

# Humanitas: A Thematic Curriculum

*Described as a caring "community of scholars," the Humanitas program is organized around a thematic interdisciplinary curriculum whose two goals are professional growth for teachers and enriched humanities education for students.*

PAMELA R. ASCHBACHER

"It has really helped me understand the world better, and myself too. I can't wait 'til next year!"

— a student, 16,  
Van Nuys High School

"I've learned more and worked harder than ever before, and it's worth it—for me and for my students. This is what I always thought teaching should be."

— Cathy Nadler,  
social studies teacher,  
Jefferson High School

"This is the best model of shared decision making, teacher empowerment, and school reform I've seen."

— M. Merle Price,  
Assistant Principal,  
Jefferson High School

Comments like these are rarely heard in most schools today, particularly in urban schools struggling with high dropout rates, crime-ridden neighborhoods, and severe budget cuts. Yet these are typical comments from students, teachers, and administrators involved in the Humanitas Program in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Humanitas is an interdisciplinary, thematic, team-based approach to teaching the humanities. Its purpose is

twofold: to promote teachers' professional growth and to improve humanities education for the full range of students.

In particular, Humanitas attempts to provide *average* students with opportunities to develop critical thinking, writing, and discussion skills and to give them a sense of ownership in the learning process. The program incorporates many characteristics of restructuring (Lieberman and Miller 1990), such as a shared mission and goals, collegiality, professional growth opportunities for teachers, flexible classroom scheduling and organization, resources to support change, site-based decisions, and partnership and networking with other schools, universities, and the community.

Unlike traditional instruction, which emphasizes mastery of basic skills as a gateway to a more challenging "thinking curriculum" (Resnick and Klopfer 1989), Humanitas is based on the philosophy that virtually *all* students can profit from a conceptual approach. The prototype for this program was created a decade ago by Neil Anstead, an art history teacher, as the basis for the Cleveland High School humanities magnet in Los Angeles.

In 1986, with the magnet school's program as its model, Humanitas was launched in several regular high schools in Los Angeles. Grants from private

foundations and organizational leadership from Los Angeles Educational Partnerships (LAEP), a consortium of business leaders encouraging reform in the public schools, have supported the initial start-up. Humanitas has since spread to 29 of the 49 high schools in the district and involves more than 180 teachers and 3,500 students. Several middle schools recently trained teams of teachers in the model; their programs began this fall.

## A Community of Scholars

How does Humanitas bring interdisciplinary education to the high school, where scheduling, subject matter specialization, and the sheer size of the school conspire against it? This model creates a voluntary "community of scholars" for both students and teachers within the school.

Teachers interested in the model form teams headed by one teacher-coordinator at each school. Teams collaborate to develop a tightly knit set of core courses. These typically consist of English, social studies, and art, but some teams include a course in philosophy, math, science, studio art, or dance. In 12th grade, however, the core courses usually include only world literature/composition and U.S. government/economics.

Core courses are organized around five or six conceptual themes that are relevant to students intellectually and emotionally; for example, Women, Race, and Social Protest and The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Themes such as these enable students to connect coursework to their personal and cultural backgrounds and yet to reach beyond their own "perceptual and experiential ghettos."

By organizing training opportunities

and special events, LAEP helps coordinators and teams throughout the district to network. Teachers typically attend a paid, two-week summer training-and-planning institute and several other events a year.

Every day, students in the program take a core of several Humanitas classes together for a block of periods, then spend the remainder of their day in regular classes. This approach provides the advantages of a full-size high school as well as the benefits of a family-like environment for part of the day.

Experienced Humanitas students recruit new students by visiting classrooms in the spring to describe the program. Students say the strongest selling points are that the program is good preparation for college, the subject matter is tough but very interesting, the teachers are extremely supportive of students, and there are great field trips.

