CICS ChicagoQuest students participated in Hour of Code workshops held at the college in December.
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Hour of Code inspires next generation of computer scientists

Mihn’Yagn P., a ninth grader at CICS ChicagoQuest, delivered an encouraging statement last December at the end of an Hour of Code workshop in one of CDM’s computer labs: “Code is kinda cool.” Along with her classmates, Mihn’Yagn had used a visual programming editor called Blockly to practice the basics of coding during her school field trip. Blockly features chunks of directional text, such as “move forward” or “turn left,” that users drag and drop to complete simple tasks. Moving at their own pace, the ChicagoQuest students tackled programming puzzles based on the popular Angry Birds app.

CDM hosted nearly 500 students from five middle and high schools across the city during Computer Science Education Week (CSEdWeek), held Dec. 9-15, 2013. Jacob Furst, associate professor and director of the School of Computing, and Nichole Pinkard, associate professor, spearheaded the project with staff from the Digital Youth Network (DYN), a hybrid digital literacy program founded by Pinkard. “Computers have become the most important and prevalent tool in our society,” Furst affirms. “While not everyone will end up programming computers, learning about code helps you understand computers. As with any tool, the more you know about it, the better you can use it to get things done.”

DYN staff and CDM professors utilized free resources from Code.org, a nonprofit focused on expanding computer science education, to lead the Hour of Code workshops in December. “One of the goals is to get 1 million students to code during this week,” DYN team member Mike Hawkins notes. On the first day of CSEdWeek, Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools, announced a plan to accelerate computer science literacy for K-12 students over the next five years, including allowing computer science to count as a graduation requirement. According to the announcement, jobs in computing are among the highest-paid positions for new college graduates, but fewer than 3 percent of college students graduate with a computer science degree.

Some Chicago high school students already have access to Taste of Computing, an introductory computer science course that is supported by Associate Dean Lucia Dettoni’s National Science Foundation grant. “Computer science teaches skills that are valuable in any field—how to think logically and coherently, how to look at problems from different angles and how to think through actions and consequences,” Dettoni says. “These skills can give students a competitive advantage no matter what career they eventually choose.”

Jennetta J., a ChicagoQuest freshman, is already thinking about her future. “I want to work with music but also with technology, so I’m going to use this a lot.” Her classmate Nia J. was similarly intrigued by the Hour of Code activities. “I want to do a harder one,” she exclaimed after successfully finishing 20 challenges. “This was a really cool opportunity. It’s going to be easier to make websites now.”

With the basics of Blockly mastered, these students and their peers will soon be able to move on to more complex coding. “I want to code for a company. I want to do websites and talk with computers,” Mihn’Yagn enthuses. “I’m going to rule the world!”

CDM students, faculty and alumni demystify mental health disorders

For individuals living with mental health disorders, the stigmas associated with their illness can compund an already difficult and painful experience. “There’s a lack of understanding among people who do not struggle with any kind of mental health issue,” says Assistant Professor Doris Rusch, one of the co-founders of “For the Records,” a new multimedia project that offers an innovative approach to raising awareness about mental health disorders. Set to launch later this year, the website will house documentary webisodes, photo essays, interviews, interactive games and resources.

“We’re creating a platform for conversation,” explains fellow co-founder Anuradha Rana, a documentary filmmaker and instructor. “This project brings shared experiences to the forefront and informs the overall discourse about mental health.” Rana and Rusch worked closely with two School of Nursing faculty members, Mona Shattell and Barbara Harris, as well as teams of students and alumni, to execute their vision. The group initially focused on anxiety, attention deficit disorder (ADD), bipolar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), but they intend to expand to other disorders in the future.

To ensure representational accuracy, individuals diagnosed with each disorder were involved throughout all stages of the process. Rusch, who led the interactive game portion of the project, asked probing questions of her volunteer subjects. “I was searching for the metaphors they used, their own images to describe the experience,” she recalls. These metaphors then created a foundation for each game sequence. For example, a dark and endless maze in the experiential game “Into Darkness” mimics the inescapable trap of OCD. When players perform a specified ritual—walking in circles several times—the darkness temporarily dissipates, but this act also prevents the exit from appearing. “This models one of the core conflicts of OCD: the desire to escape the compulsion, but fearing the anxiety that comes with not giving in to it,” Rusch explains.

