With today’s 24/7 news cycle and glut of online media, people are constantly bombarded with multiple stories vying for their attention. But how can readers learn to tell what’s balanced from what’s biased? For budding journalists in Chicago, a novel DePaul program has the answer. Pasos al Futuro exposes Latino high schoolers to media literacy through print and broadcast assignments, making understanding the news into a fun, hands-on experience.

“We’re so deluged by information all the time, and if that’s what you’ve grown up with, that’s what you expect news to be,” explains Cristina Benitez, director of DePaul’s Latino Media & Communication program. “Unless people are taught to look at it with some sort of discerning eye, they don’t know the difference. But to really read stories and recognize research, different points of view and credible sources—that’s seeing the heart of journalism.”

With the coming election cycle, media literacy’s importance to democracy is even more heightened. Through this program, DePaul is ensuring that the next generation is well equipped to understand and exercise their civic responsibilities. For that reason, Senior Instructor Marla Krause appreciates how the program emphasizes news literacy for an audience that needs it. “So many students in high school and even college don’t understand how important it is to know what’s going on in the world and how it affects every part of your life. If there’s a recession, it might affect fashion and music and movies. It’s not just a boring numbers story about unemployment figures or costs of goods,” says Krause, the faculty advisor for the DePaulia student newspaper.

For Jessenia Martinez, attending Pasos while in high school helped her see the importance of being truly informed. “Some of the best advice [I received] during this program was that to become a great journalist, I needed to pick up a newspaper,” says Martinez, who participated in the program for two years and now is a DePaul sophomore double majoring in journalism and media arts and design. “I learned that I needed to know more about the world, so now I am more mindful of what is happening around me.”

Pasos al Futuro is funded through support from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation’s Why News Matters initiative. Their $120,000 grant to DePaul in 2012 was the largest the College of Communication has ever received.
In addition to using the grant for Pasos, DePaul partners with other foundation grantees on expanding media literacy programs. Starting in summer 2014, DePaul began discussions with Kent State University in Kent, Ohio, and Stony Brook University in Stony Brook, N.Y., on how to help instructors of Latino high school students better improve news literacy instruction. DePaul’s expansion from working with high school students to beginning to work with their instructors mirrors how the Why News Matters program has broadened its own emphasis from teaching news literacy for high school students to focus on targeting college students, seniors and families as the next audiences.

The Pasos program falls under the Latino Media & Communication program, which focuses on an awareness and appreciation of culture through Latino-focused courses in Public Relations and Advertising, Intercultural Communication, Journalism, and Media and Cinema Studies. Pasos itself has two components: a winter symposium that serves to introduce high school students to what journalists do, and a summer workshop that lets them learn about the business firsthand. This year’s symposium drew 150 students who heard from DePaul professors and journalists from Univision, Hoy Chicago and Telemundo before enjoying breakout sessions on topics ranging from “Multimedia Reporting: Generation Y Leading Journalism’s Future” to “Let’s Talk News: Reporting on News Radio.”

The symposium serves as a recruiting ground for applicants for the summer workshop, which provides students with the opportunity to develop critical-thinking skills to assess credible news sources and learn to be responsible producers and consumers of news. The workshop, which has expanded from five days to 10 days, also emphasizes learning in a college environment, expanding one’s network and exploring the world of journalism while improving reading and writing skills.

Students research and produce print and broadcast pieces on substantive topics. In 2012, participants visited President Obama’s re-election headquarters and wrote about the campaign’s efforts to appeal to Hispanic voters. In 2013, stories ranged from immigration issues to sports coverage in Hispanic media. “What they do incorporates a lot of the same kind of philosophical and ethical issues that we face in the real world,” says Rick Brown, a broadcast journalism instructor and the faculty advisor for the broadcast news show Good Day DePaul. “We’re talking about fairness, being accurate and conscientious in your reporting, and not taking just one side of a story.” For example, on an issue that has a wide range of opinions, such as immigration, student journalists were instructed to contact a variety of sources to provide balanced coverage.