### Teacher Collaboration Is Key

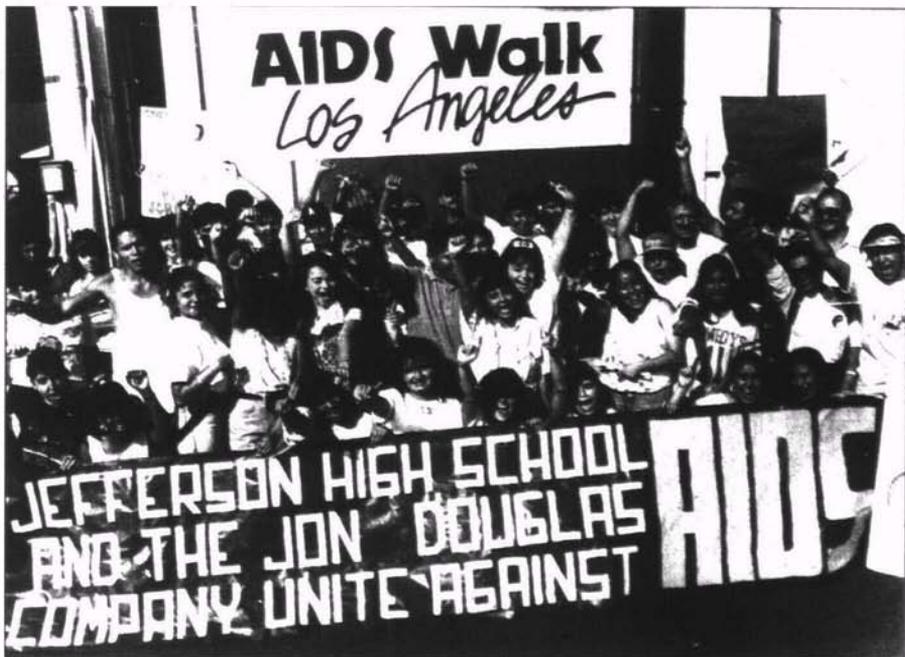
The heart of the program is teacher collaboration, and this takes time, creativity, and flexibility. Teams put in long hours during the summer and school year developing interdisciplinary themes and curricular materials. Although courses must meet state and district requirements, teachers usually have a great deal of freedom in selecting themes, writing essay questions, and developing alternative assessments such as demonstrations, plays, videos, and art exhibits.

Teachers often pass up textbooks in favor of primary sources, novels, newspaper articles, and their own writings. They sometimes revise existing materials to suit their students' reading level while maintaining the intellectual challenge. For example, teacher Cathy

Nadler reads parts of Hobbes' *Leviathan* aloud to her 10th graders, many of whom have limited English proficiency, and helps them understand it by "translating" the Old English spelling and relating the content to issues they have been studying and to their daily lives.

Team members meet daily during a

ing students to write an essay at the end of each unit. Teachers develop the essay questions early in the unit-planning process to clarify their objectives in teaching about the theme, to identify the significant issues to discuss, and to guide their selection of materials and lesson plans. The questions ask students to synthesize what they have been



common prep period to coordinate instruction and evaluate student progress. Some teachers also instruct their classes collaboratively in multi-hour time blocks. Humanitas students report that they love to observe their teachers having intellectual disagreements about course content—many have no model for this at home or elsewhere in school. Teachers usually try to recruit two or three groups of Humanitas students per grade level in order to maximize the value of their preparation time.

One way the model ensures an interdisciplinary, thematic focus is by requir-

*Thomas Jefferson High School Humanitas students and faculty celebrate their support of the 1990 Los Angeles AIDS Walk, one of the many community service projects Humanitas requires.*

studying in all their Humanitas classes. The following is a typical exam question from a unit on *culture and traditional societies* from a 9th grade team:

The cosmology of a traditional culture permeates every aspect of that culture. This is illustrated in the following three cultural groups: the Eskimos, the Southwest Indians, and the Meso-

Americans. Specifically, discuss the spirit world that each group believed in, and explain how it influenced their culture and values. Include examples from your reading in art history, literature, and social institutions to illustrate and substantiate your analysis. Finally, to what extent, if any, does the spirit world affect us today?

sample of 16 schools. They conducted a performance-based assessment of approximately 500 11th grade Humanities and comparison students' writing skills and history content knowledge using a technique developed by Baker and colleagues (1991). They also surveyed students, teachers, and administrators; observed classrooms; interviewed teachers and students; analyzed teachers' assignments and exams; and

time. For students who spent more than a year in the program, their performance continued to improve. The impact was particularly noticeable on students' conceptual understanding, where Humanities students made their largest gains and comparison students made virtually no improvement during the year.

