



A Learning Partnership

Technology enables creative discovery for university students and kids at a San Diego neighborhood learning center

by Warren Froelich

Learning Computers

In a vibrant partnership with students and staff from UC San Diego and SDSC, kids and young adults in a federally subsidized housing project are learning video production, animation, programming, and how to create multimedia video games. Photo: Ivan Rosero, UCSD.

In Southeast San Diego, the “digital divide” separating the haves and the have-nots in computer literacy just narrowed a bit. Thanks to a new partnership with UC San Diego and the San Diego Supercomputer Center (SDSC), kids and young adults in a federally subsidized housing project are now learning the basics of video production and editing, animation, programming, and how to create multimedia video games with the latest software.

After-school activities, once dominated by physical play and games, now see teens and pre-teens working a digital video camera, constructing a multimedia website, and talking about the “next step”—building “a virtual world” for a group learning environment built around a computer game.

“It’s opened up a whole new vision for these kids,” said Veverly Anderson, youth program coordinator at the Town and Country Village learning center. “They’re learning the tools of the Information Age—visualizations, games, scripting—so now they can see they have the potential to do technical things. And they’re soaking this all up like a sponge.”

The project’s inspiration comes from Michael Cole, a professor of Communication, Psychology and Human Development at UCSD. Last summer, some 10 UCSD students from Sixth College—which focuses on computer arts and technology—worked with the Learning Center three days per week as part of that school’s research requirement.

Cole also has enlisted support from SDSC to help identify and implement “kid-friendly” software and programming tools to develop, among other things, interactive computer games that can be played at a distance across a network.

“We’re providing a basket of activities—tools—that give the kids ways to create, explore, and learn about things that interest them. It’s fundamentally the same type of service that SDSC provides for scientists,” said Diane Baxter, SDSC’s education director. “It’s just amazing how quickly they adopt the technology skills and start creating their own knowledge with them.”

A Center of Creativity

Located in what's known as the Diamond District of South-east San Diego, the facility opened about a six years ago as part of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Neighborhood Networks Initiative. Managed by developers/owners of the San Diego Community Housing Corporation, the center combines two apartments in the 145-unit development.

Once attracting only about 15 to 20 kids per month, the learning center now draws 30 to 40 youngsters each day.

"Having the UCSD students here, the undergrads and grads and professors here, helps give the kids the one-on-one attention they need," said Anderson, known respectfully as "Miss Veverly." "Also, it's inspirational to the kids because they're now talking to someone who's actually in college other than me. And they're younger students in college, and they're happy in college.

"It's helping the kids who really don't have examples. Some of the parents here went to college, but more didn't. It's not the norm."

On the front porch, a group of a half dozen or so gathered around Ali Ozkan, a visual arts major at UCSD, to work on a rap video using a digital video camera and audio equipment to learn multimedia skills.

"They expressed interest in doing a rap video and I go with their interests," said Ozkan, a fourth-year student. "It's amazing how quickly they pick this up. We only have one laptop for editing and I was showing one of the kids how it's done, while another two were just watching, and I wasn't sure if they were getting it. The second time around, the other two had a chance to interact with the computer, and they remembered everything. I didn't have to tell them a thing."



Video Editing

Kids in the Town and Country Village learning center in San Diego learn the tools of the Information Age, including video editing shown here, quickly adopting the new technologies and producing their own projects. Photo: Ali Ozkan, UCSD.

Building Relationships

Tommy Ray Douglas, 17, offered a tour of the Center to a visitor. Entering his senior year at Kearny High, Douglas needed some geometry tutoring, and about three months ago Ivan Rosero, a UCSD communication grad student, took him under his wing.

"The use of technology is only a platform for learning," said Rosero, who grew up in similar surroundings during his youth in Miami, Florida. "If you don't connect it to people, it doesn't matter. You need to build relationships, and technology helps with that."

Under Rosero's tutelage, Douglas' geometry test scores began to rise perceptibly and his conversation soon became sprinkled with concepts and terms from the Information Age, such as "Dreamweaver," a software program for web design, and his vision for a "virtual world" computer game.

Cole said he'll follow the progress of the learning center youngsters through student portfolios that are created from the kids' own projects, while "Miss Veverly" tracks their report cards. To provide a record of the project each UCSD student prepares a field report with their observations, in addition to their personal reflections on the experience. Cole said he hopes to expand the program, now funded on a "nickel and dime basis," if he can find additional resources.

"This is our way to get our UCSD students out of the multiple choice mode and dealing with real phenomenon that they read about in their textbooks," said Cole. "Our social sciences students deserve this type of practical education to connect the theories with reality."

Project Participants

Michael Cole and Ivan Rosero, UCSD;
Diane Baxter, SDSC/UCSD;
and Kimberly H. Paul, SDCHC

Related Links

San Diego Community Housing Corporation
<http://www.ots-sdchc.org>

University-Community Links
<http://www.uclinks.org>

Professor Michael Cole
http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/f_cole.html