

Class in Session

Make enormous profits in real estate. Get advice from a psychic. Learn erotic secrets from an adult film star. Lecturers at The Learning Annex leave no stone unturned.



WHAT DO DONALD TRUMP, Bishop Desmond TuTu and Barbara Bush have in common? They've all delivered lectures through The Learning Annex. Nationally, 350,000 people take these seminars each year.

Last year in San Diego, an estimated 25,000 folks chose from about 150 classes that change on a monthly basis. The local demographic: over-30, middle to upper class, 60 percent women and mostly singles. Surely you've seen the class catalogue beckoning from a news rack somewhere. Or seen Learning Annex parodies played out on TV by Jay Leno, *The Simpsons* or the *Saturday Night Live* crew. "We love the mocking—we don't see it as a direct insult," says San Diego's Learning Annex program director, Jessie Schwartzburg. "We think it's fun, too."

San Diego Magazine sent four writers to sample the class list. Here are their reports from the oft-mocked, money-making world of elective adult education.

The Art of Exotic Dancing for Everyday Women

By Eilene Zimmerman

TEN OF US SHOWED UP on a gray Saturday morning for the Learning Annex's "The Art of Exotic Dancing for Everyday Women," and we were the epitome of everyday—short, tall, fat, thin, young, not so young. We sat in a circle on the floor of the Patti Wells Dance Studio on Morena Boulevard staring at each other and waiting for the instructor—a "real exotic dancer"—to teach us her secrets.

Dancer (and former stripper) Coralissa Gines is beautiful, vaguely Asian and oozing sexuality, the kind of woman who looks like she gets paid for walking down the street. Gines told us this class was about more than being sexy; it was about loving ourselves. "Being sexy is however you *interpretate* that," she says, emphasizing her invented word. Then she did a dance for us, arching her back and rolling her hips and sliding down a mirror, all in 7-inch red stilettos.

One of my classmates mumbled something about "not being able to move like that," but this wasn't the place for self-doubt, it was the place for exhibitionism. We stood in front of mirrored walls and learned how to drag walk, perform accentuated arm movements and do standing hip rolls, squatting hip rolls and kneeling hip rolls. I briefly considered sneaking out, popping some Advil and heading to a bar so I could loosen up. But things were moving along too fast. We were already onto "drawing the body"—an artsy term for mauling oneself.

One woman, her arms on her stomach, eyes closed and head thrown back, looked like she might honestly be having an orgasm. Another—taking the class with her daughter—savagely

Illustrations by Greg High



The Art of Erotic Dancing in Everyday Women



How To Find Your Own North Star

raked her hands across her breasts and along her inner thighs. I figured if she could do it, so could I, and began outlining my torso, even trying the old thumbs-in-waistband bit. But then I saw my reflection and stopped immediately.

After that, Gines had us practice eye contact. We were told to lock eyes with ourselves in the mirror without being critical of our appearance. She guided us through exotic dancing affirmations, as we whispered, "I love myself, I accept myself, I am beautiful."

Gines asked us, "Ladies, what do you see?"

And I thought, "God, I really *do* look like my mother!" When she had us down on all fours, doing the kneeling hip rolls, I caught a glimpse of the lot of us with our backs alternately humped and arched and thought about killing my editor.

Graduation came in the form of high heels and feather boas, worn for the spectacular finale, something out of an *Oprah* empowerment nightmare. All of us, eyes narrowed, mouths slightly ajar, sauntered down the room toward the mirror, hands on our bodies, hips moving in circles, hair flying in all directions, trying our best to be sexy. I felt mostly sweaty and tired. For the others, though, it seemed to work.

In fact, I was right about the orgasm. "I was so into

it I turned myself on!" says the aforementioned woman. And Gines jumped up and clapped her hands.

"That's what being sexy is all about!" she gushed. "You ladies are *awesome*."

How To Find Your Own North Star

By Margie Farnsworth

MY KARMA OUT OF KILTER, my chakra out of whack-ra, I figure the class allowing me to "Discover the Five Tibetan Rites of Rejuvenation" has my name written all over it, and I eagerly sign up. Unfortunately, it has *only* my name on it, and the Learning Annex informs me at the 11th hour that the class is cancelled due to lack of any other enrollees.

Quickly navigating through the Annex catalogue, I land on "How To Find Your Own North Star—and Fulfill Your True Life Potential." Instructor Martha Beck is a nationally known life coach whose credits include penning a monthly column for *O: The Oprah Magazine*. The catalogue promises "a life-changing seminar," and I start to feel changed—for the better—right away.

The conference room at the Red Lion Hualalai Hotel in Mission Valley is packed for Beck's three-hour evening presentation. A Learning Annex rep says 65 have signed up, a turnout he describes as "awesome." Most of us stargazers, I determine, are somewhere between 30 and 60; 10 are men.

Beck, a petite woman with a large voice and wide gestures, is an energetic and engaging speaker. She explains that the North Star is her metaphor "for the life you're meant to live," a fixed point "in the constantly changing constellations of your life."

Plotting a successful course toward one's North Star, says Beck, requires knowledge and alignment of one's essential self—our individual personalities and preferences—and one's social self, behavior we develop to get along in the world. Think Superman and Clark Kent, she tells us.

The most reliable compass to find your North Star is your body, Beck says, and much of her advice involves invoking sensations we encounter in various situations. Beck calls on class members for examples. Some are garden-variety frustrating: a woman who dreads giving an upcoming office presentation, for example. Others, such as the woman coping with the erratic behavior of her bipolar sister after their mother's recent death, are sincerely poignant.

Beck deftly handles these personal circumstances with compassion and appropriate doses of humor. She easily recounts relevant anecdotes while managing to avoid the psychobabble of so many popular self-help pep talks. She is full of affirmation, and she makes her audience feel good.

