

**REVEALING THE EXTRAORDINARY WITHIN THE AT RISK YOUTH OF L.A.-**  
**A STUDY OF SUPPLEMENTARY ART PROGRAMS IN LOS ANGELES**  
**CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS**

INTRODUCTION – “...*the mystery of the human potential.*”

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the human experience is the human potential. This is our ability to create our lives according to an image of what we can be. It is a wonderful trait that is common to us all, especially among the young people of our community. The mystery of the human potential is a very powerful code. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to claim that the goal of education is to help achieve the clarity and focus of this personal vision by giving the student the tools of communication and self-discovery to unlock this code. This is where programs that provide the art experience become very important. It helps that journey towards self-image and self-awareness.

To a certain extent, all young people are at risk of not being able to achieve this potential. There are certainly those that have a greater disadvantage because of their economic and social condition and they are the ones that are truly at risk. In Los Angeles, the city’s Unified School District (LAUSD) has created the Educational Options program. This is a dropout and recovery program known as the continuation high school. It is the largest program of its kind in the nation. It is an alternative for students who have not succeeded or have fallen behind in the mainstream high school system. They are given more flexibility, attention and in some cases, more personal safety.

This paper will attempt a simple study of two groups of at risk youth in continuation high schools in Los Angeles and the supplementary art programs they have participated in from April to December of 2005. I was fortunate enough to facilitate these programs.

LA FAMILIA – *The Teacher – Mr. Ruiz*

This continuation high school is attached to Central High School of the LAUSD. It is located in the community center known as La Familia in East Los Angeles. It has about 30 students and is run by one teacher – Mr. Ignacio Ruiz. Mr. Ruiz has taught art in middle school for 17 years and has observed that his art classes became the repository of problem kids. He would tend to 40 students at a time. He decided that he might as well have all the problem kids in a special environment. He switched to the continuation high school model and has been doing it for the last 10 years at La Familia.

He confessed to being scared in the beginning but to his surprise he experienced respectful students who were a little misunderstood. There was very little or no discipline problems, no fights, literally “no haters.” They were just noisy. His biggest advantages are his ties to the neighborhood and the families of the kids. He knows the parents and communicates well with them. He has a solid community base. The students always have the option to leave his unit.

However, there are real problems that confront his students. The most serious one being peer pressure. This heavily discourages and suppresses individual and critical thinking. Another is misguided parental protection. The

parents cover up for the mistakes of their children. They somehow project the image that their child is incapable of bad behavior. The result is a child that has little or no sense of accountability. A third burden is irresponsible sexual activity. This results in teen pregnancy and single parenthood. Lately Mr. Ruiz has not experienced drug problems and gang violence.

From April to June 2005, 28 of his students participated in an art workshop that used animation to create stories about nature and technology. The workshop was sponsored by The Heart Project.

THE HEART PROJECT – *“...work the circle of communication.”*

Now in its 13<sup>th</sup> year, The Heart Project is an arts organization that is working with 11 continuation high schools, 3 community day schools and one low-income housing community center in Los Angeles. Its mission is to bring teens, artists and communities together to create new work in the visual and performing arts. It has a series of 3 yearlong 11-week workshops. Then there are opportunities like residencies in art institutions and scholarships to art schools for deserving students.

Peter Harris has been its program director for 3 years. He has a background in education as a teacher and dean of a college, in writing as a poet, fiction writer and essayist. For him, the goal of The Heart Project is not really to turn the students into artists but to help them develop their personal vision by giving them the tools to do so and this is done through exposure to all types of visual and performance art. It is very important for them to be able to work the

circle of communication, to be able to listen to others and themselves, trust their own voice and be precise in their message. These are necessary skills that will help them neutralize their negative tendencies and avoid “being caught in the barbed wire of society.”

#### “NATURE, ART & TECHNOLOGY”

The Heart Project arts workshop that I facilitated with the students at La Familia had the following as a vector for exploration: “look at ways in which art and technology can be used to simulate nature and how art can be inspired by new technological possibilities available to society. For example: Could silk from black widow spiders be as bullet-proof as Kevlar vests? How could automated flying drones be based on hovering insects and birds?”

