

The Mustard Seed: Documentary & Webisodes
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KI 09-004

PROJECT SUMMARY

A small Christian school in Hoboken, NJ is attracting attention for its progressive integration of fine arts, worship, and community service. The success of its intentional mission to the urban poor defies the economic model that typifies many Christian schools.

For 30 years, Mustard Seed School has invested in the lives of the children from Hudson County and beyond, welcoming students from preschool to eighth grade into a community that nurtures a life-long love of learning. The school of 200 students is known for a unique integration of strong academics, the arts, faith and service. Diversity, including socioeconomic, ethnic, religious and academic, is a hallmark as the school strives to reflect and celebrate the Kingdom of God. The school principal, Christine Metzger, is a graduate of the education program at Calvin College, has been a fellow in the Van Lunen Fellows Program, and serves on the Calvin College board of trustees.

Mustard Seed is a school that others seek to emulate. Guests, educators, investors, and idealists frequent the hallways, finding a successful model of urban education that brings renewal back to cities.¹ At the request of other educational institutions and individuals, the faculty and staff at Mustard Seed are working to document the Mustard Seed program and share it in order to assist others who wish to build similar schools.

This project proposes a partnership between the Mustard Seed School, Brian Fuller of Calvin's CAS department, and the Kuyers Institute to capture some of the school's distinctive on film for sharing with a wider audience of educators and others interested in Christian education.

FILM: CONCRETIZING THE ABSTRACT

The talking head of any teacher or administrator might admit on camera that respecting the child as image-bearer is a defining virtue of the Mustard Seed School. But such admissions violate the first rule of theatrical and filmic narrative: "show me, don't tell me." If a film chiefly relies on verbally enumerating them, then Mustard Seed virtues are perhaps better conveyed by books or articles.

Thus, the first work of the filmmaker is to discover visually concrete examples of that respect. The Mustard Seed's signature birthday celebrations offer a likely camera target. A student is honored by a song that "celebrates" her, and a book – chosen as somehow representative of the child's personality – is donated to the school library on her behalf. The shelves are filled not with words but with Kavi and Pico and Calvin and Marie – students whose personhood is demonstrably treasured.

That and other events might serve as the film's building blocks of content. But *what* filmmakers communicate about respect must inform the *way* they communicate it. It works at confusing counter purpose, for example, to tell the empowering story of student-teacher eye contact with cameras on tripods six feet off the ground. If Dana Baker succeeds as a kindergarten teacher because she spends the day on her knees, then camera operators can most effectively teach that success if they themselves join her on the floor.

¹ The school's list of accolades is tellingly comprehensive. Mustard Seed was one of only 57 private schools designated "exemplary" by U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett in 1988. As one starting place for this project, the school's ability to creatively nurture faith in the inner city is chronicled in Steven Vryhof's 2004 *Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling*.

Identifying and interpreting moments of Mustard Magic will excite the parents of prospective students and open the wallets of would-be donors. But we must go further than mere promotion or fundraising. We must distinguish between what is observably cool and what might be taught to other educators. Furthermore, we must justify film as a medium well-suited to convey those teachable concepts.

STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY

Some of that load will be borne by the film's structure. While inarguably a holistic educational approach, the Mustard Seed model must be winsomely presented as a collection of memorable components, the adoption of any one of which might enhance teaching elsewhere without necessitating a full school makeover. Viewers of a four-minute movie chapter about some aspect of the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy need to feel their teaching might be improved even if they haven't the means to rearrange their facility around a well-stocked *atelier*. Specifically, a sequence in which students of Spanish present the mythical animals they've sculpted from Plastiscene as a means of acquiring descriptive adjectives might inspire teachers to incorporate art in select assignments as a stepping stone to "Seed-ier" integration of sensory experience and intellectual inquiry.

Such a sequence (1) identifies and chronicles a Mustard Seed distinctive, (2) transmits a pedagogical concept with concrete suggestions for its replication, and (3) capitalizes on the interpretive medium of film (since one can hardly imagine similar impact from the presentation of sculpture in written form). Those three criteria should drive the shooting and editing of footage for the Mustard Seed film.