While it’s impossible to precisely mimic the feelings and emotions of an individual living with a mental health disorder, the games offer an entry point. “You can use the vast interactive prowess of a video game to show people an experience that a friend or relative might be living with daily,” notes Il Bakken (CDM ’12), who worked on both the ADD and bipolar games. With 25 percent of adults experiencing mental illness in any given year, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, these simulations create valuable opportunities for increased understanding and empathy.

Documentaries are another way to enhance understanding. Like Rusch, Rana went to the source to gather material for the webisodes, focusing primarily on young adults and college students. “Since many mental disorders manifest themselves between 18 and 26, we wanted to find a way to engage with students facing those challenges,” she says. “But we also hope that this project will appeal to many different audiences, such as parents of those facing mental illness.” In “Dealing With It,” the webisode that addresses the depression aspect of bipolar disorder, audio excerpts from interviews offer provocative commentary, such as “My father believed that anybody seeking therapy was inherently weak.” Rana is also working on accompanying discussion and study guides to facilitate conversation among viewers. “People don’t like to talk about mental health disorders—too often, mental health is ‘off the record,’” Rusch asserts. “With this project, we’re putting mental health issues on the record.”
This past December, 15 students left snowy Chicago and headed to filmmaking’s global hub for a 3-week immersion trip. If you’re thinking Hollywood was their destination, think again. After traveling 22 hours, the group arrived in Mumbai, India, and made their way to Film City, where more films are produced than anywhere else in the world. The study abroad program, which was CDM’s first in India, offered students from around the university the opportunity to experience Indian culture, learn more about the Bollywood film industry and expand their horizons.

Senior Philip Bradley, a digital cinema major, signed up for the course because he wanted to see India firsthand, deepen his understanding of the culture and pursue his passion for filmmaking. The course delivered on all of those personal objectives and then some. “Getting to know a family for my documentary was one of the most humbling experiences of my life,” Bradley asserts. “It made me rethink many of my habits that I now see as wasteful.”

Working with two other students, Bradley’s 3-minute documentary focuses on a day in the life of a second-grader—the first in his family to attend school—who lives in the slums of Mumbai. “The amount of poverty there was unreal,” Bradley recalls. “I now realize on a much deeper level just how fortunate we are here.”

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Junior Anna Hendrickson served as director for her production, a role that was new to the sociology major, who is minoring in photography. “The entire process was very rewarding,” she says. “Now I want to travel to other countries throughout Asia.”

The remaining six students focused on creating two Bollywood-style song sequences: a romantic, narrative-driven piece and an “item number,” a fast-paced, choreographed dance. Daily workshops at the film school Whistling Woods International offered students opportunities to learn from and work with Indian filmmakers and professionals. “The workshops were highly intensive,” says Shayna Connelly, an assistant professor who co-led the trip with colleague Anuradha Rana, a documentary filmmaker and instructor (for more on Rana’s activities at DePaul, see page 3). “We often began the day with yoga to focus us, and then students were in class until dinner time.”

Rana developed the proposal for the program in November 2012. A native of India, Rana has worked in the media field in both Delhi and Mumbai. “India is a culturally diverse country with a rich history and a valuable heritage in storytelling and filmmaking,” she relates. “Spending time in a new country is always a huge learning experience. I think we gave our students a lot to think about and discover.” Besides Mumbai, the group also traveled to Agra and Jaipur. Their packed agenda included riding elephants to Amber Fort, feeding monkeys at Galt Temple, visiting the Taj Mahal, bargain hunting at bazaars, attending a classical dance performance and a concert, and enduring long hours in transit. “As one student remarked, even the time spent in traffic felt useful as they observed and absorbed the surroundings,” Rana notes.

Given the program’s success, Rana and Connelly are excited to make the intersession a biennial offering. “Our students were fearless, respectful and great ambassadors for DePaul and the U.S. The way they dealt with things that were unexpected or uncomfortable was incredible to see,” says Connelly, adding, “They showed great patience, adaptability and compassion for the people they encountered.”

As the group continued to process their time abroad through reflective writing assignments and individual video projects after they returned, MFA in cinema graduate student Rita Ciolek (BUS ’01) spoke for many of her classmates when she offered this summary: “The entire experience has made me into a more accepting, more open and more loving human being.”