At first I was at a loss on how to approach this since my background is experimental animation and film/video production. It seemed that I would need some science background. I reformulated the idea and proposed that the exploration be the use of the art of storytelling using real time storyboard presentations or cutouts from magazines and flipbook animation that is recorded to a digital image sequencer- to tell stories about nature and technology purely from the students’ imagination. It was approved. So once a week for 10 weeks I would encourage students to draw their stories on 4 X 6 index cards, or cut out pictures from magazines from the 70’s and imagine a plot that would provide for a dramatic arc. I would assemble a video stand that would have a camera shooting down on their drawings or magazine cutouts, this would be connected top a video recorder, a TV monitor and a microphone. They will essentially have

a live performance of their story using their own voice for the narration or character voices or in some cases sound effects and music. The whole class would watch the monitor. It was like live television. It was awkward at first but they could always redo their performance. They did come up with some good stories. Their delivery and timing got better. Then they would create the flipbooks. They created simple and crude moving images that had a very simple narrative thread. I would then record it as an animated sequence and add the voices from their interviews about the stories in the flipbooks. I would show the animation the following week. Their drawings would come to life guided by their voices. It is really wonderful how a simple creation can bring so much joy.

All workshop participants from all 5 schools using the same theme gave a presentation on June 16, 2005 at the Huntington Library. La Familia was the only school that used animation and video as linear storytelling tools. The work of the La Familia kids was probably the most accessible and entertaining because of the proximity to popular culture of the media we used – storytelling through moving images.

NICK GONZALEZ – *The Student* - "...stop war."

Nick was one of the 28 students from La Familia who participated in the workshop. He is 17 years old and is in his sophomore year. He did enjoy telling stories through hand drawn pictures and would like to do more of it. He now realizes how important stories are. For him it is a way of knowing your family and it is something that can be passed on through generations. He sees the art programs as a way of learning about yourself and also a way of learning from

others. He feels that these programs should be in every school. Part of his personal vision is to see an end to all wars.

ALL PEOPLES CHRISTIAN CENTER – *The Teacher* – Kathy Masaoka

The continuation high school at All Peoples Christian Center has actually been around for 25 years. It was run by SAAY – Service for Asian American Youth until 2001. The All Peoples Christian Center then became its sponsor. This center is in the densely populated central district of Los Angeles. It has mostly immigrant, working class, Latino families. It has about 30 kids and two teachers – Tony Osumi and Kathy Masaoka. Kathy has been with SAAY/All Peoples for the past 22 years. She emphasized that the kids who come to their school are not necessarily in trouble. A lot of them come on their own and are usually from the neighborhood. They are interviewed and must show a willingness to get along with others and verbally exhibit an interest in the program.

The most pressing difficulty that confronts the kids is in the area of immigration. A great number of them do not have legal status. Their future after finishing school is uncertain. Their language skills in English are not that good. They come from broken families and experience physical abuse from their surrogate parents. There is also the constant threat of drug abuse and gang violence. They belong to the low-income family bracket. It is fair to say that anything can happen to them at anytime.

Another problem is the recent emphasis in the LAUSD on teaching to increase test scores. The effect is that there is now less flexibility in devising a curriculum for continuation high schools. Also, the actual learning that should

happen with students is now not as important as getting high test scores. There is also a movement away from community-based schools.

Kathy is very hopeful. Her personal vision is to have everybody perceive their goals clearly and have the tools and skills to pursue them and not be “stuck.” 5 students from her school participated in a digital storytelling workshop sponsored by Visual Communications from October to December 2005.

VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS – “...*promoting intercultural understanding.*”

The oldest Asian-American media arts organization in the country, Visual Communications has been promoting intercultural understanding through the creation, education, presentation, preservation and support of Asian Pacific American media for 35 years. Its education component, run by programs manager Jeff Liu, regularly provides media arts workshops for the underserved members of the community in the downtown Los Angeles area where it is located. Jeff believes that Visual Communications’ mandate goes beyond just helping local media artists but more importantly it is to raise the profile of Asian Americans on issues of race and identity. Through critical and creative engagement of the media arts, more people will be able to change their negative perception of others and come together to create a just and humane society. He is quite aware of the problems that face the kids in continuation high schools. Visual Communications provides arts programs to students from these schools to help them develop their personal vision.

## DIGITAL STORYTELLING – *Moving The Image*

The workshop I facilitated was primarily to give the participants the opportunity to experience, understand and explore the language of film or as it is now called the moving image. The students were given presentations and exercises on visual design, shot structure, editing and the sound that accompanies the moving image. Then they are asked to make personal narratives on three levels. The first is the fictional dramatic narrative where they create their own 1 minute dramas using each other as actors. The next is the documentary narrative where they take elements from their contemporary situation and present it with their own critical analysis. The last is an exercise in experimental imagery. The tools used were simple mini-DV camcorders and the editing was done on the G4/G5 apple stations with i-movie. We encouraged the utilization of i-movie's titling module, sound effects library and for the experimental component i-movie's transition and visual effects module. It was clear that during the course of the workshop we would have to engage the problems that surround these 5 students. It also made a difference that they had to come to a different location outside of their regular school hours and that some of them did not need the academic credit the workshop provided. So what started out as 12 interested students became 6, and only 5 completely finished the workshop. There was tardiness and absenteeism and so another 3 sessions were added to allow for the completion of the pieces. The best moment came when they presented their work to their classmates. The 5 students realized that they themselves, their neighborhood and their specific culture became the

heroes, the settings and themes of the stories that unfolded as moving images on that familiar screen that everyone watches. There was an intuitive recognition among all of the students of the power of this experience. The students started asking about the next digital storytelling class.

JULIO DIAZ – *The Student “...I just want to graduate sooner and go to college.”*

Born in South Central Los Angeles, Julio Diaz is an 18 year old 10<sup>th</sup> grader from All Peoples. He was punctual, articulate, hard working and most of all, thoughtful about his images. He enjoyed the workshop; particularly the aspect where he learned about the language of film. He had always enjoyed movies, but when he understood how films worked, he enjoyed it even more. For him telling stories are important because it allows people to represent their neighborhood. He feels that it improves his critical thinking. He hopes to do more of these stories and wishes that there are more programs like these. His personal vision is just to graduate and be able to go to college.

IN SUMMARY – *“...the tools to unlock the mystery.”*

On the most fundamental level, both supplementary art programs succeeded in that it provided the students with the opportunity for self expression using visual art, story telling through animation and digital narrative. An important component of this experience is the presentation of their work to their peers. In both cases it was very effective. Peter Harris of the Heart Project made the comment that serves as guidelines for artist/facilitators/teachers in art programs. There are three imperatives – first, that the teacher/artists have to be good at

what they do. Second, they have to demand excellence from their students because that is really what the kids want from them. Finally, they have to be flexible and consider the specific personal situation of the student when they fall behind. We can begin to summarize the benefits of these programs as observed by the teachers and its program directors. It relieves the continuation schools of the burden of providing for the infrastructure and resources of implementing art workshops in their curriculum. In both cases we have an on site workshop and in another the students had to go to another location after school. The students were given academic credit for their participation. In the case of the Heart Project, a variety of art workshops are offered from visual art to performance art. It also provides for insight into opportunities for careers in the entertainment industry, which happened in the Visual Communication digital storytelling workshop. It helps encourage collaborative learning, the sharing of ideas with your peers and the experience of learning from others. It increases self-confidence and allows the student to experience a diversity of lifestyles as they are exposed to different artist/teachers, their ideas and their work. In the case of off-site workshops, it allows students to develop a sense of independence as they negotiate an unfamiliar environment. Finally, when these programs work at their best they provide effective tools to students to help them formulate the image of what they want to be and to pursue them. These are the tools that help unlock the mystery of the human potential.