Though well served by such a yardstick, it must be admitted that documentary films are more "discovered" than "fashioned." Yet stewardly filmmakers cannot champion indiscriminate shooting, hoping later to find messages in hundreds of hours of footage. Instead, we ought to seek the balance between serendipitous discovery and project planning that Mustard Seed staff members often themselves articulate.

To that end, a 26-minute² documentary for DVD and broadcast distribution will gather content around three tent poles: Respect. Reggio. Response. The "Three R's" of the Mustard Seed School.

I. RESPECT

- A. Respecting Individuals (as image-bearers of Christ). See earlier discussions of birthday celebration and kneeling teachers.
- B. Respecting Community. A park shared by eight different schools offers opportunity to chronicle how Mustard Seed is fully situated in – yet a distinctly positive influence on – its Hoboken neighborhood. Footage of the school's yearly Hispanic *Posadas* tradition would also demonstrate how it creates context for its academic enterprise.
- C. Respecting Diversity. The student body's essential balance of social, ethnic, and economic groups might best be illustrated with filmed visits to the homes of children. The same visits will likely show the school partnering with families.

- II. REGGIO – The Shared Space is central to but not alone in the opportunities it presents for the film to demonstrate the benefit and practice of the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

² 26:40 = ½ hour of PBS

- A. Children must have some control over the direction of their learning (evident in each classroom's planning boards). Curriculum is thus likely to arise from:
 - 1. a systematic observation of student curiosity,
 - 2. adaptively incorporated by autonomous teachers,
 - 3. who document the workflow of project and process.
 - B. Children must be able to learn and expresses themselves through experiences (or "languages") of moving, listening, seeing, and hearing (evident in Kodaly music instruction to name only one of many, many examples).
 - C. Students explore relationships with other children and with material items in the world. The arrangement of the teaching environment (its situation within the surrounding community as well as the proximity of classrooms to a central *atelier*) encourages students to interact with each other and with art supplies as means of academic inquiry.
 - D. Long-term projects balance planning with serendipitous discovery.
- III. RESPONSE (The Responsive Classroom) – Morning meetings and other group times (like dramatic play in the school's Shared Space) when students are likely to create rules and goals or when teachers are likely to lead them in guided discovery (say, journaling a worship response or conversational reflection on a field trip) offer opportunities for filmmakers to embody lynchpins of the responsive classroom:
- A. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
 - B. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction
 - C. To be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.

That teachers live these “Three R’s” (deeper than any administrative declaration) was evident during Fuller’s March 2009 MSS location scout visit. The principles of Reggio and Responsive Classroom are no doubt operative in many schools, but Mustard Seed’s faith component is no mere “add-on.” MSS Founder Shanna Pargellis describes the interweaving of philosophies:

The process is as important as the product; the quality of the work, not just the completion of the task, is one of the ways in which we glorify God. The Reggio Schools are very much in line with our thinking about aesthetics and the quality of work in schools and the Responsive Classroom connects very well with how we live our life together at school. We are more than this, but we have found these two approaches to mesh well with our work.

Mustard Seed integrates principles from [these and] other approaches... such as The Twelve Affirmations, but they become real when as a staff we collaborate and share practices throughout the school with common purpose.³

Examining these convictions could easily overfill a 26-minute documentary. Thus we suggest the accompanying “webisodes” may total as many as 40 minutes, offering slightly deeper treatment of the film’s major points. In addition to judiciously expanding the film’s pedagogical instruction, one might also expect the school’s faith worldview to be more explicitly stated in the web’s episodic “bites.” Thus, the film satisfies a general audience of multiple constituencies while the promise of additional content

³ MSS Pedagogical Mission, Shanna Pargellis. 12 May 2009.

creates an incentive for interested educators to consult the web – not only for videos, but text and links which reinforce the film’s message.

