A BBC radio reporter who recently wanted to learn more about CTY for a program he was preparing asked me if we “had any Einsteins in the summer programs.”

We got the “Einstein” question a lot. My answer is that if the next Einstein is to be found anywhere, it will be in our summer programs. But our mission is broader than finding the next Einstein. Our aim is to meet the current academic needs of thousands of bright children who join us every summer, and to hone their talents and direct their studies towards academic fulfillment.

When CTY summer programs first began in 1979, there were few models to follow, but research at Johns Hopkins in those early years charted our direction. We found that students who performed extremely well compared to their classmates on above-grade-level standardized tests could handle courses pitched at a faster pace and greater depth than what was considered “normal” for their age. In 1982, a major literature survey of 52 studies in gifted education found compelling evidence that highly able students grouped with their peers of like ability, as is done at CTY, achieve at significantly higher levels than gifted counterparts in mixed ability classes.

The important of identifying talent in a particular academic area and then making the most out of that demonstrated academic strength is the reason behind the development of academic programs at CTY. Our aim is to offer courses that are faster paced or cover material in greater depth; allow them to be in the company of students with similar abilities; offer them a range of choices in disciplines for which they have talent and motivation to excel; and provide them with talented instructors as role models who guide them in shared inquiry. And that is exactly what CTY strives to do.

A fourth point is made by both CTY staff and Dr. Ellen Winner, well-known researcher at Howard Gardner’s Project Zero at Harvard University. Both support CTY’s practice of giving very bright students, in Dr. Winner’s words, “a chance to take fast-paced intensive summer courses in their area of talent.” This idea displays the importance of identifying talent in a particular academic area and then making the most out of that demonstrated academic strength.

Following these findings, a program for highly gifted children ought to offer them courses that are faster paced or cover material in greater depth; allow them to be in the company of students with similar abilities; offer them a range of choices in disciplines for which they have talent and motivation to excel; and provide them with talented instructors as role models who guide them in shared inquiry. And that is exactly what CTY strives to do.

The following pages highlight just a few of the 100+ courses available at CTY. Taught well above grade level and by caring and skilled faculty, CTY courses enable very bright students to learn in the company of others of like ability, while developing their talents to the highest possible levels.
For student Emma Cohen (pictured, right), the formula “I’m a math person,” says Emma’s mother, Eve Cohen.

In larger terms, a classic challenge for CTY staff is found in this class: some students will enter the class on day one already knowing something about the subject, while others may know much less. CTY’s focus on teaching the individual, not the course, ensures that all students move forward in a climate of high expectations. Says Daw, “The goal is to have all students learn as much as possible.”

Class observations demonstrate the model in action. With abiding patience, Daw and his teaching assistant Sean Lawton, also a gifted mathematician, give presentations, pose puzzles, and continually make themselves available to every student who approaches them for help, while visiting less forthcoming pupils. This format, multiplified by five hours a day, five days per week, over three weeks, adds up to a learning experience that distills it to its essentials. For example, she cut the original 28 labs to 18. Her efforts paid off. After teaching the course for a summer, Parker learned to achieve a 30 point rise between the pretest in the morning and the post-test in late afternoon. “It was a stunt,” he says today, “but we did prove a point.”

The point is that students who qualify for CTY can handle fast-paced academic course work. For them, completing a course in three weeks that others take over a year helps them master that subject quickly, retain the material well, and sooner reach the loftier levels of that discipline where real contributions and achievements are made. That explains why CTY offers a number of courses in which students can, in three weeks, cover a year’s worth of high-school work.

“Students in my CTY class do learn at a very fast pace, and I am sure that some of them would be very bored by needing to take a year to complete chemistry,” says Dr. Carolyn Parker, who for eight years has taught Fast-Paced Chemistry at CTY’s Saratoga Springs location. Parker, an assistant professor in the University of Maryland system, says that there’s not a spare moment in her class. “We keep a very tight linkage between morning class lectures and concepts, and afternoon labs,” she says.

After teaching the course for a summer, Parker learned to distill it to its essentials. For example, she cut the original 28 labs to 18. Her efforts paid off. “Once, at the end of an academic-year course at a private school where I taught, I gave the post-test we use at CTY to my students. CTY students scored higher.”

Other CTY courses designed to help students skip the same course back at their home school include the biology and physics courses titled “Fast-Paced,” the Math Sequence courses, Latin, and Greek.