Learning by doing

Because of the workshop’s condensed format, current DePaul students set up interviews with potential sources so the high school students can begin reporting right away. The DePaul students also serve as mentors in and out of the classroom.

For Odalis Suarez (CMN MA ’14), assisting the high school students during the workshop was just the starting point. “You really do build friendships with them, and you’re there for them to give advice for the long run, not just for the short run. You don’t want them to think you’re just there for those few days and that’s it,” says Suarez, who still keeps in touch with students she mentored during the broadcast section. JoDelle Maglaya (CMN MA ’14) worked with students during their sports broadcast section because she wanted to be a role model. “I’m a minority, and I know sports journalism is a very male, white-dominated field. So I told myself, ‘Why not give these minority high school students someone to look up to?’” says Maglaya, who grew up in Hawaii and didn’t see many people like her in the industry. She was impressed by the students’ enthusiasm. “Knowing that there are people a few years younger than me who have that passion gives me hope that journalism won’t die, regardless of what everyone says.”

Even the students who come in excited about journalism have a chance to understand it more deeply through their assignments. “My favorite part was being exposed to video broadcasting with DePaul professors and going out to do a full news story,” says Martinez. “I felt like an actual news reporter whenever I held the camera, and I could see this being a part of my future.” As an alumna of Pasos, Martinez continues to share her love of journalism with program participants, including speaking at this year’s symposium and serving as a student worker at the summer workshop.

Through an annual winter symposium, Pasos al Futuro shows Latino high school students what it’s like to be a working journalist and recruits them to apply for its hands-on summer workshop.
Students in the program do one set of interviews and then adapt their notes to both broadcast and print stories. Learning the difference between the formats helps students improve their critical-thinking skills, says Krause. She notes that some students are surprised at the process that goes into a print story, including the research, writing, and back-and-forth with an editor to improve the copy. “When they write a paper in high school, they get it back and there’s a grade. It’s not ‘add this, fix this, change this, do it again,’” Krause says.

Seeing students develop their talents over the course of the workshop is a highlight for mentors and faculty. “Students learned that they have more potential than they thought,” Suarez says. “It was amazing to see this transition from the first day to the last day. They learned not just how to speak in front of the camera, but also how to make something come to life.”

Highlighting culture, building skills

In addition to learning about journalism, the Pasos program helps students focus on the importance of their culture. “I think it really made an impact that they saw, ‘Well, this is my community. We’re at the forefront of immigration reform and sporting events and other issues,’” Krause says. Mentor Josclynn Brandon (CMN MA ’13) enjoys that the program focuses on a specific group. “I think that it’s great that it’s a program for a demographic that sometimes feels left out. I’m African-American, and growing up I don’t remember there being a lot of opportunities for African-American students to report and learn how to tell stories for an African-American audience,” says Brandon, an associate content producer for PBS’s “Chicago Tonight.”

While the program focuses on Latino students, it still provides opportunities for those from other backgrounds. One example is Brandon Davis (CMN ’14), who helped high school students with layout for their print stories at last year’s workshop. “As a non-Hispanic person, I learned from students every day because they come from backgrounds different from mine,” says Davis, who also has a minor in Latino Media & Communication. “I think we’re on the cutting edge [with this program], and I hope that in the future we can expand and involve other cultures at DePaul.”

Beyond cross-cultural understanding, Pasos al Futuro teaches life lessons. “Journalism training teaches you critical thinking and focus. You can’t just nod your head in an interview; you have to really be listening to what someone says,” Krause says. “The program serves a huge purpose with the literacy and life skills it emphasizes.”

Benitez agrees. “Even if they don’t turn out to be journalists, students will be good critical thinkers and writers. This program is about spreading the word that DePaul is an institution of higher learning that has a big reach extending to Latino communities. We’re telling high school students that there are opportunities here to learn about all sorts of topics—journalism is just one.”

Learn more about Pasos al Futuro by visiting bit.ly/pasosalfuturo, which includes links to social media updates and more photos from the program.