A new kind of classroom experience

Open-source learning method is opening minds at Righetti

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In a back corner of the Righetti High School campus in Santa Maria is a portable-style classroom that looks and does things a bit different.

The walls are littered with a variety of items. Two corners are filled with more than 250 CD cases that portend an extensive music library that often comes into play. Movie posters and quotes from literary heavyweights such as George Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain and E.B. White offer humor and inspiration. And the face of the perpetually broken clock is covered with a piece of yellow lined paper with the words "IT'S TIME" scrawled in block letters.

And sitting on a desk with a pencil tucked snugly behind his left ear, Dr. David Preston waits for his students to trickle in and take their seats. On this day he is eager to talk about the centuries-old epic poem "Beowulf," which his Advanced Placement English students have recently finished reading.

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>
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> Righetti High School teacher

But before the discussion about potential essay topics can bounce around from heroes, mythology and even George Orwell, the students are tasked with several minutes of journal writing as Dave Grusin's "History Lesson," the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil" and "History Lesson Pt. II" by the Minutemen play quietly in the background.

Dr. Preston, 43, who began his career in education as an instructor at UCLA and ran a consulting firm before getting hooked on teaching, wants his students constantly thinking on different wavelengths.

"It's usually to get them thinking on a different channel," he said after imploring the class to listen to try to connect a way in which the music can relate to their readings. "I want them to listen to the lyrics of 'Sympathy for the Devil,' because it's all historical allusions. Sometimes it will be thematically connected. Sometimes it will be something I want to hear."

While the only part of the class that involved pen and paper was brief, those moments are something Dr. Preston sees as integral to the art of learning.

"The big part of it is just facing the blank page," he said. "Even though the topic isn't exactly on point, it's marshaling what they've been learning about this past week, to get them to think a little more critically about what's the point.

"If you don't see value in what you're doing it makes everything harder."

Dr. Preston uses that philosophy in a teaching method called open-source learning to integrate the endless resources available on the Internet with blog posts, classroom discussion and open collaboration to inspire his students and teach them "21st-century skills."

"I think it makes the learning experience so much better," said Daniel Rucker, a senior in Dr. Preston's third-period class.

While many facets of Dr. Preston's teaching are standard fare for an advanced English class — even the heady reading list that includes works by Plato, Chaucer and Jean-Paul Sartre — blog posting as homework is a new and different form of homework for many students.

"At first I thought it was going to be weird, but you look around and everyone's doing the same thing as you and everyone's work is different," senior Haley Zahn said. "I don't feel self conscious about it because I really put thought into what I do, and maybe someone else out there wants to read it or is looking for that. I look to other people's blogs to get inspiration and help or if I'm confused or ask a question to get help."

Collaboration and understanding are crucial to success not just in the classroom, but also in the real world.

"The students who are graduating now aren't getting what we got when we left," Dr. Preston said. "We got it better than our parents, and by we, I mean everybody in history got it better than their parents until now. And now that we don't know what we're preparing them for, we can't make any guarantees about the job market, the economy and what they really need to know. And really, when it comes right down to it, we don't understand learning very well.

"So all the talk about standardization, that's supply side efficiency talking. That makes sense in a world where you don't have tools to get at what everybody's thinking in real time. Until a few years ago we didn't have that. In the absence of better information, a bubble test is something. That makes a lot of sense. But now that we've got all this, and you can see what learners are thinking about and doing in real time, and now that we've got tools to read analytics and figure that data, it's a totally different ball game."

The results of Dr. Preston's efforts have been seen in different ways. He claims that the number of students taking the standardized AP English exam has tripled since he began the program, and last year his students earned about $1 million in merit-based scholarships.

Dr. Preston, who began teaching at Righetti in 2006, implemented the open-source program in 2011 after years of advocating the style, which is how he ended up going from college instructor and consultant in Los Angeles to high school teacher in Santa Maria.

The move first came when Dr. Gregory Vallone, then the principal at James Monroe High School in North Hills, heard Dr. Preston talking about what he saw as the problems with education today. Dr. Vallone challenged Dr. Preston to try his hand at teaching, and though he initially scoffed at the notion, Dr. Preston was soon compelled to accept the offer.

"I called it the Domestic Peace Corps," Dr. Preston said. "I was going to be in and out, like an embedded anthropologist, and continue complaining — but with better information. I certainly wasn't planning to stay in it for the long term and try and make a difference."

That changed while Dr. Preston taught a crowded summer school class in 2006 — with some inspiration through an exchange student from Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

"I felt like I had seen enough," Dr. Preston said. "I was ready, and my wife and I were thinking about what was next for our family. This kid walks into my classroom, and he was carrying a book, which was unusual, and it wasn't the text book. The book he was carrying was 'The Art of Happiness' by the Dalai Lama.

"He learned English fluently and passed the entire high school curriculum in less than two years, and then he invited me home for dinner. My wife and I spent about a month in Mongolia and Tibet and western China with this kid and his family."

That trip convinced Dr. Preston that he belonged in a high school classroom, and as soon as he returned to California, he began looking for teaching jobs on the Central Coast.

