

School Days

Catherine Wargo • Web Contributor • San Francisco

So, now we're grownups (theoretically), you might have your MBA or your PhD, but at this point, you can never learn too much. After several cocktail party run-ins with a massage therapist who speaks fluent Icelandic, rolls their own sushi, and is currently learning the Tango, you start to feel a bit boring. What curious hip urban explorer doesn't long for the school days of yore? I'm not talking about blue-book Shakespeare exams or political science class discussions. Oh, no. I'm talking about some storybook reading, a little Home Ec, and maybe even a shop class. The major obstacle? Money. A proper semester class at any of the fine educational institutions in the area can cost thousands of dollars. Fortunately for us, the Bay Area is home to tons of free and low-cost resources for adults to educate themselves. With a dedicated population of free spirits and curious intellectuals, there are always plenty of takers...

Art

I admit it: I have been mourning the absence of "arts and crafts" hour since leaving kindergarten. Well, for us fortunate San Franciscans, it's back with a vengeance and at Craft Gym, where it's arts and crafts time *all* the time. Craft Gym is a place to "work out your creative side," as the proprietors put it. We're not talking classic figure drawing or oil painting, nude sculptures, and other basic art-school courses. This is a craft free-for-all. Signing up for any of their classes or workshops gets you access to their open studio times, which are every Thursday evening. The founders, Jackie Ortega and Jane Logan, understand that in our daily lives, it is a thousand times more convenient to buy a ready-made gift for any occasion than to make one by hand. Craft Gym has been created as a place to make crafting easy and flexible and teach you some skills for your next craft. Classes range from *Beginning Sewing 101* to *Sgraffito Tilemaking* (an early form of ceramic tilemaking) or making etched pint glasses. Most classes run between \$45 and \$85, all materials and supplies included. Also offered: *Lingerie Making* and, my favorite, *Make Your Own Stick Pony*. Another stroke of genius is that the Craft Gym offers project-finishing services. Two weeks before your massage therapist's birthday, you start knitting him a hat. Two days before his birthday, you've only got something the size of a yarmulke. Never fear, for a fee (to be negotiated on a by-project basis), the experts at Craft Gym will finish it for you. Your masseur will be none the wiser, and when chilly December comes, he'll have more than a beanie's worth of warmth.



Craft Gym
Photo: Catherine Wargo

Reading and Writing

In a city so rich with literary culture, there are myriad options to educate yourself about reading and writing without taking a traditional class. Some of my favorite literary education options are fun and informative, starting with Litquake (www.litquake.org) coming up during the week of October 7-15. This celebration and overview of San Francisco's literary scene, past and present, includes a boatload of current local authors and pays homage to San Francisco classicists such as Ferlinghetti, Hammett, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. The ongoing Writers With Drinks (www.writerswithdrinks.com) is a fantastic sample of local literary talent that you can get straight from the writers' mouths. Bay Area authors, published or up-and-coming, read their work aloud to what amounts to a modern-day salon. Writers With Drinks meets at the Make-Out Room one Saturday each month for a bargain door price of \$5, starting at 7:30 pm. There are no rules too sacred to be broken by this crowd, and material ranges from erotica to science fiction, from the novel to the essay to the poem. Along the lines of a more traditional class, try 826 Valencia's Adult Seminars. 826 is a nonprofit tutoring center founded by author Dave Eggers, which serves the surrounding Mission District children in an effort to boost reading and writing skills. They also host adult seminars on a variety of topics, and Mr. Eggers' reputation and connections in the literary world, coupled with his humanitarian cause, draws some pretty big names. Each course is limited to about 50 people, including breakout sessions that promise a ratio of 5 students to one author. The seminars occur monthly, and the \$100 fee, as well as being worth the

experience, goes directly to student programming at the tutoring center. Next up? “Writing the Novel,” on October 16, featuring several widely published authors (Andrew Sean Greer, Bharati Mukherjee, Stephen Elliot) who promise to reveal their secrets from editing to agents as well as discussing their personal ups and downs in writing their novels.

Languages

Most of us sat through yo hablo español, tu hablas español, Taco habla español with a glazed countenance and one eye on the clock. Who knew languages would be the one thing we learned in high school that might actually come in useful someday? Not me. Whether you are interested in starting a new language altogether, reviving your high school French 101, or are planning a trip somewhere and want not to be deaf and dumb, there are a several options in the city. I’ve included the crowd-pleasers here, but for possible pursuit of a more obscure language, try the Piedmont Adult Education Center in Oakland.

The Alliance Francaise has all different levels of classes, from children’s to advanced to business or corporate French. \$348 for 8 weeks of three-hour classes. It’s the official center of French Language and Culture in San Francisco—what better place to learn? They also host an extensive program of events if you are a rusty high-school speaker and want to brush up. Show up, trip over some words, understand a half of the lecture. It will be just like the old days and might only cost you \$10 or so. Like every Wednesday, they hold a screening of a French film that costs \$6. Don’t underestimate the language skills you can pick up from subtitles.