“The fast courses were great,” says former CTY student and Cryptography instructor (see article) Stefan Treatman. “I completed all of Algebra 1 and Geometry at CTY and moved right into Algebra 2 that fall.” Such testimonials, combined with research demonstrating their effectiveness, continue to highlight the value of such courses for future academic high-flyers.
For student Emma Cohen (pictured, right), the formula "complex problems. By doing so, Daw helps his students as well as time-honored shortcuts and utilities for solving this by presenting the concepts of formal reasoning, as any discipline for that matter, is of fundamental importance in higher math, and The larger goal? Getting kids to explain their reasoning. Yet her abilities were clearly up to excelling in her course of math study so far included formal reasoning. Her teacher, Russell Daw, says his CTY students learn useful mathematical principles rarely taught in early grades.

Russell Daw (pictured, with Kevin Ma and Emma Cohen) says his students learn useful mathematical principles rarely taught in early grades.

Is the number 0 odd or even? Is there any way besides infinite experimentation to prove that the product of two odd numbers is odd every time? Can you prove that diagonal lines drawn between opposite points in a rectangle are equal in length? Welcome to CTY’s reasoning course for fifth and sixth graders, where students wrestle with these and other brain exercises. Russell Daw, the University of Virginia Ph.D. who taught the course in 2001, says his CTY students get excited about an aspect of mathematics that’s extremely useful yet gets very little “airtime” in elementary school. The larger goal? "Getting kids to explain their reasoning. This is of fundamental importance in higher math, and any discipline for that matter,” says Daw. He accomplishes this by presenting the concepts of formal reasoning, as well as time-honored shortcuts and utilities for solving complex problems. By doing so, Daw helps his students “load a toolbox that improves their thinking in math.”

For student Emma Cohen (pictured, right), the formula clicked. “I’m a math person,” she adds. Emma says that her course of math study so far hasn’t included formal reasoning. Yet her abilities were clearly up to excelling in the subject. “Logic puzzles are just the sort of things she likes to do,” says Emma’s mother, Eve Cohen.

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Skepticism abounded about his findings, so Stanley rounded up a class of middle school prodigies and taught them the entire Algebra 1 sequence of concepts in a day, achieving a 30 point rise between the pretest in the morning and the post-test in late afternoon. “It was a stunt,” he says today, “but we did prove a point.” The point is that students who qualify for CTY can handle fast-paced academic course work. For them, completing a course in three weeks that others take over a year helps them master that subject quickly, retain the material well, and sooner reach the loftier levels of that discipline where real contributions and achievements are made.

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Talent Search founding father and Hopkins professor Dr. Julian Stanley was startled in the 1970s to realize, during his early work with a handful of exceptionally gifted middle schoolers, how much these students could learn, and how fast they could learn it.
Cryptography

Keeping Secrets a Secret

For the active imaginations of instructors Stefan Treatman, David Perry, and the students in CTY’s Cryptography course, the parallels between CTY and Bletchley Park were striking.

Bletchley Park! Historians – and now the 30 students who took the new course last summer – will know this as the secret location in England where, during World War II, mathematicians and linguists finally unscrambled the coded messages being sent by Germany’s Enigma device. Teamwork, cleverness, and perseverance were needed to break the codes – qualities Treatman and Perry also required for their popular but challenging course. And ultimate frisbee (surely by now CTY’s unofficial sport) was thrown in for good measure during breaks, just as rounders (similar to baseball) was the popular diversion at Bletchley.

Treatman, a U.S. government cryptographer who himself was a CTY student (early 80s), is the developer of the cipher they’d already studied and made it more formidable by shoring up its known deficiencies. Says Treatman, “One girl made a cipher based on notes of a flute. It wasn’t very secure, but it was creative. And it helped us illustrate an important point, which is that some ciphers needed to be secure for a long time, while others needed to be secure just long enough. If the cipher can’t be cracked for two hours, and you only need it for one, that’s an effective cipher.”

Treatman says his years as a CTY student himself and close knowledge of the program from that side of the field gave him extra energy to plan a great experience. “It’s not available in stores,” he says with a laugh, then, earnestly, “I myself hadn’t even heard of the field until well into grad school. I imagine how much I’d now know about the subject if I knew about it when much younger.”

