

Any discussion of Brownfields revitalization, to be successful, must involve the participation of the youth in urban areas where Brownfields dominate. These youths will eventually be the decision makers for their communities in the future. Therefore, to avoid making today's solutions tomorrow's dilemma for the youth, it is essential to get their input. Additionally, meaningful employment and career prospects rank among the central question facing young persons— in many ways defining young people's sense of identity and connectedness to society.

—The Search for Authentic Signs of Hope

How To Look At a Brownfield and See a Flower Garden

BELVIE ROOKS

The Challenge

How can we create quality learning environments for youth in neighborhoods with 50% to 70% school drop-out rates? What are the kinds of educational activities that get young people from inner-city communities excited about learning? How can state-of-the-art multimedia technology be used to teach students about the critical social and environmental issues affecting their community? How can these same students be motivated to become agents of activism and change in the struggle against environmental racism? How can they be inspired to create educational and organizing tools that address the myriad environmental issues confronting their community? How can youth from marginalized, inner-city communities come to understand that, within the unfolding evolutionary context of the planet, and the universe, their lives matter?

The Response

Hey, Listen Up! a multimedia-based, urban, eco-literacy project, was designed to address some of these questions, issues and concerns. Piloted in South Central Los Angeles in 1997 and 1998, with partial support from the Urban Habitat Program, Hey,

Listen Up! involved a group of high school and junior high school students, ages 13 to 18.

The project was designed so that the student participants could learn state-of-the-art multimedia technology and, at the same time, explore some of the critical social and environmental issues affecting their communities. A major objective of the project was to demonstrate how both technology and environmental content could be taught in a culturally relevant and socially conscious context.

Why Technology?

As we approach the 21st century, it is clear that computers and digital technology will play an increasingly important role in shaping our lives, our realities, and our futures. The rapid changes taking place in information and communication technology mean that, at one level, we are becoming one vast global village. What this new technology-inspired village will look like will depend, in large part, on who has access; it will also depend on the quality of that access. In fact, for many African-American and Hispanic communities, a growing concern is whether the increased focus on technological expertise and computer

literacy will further exacerbate existing social and economic inequities. Therefore the aim was to teach technology, and use it as a tool for empowerment.

The Learning Process

The overall curriculum for Hey, Listen Up! was designed so that students participating in the project could explore who they were in the unfolding evolutionary context of family, community, bio-region, planet, solar system, and ultimately universe. In fact, the entire learning process was grounded in the personal stories of the individual students.

One of the most challenging and innovative aspects of the curriculum involved the development of a CD-ROM with an interactive time-line that traced the evolutionary unfolding of the universe, from the "Big Bang" to the current era. Each of the students learned to create an interactive time-line of their individual life stories. They were then able to locate, and better understand themselves, their families and their communities within the larger, and constantly evolving, universe time-line.

By viewing themselves in the context of the whole, the dialogue and discussion shifted from a micro to a

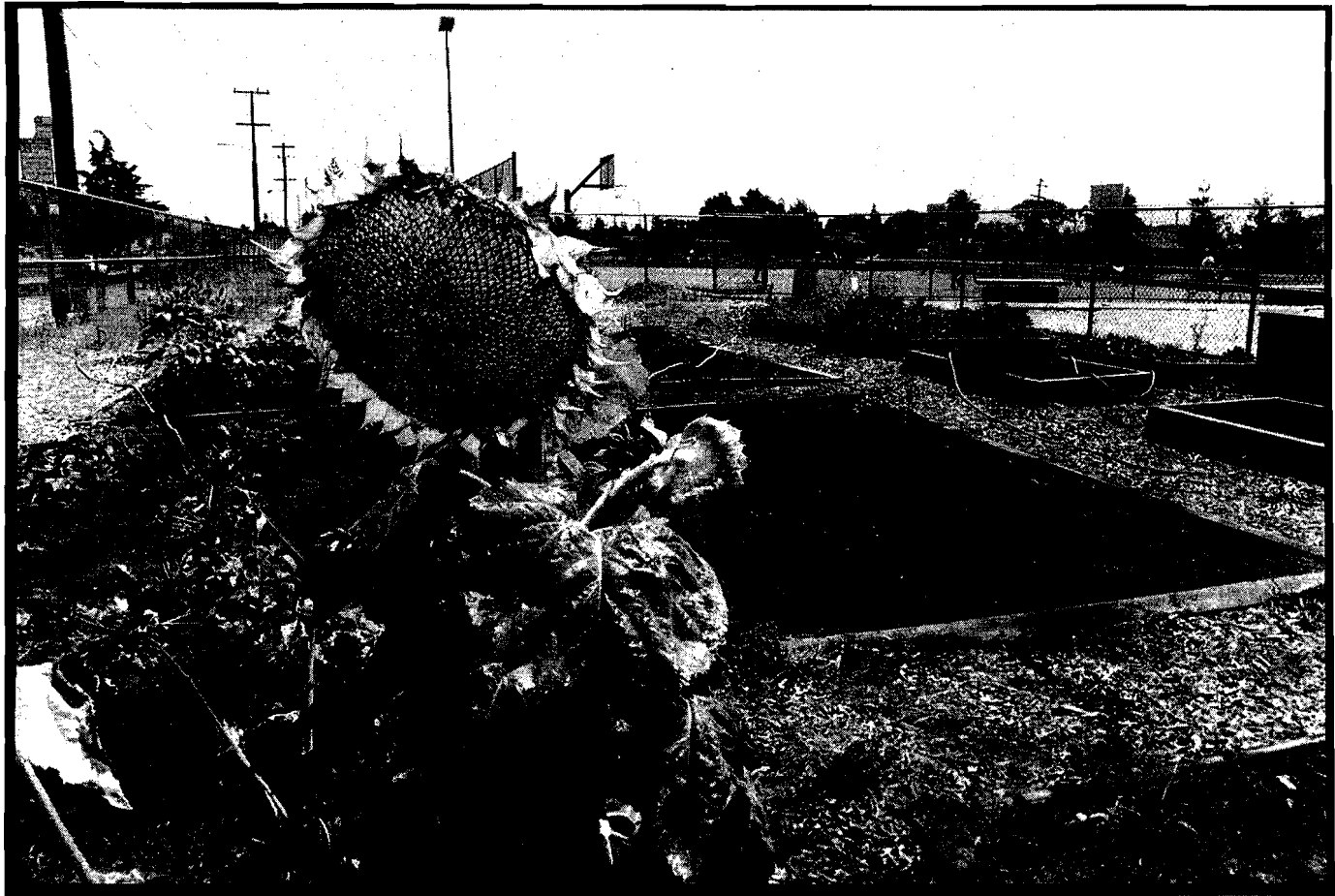
macro context; from the block to the planet. When we viewed NASA photos of the Earth, taken from outer space or from the moon, we were able to see that there were no artificially imposed boundaries separating nations and communities. In the context of the "big picture" there were no visible "ghettos" or "barrios." In fact, identity based

