

"It definitely pushes you outside
your comfort zone." 0721-1

— WHITNEY COX, STUDENT WHO TOOK THE CLASS



CHRIS PIETSCH/The Register-Guard

Spinoza Gordon, 16, reads "The River Why" in the garden that he and other members of his South Eugene High School literature class helped create in a school courtyard.

SHARED INTERESTS PROMPT TEACHERS TO CREATE A CLASS

They found that many students were drawn to learning about literature and the outdoors

BY ANNE WILLIAMS
The Register-Guard

Five years ago, friends and colleagues Peter Hoffmeister and Jeff Hess hatched a plan for a class that combined many of the things they hold dearest in life: Great literature. Wild places. Adventure sports. Stewardship of the planet.

With a green light from administrators at South Eugene High School, the two teachers could only hope enough students would share their passions to keep the class viable.

As it turned out, plenty did. Many students say the Integrated Outdoor Program, called IOP, has been a highlight of their high school experience — even factoring in January's shivery, two-night camp-out in the snowy foothills of Fuji Mountain southeast of Oakridge.

"It definitely pushes you outside your comfort zone," said senior Whitney Cox, who took the class as a junior and loved it so much she returned this year as a for-credit teacher's assistant. "But you become really passionate about what you're doing and what you're learning."

IOP is a blended English and P.E. class, offered to juniors and seniors in daily, two-period blocks. Hoffmeister and Hess each teach one class, joining together for trips and special projects, such as a recently concluded effort to clear out a courtyard garden on campus and build new features, including a boardwalk, irrigation

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INTEGRATED OUTDOOR PROGRAM

◆ The class raises money to buy books, defray equipment

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Class: Lesson plans follow themes of desert, snow and river

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system and outdoor oven.

The teachers said they've heard of a few programs with similar elements elsewhere, including one in Sisters, but nothing quite like IOP.

The class adheres to a set of ethics that includes being open to new people, activities and ideas; being grateful for resources; and believing process trumps product.

Lesson plans follow three broad environmental themes: desert, snow and river. Most of the assigned readings, classroom work, physical challenges and out-of-town trips relate directly to those themes. This week, for instance, the students are reading David James Duncan's bestselling 1983 fly-fishing novel, "The River Why," and learning safety tips for river rafting in anticipation of the year's culminating adventure: a two-day rafting trip down the Deschutes River next month.

The year's first trip — which coincided with reading and writing about Jon Krakauer's "Into the Wild," Edward Abbey's "Desert Solitaire" and Barry Lopez's "Desert Notes" — took the students to Boyd Cave, near Bend. In addition to spelunking in the cave, they were deposited in small groups in the ponderosa forest miles from camp and told to find the way back using newly acquired orienteering skills. Each group had an experienced guide on hand should things have gone awry, but the experience nonetheless tested limits and demanded teamwork, students said.

"It took us a few hours," junior Jessica Kissell said. "But it was an experience I never, never would have had. When we got back to camp, we felt so healthy, so cleansed."

The two-night snowshoeing trip to Fuji Mountain is the one with "the greatest potential for changing students' perceptions of what they're capable of," Hess said. So far, he said, they've been lucky with the weather — though it's never exactly comfortable in the Cascades in January.

Logan Johnson, a senior, called that trip "long and sobering," but said the class has been a favorite. "It really sends a message to have stewardship and responsibility for others in

your group, and for the environment," he said.

Hess, 48, and Hoffmeister, 32, met in 2001 through a mutual friend and rock-climbing partner. Both are slight yet muscular, and they share a love of the outdoors and an ethos of frugality and conservation.

While earning his teaching license in 2002, Hoffmeister student-taught for Hess and soon thereafter landed a job at South. Hess has taught both English and P.E. in his 10 years there, and is also the

head cross-country coach.

"We spent time brainstorming (about IOP) out on climbing trips," said Hess, who spearheaded the effort five years ago to transform a gymnasium storage closet into a climbing room. IOP students meet there — and climb — regularly.

Hoffmeister said the class "is really about love."

"We love literature and the act of writing," he wrote in an e-mail. "We love weather and the outdoors. And we love to learn along with our students."