Daily lessons focus on the history of cryptography, from the time of Caesar, to the adoption of the current world standard for cryptography – Public Key Encryption – that makes possible such take-for-granted activities as email and using a credit card at the gas pump.

Interspersed between lessons were more extensive projects. The Enigma activity was one, where students made a model Enigma device, then received and cracked its messages. In another, students were asked to create an original cipher (a message in code). Several students modified a cipher they’d already studied and made it more formidable by shoring up its known deficiencies.

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Dynamic Earth

An Earth-Shaking Course

“Yes, it’s gonna blow!” a student in the Dynamic Earth class exclaims. A moment later, a sloppy punch made of vinegar and baking soda oozes out the top of the “volcano” cone.

It’s no Mount Etna, but the display during the afternoon lab does etch into the minds of these 11 and 12 year olds the morning’s lesson about types of volcanoes: cinder cone, shield, composite …

The Dynamic Earth class was developed five years ago to give rising fifth and sixth graders an introduction to geology; although its subject requires a synthesis of disciplines and lab skills. David Radell, a CTY instructor since 1996 and a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska, devotes one week each to physical geology, hydrological processes, and the effects of humans upon earth systems. Specific activities included in the course have students performing physical and chemical tests performed on unknown minerals, and tramping along a riverbed or the nearby San Andreas fault for up-close inspection of geological displays. “The field work is the bread-and-butter of the class,” says Radell.

The course curriculum aligns with the CTY notion, supported by research, that youthful inquiries into specialized fields can light a lifetime passion. “Many of us may remember, as incoming college students, the delight of walking into the course of a dynamic instructor and seeing for the first time a universe of inquiry far beyond what we’d known until that time,” says Lea Ybarra, CTY’s executive director. “We want our students to have this same exciting experience.”

For Ravi Agarwal, 13, from Santa Clara, CA, the chance to combine traditional work in geology, such as chemical testing for mineral identification, with field work, was an effective mix, though he admits to slight disappointment upon arriving at the San Andreas fault line and not finding a gaping chasm in the earth, “just a few small cracks.”

No cracks were apparent, however, in the way Dave Radell taught the class, says Ravi. “He explained everything thoroughly, mixed activities, and used humor to help us learn.” Now, months later, he says, “When my friends have a question [about earth science], I tell them everything they need to know.”
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"Teachers Should Be Problem-Posers"

Phil Boshoff (photo, right), a professor at Skidmore College and a CTY instructor since 1986, explains how his CTY course, focused on literary analysis and persuasive writing, sets CTY students on exciting new paths of academic inquiry and personal quests for high achievement.

Q. How do CTY students compare to your undergraduates?
P. B. CTY students are the intellectual equals of many college students, only without as much “lived experience,” and very open to new ways of looking at learning.

Q. How does your CTY course compare to your college courses?
P. B. My CTY writing course is college-level in its depth and expectations. For example, my CTY class reads Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, a challenging novel by any measure. CTY students are pleased to learn that my college students also read this book, and that I hold both groups to about the same standards.

Q. How do you introduce CTY students to literary theory?
P. B. We read closely and critically. This means rereading, discussing, contesting, and finally constructing reasoned and defensible ideas and points of view. Then we apply types of literary criticism, both to well-known pieces of literature, but also to artifacts of contemporary culture, such as film, the internet, even advertisements.

Q. A skeptic may argue, literary theory for kids, what’s the point?
P. B. It’s the language specialists use in understanding major works of literary art. At its core, students are asked to wrestle with a text and develop a well-reasoned and extended argument. You can use that knowledge in literature class or in writing a brief for the Supreme Court!

Q. What do you hope your students get from their CTY experience?
P. B. I want them to develop original and well-reasoned arguments. And it’s important for them to take some chances here. Although I give extensive feedback at CTY, I don’t grade. I think that encourages the taking of risks. Beyond that, I also want my CTY students to receive the honest criticism they need.

Q. Honest criticism?
P. B. At CTY, we praise good work and effort, but we also give critical feedback as well. Ratcheting up the standards in this way helps students become better self-appraisers of their writing and thinking. This is a very valuable skill to acquire, although not often easy or comfortable for students. But the payoff comes for me when, months or years later, I receive letters and email from my students who say they’re now using skills acquired in my classroom in their schoolwork or job.

