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Poetry in Motion

Life's little dramas are all in a day's work for elementary school teachers, who often have to stop lessons to comfort unhappy kids, or mitigate an argument between students. Requiring compassion, intuition and patience, these are common crises for which no textbook has answers.

UC Santa Barbara scholar Rick Benjamin, an adjunct professor in the Departments of Comparative Literature and Environmental Studies, sees such interactions as valuable learning moments. So, to emphasize their importance, he "invites" his students to aid teachers and pupils at Isla Vista Elementary School, as part of his Community Matters course. The class mixes civic reflection and action through mentoring, tutoring and supporting classroom learning.

Benjamin's philosophy: Students get a well-rounded education by experiencing a true slice of life — whether it's community engagement, field work or a clinical component.

"Students come back with a profound appreciation of what it's like to be a teacher," Benjamin said, noting it could involve watching a lesson "completely fall flat," because it's simply the wrong topic on the wrong day. "There's so many different variables in a classroom at any given moment.

"Sometimes the way things don't work is the most instructive thing in the world," Benjamin added. "That's what some of the students come back with — is that this didn't work. Well, let's talk about why that didn't work. I'm very receptive to that

notion.”

At Isla Vista Elementary, Benjamin said, “The Community Matters class has been helpful in terms of offering support without strings attached. We don’t have an agenda. We’re here to support them in whatever way they need us.”

The relationship works both ways. Benjamin noted that IV Elementary offers great flexibility by allowing UCSB students, who work in pairs, to assist at convenient times in various grade levels. Some days they provide poetry workshops; other days they might assist a teacher with a lesson plan. Coming from various disciplines, the UCSB cohort includes graduate students in education, math majors and others interested in social justice or nonprofits.

“If I have a bias, it is community engagement work should always have a basis in some kind of learning,” Benjamin said. “And if I have another bias, all learning should have a basis in some form of community engagement.”

Benjamin also incorporates outreach in his other courses, Poetry & Community Practice and Wild Literature in Urban Landscapes (offered this spring), partnering with local middle schools, high schools and community centers. “I think being at a public institution is at the heart of the freedom I feel to try out various things,” he said. “And a public institution has obligations to invite in community members.”

Before joining UCSB, Benjamin worked on similar community programs at Brown University. He also was the state poet laureate of Rhode Island from 2012 to 2016. His books include: “Passing Love” (Wolf Ridge Press, 2010); “Floating World” (Wolf Ridge Press, 2013); and “Endless Distances” (Lawrence & Crane Publishers, 2015).

“Having relationships with others through any lens, whether it’s through a disciplinary lens or through a medium like poetry, is worthwhile because other people need what you need,” said Benjamin, formerly with UCSB’s Interdisciplinary Humanities Center. “And if you need certain things in an institution like UCSB, you can bet that some 5 year old needs it.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary

collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.