community stories, the students learned scanning and digitizing. They were also introduced to some of the basic principles of interactivity, as they learned state-of-the-art multimedia applications such as Director, SoundEdit, Premiere and PhotoShop. In addition, they had a chance to do autobiographical and script writing

ers, activists, and organizers who addressed a number of critical environmental issues including the prevalence of toxic waste sites in low-income, communities of color, such as theirs. There were speakers who talked about brownfields, and others who talked about environmental health issues such as asthma, and the frequency of

ica Bay. Global environmental issues were also discussed, such as the relationship between global air quality and rainforest destruction.

Through a process of engaged dialogue, rooted in their own personal stories and experiences, students were able to arrive at an understanding and definition of environmental racism.



solely on narrowly proscribed definitions and geographic boundaries, were discussed in an expanded context. Where is Earth located in relation to our other neighbors in the solar system?" In other words, who are we, not just in the context of neighborhood, but who are we in the larger context of "solarhood?"

In the process of creating their personal, family and

Maybe the way that change has to come is lot by lot and block by block.

—Alice Walker

and storyboarding and received a preliminary introduction to audio and video digitizing and editing..

In terms of environmental content, during the course of the project students were exposed to a range of speak-

such ailments in communities like South Central. There were environmental discussions about the region's air quality, water pollution, regional water issues, and the dangers facing fish and marine life in the Santa Mon-

They were also able to explore what it meant, in the micro-context, to live in a "marginalized" community.

Results

In a workshop segment entitled, "Re-Envisioning Place,"



We have to keep track at any social moment of who is bearing most of the social cost. This is what it means to look at the world from the vantage point of those below.

—Cornel West

students used PhotoShop, a computer software program, to "re-envision" some of the brownfields, and abandoned lots in their neighborhoods. In their computer-generated mock-ups, they replaced the garbage, abandoned cars and weeds with flowers, trees, birds, ponds, and park benches.

Using their re-envisioned computer images, they inspired Community Build, the local sponsoring organization, to help them become involved in turning their computer-generated vision into reality. What was once an abandoned lot with weeds and garbage is now a green space with grass, flowers, shrubbery, and a patio area. All of the students were involved in every stage of the planning and implementation process. In the course of bringing their

computer generated vision to life, they learned invaluable planning, budgeting, and team-work skills.

They also learned how to inspire, organize, and involve the community in helping them manifest their vision. In the process they learned that their vision mattered. They also learned that their voices mattered. Perhaps the most important lesson that they learned, however, was that they mattered.

As a way of further sharing their learning experience with the larger community, and further demonstrating how technology could be used as a tool for empowerment, they developed two interactive computer games dealing with the environment and environmental health issues. The games have been used as educational and organizing tools

at school and community meetings.

In addition, each student participant wrote and produced a one-minute video taped public service announcement (PSA) aimed at their peers, dealing with a critical environmental issue that had impressed them during the course of the project. The PSAs covered a variety of topics including recycling, the need to halt marine-life destruction, toxic waste facilities in low-income communities, and the related health risks. One student's public service announcement was an expression of outrage that a corporation would use nuclear waste as fertilizer in order to maximize their profit.

During the course of the project, African-American students who participated in

the first phase of the pilot successfully mentored a second group consisting of Hispanic and African-American students.

One of the exciting results of the project has been the fact that the students have become active participants in an emerging global dialogue about a re-envisioned planetary future. It is a future in which they are now better equipped to see themselves as co-creators since their learning process enabled them to "look" at an abandoned lot and "see" a flower garden. Most importantly, they have entered the dialogue by choosing to look at their block, and the abandoned lot next to their house.

The most significant lesson that they learned, however, was that their vision matters; their voice matters. They matter! ■

Notes

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