

The Inclusion of Social Responsibility in the Visual Communications Curriculum

2008

Case Study

Submitted by:

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New York, New York

“This is a way for students to get their work used in a real-world scenario while learning a sense of social responsibility—learning that as visual communicators they have a great deal of power that can be used to motivate and mobilize people, and represent organizations that might otherwise not get their message across.”

Nomi Altabef
Director of Student Experience
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Sessions Online School of Design

Synopsis from official website <www.sessions.edu>

Sessions Online School of Design, established in 1997, offers dozens of individual courses in Graphic Design, Web Design, Multimedia, Digital Art, and Business Marketing Design. In addition, we offer certificate programs in Graphic Design, Web Design, Multimedia, Digital Arts, and Business Marketing Design, with concentrations available in advanced portfolio, corporate identity, digital photography, digital illustration, digital imaging, e-commerce, Web design, Flash, web coding, visual identity, and web business.

Sessions welcomes both novice and experienced designers, giving them the professional skills and techniques they need for successful careers in digital arts and design.

The Sessions Certificate is the mark of excellence in design education. Recognized for both strength of faculty and innovation in online training, Sessions Accredited Design Certificate Programs are structured specifically to empower students with a portfolio of design work. The professional portfolio of work that is developed by each student as they progress through their Certificate program is critiqued by the professional design faculty of Sessions and by their peers.

Through hands-on projects and critique and feedback from expert instructors, students learn creative and technical approaches for designing in digital media.

The Sessions Faculty are industry-leading artists, designers, and writers who share a passion for online teaching. They bring together decades of professional and educational experience to deliver excellent courses and online instruction.

Personal Interview

November 6, 2007

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How did social responsibility become a part of your curriculum?

We are always trying to find ways of mitigating against the isolation of learning online, and create advantageous group experiences. After 9/11 we saw that the city was in economic crisis. Nonprofit organizations that were not involved with rebuilding the city were being drained of funds necessary for operating, perpetuating, and supporting their cause. We developed our program as a result of this dire situation. Our first project was for a NPO that mentored kids who lost parents in 9/11.

Do your students only work for local NPOs?

We felt our first projects needed to be local to New York City to allow for face-to-face client meetings, however, after our first few years of managing this program, we acquired the confidence to branch out to broader geographical regions that now include international clients.

How are the nonprofits chosen?

First of all, they must have a 501c3 status, in order to be considered as a sponsor of our competition. As a learning institution, we can't endorse anything that might be deemed controversial—therefore, political or religious organizations are off limits. Mostly, we want to make sure that the NPOs we work with have the intentions and the abilities to implement the projects that our students create.

The nonprofits that are trying to make a real difference in our world, with limited operating budgets, and urgent communications needs are the organizations that we choose to work with.

Are you involved throughout the entire competition?

Yes. The process begins with me contracting with the NPO that we will be working with for that competition. Then I devise the creative brief based upon the expressed needs of the NPO, while taking into consideration the scope of the student's capabilities. The clients generally rely on me and the students to lead them in the direction that will best help them meet their goals and objectives. We offer assistance with advertising text, as well as other forms of communica-

tion that will help the client appear credible, and get their message across to their constituents.

I always try to make sure the students have a good experience working with the client.

Do students ever have difficulty balancing the competition with their school work?

We find it to our advantage that our program does not adhere to a set quarter or semester schedule, because the projects can take up to three months to complete. The students generally take about four weeks to complete the initial design process, while the remaining time is consumed with narrowing the finalists, the competitors pitching for the winning bid, and the winner completing the project.

Design is such an intelligent process, and we find that the smartest, most capable students are usually the winners of our competitions. Generally speaking, these students have no issues balancing the client's deadlines with their school work. In the end, the best work ethic shines through, and the winning student figures out how to submit polished, professional, completed projects within the client's timeframe.

Are NPOs ever reluctant to work with students?

No. NPOs are so excited and thrilled to be a part of the program, there is never an issue with them working with the students.

What are the benefits to the students for participating in the competition?

Participating students get real world skills, experience for their resumes, and the opportunity to work on a professionally-produced project that will enhance their portfolios. Finalists are also highlighted and acknowledged in our online gallery.

Do all of your student's participate in the competition?

All currently enrolled Session's students are encouraged to participate, however, not every student enters the competition. Some students choose not to participate because the particular project at the time is not in alignment with their expertise, and they just don't feel they have the skills to compete. I would love to see more students participate, though, just to have the experience.