To choose where cameras look for meaning (the Three R’s) is to necessarily exclude other subjects. As a matter of resource and focus then, a filmmaking team would concentrate on the Mustard Seed’s lower school (grades K-3 or 4). While the upper grades no doubt employ similar learning principles, they do so in less visually and aurally distinctive ways. “The Nest,” MSS’s pre-K program should also be excluded from the film. Explaining the evolving relationship of this half-day program to the rest of the school would detract from the film’s pedagogical emphasis.

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

It must be admitted that videos of any length that *demonstrate* actual teaching models (in contrast to those which merely *discuss* them) are rare and typically dated. Videos with a Christian emphasis are certainly harder to come by.

As a **half-hour documentary**, the film project might convey – to an audience of Christian educators, administrators, would-be donors, and other constituencies – a big-picture appreciation of the school’s atypical paradigm.

Distribution of a high-quality documentary (via PBS and public screenings) would inject positive insight into the subject of Christian schooling into the forum of social discourse – where it is currently under- or misrepresented. Given the director’s track record (which includes an Emmy, a C.I.N.E. Eagle, two Telly Awards, three Davey Awards, and screenings of his work in Hollywood, Toronto, Egypt, Hungary, and Belgium), submission of the film to festivals, competitions, and broadcast venues is anticipated.

As a professional development resource, a DVD could be screened at Christian educator conferences such as the CEA convention.

Site-specific, broadcast, and net-based screenings of the films offer the Kuyers Institute and Calvin College important promotional opportunities.

The MSS itself would obviously enjoy a development and recruitment benefit which would strengthen and further encourage a network of Calvin connections, among them:

1. Founder of MSS a Calvin grad
2. Currently 4 of 9 homeroom teachers are Calvin Grads plus the Head of School and the Lower School/Preschool Director
3. We’ve had Calvin students intern here during Interim
4. Calvin staff have provided professional growth training
5. Head of School on the Calvin Board of Trustees
6. Head of School VanLunen Fellow
7. Head of School profiled for Calvin promotional materials, including print and commercial ads
8. Head of MSS also a leader in Hoboken Group (urban Christ –centered educational movement with national connections)
9. MSS a model urban Christ centered school which upholds reformed principles and has been the catalyst for many new urban schools for 30 years.
10. Teachers involved in Worship and Writing conferences at Calvin

11. Investigating graduate credit for students interested in interning at MSS (we were working with Sue Hasselar)
12. Worked on the 12 Affirmations Project Book (the original and now the updated version) with Steve Vryhof
13. Several Christian colleges have sent their teacher interns and student teachers to train at MSS
14. Several Christian Schools have sent teachers to observe and train at MSS as well.

Additional outcomes may be realized by a **series of shorter "webisodes"** that will be posted online in venues such as YouTube and Vimeo, then embedded in websites which contextualize the video content with supporting material.

The moving image enjoys a credibility and entrée into circles of influence which differ from those enjoyed by print materials. Brief web episodes have potential to provide teachers and school administrators both nationally and internationally with short, accessible case studies of aspects of one school's effort to realize Christian education. Such material can be used as discussion starters for staff meetings or professional development sessions, and could also be useful to teacher education programs as material for students to access, analyze and discuss. Interaction with Christian administrators at Christian education conferences suggests that many are very interested in seeing how other schools are doing Christian education; a project such as this could provide an accessible and ultimately economical way for this to happen.

The webisodes could form the nucleus of a teaching "idea bank" to which other schools could contribute via uploaded case study.

Mustard Seed Head of School Metzger is in conversation with directors of college education programs (among them Covenant's Steve Kaufmann and Bryan's Steve DeGeorge) which have shown interest in web video resources which might:

1. model collaborative planning meetings
2. demonstrate the structure/freedom balance necessary for children to make sound curricular choices
3. model Mustard Seed's formal progress report process (to the end that those in training to become teachers will understand and value of knowing a child well and communicating with parents)
4. demystify the thorough teacher planning that facilitates broader student choice (while maintaining a cohesive program)
5. show how to assess teaching practice in light of the school's mission statement.

