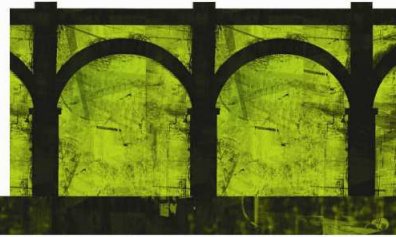


the partnership for better education



M-LAB: Where Learning Sneaks up on Students While Having Fun

Story by Judy Holmes

"It's cold in here," complained the students as they slowly filtered into the M-LAB, a mobile classroom parked outside Syracuse City School District's Fowler High School. "Don't worry, it will warm up really fast--you know, body heat!" quipped Jessica Posner '08, M-LAB coordinator who also doubles as the driver of the Mobile Literacy Arts Bus. Outside the bus, a second group of students was shivering in the damp late September morning air. They eagerly awaited the day's photography assignment from Stephen Mahan, photography instructor in the Department of Transmedia in Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA).

The Fowler students are participating in an enrichment class designed to empower them to express their creativity in words and images. It's the outreach component of an interdisciplinary SU course, "Literacy, Community, and Photography," taught collaboratively by Mahan and John Colasacco, an instructor in The College of Arts and Sciences Writing Program.

Twelve SU students from colleges across the University are enrolled in the course. The SU students mentor the high school students in both the writing and photography components of their class project. It's the third time the course has been taught. Originally conceived by Mahan and Michael Burkard, associate professor in The College of Arts and Sciences Creative Writing Program, the course ran both semesters last year in collaboration with Henninger High School. However, this is the first time the course is being taught in the M-LAB, which was built by a team of SU students enrolled in a seminar taught by Marion Wilson, director of community initiatives for VPA. M-LAB is a project within the Partnership for Better Education, which engages the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) and higher education students, faculty and staff in projects that enhance and enrich the educational experience of the students and communities served by the SCSD.

M-LAB is equipped with digital cameras, laptop computers, printers and other technologies the high school students will use to publish an interactive, online Zine of their work and mount an exhibition in SU's Warehouse Gallery. "The M-LAB adds a new dynamic to the program," Colasacco says. "It gets the students out of their classroom into a space that doesn't feel or look like a classroom. The message is 'this is not school.'"

Rather, it's a creative space where they are invited to freely and creatively express who they are, their ideas, and what they are feeling."

For Samantha Harmon, a VPA senior, mentoring high school students in the M-LAB is a sweet reward. She and Posner were part of the original group of SU students who conceived and renovated the bus--a 30-foot-long 1984 recreational vehicle. "A year ago, I was sitting with another group of SU students discussing ideas before we even saw the RV," Harmon says. "This semester, I'm enrolled in the kind of class for which M-LAB was built. For most of my current classmates, M-LAB sort of appeared like magic--processed and ready to go. But I see high school students actively using what was once only concepts and drawings. I see my role as one of figuring out whether our intentions are ultimately successful for these students. The idea that the bus is for them is always in the forefront of my mind."

Both M-LAB and the program the SU students and faculty are offering seem to be a hit among the teenagers. Class attendance and participation have increased steadily since the first meeting when only half the students appeared. In fact, despite its 8 a.m. start, by the third meeting, all of the students are showing up on time. What's more, the students are coming to understand that learning happens even when they are having fun.

After the second session, one of the teenagers told Mahan that the class was the best he ever attended because "we're not learning anything." Mahan says he then gently quizzed the student about "point of view" as it relates to photography. The student energetically discussed everything the group had talked about that day. "I then told the student 'see that, you learned something and still had fun,'" Mahan says.

"This program is really about giving students tools for self-expression, self-esteem, and in the end, a real sense of empowerment," Mahan says. "We help them achieve that through photography and writing, but in the end, my hopes are that the students, both SU and Syracuse City School students, are curious, empowered and validated. These are the values that are life changing."