Q. What prepared you to teach CTY students?
P. B. I draw from the ideas of Paulo Freire, the late Brazilian educator. Freire held that teachers should be problem-posers and discussion leaders and not simply dump information from lecture notes into students’ brains. For example, I’ll walk into a morning’s class and ask students to tell me why I should or shouldn’t critically respect a work. I am genuinely interested in their responses, because it often helps me to deepen my own understanding of the story.

Also, Roger von Oech’s article, “To Err is Wrong” guides my teaching. He says that today’s students are taught to play it safe, thanks to performance-based standards that emphasize “one right answer.” But, at least in the humanities, there often won’t be one right answer, only one that’s more creative, compelling, reasoned, and beautiful than others. Arriving at this doorstep involves creative, deep thinking, and also the taking of some risks, of traveling into uncharted intellectual territory. CTY is a wonderful environment where this can happen.

Q. Besides the students, what keeps you coming back to CTY year after year?
P. B. The on-campus collegiality among faculty is really powerful. Instructors exchange ideas constantly – after classes, at staff meetings, over lunch or coffee. We constantly discuss teaching strategies, especially how to adapt teaching approaches to the talents and needs of each student. In many ways teaching at CTY is like an academic retreat. The air is full of discussions about each student, and many of the instructors keep the conversations going all year.

Q. So the secret for teaching CTY students is …?
P. B. I think the best CTY instructors successfully show students why diving into an academic discipline can be exciting and wonderful. For me, that’s literary theory. For my CTY colleagues down the hall it’s astronomy, or logic, or mathematics. Whatever the subject, the best instructors at CTY treat it as if it’s the most important thing they’ve ever encountered, and soon the students are seen running right along.

Gifted Students Deserve Gifted Teachers

Much credit for the success of CTY classes goes to the terrific teachers who spend their summers developing our nation’s top academic talent. College professors, public and independent school teachers, and doctoral candidates, the members of the CTY faculty mix academic challenge with the wonder of discovery, and add a sense of fun to the more serious enterprise at hand. Says Scott McVay, CTY advisory board member and president of the Chautauqua Institution, “You see the inspired, informed teaching that goes on at the CTY summer programs, and you say to yourself, ‘every child should have the chance to have teachers such as these.’”
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Hopes, Dreams...

Alan Ra
Hometown: Roanoke, VA
Age: 14
Favorite Book: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Pirsig.
Intended career: Neurosurgeon.
Advice to CTY prospects: Come with your intelligence without apology.
Greatest challenge of my generation: Our need to adjust to growing demographic diversity and environmental issues.

Gabrielle Vance
Hometown: Juneau, AK
Age: 12
Favorite book: The Bean Trees – Mr. Guacamole – Mr. Avocado – "Mr. Guacamole"
Best thing about CTY: Living in a college campus, because it gave me a feeling of control and a chance to be dependent upon myself.

Dana Wilson
Hometown: Brooklyn, NY
Age: 14
Book I'm reading now: The Giver by Lois Lowry.
Intended career: Engineer, Lawyer.
Best thing about CTY: Universal appealing style.

Frank Lopez
Hometown: Los Angeles, CA
Age: 14
Book I'm reading now: The Giver by Lois Lowry.
Intended career: Anesthesiologist.

Vivienne Machi
Hometown: San Francisco, CA
Age: 11
Last book read: To Capture a Castle by Dodie Smith.
Intended career: I want to be a linguist and/or writer.
Favorite book: Number Devil by Hans Magnus Enzensberger.
Wish I had written: Dr. Faustus by Christopher Marlowe.

Erich Steubgen
Hometown: Bond, OR
Age: 11
Best thing about CTY: Spending time with the "crew," a big open circle of friends.

Scott Krysa
Hometown: Robbinsville, NJ
Age: 16
Book I'm reading now: Love's Labour's Lost by William Shakespeare.
Favorite author: Shakespeare – surpises, quick moving plot.
Intended career: Social work.
Wish I had seen: Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi speaking – they changed the way people thought.

Anita Varma
Hometown: Pittsburgh, PA
Age: 16
Book I'm reading now: A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith.
Intended career: Anesthesiologist.
Favorite author: Shakespeare – surpises, quick moving plot.
Intended career: Social work.
Wish I had seen: Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi speaking – they changed the way people thought.

Through a year of unprecedented events, CTY students reflect the concerns of others, while also displaying unfazed optimism and a love of learning that has characterized CTYers since 1979.