

Humanities & PROFESSIONS

by Sanford M. Lottor

What can Shakespeare, Camus, Tolstoy, Melville, and Conrad teach professionals about the power and authority they exercise in society? Why have so many judges, physicians, schoolteachers, and executives in Massachusetts and throughout the country developed a new interest in reading great literature?

Perhaps the answers are to be found in the following quote from Rene Dubois:

Only parables can express the full complexity of our times. If you define your subject too precisely, you'll stifle its living richness. But if you tell a story, then your listeners will sense everything that the story may contain. . . this is the way to make ideas grow.¹

This philosophy exemplifies the thinking behind the Humanities and the Professions program at Brandeis University. The program began in 1980, when Chief Justice Samuel E. Zoll of the Massachusetts District Court System requested that Brandeis develop a stimulating continuing education program for judges. He had observed that judges were overworked and understaffed, constantly faced difficult decisions, and had too little time for thoughtful decision making. He believed judges needed to be stretched intellectually, as adherence to the routine tasks of their jobs did not allow time for outside educational pursuits. And he suggested that judges needed an opportunity to discuss, reflect upon, and better understand the complex social and moral issues they faced in their courts daily.

The program was originally designed to address law issues, but it soon became apparent that the heart of the program was the way it allowed professionals to explore with one another, in a candid and supportive setting, how it feels to exercise power and responsibility in

our society, and to discuss human values. It was an easy step to go from judges to other professionals. Thus, we inaugurated Humanities and the Professions.

These daylong seminars reintroduce professionals to great literature and make them aware of the sensitivities of their colleagues.

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Humanities and the Professions is based on a two-text idea: the written text and the text of personal experience. What the program tries to achieve is a balance between the two. It leads to discussions of universal themes in the texts and encourages participants to relate those themes to their own lives.

At present, Brandeis has identified about 50 short novels, novellas, and short stories for use in the program. These texts are determined by the themes and issues recognized as being important to a particular profession. Judges discuss *Billy Budd* and the difference between law and justice, or read Von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* and debate the pursuit of personal vengeance beyond the law. Executives see in *Othello* different leadership styles. And physicians understand the life-and-death struggles in Tolstoy's *The Death Of Ivan Ilyich*.

To ensure that professionals' life experiences be taken into account, faculty members who lead the seminars attend training sessions on their roles as discussion facilitators.

Approximately 30 faculty members are associated with the

program. They come not only from Brandeis but from Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mount Holyoke College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Tufts University, Wellesley College, Simmons College, Hampshire College, Boston College, and Boston University. More than 50 faculty members from ten other states are also associated with Humanities and the Professions. Our faculty are scholars from virtually all disciplines, who are basically humanists first. They understand how to use literature and are able to work with adults in a non-threatening way.

Other colleges and universities may be interested in implementing similar programs on their own campuses. Since faculty selection and training are essential, these schools may want to ask Brandeis to conduct a two-day training session for them. During the first day we would lead a regular session for a group of professionals designated by the school. Faculty selected by the school to take part in the training session would be observers at this session. On the second day, we would train these faculty in methods we have developed and would expect the trainees to lead discussions of very short texts.

Training sessions similar to the above were conducted for the University of California at San Francisco Medical Center. The program has received wide national publicity through more than 50 articles in newspapers, newsletters, journals, magazines, and other publications and has been featured six times on radio and television. The program founders are Brandeis University's director of continuing studies, Sanford Lottor, and Professor Saul Touster, director of the Legal Studies program. ■

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Sanford M. Lottor is co-director of Humanities and the Professions, Brandeis University.*

¹ Dubois, R., and Escande, J.-P. (1979). Harcourt *QUEST Reflections on Medicine, Science and Humanity*, New York, Jovanovich.