Students in the UH 333 Chess in Education course learn the academic and social benefits the game holds for children while teaching it in Tuscaloosa schools.

By Alice Deters and Courtney Stokes | Photos by Alaina Clark and Mica Aguilar

When Kayla Montgomery signed up for the Every Move Counts course on the advice of her roommate, she didn’t know what to expect. 

Now, after participating in the program over multiple semesters, Montgomery describes UH 333 Every Move Counts: A Chess in Education Project like this: “It’s not just a class, it’s a way to get involved with the community.”

Every Move Counts partners UA students with second through 12th graders in Tuscaloosa public schools. The program is a nationally unique service-learning initiative of the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility.

In addition to reading about and discussing the academic and social benefits of chess and its emerging role in U.S. education systems, students develop lesson plans and spend at least two hours each week mentoring and teaching chess to children in nearby schools.

Educational research shows chess improves critical-thinking, problem-solving and concentration skills as well as math, reading and English scores. Since gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic status are irrelevant to the game, chess brings together diverse groups of children, helping them build friendships they might not have formed otherwise. The game also instills life lessons such as perseverance, responsibility, sportsmanship and planning ahead. Research indicates children gain all these benefits just by learning and practicing chess, regardless of how well they play.

“I like working with the younger kids best because many of them have no chess knowledge, so it’s cool when you see what you’re teaching click in their heads – to see the gears start turning,” says Montgomery, a junior majoring in journalism and Spanish. “It’s awesome to know that you are teaching them a skill that they will take with them.”

The program has grown significantly since Spring 2010, when it began with three UA students teaching chess to 12 sixth graders. In Spring 2015, 58 UA students taught chess to approximately 240 children in once- or twice-weekly lessons at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools-Elementary and Middle, Alberta Elementary School, Central Elementary School, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, Oakdale Elementary School, Oak Hill School and Bryant High School.

Since its inception, Every Move Counts has held a Tuscaloosa-area chess match each year for children in the program and others in West Alabama to come together and experience competitive play. The program also has developed chess teams at four schools, and these teams compete in other tournaments as well.

During their first semester in the Every Move Counts program, two Bryant High School students, Kodei Payne and Jacob Willoughby, won first and second place, respectively, in their division of the 2014 Tuscaloosa Scholastic Chess Championship. Je’De Simmons, a fourth-grader at Central Elementary, and Thaddeus Roberts, a fourth-grader at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools-Elementary, tied for third place in their division.

Isaac Smith, an eighth grade and member of the chess team at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools-Middle, says chess is fun because a lot of strategy is involved, but the game isn’t terribly difficult to understand. “Chess teaches me to look ahead and guess more accurately what will happen later in the day,” he says. “Chess also helps me predict what others will do, in a game or in life.”

Makenia McHargh, a sixth-grader at the Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools-Middle chess team, says the game can teach a person many things: “Chess teaches me patience and skill. Another thing that chess helps me learn is the importance of practice, because without practice you can’t be good at chess.”

UA students organize chess festivals at several schools each spring. During these events, kids participate in creative, fast-paced, chess-related activities such as chess Jeopardy, earning tokens they trade in for chess-themed prizes.

Every Move Counts is a student-led initiative. Students involved in earlier semesters of the program return as lead volunteers through an honors independent-study course. This structure facilitates expansion of Every Move Counts and gives students an ownership stake in the initiative.

Haley Burhans, a lead volunteer with the program and senior majoring in chemistry, says she has enjoyed being able to give back to the community in a unique way. “Maybe these kids will be great chess players, but in the end, if it’s just them teaching their siblings to play chess or having something to bond with their parents over, getting to work with these kids is more rewarding than I can say,” she says.

To learn more about Every Move Counts, visit cesr.ua.edu or contact the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility at cesr@ua.edu or 205-348-6493.

Why Chess?

In the United States, chess has not achieved the status it holds in other countries. Nearly 30 nations around the world include chess in their education systems, and the International Olympic Committee recognizes chess as a sport. Recently, education communities in the United States have begun taking note of the academic benefits of chess, and a growing number of states are including it in their curricula.

Every Move Counts is a nationally unique effort within a school setting that provides advantages for both through mentoring young chess players, college students establish a tie with the community while teaching a game they enjoy, and children have fun while reaping educational and social rewards."

UA student Zachary Reitsen explains a strategy to Charlie Baker, an eighth grader on the Tuscaloosa Magnet Middle School chess team. Opposite: Alberta Elementary School student J’Amon Brown practices his skills.