*The Alliance Francaise
Photo: Catherine Wargo*

Finally, Casa Hispana offers 8-10 week classes for all levels in Spanish for a reasonable \$300-400, depending on the class. With all native speakers and a strict immersion policy, you will be mistaken for a local in Baja in no time and making your order at Taqueria Cancun with flawless diction. The center started in 1985 and is working on 20 years of experience. They also have programs abroad if you are so inclined.

Home Economics

First Class Cooking is made for those twenty and thirty-somethings that find themselves suddenly out in the real world knowing how to make three things: a phone call to the pizza place, a phone call to the Thai place, and a phone call to the Indian place. Emily Dellas, a chef, lover of food, and a twenty-something herself, is the anti-Martha, using time-efficient methods while also placing importance on fresh, local, whole ingredients. All students are involved in all aspects of the meal and class sizes are limited to eight people for hands-on experience. Learn how to mince Thai peppers without burning your fingers, why it’s better to use a shitty saucepan when heating the ingredients for banana coconut ice cream, and what the hell galangal is. Each class is a four- or five-course meal arranged around a

theme, be it Thai, Indian, or Australian. Emily also sometimes works with a sommelier. The classes are held in a cavernous state-of-the-art kitchen in Pacific Heights where her dog Buffy will greet you at the door when you arrive from your workday. The first priority is to make something quickly so that hungry after-work professionals can munch on something while concentrating on the rest of the meal. The Thai Lime Cilantro Chicken Lettuce wraps that we made were like something I’ve eaten at Le Colonial and I was shocked to see how easy and quick it is to make them. The end of the class consists of eating the full meal together with your new acquaintances and Emily. Classes are held four times a week and a single class costs \$45.



Photo: Catherine Wargo

Shop

Those of us who hail from public schools remember fondly the hours spent wasting time in shop class. The best way that I have found to recreate this, minus the boredom, pointlessness, and crooked picture frames you give your parents for their anniversary, is The Crucible in Oakland. The Crucible is the Bay Area's only nonprofit sculpture studio and their mission is to make fine and industrial art an accessible part of people's everyday lives. Classes here cost about \$300-400 to get you started in blacksmithing, foundering and molding, kinetic sculpture, and some other cool stuff you might want to learn about. Current or previous students have access to studio time for a rate of \$8 member/\$12 non-member per hour, which is more than reasonable for the spectacularly outfitted space. Free tours of the facility are held every Thursday at 6 pm if you want to check it out. Picture yourself with a welder's mask and a spark-shooting torch, then bringing home a rad metal sculpture. And when people come over and say, "Wow, what a great sculpture," you can say, "Thanks. I welded it myself."

Music

A night at Café Royale is a music class disguised as a regular jazz night in a hip, dimly-lit bar. The wine selection is high-quality and affordable, and their cheese plates and other little snacks are perfectly elegant bar food, but the real gem is the music education. Several times a week, the bar hosts live jazz for an eclectic group of performers. The atmosphere is intimate and unintimidating, and there is an ever-changing cycle of local artwork on the walls. I most recently attended a show of the Marcus Shelby Trio featuring New Orleans trumpeter and recent transplant Kid Merv. The performers' off-the-cuff discussion of the jazz scene in New Orleans, how it used to be, what the future holds, and how Kid Merv fits into that was informative and unique. On a regular basis, the performers that Café Royale hosts interact with the audience and share their knowledge about the music and the history, the musicians, and what's happening on the jazz scene now. It's an informal and authentic education that can be enjoyed with a glass of wine and some good friends or lovers, and yes, you can take your dog.



Café Royale
Photo: Catherine Wargo

There are some fantastic ways to keep educating yourself without breaking the bank, as demonstrated above. Sign up for a few, and get ready to learn something new and be the most interesting guest at the next cocktail party you attend...

Places Mentioned:

826 Valencia's Adult Seminars
826 Valencia St
415-642-5905
www.826valencia.org

Craft Gym
1452 Bush St
415-702-5700
www.craftgym.com

Make-Out Room
3225 22nd St
415-647-2888
www.makeoutroom.com

The Alliance Francaise
1345 Bush St
415-775-7755
www.afsf.com

The Crucible
1260 7th St, Oakland
510-444-0919
www.thecrucible.org

Piedmont Adult Education Center
800 Magnolia Ave, Piedmont
510-594-2655
www.piedmontadulthoodschool.org

Café Royale
800 Post St
415-441-4099
www.caferoyale-sf.com

First Class Cooking
1911 Sacramento St
www.firstclasscooking.com
emilyd@gmail.com

Writers With Drinks
www.writerswithdrinks.com

Casa Hispana
110 Gough St #401
415-861-1223
www.casahispana.com

Litquake
www.litquake.org