Kids Connect

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1. Introduction

Kids Connect is a series of summer workshops for young people in multiple locations, teaching them to connect and work together, in person and remotely, with audio/visual and Internet technologies. Teens in each city are taught teamwork skills, as well as social and technological skills in performances and audio/visual workshops facilitated by technologists and theater artists. They subsequently create a performance that occurs both live in theaters and online simultaneously in the virtual 3D world of Second Life, an international gathering place that facilitates supervised collaboration, learning and creating.

In the pilot program, we will be working with young people in Amsterdam and New York, ages 13-16, with a maximum of 15 students in each city. In a series of progressive workshops, they will learn technical skills such as video/audio production, networked collaboration, digital storytelling, and streaming Internet media, while also developing social skills, creativity and communication skills through group work in improvisational theater, music and dance.

Using these skills and teamwork, they will create a show. The entire process will be collaboratively created by the youth involved, from storyboarding and concept creation to performing and online stream mixing, resulting in a show that they can perform together, simultaneously occurring in Amsterdam and New York, on the web and in Second Life.

Experience with and knowledge in the arts is a vital part of a complete education. The arts offer tools for development and provide methods of interacting with other students – socially, culturally, and intellectually. For students, an education in the arts provides not only a creative portal but a social and communicative one too. Through working with multiple disciplines in inventive ways, they learn to be creative problem-solvers and gain varied and powerful ways of communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings. The students are given a framework that encourages teamwork and fosters leadership skills. A sense of accomplishment enhances self-esteem and gives them the confidence to undertake new tasks.

Consequently, combining a performing arts curriculum with a technical curriculum, will develop a rich context for the youth to develop keen perception, process and systems thinking, self-management as well as teamwork skills, and skills for achieving desired results.

Our objective is to bring youth together, so that they gain a sense of cultural understanding, social interplay and connection while also learning creative and technological skillsets.

Now is a perfect time for a project that brings together artists, technologists and young people via performance and technology. New information technologies have entered most homes and young people are growing up more comfortable with them than their parents were. In an age where the square of the television screen and the square of the computer monitor dominate kids' lives, why not harness that intimacy with technology to teach social skills, media literacy and creative risk-taking?
The performance will serve as a creative outlet and learning tool for both the artists and youth involved and will cross cultures and disciplines.

Our mission statement: we are dedicated to the promotion of cultural connection and understanding between children in different nations, through the use of online collaborative arts initiatives and education in media technology.

Josephine Dorado (ZoomLab, New York), Saar van Kouswijk (Waag Society, Amsterdam), and Dan Winckler (Integrated Digital Media Institute/Polytechnic University, New York) will be collaboratively directing the workshops and performances. Participating organizations in the pilot project are the Waag Society for Old and New Media (Amsterdam), ZoomLab (New York), and Polytechnic University (New York). At the time of writing, there is also the potential for partnerships with Imagine IC (Amsterdam) and Eyebeam (New York).

The pilot project will be a model upon which to build future collaborations. The goals of the project are to foster creative interplay and cultural connection and also create a flexible, sustainable program that, through training and the use of local talent, can be repeated from year to year and city to city.
This pilot project will commence in July 2006 and will conclude in a performance and showcase for parents at the end of the month.

2. Workshops

The workshops will be divided into the following phases:

Phase 1:

- Group skills and social/creative interplay will be emphasized
- Using the computer as a medium for social interaction and collaborative exchange will be encouraged
- Theater games, sound/movement experimentation, and improvisational exercises will be explored to provide a foundation for creative interplay between the kids
- Additional local educators in sound, video and performance may be brought in to introduce the teens to different viewpoints on the workshop material

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    - One of these artists in each city will be trained with the necessary knowledge to continue curriculum involved for future phases and to coordinate that site's networked collaborations
- A theme will be decided on that is relevant and urgent inthe youth communities
- Narrative structures will be explored that combine the strengths of physical and virtual interaction
- Performance roles will be explored that teach social skills, risk-taking and confidence

Phase 2:

- Introduces the online component of the workshops The teens meet their online partners
    - Implementation of theater games/structures in an online collaborative environment
- Exploration of thematic details and performative roles
    - Specific theme subsets may be assigned to certain locales or specific performance roles may be assigned to certain students
- Collaborative storyboarding of the themes and stories begins via multi-user online authoring and streaming video
- Students learn the necessary tools and technical skills
- Media (sound, video and text) are prepared for inclusion into the storyline

Phase 3:

- Rehearsals begin for the final performance
- Performance premieres in each city simultaneously in theater and online
- Entire process is documented both in video and in writing and published online

3. Skillsets learned

Specific skillsets are learned through the course of the workshops. Students become proficient in a number of creative and technical areas. In addition, they have the chance to improve their ability to collaborate, share and socially interact with other cultures. Examples of skills learned include:

Mathematics, science and technology skills:

- Encourage scientific inquiry and problem-solving: pose questions, seek answers, develop solutions
- Apply mathematics in real-world settings by learning basic coding (programming concepts)
- Communicate and reason logically
- Understand interconnectedness between disciplines: apply common themes connecting technology, science, math
- Apply technological knowledge and skills to design media and online environments
- Encourage interdisciplinary problem-solving: apply knowledge and thinking skills to address real-life problems, seek out reliable information, and make informed decisions

Communication and performance skills:

- Improve social interaction skills through learning to perform for a live audience
- Enhance ability to express verbally, sonically and physically through improvisational theater, music, and dance
- Understand teamwork process via close collaboration within groups and with online partners
- Enhance ability to communicate through writing exercises and supervised online communication
- Create a common language between kids in different cultures via audio/visual media and creative interplay
- Understand performance as communication in different social structures
- Improve understanding of social exchange, sharing and collaboration through performing and authoring stories together

Literacy skills:

- Reading/writing literacy
    - Writing exercises
    - Team-authoring of narratives
    - Storyboarding
    - Writing/communication via wikis (multi-user authored websites), email, instant messaging
- Digital/technological literacy
    - Computer use: hardware and software
    - Digital storytelling in visual media
    - Virtual communication techniques
    - Video and audio production
    - Virtual environments (Second Life)
    - Internet streaming technologies
    - Multi-user media manipulation
    - Basic programming fundamentals

As mentioned above, other performing and media educators and artists will be invited to participate and facilitate in the workshops. Depending on the topic being taught, students may learn about writing a script, programming inside Second Life, creating a character, editing sound, shooting video, making a dance, or streaming the production online over the Internet.

In addition, at least one artist in each city will be trained with the necessary knowledge to continue the curriculum involved for subsequent phases and to coordinate that site's show, thus creating a sustainable event.

4. Output

The output of the *Kids Connect* pilot project will result in an original performance that will take place live in both Amsterdam and New York, on the web and in Second Life. It will be broadcast globally over the Internet and documented on various websites to share educational techniques and knowledge..

Audiences may come to any of the performance venues in each locale, and those not able to attend in person may also watch it online.

Lesson plans of theatrical exercises and improv gameplaying for interdisciplinary collaborative creation will be assembled for dissemination.

Through media technology, collaborative arts and the Internet, kids can connect with kids in other countries, developing valuable social and technological skills for the fluid workspaces of tomorrow while creatively learning about other cultures.