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Silicon Valley 101 for Stanford class of international scholars

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The lingo of Silicon Valley, from "pet project" to "mogul" to "venture capital crowd" to "startup," isn't the kind of language one learns in a traditional Berlitz class.

But a unique Stanford course teaches the tongue of tech to campus newcomers from across the globe who are ready to grasp the finer nuances of Valley speak -- and the mysterious culture it captures.

Meg Morris (l) works with student, Marcella Manghi during a "Silicon Valley Life" English class. (Gary Reyes)

In a free, noncredit class known as "Silicon Valley Life," international scholars and spouses visiting Stanford ponder a map, learning the answers to such questions as: "Where exactly is Silicon Valley?" "What is 'charisma'?" "Why didn't Steve Jobs' real parents want him?" "Who is Hewlett?" "Did Steve Wozniak die?"

Conceived by 82-year-old volunteer teacher Meg Morris at the university's Bechtel International Center, the class helps students strengthen their conversational English skills while teaching them the rich history of their new home -- a place that can be enchanting, yet utterly mystifying.

Informal setting

In their native countries, they are esteemed engineers, physicians, scientists and policymakers.

Here, they're simply students, having fun. Morris encourages them to ask questions, interrupt, challenge each other and play games. This isn't the formal classroom so familiar in their native countries, with an emphasis on memorization and recitation.

Discussions explore the role of immigrants in America, ethnic diversity in the valley, global commerce and tech centers of other nations. They read newspapers, The New Yorker and book excerpts, dutifully underlining every word they don't understand.

Along the way, they make new friendships, helping ease their isolation and expanding beyond the narrow confines of their cultural or academic circles.

And when they return home, they'll take a piece of California culture with them -- disseminating valley-speak and the spirit of entrepreneurship.

"This will increase my innovation spirit, I think," said Beijing-based Li Weidong, 45, a visiting scholar at the Stanford Center for International Development who works for China's Ministry of Finance. "Maybe, in China, in the current situation, we need this spirit. Cities have a Silicon Valley, but we need a lot more."

Colombian Luisa Garcia, 26, also welcomed the chance to study Silicon Valley culture and history.

"I like to know more because it is my job in Colombia -- entrepreneur and innovation coordinator for CES University -- in Medellin, the system to get ideas to work," she said.

Morris, 82, relates strongly with the students because of her own richly international family, and interest in technology. She met her first husband, an Italian, in Saudi Arabia. Her daughter's husband is Japanese. Morris' current husband, Ray Franks, is an engineer; they met while she was working at TRW. She's also worked at Lockheed.

After getting a doctorate in education at age 71, Morris earned her certificate to teach English as a second language and began specializing in the use of drama, especially improv, to better teach the language. On the side, she coaches private students in pronunciation, reading and writing, and helps with business and personal skills -- observation, listening and collaboration.

"We have a much richer life because of immigrants," Morris said. "And one day I was thinking: 'Here is this Silicon Valley culture and they're right in the middle of it. They should know about this."

Not for beginners

The homey Bechtel Center, located off Campus Drive, offers other types of English classes, as well, covering such topics as California Travel and Beyond; American Customs and Institutions; American Idioms, Media and the U.S. Culture; Introduction to the American Short Story and -- most befuddling of all -- American Humor.

"They're enrichment classes, not for beginners," said Mary Ann Saunders, who supervises the classes at the center and carefully screens every prospective teacher. Most are taught by retired valley professionals. There's a pediatric dentist. A lawyer. A tour director. A physics professor.

"What we're trying to do is expose them to what's below the surface -- the culture," she said. "Not just: 'Do you know a word?' But: 'Do you know when to use it? How to use it? Who to use it with?' "

"You can't teach language devoid of culture," Saunders said.

Culture is celebrated in the final moments of Morris' class, when students jump out of their seats for a game, swapping roles.

Now they're the teachers. They practice giving instructions:

"If you love Spanish food, follow me!" says Alba Sanchez, 26, from Barcelona, Spain. "If you've been in China, follow me!" instructs another.

And then: "Follow me, if you like Silicon Valley, and this class!" says a third.

The entire class laughs, then quickly lines up behind him.

Classes at Stanford's Bechtel International Center

English classes are open to Stanford students, visiting scholars and their families. There is no tuition charge. They are for intermediate and advanced students; beginning English students should contact Adult Education programs in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Mountain View or elsewhere. Volunteers are needed to help scholars practice conversational English. For more information, go to www.ccisstanfordu.org.