Competition Announcements

All current design competitions are announced and posted online.
<www.sessions.edu/student_life/competitions/index.asp>

The screenshot shows the Sessions School of Design website. At the top, there's a banner for 'Design Software Enrollment Benefit Sessions Certificate Programs Now Come with Design Software'. Below this is a navigation menu with links like 'login', 'programs', 'courses', 'faculty', 'how it works', 'student life', 'career center', 'enrollment', and 'contact us'. The main content area is titled 'Design Competitions' and includes a list of sponsors: Kohala Center, DETC, Mariska, Joyful Heart Foundation, FlowerPower, NPower, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Global Action Project, Cambodian Arts and Scholarship, City Project, GenArt, Urban Word NYC, and Tuesday's Children. There are also promotional banners for 'Design Software Enrollment Benefit' and 'Video Tutorials'.

All currently enrolled Sessions Certificate students are eligible and encouraged to participate.

Sessions.edu Design Competitions are sponsored by leading New York-based companies and organizations.

- Competition winners gain a portfolio piece second to none: the chance to design a professionally-produced project that is used by a leading company or organization.
- Runners-up will have their work featured in our online design competition gallery.
- To sign up, complete the Joyful Heart Foundation Competition Sign-Up form within the Competition folder in the Student Center.
- Have a question about the Sessions.edu Design competitions? Email us at competition@sessions.edu.

Project: Joyful Heart Foundation

<www.sessions.edu/student_life/competitions/Joyful_Heart_Foundation/index.asp#rules>

THE PROJECT:

Design a brochure that illustrates the mission, programs, and values of Joyful Heart Foundation, an organization that helps the survivors of sexual assault to heal.

About The Client

Joyful Heart Foundation was established by emmy-winning actress Mariska Hargitay in 2002. Through playing Detective Olivia Benson on NBC's Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, Mariska had become a role-model and spokesperson for victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. She decided to deepen her involvement with the issue and started JHF. Working hand in hand with rape-crisis centers and counselors, the Joyful Heart Foundation synthesizes all of the components of the healing process— emotional, physical, and spiritual— into one experience. After much-needed talk-therapy, survivors often need additional outlets to help them continue to heal. JHF is committed to finding and developing those other avenues.

About The Project

JFH needs a brochure that illustrates in vivid, evocative color and image what the Web site does so eloquently. The brochure needs to be have some consistency with the identity established on the JHF site, but the layout and use of text and images must be conceived for the print medium. The brochure will be a general informer all about the programs JFH offers and the results it has generated, hoping to get the word out both to prospective donors and to people who may be in need of care.

As you will see in the photos taken on JFH retreats, the spirit of the organization is energetic, hopeful, and uplifted; although it deals with the very serious issues of sexual assault and domestic violence, the focus is on healing, education, empowerment, and fun. The message is radiantly positive, and this should definitely be reflected in the design of the brochure. The organization gets tremendous exposure, so this would be a project that would be seen by a lot of people! The winning designer will be credited in small print on the brochure, with portfolio url (if applicable.)

After you register, you will receive images, logo, and content for the brochure from Joyful Heart Foundation in the download area within the course environment. Finalists will refine their brochure designs based on feedback from faculty and client, and a winner will be chosen from the group of finalists. Finalists, and then winner, will be announced via email to all participants.

File formats: As usual, you submit jpegs for judging, but make sure you save all your original Illustrator or Quark files to work with on your next version—and for printing, just in case. I can't stress the importance of this enough: save your originals!



The Spring competition sponsor is Joyful Heart Foundation, Mariska Hargitay's foundation dedicated to helping the survivors of sexual assault heal: body, mind, and spirit.

Visit the Joyful Heart Foundation site to learn more about the organization. <www.joyful-heartfoundation.org>

HOW TO PARTICIPATE:

All participating students must complete the Joyful Heart Foundation Competition Sign-Up form within the Competition folder in the Student Center. Upon doing so, we will enter you into a “class” within Angel where you can download the images and copy. There you will also view more detailed competition information and submission instructions.

Submit JHF brochure designs by Monday, April 3, 2006.

Each participant has the opportunity to submit 3 versions of their initial brochure designs. If you are selected as a finalist, the client will indicate which one to use for revisions in the next phase of the project. Semi-finalists will have an opportunity to revise and improve their designs with Faculty feedback. We will be reviewing final submissions along with JHF, who will be selecting the winner. If your design is selected by JHF, we may give you some notes for minor tweaks and revisions, and you may also be given feedback directly with the client, after which point you must submit a version of the design with finalized copy as provided by JHF.