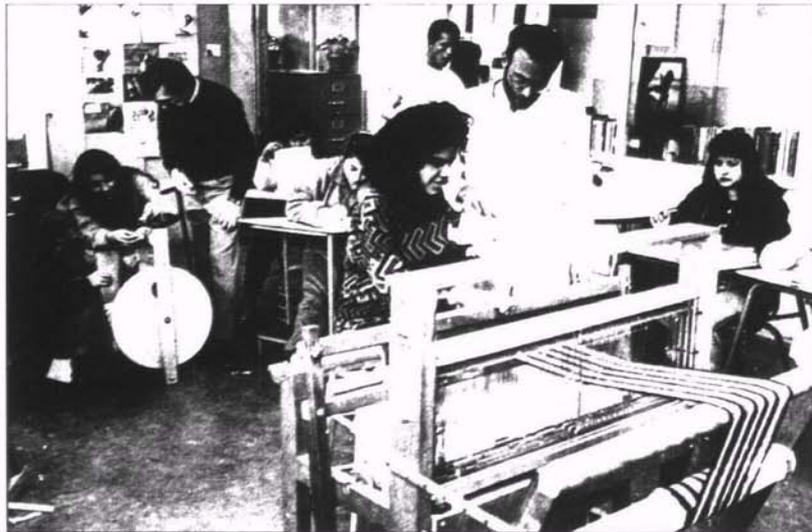
From classroom observations, we found that Humanities classes spent about 6 minutes more per day in thoughtful discussions than comparison classes. Further, these discussions involved more students (an average of 10 Humanities students versus only 3 comparison students).

Our examination of attendance rates across several years at one school revealed that the longer students spent in Humanities, the better their attendance was. The overall school attendance rate is 76 percent, compared to 86 percent for students after their first quarter in the program (regardless of grade level) and 94 percent for students in their third year of the program.

In a district plagued by high dropout rates, only 11 percent of Humanities students dropped out of school during a year, compared to 15 percent of the comparison students. Among students with relatively high language ability (above the 65th percentile on the CTBS language subscale), only 3 percent of Humanities students left school compared to 13 percent of comparison students.

Evidence from surveys, interviews, and assignments suggests that Humanities teachers assign harder work, expect more from students, and require more complex thought in class discussions and unit essays than comparison teachers. Yet Humanities students like school better than comparison students, even though they find it demanding.

Several students noted in interviews that they could "probably be getting easy A's in the 'cakebake' classes" but that they prefer to be working harder for B's in Humanities. The reason? They say that they believe they'll learn more and that the experience will help them get into college and do well. In addition, they feel their Humanities teachers



*Thomas Jefferson Humanities students, much like early Americans, craft woolen articles with the help of weaver Brad Mower. Teacher Jim Martin learns from his students.*

Through such an issue-centered approach, the program seeks to improve students' analytic and critical judgment skills.

### Positive Effects on Students

A complex evaluation of the program over the past three years conducted by UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) documented a number of important effects on students and teachers. Evaluators collected information from Humanities and "comparison" 10th, 11th, and 12th grade classes in a

analyzed portfolios of student work.

In addition, researchers analyzed school records of students' attendance, discipline, and college-oriented behavior in a sample of four schools. Standardized test scores were used in statistical analyses to help control for any differences between Humanities and comparison students' language skills. A few of the key findings from these studies follow (see Aschbacher 1991 and Aschbacher and Herman 1989 and 1990 for greater detail).

Regression analyses of students' essay performance indicated that, even after accounting for the effect of language skills (as measured by the CTBS), the program had a statistically significant effect on students' writing and content knowledge over a year's

and fellow students care far more about them than comparison students think their teachers and classmates do.

