and history are run in partnership with RCC and Bard College in New York.

Their goal: to bring the humanities to residents of low-income communities. Participants get free tuition.

Their only requirement: English literacy, commitment to completing the program, and demonstrated low household income.

They get free books, transportation, and child care, and can earn up to six college credits. Many attend Tuesday writing workshops in addition to the two-hour sessions held on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Dianne Richardson, a 44-year-old Jamaica Plain resident and medical records staffer, enrolled "just for my enjoyment" and so she could get back into the habit of reading and writing. Bantering easily with Northeastern philosophy professor William DeAngelis about 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes's stark conclusions, she says the courses have "meant a lot to my life. I can see where certain ideas come from, what slavery meant to Thoreau."

DeAngelis, codirector of the DuBois program, says students can use this "as a springboard for college, although it can be an end in itself."

He applauds their "tremendous level of enthusiasm that you'd expect from the best university students. The very best would be stars [at Northeastern]," he said.

RCC literature professor David Coleman said he finds students in his classes absorb ideas "like a sponge," and do extensive research into his assignments to consider blues, jazz, and hip-hop lyrics as poetry.

Marlene Johns, 42, of Jamaica Plain, likes "getting my feet wet" after 15 years away from college. She finds "the hardest part is constructing sentences. I like to read [but] grasping it is a little difficult."

To help her and her classmates, four of DeAngelis's Northeastern student volunteers scrutinize their essays, suggesting that they "find a good spot for a period," and read their prose aloud. Tutoring doesn't mean coddling: One student is told that while her first draft "might be a mess, it's going to be good" with revision.

Sharing that optimism is Darren Rustin, a 34-year-old Mattapan resident and Violence Prevention Program volunteer. He says he gets spiritual insight and mediation tips from the philosophy courses. Now unemployed, he hopes to use the DuBois program as a stepping stone to go back to school.

Her 14-year-old son pushed Janice Gesse into the program. The 54-year-old Dorchester resident, a nursing assistant at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital, hadn't been in a classroom for 35 years: "I knew it would be a challenge, but that if I got in, I'd try my best to stick it out."

So she shrugged off a head cold and showed up because "I don't want to miss anything. I love it. I love tough assignments. I'm getting into it." She says she may take more college credit courses in social work.

Julie Joseph, a 35-year-old patient service coordinator at Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary, enrolled because "I wanted to jump-start my brain again. I'm trying to learn how to write English."

Loving literature, poetry, and playwrights, she hopes to transfer the DuBois program's college credits to a university nearer her Lynn home.

Her ambition isn't unusual. Nationally, the seven-year-old Bard program has sparked many participants' entry into higher education. Bard reports that 603 of 1,090 students have completed the program, with 450 of them attending, or planning to attend, college.

To make this happen in the Boston area, DeAngelis hopes donations will finance additional college courses for graduates. But even if they go no further, the program seems to have jump-started its participants. As DeAngelis outlined the history of non violence, one woman became fascinated by John Locke, the 17th-century philosopher who refuted the divine right of kings and argued that all men are born free and have equal rights.

"I like Locke!" she exclaimed to the woman at the next desk.