COMPETITION RULES:

At the judges' discretion, competition submissions that arrive late may not be included. By participating in this competition, you hereby release all rights to the final product to Joyful Heart Foundation. Every design submitted becomes the exclusive property of Joyful Heart Foundation. By submitting a design, the designer thereby grants Joyful Heart Foundation perpetual license to use the design on its press release, advertising, and any other way it sees fit, anywhere in the world.

Examples of outstanding student work may also be displayed or publicized at Sessions.edu site or in the Sessions.edu catalogue.

JOYFUL HEART FOUNDATION'S COMPETITION WINNER:

To be congratulated: Megan Johnson, Web Design Certificate student, is the winner of the Joyful Heart Foundation competition!

The inside and outside of Megan Johnson's winning trifold brochure design.



Joyful Heart Foundation was founded by Mariska Hargitay, star of Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, with the mission of reaching out to victims of sexual assault. The challenge was to design a brochure that emphasized the positive, uplifting message and mission of Joyful Heart Foundation while also conveying the seriousness and importance of it. As the client put it, “We have to make sure it doesn’t just look like a travel brochure!” Megan’s design and use of type was clean and sophisticated but not too slick or corporate; her color and composition choices helped emphasize the connection with nature, creativity, and healing.



Left: Megan’s before (left) and after (right): she got rid of some images to simplify the cover and make room for type treatment on the back.

Below: Runner Up Kelly Mercer’s brochure design, front and back panels (top and bottom)

In the first version of her design, Megan had a more image-heavy design. Mariska and Stacey gave a thorough critique of each panel and asked her to simplify it, moving some images from the cover, taking out some nonessential images, and adding a type treatment on the words “courage, fearlessness, awakening, possibility” that clearly show that the JHF program is a retreat with a healing purpose. Needless to say, the folks at Joyful Heart Foundation were thrilled with the result and will be distributing the brochure at a big event this week in Los Angeles. Megan’s final step was to add her designer credit and portfolio url, so that when people want to see more of her work, they’ll know where to look!

RUNNER UP:

Kelly Mercer , Web Design + Multimedia Masters Certificate Student

Kelly Mercer’s gorgeous design made JHF’s top 10, top 5, and top 2 lists. The client was drawn to Kelly’s creative use of the images, how clean and readable it was, while at the same time she managed to get these flowing lines. Great work, Kelly!



Project: Urban Word NYC

http://www.sessions.edu/student_life/competitions/UrbanWord_TW/index.asp

THE PROJECT:

Design a suite of promotional materials for the annual Teen Poetry Slam

About The Client

Urban Word NYC provides free creative writing, performance, spoken word, and hip-hop resources to teenagers in NYC.

As a youth-driven program, Urban Word NYC encourages teens to discover and use their voices to bring to light the issues that are important to them. They are a community for young writers in all five boroughs of New York City, aiming to reach underserved populations of teens in particular. Urban Word NYC knows that youth need a creative and critical outlet and a community that supports them.

Urban Word NYC programs include:

- Workshops in creative writing and performance.
- Youth mentoring, leadership, scholarship, and internship programs.
- Performances, publications, and CDs of NYC's best youth poetry and spoken word.
- Outreach programs in schools, homeless shelters, rehabilitative sites, and correctional facilities.

About The Project

Finalists will be asked to design a suite of promotional materials, including a logo, postcard, poster, brochure, programs, T-shirts, neck tags and stickers for the Annual Teen Poetry Slam, an 11-day event in NYC. These pieces will get tremendous exposure—they are circulated all over the city and worn by the participants long after the event, and the event itself garners press coverage in sources such as Seventeen Magazine and the New York Times.

Because the competition is so extensive, the project was divided into two parts: competitors submitted up to three variations on a logo, plus a postcard design featuring their favorite logo, for an initial deadline of Monday, November 17. From these submissions, semi-finalists were chosen to go on and submit the full suite of designs for the brochure, poster, program, invitations, necktags, T-shirts, and stickers.

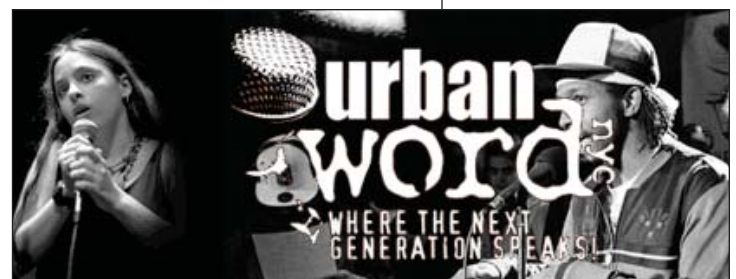
For reference, here are the guidelines that were provided to participants:

The Logo: Contestants were asked to design a logo specifically for the Teen Poetry Slam event. This logo must look good with the pre-existing Urban Word NYC logo (see right) and also work as a freestanding logo, used every year as branding for the Teen Poetry Slam.



