"Would Gandhi have had a Twitter account?" During a typical "Ideas That Change the World" class, Professor Kathleen Brown-Pérez facilitates discussion by asking such unexpected questions.

Brown-Pérez, a Federal Indian Law attorney and former corporate lawyer, uses the law to weave together the four units in the multidisciplinary, 4-credit course required for all Commonwealth Honors College students. She supplements the material with TED Talks, documentaries, and a screening of the film 12 Angry Men to get her students engaged. Everyone speaks up in her class, she said.

Every section of Ideas That Change the World studies Plato, Gandhi, Rachel Carson and Orson Welles, but each faculty member presents these works to students in varied and creative ways. Professors use their own backgrounds and expertise to challenge students and inspire them to share thoughts of their own. Discussions are broad and no two sections are the same, since student input often drives the conversation.

"I learn a great deal from my students every semester," said Professor Nicole Nemec, who has taught the course since 2009. "Though we read the same texts each term, each class can be dramatically different....What each student contributes is crucial."

At the start of each class, Nemec introduces a contemplative practice derived from Greek, Roman, and Buddhist traditions. These short exercises bring students away from the monologues inside their heads, with the goal of instilling a sense of self-awareness and a habit of thoughtful inquiry over time. A member of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, Nemec encourages students to become ethical thinkers through the 25-Hour Project, a semester-long exploration of a topic of their choice. "It acknowledges that, for the most part, students at this level don't really know that much about their future disciplines," she said.

Soun Heang Lee, a senior biochemistry & molecular biology major from Revere, Mass., says that the course taught him in a way
that was different from his major-related courses. "I'd divide knowledge into two compartments," he explained. "One is specific knowledge, like chemistry or math. Then, there is the knowledge where you use what you know and apply it in a different way to solve problems. The honors seminar taught me in that creative space."

Brown-Pérez wants her students to move away from the habit of regurgitating information they learn, and start to develop, speak, and support their own ideas. She added that the class could aptly be called "Let's Think."

Professor Connolly Ryan also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking in his classes. Ryan has a background teaching courses in writing and poetry. He assigns five five-page essays throughout the semester, prompting students to write in a way that is "introspective as well as investigative." Ryan brings the texts into today's world by presenting a few current events for students to think about and relate back to the readings. Students in his class connect the material to their own relevant experiences and opinions to generate a new discussion.

"One of our precious resources that is accelerating towards obsolescence is the art of critical thinking," Ryan said. His goal is for students to go beyond passive spectatorship and instead dive into their own work.

Across the sections of Ideas That Change the World, there seems to be a guiding vision: students should be thoughtful and investigative about the world, in settings beyond the classroom and beyond the UMass campus.

While there is plenty to be learned from studying Plato, Gandhi, Carson, and Welles, Ideas That Change the World focuses not only on what students learn but how they can become learners, exploring their own ideas that might one day change the world.

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