Study abroad intersession enhances global perspective
Jason Pecho (CDM ’08, MS ’10) had a life-changing experience his very first day at DePaul. The South Side Chicago native intended to pursue a graphic design major, but when his advisor noticed Pecho’s stellar grades in high school math and programming courses, he directed Pecho to CDM’s computer game development degree instead. “I grew up playing video games, but I didn’t know it was something I could study,” Pecho recalls. “I jumped at the opportunity.” Now Pecho spends his days as an engineering manager for some of Disney Interactive’s best-selling mobile games.

Pecho’s career path began to take a more defined shape during his junior year. By then, with most of his prerequisites completed, he started tackling hard-core gaming classes. “That’s when it got really fun,” Pecho says. In particular, he still fondly remembers participating in 48-hour game development jams. “It’s basically staying all night and making games in a short amount of time with a small group of people,” Pecho explains. “CDM kept the labs open for us, faculty stayed overnight and we all worked together to create the games.”

After graduating, Pecho wanted to stay in Chicago, and since he was still in school mode, he signed on for two more years at DePaul. His master’s degree experience offered new challenges and opportunities, including teaching introductory game development courses as an adjunct faculty member. “Usually half the students were DePaul alumni,” Pecho says, “so I still fondly remember participating in 48-hour game development jams.”

Pecho’s coursework at DePaul prepared him for a coveted internship at Disney Interactive’s Los Angeles campus. “The nice part about the DePaul program is that you get a little taste of everything,” he explains. “I’m a programmer by trade, but because of the small team size in mobile, I typically have a lot of say in design and development as well.” Out of six interns at Disney Interactive, Pecho was the first of three selected to join the Disney Mobile group, and he has enjoyed continued success along the way.

One of his first projects was “Where’s My Water?,” an award-winning physics puzzle game that has been downloaded more than 200 million times. In the game, players try to move water from point A to point B on behalf of a quirky alligator named Swampy who wants to take a shower. Besides the engaging protagonist, the game also features more than 400 different challenges and incredibly realistic water. “The first thing we did was try to simulate water in code,” Pecho says. “I read tons of white papers trying to figure out how to translate the math into code.” From there, Pecho’s team focused on the rendering aspect—that is, making the onscreen image look and behave like water.

The tremendously positive response to “Where’s My Water?” has prompted two spin-offs and continues to inspire Pecho, despite the long hours demanded in his industry. “We could probably work 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and put out a decent version of each game, but quality is very important to my colleagues and me,” he says. “You have to put the extra time in.” As for the future, Pecho says he just wants to keep making games. “It’s been really memorable so far.”

Double Demon brings Disney mobile games to life

Jason Pecho’s top four tips for recent graduates:

**Work hard.**
If you work hard, people will notice you. Keep doing what you want to do, and people will see that you are passionate.

**Hone your craft.**
Honing your craft applies to any industry, but you are into gaming. Make games on your own using the free tools that are available; it will give you something valuable to discuss at job interviews.

**Don’t give up.**
It can be hard to get your foot in the door, especially in the gaming industry. But stay positive and persistent, and you will find success.

**Make connections.**
Go to industry events and meet new people. Go to meet-ups. Follow people on Twitter and start conversations with them. If you make an impression, when the time comes for them to recommend or hire someone, hopefully you’ll be on their short list.
CDM welcomed director John McNaughton (“Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer,” “Wild Things”), actor Michael Shannon (“Boardwalk Empire,” “Man of Steel”) and Producer in Residence Steven A. Jones to campus last October for a pre-release screening of “The Harvest.” After the screening, Associate Professor Matt Irvine (far left) joined McNaughton, Shannon and Jones (left to right) onstage for a lively discussion in front of an appreciative crowd of students, faculty and community members.

As part of the Visiting Artists Series, renowned filmmakers Lana and Andy Wachowski (top row, fourth and fifth from left) shared details of their creative process during an onstage conversation last fall. The multitalented siblings directed “The Matrix,” wrote and produced “V for Vendetta,” and wrote, directed and produced the upcoming film “Jupiter Ascending.” View a short video of their discussion at bit.ly/wachowskis.