## Appendix:

**“ART, TECHNOLOGY & NATURE –A VISUAL NARRATIVE EXPLORATION”**  
**HEART PROJECT – SPRING 2005**  
**CENTRAL HIGH-LA FAMILIA 4/7-6/9/2005 - 9-11AM**

- syllabus by Mar Elepano [elepano@usc.edu](mailto:elepano@usc.edu) 213 740-3985

As the title of this workshop suggests, the participants will be encouraged to explore the relationship of art and technology to nature as a source of inspiration, ideas and innovation. This will be done through storytelling using graphic elements (drawings and collages, found objects) and video. The students will create short narratives recorded on video (10 seconds to 1 minute –mini-movies). They will use their own voice to create the soundtrack as narration, sound effects and/or music. The visuals will be created by using hand drawn images on 4 X 6 index cards, cut-outs/collages from magazines of the same format/size, found objects that will also fit in that format, and photographs (archival or recent). The students will be asked to explore their personal experiences in their neighborhood and use it as the source for the visual narratives they will create.

### Session

- 4/7 - introduction & orientation  
storyboard exercise – create a 10 second – 1 minute story using drawings on a 4X6 index card, the student must narrate the story providing the dialogue, sound effects and or music with only their voice, the story can be about anything.
- 4/14 - continue beginning exercise
- 4/21 - continue beginning exercise
- 4/28 - nature story – using any of the techniques- create a story about nature inspired by their neighborhood (ex. plants, birds & trees in their street)
- 5/5 - continue nature story
- 5/12 - continue nature story
- 5/19 - technology story –create a story about technology found in the neighborhood like cars, computers, cel phones.
- 5/26 - continue technology story
- 6/3 - continue technology story
- 6/9 - catch up and finish all exercises for presentation on screening day.

SCREENING DAY - students present their work to the public.  
June 16, 2005 – Thursday at The Huntington Library

**VC DIGITAL ARTS WORKSHOP 2005**  
**UNION CENTER FOR THE ARTS**  
Oct. 22 – Dec. 18, 2005, 9am – 12noon

**EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY**  
**aka “MOVING THE IMAGE”**

Instructor: Mar Elepano 213 740-3985 elepano@usc.edu

**GOALS**

The workshop will attempt to explore narrative possibilities in three styles: dramatic, documentary and experimental. It will utilize short exercises using storyboards, collected and sampled sounds, dvcam camera exercises, i-movie editing exercises. They will lead to the creation of three narrative pieces, one in each style. They will be limited to **12 shots and /or 1 minute for each piece**. Aspects of sound will be integrated as a requirement. A basic understanding of film language is the ultimate goal of this workshop.

**TOOLS**

The VC Digital Arts Lab which consists of G4's, dvcam camcorders, lunchboxes/synchboxes, throwaway 35mm still cameras, 5 X 7 index cards, a pencil, an open mind...and ability to work fast and hard from 9am-12noon every Saturday.

The Union Center for the Arts and its surroundings in Little Tokyo will be the venue and location for all exercises and pieces, except the take home assignments.

**SCHEDULE**

- 1 10/22 - INTRO - principles of visual expression (in-class exercise)
  - lecture on history & technology
  - ***in-class exercise #1 - STILLS***-using a disposable 35mm still camera create shots that will show the ff: deep space, flat space, ambiguous space, monochrome, one color, a color and it's opposite
  - ***in-class exercise #2 - PORTRAITS*** –using the dvcam create a 10 second portrait of your classmate using only one shot with no camera moves, no effects, only camera start/stop, use live sound except dialogue from the subject
  - ***EVALUATION INTERVIEW***
  
- 2 10/29 - EDIT - lecture/presentation - FILM LANGUAGE
  - ***in-class exercise #3 - 8 SHOTS***-with the dvcam use eight shots, namely long shot, medium shot, close up, pan, tilt, dolly, truck, zoom and in camera editing to describe a simple process, no sound to show a simple walk
  - ***in-class exercise #4- edit PTM***
  - ***in-class exercise #5- edit THE MATCH***

**- assignment # -1- CREATE A STORYBOARD** – use only 12 panels or less, it should be not more than one minute, create a linear dramatic narrative with one or more characters (draw the boards), design sound only as a single track either music or efx.