Almost a decade into his teaching career, Dr. Preston is convinced that he not only made the right decision, but that open-source learning, combined with recently implemented Common Core Standards, will help the institution of education emerge from the quagmire from which it has become stuck.

"I turned into a guy I used to make fun of," he said. "When I was a kid I used to be as cynical as everybody else, and if I had thought that in 20-30 years I would give up that life for this, I would have said 'You're insane. What's wrong with you?'

"I can't explain why or how it happened, but since I was 5 years old and I walked into my first-grade class and Mrs. Begley pulled some kid's hair because his math problem was wrong … I remember thinking 'this has to be better,' and I've never been able to un-ring that bell. The honest truth is I want to create the best learning experience for the biggest number of people worldwide."

For him, that starts at Righetti, where Principal Steve Molina has become a supporter of Dr. Preston's teaching methods.

"With every teacher working toward the Common Core in the state, Righetti is at the cutting edge of implementing the skills for the 21st century," Mr. Molina said.

At Righetti, the cutting edge begins in a back corner of campus. One day, it could become the standard in every classroom.

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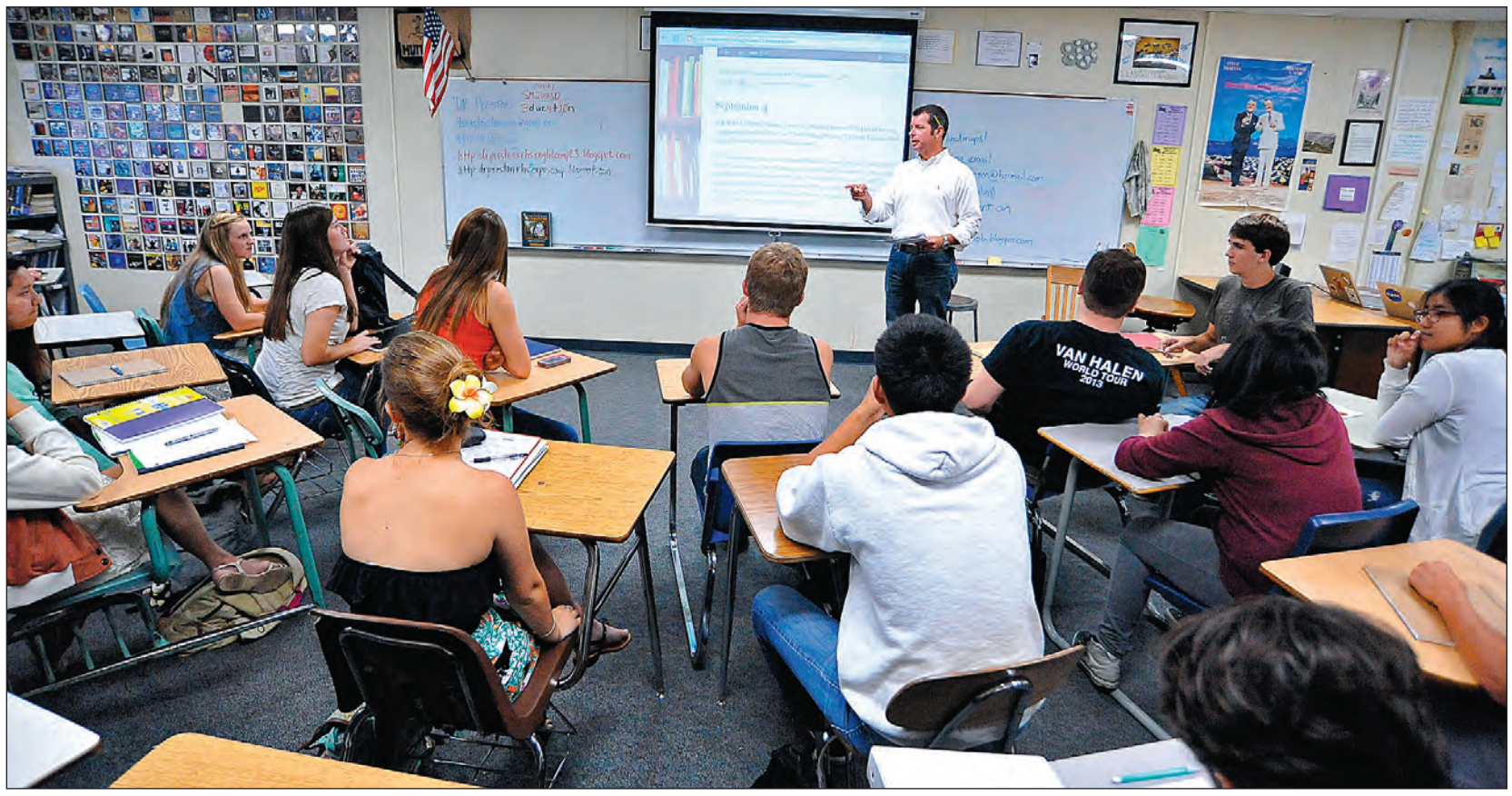

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Dr. David Preston employs open-source learning, which melds the Internet, blog posting, classroom discussion and open collaboration to inspire his students and teach them "21st-century skills" in his Righetti High School Advanced Placement English classes.