TIMELINE AND METHODS

The project has already enjoyed an exploratory stage of meetings and conversations among affected constituencies. If successful in its fundraising phase, the film will enter pre-production in earnest. Articulating and narrowing the film's specific messages, then assigning them diegetic particulars (composition, camera angle, a color palette, disc management, editing pace) will be the work of the FA09 semester.

The shoot itself will occupy three weeks in January. The director and three Calvin students will use that time to train a cadre of Mustard Seed student videographers who will, in turn, chronicle the work of their classmates in interviews and candid observational footage. That footage will supplement footage shot by the Calvin crew itself. In the best possible case, a few representative Mustard Seed students

might be followed to their respective homes to give viewers a sense of the student body's diversity and the difference a Mustard Seed education makes in character development away from the school.

To the layman, a three-week production schedule may seem lengthy, but experienced documentarists know how long it takes for camera operators to "disappear" into the woodwork. Children, in particular are wont to "ham" for the cameras until they cease to notice them. Similarly, interview subjects are more likely to "open up" to filmmakers they have come to trust over time.

It would not be uncommon for such a shoot to produce 65 hours of footage, each minute of which has to be logged and transcribed before a script can be written. That daunting organizational task will take most of the spring semester, owing to the crew's simultaneous juggling of academic responsibilities.

The edit can begin summer of 2010, while marketing materials (the DVD label, case, and website) are designed. A half-hour piece will be "rough cut" first and shown to invite feedback before the polished final is completed. Shorter web pieces will be cut from the completed half-hour piece and uploaded to Vimeo (a higher-quality YouTube-like service) for embedding as the end-users choose.

- 01.11 web distribution
- FA10 disc distribution, webisodes edited
- SU10 edit; design, duplication, and marketing
- SP10 transcription, footage logging, script authoring
- 01.10 shoot
- FA09 preproduction and research
- 05.09 publicize student internship via trailer screening
- 03.09 location scouting visit Mustard Seed school
- 02.11.09 Academic Dean approves 2010 interim leave.
- 02.03.09 submit Interim leave application to CAS chair.
- 01.16.09 Academic Dean approves Interim leave application extension.
- 01.13.09 Kuyers Institute authorizes SP09 location visit
- 09.24.08 Meeting with David Smith and Christine Metzger
- 08.04.08 Meeting with David Smith (director, Kuyers Institute)

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Among many awards garnered by the director's previous film, *The Hope of the Quechua*, the documentary was chosen a semi-finalist in InterVarsity's 2008 Bosscher-Hammond Prize competition. The prize rewards graduate and faculty projects which further the integration of faith, learning, and practice. Thus – in addition to consideration of form and content – the director's approach to the teaching/filmmaking enterprise mirrors many of The Mustard Seed's own goals.

While courses in media *consumption* thoughtfully offer worldview instruction, a reflective approach to media *production* is surprisingly rare in the Christian Academy. Instead, lighting, camera operation, and editing are too often presented as values-neutral skills to be mastered, redeemed chiefly by the content on which they are brought to bear.

Believing shooting ratio, camera angle, and editing pace to be opportunities for character formation, I present the following questions (and many others in their vein) to student collaborators:

1. Which camera angles might ennoble the film’s subjects – school-aged children in this case – as image-bearers of Christ?
2. What are the incarnational implications of having those same children assist in the shooting of the film?
3. What editing pace both reflects The Mustard Seed’s level of activity and responsibly engages the audience?
4. Given music’s ability to emotionally color a film’s content, how should the soundtrack be designed to involve viewers without manipulating them?

Classroom instruction might address these questions in a theoretical sense, but it is in apprenticeship’s situated learning that students are most likely to see how a Christian filmmaker embraces (and even fails in) a life of vocational worship. On location for a three-week shoot or in successive months of close-quartered post-production, alloys of rabbinical teaching and New Testament fraternity are routinely melded in the forge of collaborative art.