- |    |       |  |
|----|-------|--|
| 3  | 11/5  | - SOUND- lecture & presentation on Sound -dialogue, music, efx & silence<br><b>- in-class exercise #6 – SPOT THE MATCH</b><br><b>- in-class exercise #7 – FOLEY THE MATCH</b><br><b>- in-class exercise #8 – DUB THE MATCH</b><br>-presentation of boards for drama piece            |
| 4  | 11/12 | - DRAMA - <b><i>in-class exercise #9- IMPLEMENT DRAMATIC PIECE <u>12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE (SILENT)</u> shoot, edit &amp; finish</i></b><br><b>- EVALUATION INTERVIEW</b>   |
| 5  | 11/19 | - DRAMA – finish editing and sound exercises<br><b>-in-class exercise #10 – create single soundtrack for dramatic piece either music, efx or dialogue.</b><br>- discuss & plan documentary project:<br>- choose one person,place or event<br>- dialogue, music & efx can be combined |
| 6  | 11/26 | - DOC - <b><i>in-class exercise#11 - IMPLEMENT DOCUMENTARY <u>12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE</u> shoot, edit &amp; finish</i></b>   |
| 7  | 12/3  | - DOC - finish documentary project<br><b>- EVALUATION INTERVIEW</b>  |
| 8  | 12/10 | - VFX - lecture & presentation - the efx possibilities of the dv camcorder and the lunchbox<br>-discuss and plan experimental project<br>-choose one effect  |
| 9  | 12/17 | - VFX - <b><i>in-class exercise#12- IMPLEMENT VFX <u>12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE</u> shoot, edit &amp; finish</i></b><br>- use any combination of sound elements   |
| 10 | 12/18 | - <b><i>FINAL SCREENING &amp; evaluation interview</i></b>   |

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARY (FALL '05)

**5 Credits  
75 points**

### \_\_\_\_\_ Participation and Attendance (20 points)

10/22	10/29	11/5	11/12	11/19	11/26	12/3	12/10	12/17	12/18

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 1 – STILLS-** (3 points) using a disposable 35mm still camera create shots that will show the ff: deep space, flat space, ambiguous space, monochrome, one color, a color and it's opposite

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 2 – PORTRAITS** –(3 points) using the dvcam create a 10 second portrait of your classmate using only one shot with no camera moves, no effects, only camera start/stop, use live sound except dialogue from the subject

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 3 - 8 SHOTS** –(3 points) with the dvcam use eight shots, namely long shot, medium shot, close up, pan, tilt, dolly, truck, zoom and in camera editing to describe a simple process, no sound to show a simple walk

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 4 – edit PTM** - (3 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 5 – edit THE MATCH** (3 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 6 – CREATE A STORYBOARD** –(3 points) use only 12 panels or less, it should be not more than one minute, create a linear dramatic narrative with one or more characters (draw the boards), design sound only as a single track either music or efx.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 7 – SPOT THE MATCH** -(3 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 8 – FOLEY THE MATCH** -(3 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 9 – IMPLEMENT DRAMATIC PIECE 12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE**  
- (3 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 10 – create single soundtrack for dramatic piece either music, efx or dialogue.**- (6 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 11 – IMPLEMENT DOCUMENTARY 12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE** - (6 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Project 12 – IMPLEMENT VFX-12 SHOTS AND /OR 1 MINUTE** -(6 points)

\_\_\_\_\_ **Presentation and Community Screening** (10 points) – Present your Personal History project and other animation projects at a community screening and answer audience questions.

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Code \_\_\_\_\_ Credits \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher signature \_\_\_\_\_

**Websites:**

The Heart Project <http://www.theheartproject.org/>

Visual Communications <http://www.vconline.org/>

All Peoples Christian Center <http://allpeoplescc.org/>