TACKLING THE GENIUSES  The Socratic connection  Students learn literature, science and art the old-fashioned way — by asking questions

By Theresa Harrington

MORAGA — As high schools and colleges intensify focus on preparing students for jobs after graduation, some question the value of a liberal arts education in an increasingly technical world.

But not this week at Saint Mary’s in Moraga. The college is hosting a summer camp with the catchy title of “Talk Back to Socrates” where high school students from the Bay Area and beyond dig into great works of literature and science to learn how math, science, literature and philosophy are all connected — and how one discipline can rely on another.

Students at the camp tackled literary, mathematical and philosophical geniuses such as Plato, Sophocles and Shakespeare, dissecting the complicated texts and sharing diverse opinions. They related what they read in “Euclid’s Optics” and Leon Battista Alberti’s “On Painting” to help them understand how artists interpret what they see with their eyes and how they portray that vision onto a canvas or other medium.

“The optics are very interesting, because I’ve never really thought about how the eye works,” said Dana Pine, a 17-year-old Northgate High senior from Walnut Creek. “We were learning a lot about depth and See SOCRATES, Page 5
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Socrates

mathematics. I didn’t realize how much mathematics have to do with vision. We actually had to do a lot of measurement.”

The unique program teaches students to think critically through in-depth class discussions, hands-on activities and field trips to museums, the Palace of Fine Arts and a Cal Shakes performance of “The Tempest.”

It offers students a taste of the Integral Program at Saint Mary’s, a liberal-arts major in which a small group of students explores a variety of disciplines by taking the same courses together, reading classic literature and then questioning its meaning and relevance. Courses include tutorials and seminars taught according to the “Socratic method,” in which professors are called tutors because they guide discussions rather than lecture, said Professor Joseph Zepeda, who directs the camp.

“You can give students all the answers in the world, but it doesn’t matter if they’re not asking the questions,” he said. “It has to be their questions for it to matter. This is the opposite of a knowledge dump. You could ask them to think critically about a made-up paragraph, but that doesn’t set them on fire.”

Although the classes do not necessarily teaching technical job skills, the students agreed they were learning valuable skills that would help them throughout their lives.

“It will teach you how to think and that will be useful no matter what you do,” said Veronica Oberholzer, 16, a senior at Holy Names High in Oakland. “It gives you a good foundation.”

Students were also impressed by the open-minded responses they received from their classmates, even when they disagreed.

“You’re not trying to convince them that your opinion is better than theirs,” Pine said. “It’s just like, ‘Well, this is my take on it’ and people respect that. It’s nice.”

Since only 15 students are enrolled in the camp and they are living on campus, they are getting to know each other well and feel comfortable sharing their views.

“We actually understand people’s opinions on religion or philosophy,” said Elizabeth Casey, 17, of Pacifica, a senior at St. John’s Academy in San Francisco.

While developing their own friendships, they learned how Socrates taught about that topic by reading “Lysis” by Plato.

“Our conclusion was that a friend’s someone that you can learn something from,” said Pine. “But you can also offer them something.”
DAN ROSENSTRAUCH/STAFF

Devon Simms, 17, left, of Memphis, Tenn., and Tyger Cohen, 16, of Berkeley, work to gain a better understanding of math and geometry in art.