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EDUCATION

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TLC for Social Groups in a Technological World

FEATURED:

Joseph Deken, SDSC and University of California, San Diego



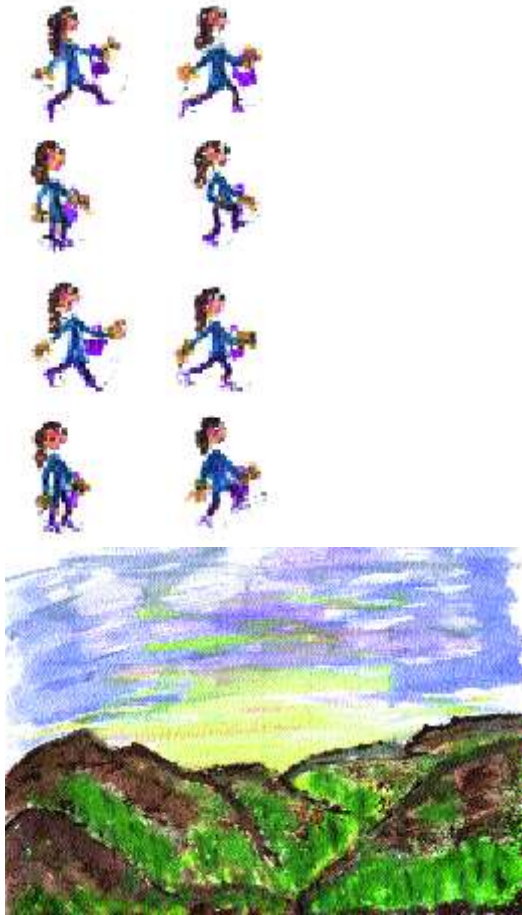
At a Boys and Girls Club in Solana Beach, California, Marley Anderson's sidewalk chalk drawing is photographed and animated so the mermaid swims from the sidewalk to her hand. A team of students at another club in Clairemont, a San Diego neighborhood, collect their own drawings into a "storyboard," from which they write and create an illustrated storybook. With help from computers, these and other projects become part of living "museums" enjoyed by club visitors.

Part art studios and part museums, these sites can't easily be pigeonholed with a simple description. "The technology here is a seed," said Joe Deken, SDSC senior fellow and the founder and director of [The eLectronic Commons \(TLC\) project](#). "TLC sites are reasons for people to get together and create some excitement, a place where they can take charge of the technology."

A grassroots approach to empowering people, project TLC faces several obstacles. Today's society encourages individuals, especially children, to consume entertainment passively instead of participating actively in projects like those at TLC sites, Deken said. In addition, project TLC battles the trend for technology to divide people--into the "haves" and "have-nots," the "cool" and the "geeks," even the boys and the girls.

Project TLC Artwork

Some of the artwork produced by Project TLC participants at San Diego County Boys and Girls Clubs. The collage shows a screen full of drawings at a TLC kiosk. The photograph shows 9-year-old Marley Anderson from the Solana Beach club. The photo was scanned and the mermaid animated. The TLC collections are limited only by the imagination of the children.



Deken began with the idea of a "common," a shared, public place set aside by a community where its residents can gather. Commons, of which Boston Common is only one of the most famous, have been around for centuries. Deken's twist is not to establish real-world parks, but to open up virtual playgrounds with computers, where creative environments can take root and grow. Working mainly with Boys and Girls Clubs in San Diego County, project TLC explores how to build these new commons by uniting computers and cooperative social structures.

Deken has worked with museums and served several years as technology curator for the California Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles. He initially envisioned that project TLC would follow the museum theme, but with a unique variation. TLC sites were designed to be much more dynamic and interactive. Although museums are public places, they lack the opportunity for people to interact there.



"Project TLC also looks at how technology can be incorporated into social groups in more positive ways," said Deken, who is also a senior fellow at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC) and a research associate at the Center for Research in Computing and the Arts, two UCSD groups that have also supported the project. In addition to Deken's fellowship, SDSC provides networking and graphics facilities to the effort. The lion's share of support has come through the UCSD Chancellor's Associates after Mike Cole, UCSD professor and LCHC director, recommended project TLC to Richard Atkinson, former chancellor of UCSD and now University of California President.

Rather than try to form a social group around a computer, project TLC starts with habitual gathering places, like Boys and Girls Clubs or St. Leo's Mission in Solana Beach, which hosts many activities for Spanish speakers in the community. In the coming year, TLC plans to reach other kinds of community centers, such as a senior citizens' center or YMCA. "At all these sites, people are there regularly, and they provide the underlying community to keep the TLC groups going," Deken said.

As the hub of each site, a multimedia computer "kiosk" provides an interactive display of animation, graphics, and sound. At weekly club meetings, members hatch new ideas and projects that become animations, stories, videos, and exhibits showcased on the kiosk. At the Clairemont Boys and Girls Club, for example, 9-year-old Bei Wang, who recently arrived from China, drew in crayon a butterfly, which was then animated to flit across the screen and land on the flowers she drew. The TLC group at the Del Mar club put together a computer museum of their drawings, sculptures, and other creations. The Juggling Club at the Encinitas Boys and Girls Club inspired a juggling display. The kiosks also display other works collected electronically from places around the world, including other TLC sites.



At St. Leo's TLC site, Spanish speakers learn about computers, language skills, and self-help strategies simultaneously. Adults who are using or purchasing inexpensive computers for the first time can get technical advice and access to free software. The equipment at each site, ranging from computers to video cameras to MIDI keyboards, is donated by the community, and local businesses also have donated equipment and repair service. At SDSC, Sun Microsystems Computer Corporation loaned Deken a workstation.

A lot of the kiosks now have video capabilities as well as computers, because the children were more tuned into television than museums. "The participants--kids and adults--don't always do what you expect them to do," Deken said. Every site has its own personality, and the kids participate in very unpredictable and unstructured ways.

"Project TLC only touches club members in a small part of their daily lives," he said. "But if we can make even a small change, it's worth the effort. Individuals and small groups of people can influence history in profound ways."

Project TLC makes technology freely available and inclusive, mixes high-technology equipment with low-technology media like crayons and clay, and emphasizes cultural and artistic possibilities instead of the technology itself. The single biggest difficulty for the project is that club members can't just add on or plug in the technology like a new stereo. The computer is a fundamental, open-ended tool, and club members have to learn new skills to use it effectively. It challenges organizations to redefine themselves, Deken said.

"It's more like gardening than architecture," he said. "You can't just assemble all the materials and build exactly what you want. You have to plant the right seeds in the right places and see what grows."
--DH

FURTHER INFORMATION

<http://www.sdsc.edu/projects/ptlc/>