This project ought naturally to attract Calvin students to key creative positions of the filmmaking team. Between six and ten of the most talented and driven student applicants will be accepted into the crew. Whether enrolled in independent studies courses, hired as interns, or recognized as McGregor Research Fellows, Media Production and Teacher Education majors will build both transcripts and résumés. Indeed – as of 13 May 2009 – two students had already applied for production internships, five months in advance of the deadline.

But Calvin’s students are not the only ones who stand to gain from the production. Since the production of art is integral to the Mustard Seed’s educational identity, a half-hour documentary about the school’s unique teaching techniques might reasonably include segments shot (or even animated) by students themselves under the tutelage of the film’s director.

BUDGET AND JUSTIFICATION

Three versions of a detailed budget follow. The column to the far right maximizes opportunities for cost savings and volunteer involvement in the film’s production phase. In particular, substantial savings may be realized in the area of crew meals and lodging. The final cost may be even lower if Calvin’s Alumni Grant monies are used to pay for student travel and if a McGregor Research Fellowship can supplement student stipends.

	1	2	3
Salaries			
Director	4000	3000	3000
Editor	4000	3000	3000
Writer	1500	1000	1000
Talent	300	300	300
Producer (student stipend)	1000	1000	1000
Audio Technician (student stipend)	1000	1000	1000
Camera Operator (student stipend)	1000	1000	1000
Post-Production Assistant (student stipend)	1000	1000	1000

Equipment Rental

Lowell Lighting Kit			
Soft box, 750W Nook, 1kW fresnel			
(3 weeks @ \$35.00/day)	525	in kind ⁴	in kind ¹
Cameras (2)			
Sony HVR-Z1U (1 month @ \$2000 each)	4000	in kind ¹	in kind ¹
Production Expenses			
Location Scouting	800	800	0 ⁵
Airfare	1200	1200	1200
Minivan Rental (3 weeks @ \$475/week)	1425	1425	0 ⁶
Meals (4 persons x 3 weeks @ 49 per diem)	4116	4116	2436 ⁷
Lodging (3 rooms x 3 weeks @ 150/day)	9450	9450	3150 ⁸
Misc	200	200	200
Stock & Masters			
HDCAM (4 Masters)	200	200	200
DVD (6 Masters)	20	20	20
Tape Stock			
Sony DVM60PRR Mini DV (100 @ 2.00 ea)	200	200	200
Post-Production			
Video Editing			
Avid Media Composer HD Nitris Suite			
3 weeks @ \$350/day	5250	in kind ¹	in kind ¹
Audio Editing			
Pro Tools 48-channel audio editing suite			
4 days @ \$200/day	800	in kind ¹	in kind ¹
Music	150	150	150
Effects/Titles	500	500	500
Close Captioning	200	200	200
Duplication			
200 DVD w/full-color disc label			
200 Amaray case w/insert			
200 full-color case wrap	2300	2300	2300
Distribution			
Web Page Design (student stipend)	300	300	300
Vimeo HD Upload/Hosting (1 year)	60	60	60

⁴ Provided by Calvin College's Department of Communication Arts and Sciences.

⁵ This expense was paid by the Kuyers Institute in March 2009.

⁶ Presumes a minivan is provided by a school benefactor.

⁷ Presumes a \$20 reduction in the per diem if crew lunch is provided by the school.

⁸ Presumes lodging for student filmmakers in the homes of school volunteers or benefactors.

Subtotal	45496	32421	22216
Producer's Contingency	6824.4 ⁹	4863.15	0 ¹⁰
Total	52320.4	37284.15	22216

The considered approach outlined herein is intended to offer the Kuyers board a more concrete understanding of the film's trajectory and benefit, an understanding that may allow them in good conscience to join an effort well-started by the \$10,000 of "earnest money" already raised by the Mustard Seed School. We're asking the Kuyers Institute to match those funds, leaving the school to raise any difference.

⁹ A 15% contingency fee to cover unexpected overages.

¹⁰ Presumes airfares don't increase, rain never delays a shoot, luggage is never lost.