Still, her suggestion of four questions to ask yourself when confronting one of those dark clouds obscuring your North Star is a bit muddled. Basically, I ascertain that we students need first to make tiny changes in our vessels' trim tabs rather than give the rudders one big yank. Our ships, Beck promises, will eventually turn toward the white light of our individual North Star and its inherent fulfillment.

I leave the class ready to set sail. Heck, I'll go anywhere. Except maybe Tibet.

How To Use NLP To Get People To Do Whatever You Want

By Ron Donoho

I'VE BEEN DUPED by this 12-word seminar title. Actually, 11 of us have been conned. First, an explanation: NLP stands for neurolinguistic programming.



How To Use NLP To Get People To Do Whatever You Want

I interpret this as “Sell the sizzle, not the steak.” That’s my stab at clichéd psychobabble (but might actually sum up the whole Learning Annex philosophy).

It’s the art/science/song-and-dance of using words, tonality and physiology to build rapport with others.

Fair enough.

“But,” announces seminar leader Gary de Rodriguez, “NLP has nothing to do with getting people to do what you want. The Learning Annex thought it would entice people to come. NLP is not about manipulation. But I can’t convince New York [home office of The Learning Annex] to change the title.”

De Rodriguez offers to refund anybody the \$2 materials fee, collected in a cardboard box by the classroom door in this Hillcrest office building. Unsure if this offer extends to the prepaid class cost of \$78.49 (including a \$12.50 monthly registration fee), I stay put.

Each of us is asked to describe ourselves and state why we’re here. Good idea. I’ve always wondered who attends these things. It’s an articulate group. There’s a business owner. A couple of computer programmers. One East Coast college grad is on a cross-country trip and is taking the class to escape the San Diego phrase he’d just learned: June gloom. One man describes himself as a “child of the universe, seeking enlightenment.”

De Rodriguez informs us we are all hallucinating. Over the course of three hours, we also hear that: The conclusions we draw are based on our filters. Memories are how we know who we are. Ninety-nine percent of our immune system is in the mind. There are 11 dimensions to reality—this has been proven by quantum physics. The relationship with yourself is the most important relationship. Your resonance will attract similar resonance. You shouldn’t fall asleep with the TV on. (*Guilty.*) There is no failure, only feedback. How I see the world is not the truth. None of us sees reality. A fish rots from the head down. A person’s eyes are a window to the soul. All religion is hypnosis. The perfume industry is hypnosis.

I may have left a few out.

Eventually, we are asked to practice NLP on classroom partners. Not to get them to do what we want—but to build rapport. An essence of NLP is the act of mirroring body actions during conversation. Supposedly, communication is 7 percent words, 38 percent tonality and 55 percent physiology.

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We also learn that our seminar leader spent three days getting his “core values” on money in order. Soon thereafter, he sold his house for more than the list price. “I manifested it,” he says.

A student asks him to clarify. Does he mean he meditated, and this enabled the house to sell?

“Is this part too woo-woo for anybody?” de Rodriguez wonders.

Yes. But who can say for sure. I think I’m hallucinating.

Mining Your Info-Preneurial Spirit

By Deirdre O’Shea

WHEN SEMINAR INSTRUCTOR and “focus expert” Susan Gilbert asks if anyone is allergic to dogs, it seems a rhetorical question: Could the microscopic Yorkie on her arm produce enough allergens to sell even a single tablet of Claritin? The pup stays put, and Gilbert, with her shiny penny-color hair and soothing seafoam-green suit, gives her background, from her heady days in sales at AT&T (“phenomenal”) to starting a Little Miss Muffins bakery/café chain to an unsuccessful foray into Web publishing to her true calling—information marketing.

Fourteen of us—middle-class folk, average age about 45 (*Other people are rich; why aren’t we, damn it!*)—are here to become “info-preneurs.” A table is stacked with Gilbert’s helpful You Can! products, including a fat loose-leaf book called *Information Marketing Bootcamp* for \$399 (that seminar costs \$3,000), and her book *The Land of I Can*. We’ve each paid \$78.49 to learn to package and sell information—in other words, to give a seminar like this one.

Gilbert asks how many students know what information they want to sell. Seven hands go up. How many have no idea but think this sounds like a good way to make money? Seven different hands. Gilbert insists we’ll

need a *quality product* to keep people coming back for more: "It has to look like you didn't just staple it together. . . . It's the content that matters."

But enough about that.

"Marketing is king!" Gilbert continues. "Stop thinking of yourself as an information person, and start thinking of yourself as a marketer!" Still, the question lingers for many—what to market? Two precious words pop out of Gilbert's mouth: public domain. If it was written before 1923, it's all yours. Can't find something good by a dead guy? Hire someone to write it for you at Elance.com.

Gilbert shares a story about John Reese, who is "amazing" and gave a seminar that she attended "to see how his mind works." Gilbert laughs. "Reese would say, 'It's all about getting the crap out there on the Internet, then you can improve it.'"

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One of the most successful info-preneurs is just 19. Germaine has made more than a million dollars with one e-book, *How To Play the Piano*. Does he play the piano? "Oh, yes," Gilbert says. Did he have to establish his background? "Absolutely not!" cries Gilbert, triumphantly.

It's time to talk numbers. "Let's say you want to make money, and you don't care about the subject," says Gilbert. If a site gets 100 visitors a day—"a conservative amount, if you're doing anything right"—you can expect one sale a day of a \$30 e-book. Multiply that by 40 sites, and it's more than \$400,000 a year. "The first site will be the hardest," she says. "It's a numbers game." The electricity in the room is palpable.

"You're going to run out of here all excited. But be careful who you share this with," she warns. "Some people are going to shoot you down."

Think what you will. This I know: Gilbert makes a lot more money than I do. ■