The program has been successful with a diverse population of students, including those who are just learning English and those who have already failed courses and seem likely to drop out of school. As one teacher put it, "This program motivates students who would otherwise tune out." In her school, the Humanitas team provided a safe environment in which to "be a nerd" (to carry books and discuss ideas), which eventually spread to many of the other students as well.

### A Renewing Experience for Teachers

How do teachers feel about the program? Being a Humanitas teacher requires a lot of effort. Teachers who participate in the program must learn a portion of one another's subjects in order to create an interdisciplinary program, develop themes and curriculums, collaborate with colleagues on a daily basis to coordinate instruction, and grade performance-based assignments. And yet, they almost unanimously report that participating in Humanitas is one of the most renewing experiences they have had.

Teachers find that the team structure allows them to build on their individual strengths and interests, to develop their curriculum around the themes and issues they feel passionately about. At the same time, it provides them with a professionally nurturing environment with opportunities to collaborate, to learn new content and methods, to take risks and innovate, to get caring feedback from colleagues, and to apply for small grants and otherwise stretch professionally.

The least successful teams are those who don't really collaborate and clarify their objectives, who think they can carry off an interdisciplinary program without meeting frequently to share feedback and revise their plans. Evidence also suggests that success follows those whose principals, assistant princi-

pals, and counselors are also enthusiastically committed to the program goals and willing to take risks and be creative to accomplish them.

### What Makes Humanitas Work?

That the program creates a community of scholars within the larger, impersonal school context is critical to its success. Teachers and students get to know one another well because they share several hours a day. During this time, they provide one another with mutual high expectations, support for effort, and rewards for success.

But a healthy program does have its costs, primarily for released time for teachers to cover three weeks of planning and training time. Some states have special staff development funds for which districts may apply to cover some of these expenses. The costs of copying materials may be offset by reduced need for expensive texts. And field trip expenses may be covered by partnerships with community agencies and local businesses.

Overall, however, the benefits of Humanitas far outweigh the costs. Teachers model a powerful culture that students can join, one characterized by intellectual curiosity, willingness to risk and to strive, collaborative decision making, and constructive feedback. In the process, students discover that it is good to be an adult, that intellectual and human problems are interesting to try to solve, and that working in groups is powerful and supportive.

Two or three years in such a program can make a tremendous difference for many students, report the teachers, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, Enrique, a Humanitas senior and former gang member who was interviewed for the evaluation, noted with pride that he had been accepted by both the University of California at Berkeley and Occidental College.

"For years we have sold kids short," said Neil Anstead, founder of the humanities magnet school in Los

Angeles. "They are capable of so much more."

The same is true of teachers. For years we have not trusted teachers to exercise good professional judgment—but they too are capable of so much more. Humanitas provides them with opportunities and expectations to expand their professional knowledge and skills, the freedom to use their expertise to make important curricular and instructional decisions, and the support to take risks. □

### References

- Aschbacher, P.R. (1991). "Effects of Restructuring on Disadvantaged Students: Humanitas—a Case Study." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.
- Aschbacher, P.R., and J.L. Herman. (1989). *The Humanitas Program Evaluation Final Report, 1988-89*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation.
- Aschbacher, P.R., and J.L. Herman. (1990). *The Humanitas Program Evaluation Final Report, 1989-90*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation.
- Baker, E.L., P.R. Aschbacher, D. Niemi, E. Yamaguchi, and Y. Ni. (1991). *Cognitively Sensitive Assessments of Student Writing in Content Areas*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing.
- Lieberman, A., and L. Miller. (June 1990). "Restructuring Schools: What Matters and What Works." *Phi Delta Kappan* 759-764.
- Resnick, L.B., and L.E. Klopfer. (1989). "Toward the Thinking Curriculum: An Overview." In *Toward the Thinking Curriculum: Current Cognitive Research, 1989 ASCD Yearbook*, edited by L.B. Resnick and L.E. Klopfer. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

**Pamela R. Aschbacher** is a Project Director at UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) and the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST). She has been head evaluator of the Humanitas Program for the past three years.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.