Project Bluelight, the professional motion picture company housed in CIM, teamed up with Lukas Piano Service to produce a documentary during Chicago Artists Month last October. “147 Pianos” captures a special performance of beginning, intermediate and advanced volunteer musicians playing 147 pianos in the company’s West Side Chicago basement warehouse. Professor Dolores Wilber created and led the project, which also served as a Junior Year Experiential Learning internship class for CIM students, alongside Cinematographer in Residence Peter Biagi (cinematographer), Associate Professor Dana Hodgdon (producer) and Assistant Professor Robert Steel (composer/sound designer). The film has an anticipated release date of fall 2014.

CIM recently started offering quarterly mini career fairs for undergraduate and graduate students. The fairs, called CIM Career Connections, focus on a theme, such as consulting or startups, and students from relevant majors are invited to attend. Each mini career fair allows students to connect with representatives from six to eight companies seeking full-time employees or interns. On average, 60 students looking for career opportunities attend each session.

The MS in predictive analytics program has added health care analytics as a new concentration for the winter 2014 quarter, joining existing concentrations in computational methods, hospitality and marketing. This new concentration addresses a critical need for data scientists who understand the complexity of health care data management and integration, and who can develop meaningful analytics designed to improve patient outcomes, health care quality and value. Learn more at bit.ly/newconcentration.

This past fall, lecturer Chris Vinopal and CDM film students helped produce an anti-bullying public service announcement (PSA) initiated by the Kindness Counts Club at Highland Elementary in Skokie, Ill. A fourth-grade student who had been bullied came up with the idea of creating a video to combat bullying behavior. The student’s mother, who works in the film industry as a costume designer, shared the idea with Vinopal and several CIM students came on board to direct, write and produce the PSA. The inspiring video was released in October, which is National Bullying Prevention Month. Watch it online at bit.ly/kindnesscounts.

Around the college
Academy stipends

Five students received stipends from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to support their LA Quarter internships. During the LA Quarter, CIM students explore Hollywood's entertainment industry through hands-on internships, professional networking and in-depth classes. Over the past four years, the academy has provided more than $25,000 in stipends to DePaul students. This year, the stipends were awarded to Matt Brassil (Good Universe, production), Nick Brown (Bold Films, development), Dylan Drukenis (DreamWorks Animation, postproduction), Elyse Maccabee (Intuition Films, development) and Bailey Sullivan (Indian Paintbrush, development).

The Amiable

A group of current students and alumni formed an independent game studio called The Amiable and successfully completed a $15,000 Kickstarter campaign to finance their first creation, Tetrapulse, a co-op arena battle for two to four players. The Amiable team (left to right) includes Jorge Murillo (CDM ’13), Ricky Roberson (CDM ’13), Peter Sheff, David Laskey and David Finseth.

Tessallation

Tessallation, a first-person game about a time-traveling fourth-grader, was a runner-up for the Best Student Project at the 2013 Unity Awards. The game was the senior capstone project of recent graduates David Bayzer (CDM ’13), Sean Cannata (CDM ’13), Graham Gileath (CDM ’13), Christopher Klein (CDM ’13), Kristen Lambert (CDM ’13) and Eric Spevacek (CDM ’13).

Grant awards

The DePaul-based Digital Youth Network (DYN), a digital literacy program founded by Associate Professor Nichole Pinkard (top), received a $1.5 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to expand Chicago's Summer of Learning program into a yearlong initiative. Additionally, Pinkard and Instructor Denise Nacu (bottom) received a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant of $1.349 million in the cyberlearning category to research the sociotechnical systems that support blended learning. Pinkard also won an NSF grant of $199,000 for an upcoming study examining how online learning opportunities affect youths’ short- and long-term STEM interest, attitudes and learning outcomes.

Cisco NetRiders competition

For the first time, CDM entered a team in the annual Cisco NetRiders postsecondary academic competition. After answering a series of challenging questions on network topics, as well as configuring and troubleshooting a complex simulated network, two CDM students advanced to the second round. Emily Clar (CDM ’12, MS ’13) finished in first place out of 36 students from Illinois colleges and universities, while undergraduate Larry Lulich took eighth place. During the second round, Clar secured a second-place finish and earned a bid to the finals. Clar continued her streak of success in the finals, finishing 17th out of 84 total competitors.
IN THE LOOP

We welcome your story ideas, questions and comments. Please contact Kelsey Rotwein at (312) 362-6368 or krotwein@depaul.edu.

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