The Winter competition sponsor is Urban Word NYC, a non-profit organization providing community and support through free creative writing programs to NYC teens.

All contestants were provided a PSD version of the logo to work with on the print design



Design Brief: The logo should read 6th Annual Teen Poetry Slam and incorporate the url www.urbanwordnyc.org. The logo should be done in only one color, and in general it is best to work out logo designs in black and white to evaluate the shape before you apply color.

The main element of the logo is “Teen Poetry Slam” The words “6th Annual” would be introductory words, functioning as lead-in text, so this would be reflected in their size and/or placement in relation to the main element, “Teen Poetry Slam” The url, www.urbanwordnyc.org, should be worked into the logo in a subtle way, functioning as an add-on or subtitle, also secondary to the main element. Logo designs should be submitted in black and white, two color, and four color variations. The logo should be done in Illustrator or another vector-based program so that it can be easily resized without compromising quality. You may submit up to three versions of the logo, using your favorite on the postcard design. Finalists will be given feedback on the logo and told which one to use when designing the rest of the pieces.

Postcard: This will contain the Urban Word NYC logo, the Teen Poetry Slam logo, and the dates, times, locations and descriptions for all functions taking place in this eleven-day event. All copy for the postcard was provided in a text file upon competition registration.

Size: The postcard will be 5" x 7", and JPEGs for the initial November 17 submission should be saved at that size.

Colors/Fonts: To keep production cost down, the postcard should be done in a two-color design, (last year’s was black and red on white) though you may also submit a 4-color version if you like. No hard and fast specs for type fonts will be given, but participants should look at the Web site, www.urbanwordnyc.org, to get a sense of the feeling of the young urban sensibility combined with creativity and self-expression that comprises Urban Word NYC’s image. You will also get a sense of the client by looking at last year’s postcard, which will be available to view upon registration. Your design should be in keeping with the client’s image, just like with any design for a client.

Images: Upon registration, contestants were given the opportunity to view some artwork from Annual Teen Slam events of the previous year. This should have given participants an idea of the mood of the event, without suggesting that participants do something exactly like what’s been done before.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE:

The competition follows very strict rules. For reference, here are the rules that were provided to participants:

All participating students must enter their email address in the form on this page to confirm their entry. Upon doing so, we will send you a zip file containing the Urban Word NYC logo and copy mentioned above, as well as a sampling of designs that were done for last year’s Teen Slam events.

Submit initial logo and postcard designs by November 17, 12 noon EST

While you may use Photoshop for part of the project, all your actual design work must be done in a print production tool: Illustrator, Quark, InDesign, or Freehand. You may import images from Photoshop into one of those tools, but for printing and reproduction reasons do not do any final work in Photoshop.

You must save your work in eps format at all times, but your initial postcard submission for the November 17 due date will be a .jpg version at the actual 5x7 inch size. Semi-finalists will be chosen, and then feedback will be given to those students.

Semi-finalists will have an opportunity to revise and improve their designs with Faculty feedback, and submit the full suite of designs. We will be reviewing final submissions along with Urban Word NYC, who will be selecting the winner. If your design is selected by Urban Word NYC, we may give you some notes for minor tweaks and revisions, and you may also be given feedback directly with the client, after which point you must submit the designs in eps format, with fonts included, ready for printing.

COMPETITION RULES:

At the judges' discretion, competition submissions that arrive late may not be included. By participating in this competition, you hereby release all rights to the final product to Urban Word NYC. Every design submitted becomes the exclusive property of Urban Word NYC. By submitting a design, the designer thereby grants Urban Word NYC perpetual license to use the design on its press release, advertising, and any other way it sees fit, anywhere in the world.

Examples of outstanding student work may also be displayed or publicized at Sessions site or in the Sessions catalogue

URBAN WORD NYC'S TEEN POETRY SLAM FINALISTS :

Participants in the Urban Word NYC winter design competition designed a logo and postcard for the 6th Annual Teen Poetry Slam, an eleven day event in NYC. With over 120 competition entrants, it wasn't easy to select the finalists, who will go on to create a poster and sticker design from which the winner will be chosen.

A Sessions Faculty panel weighed in on the designs, noting positives as well as areas for improvement, which finalists will get the opportunity to address in the second round. Then the client had the final say, and in the end, five designs were chosen based on the merits you can read about below:



Finalist
David Nodal
Master's Design Certificate Student

The client really responded to color of this design and the intensity of the image with its bold cropping. The client felt that David's entry epitomized the mood of the event.



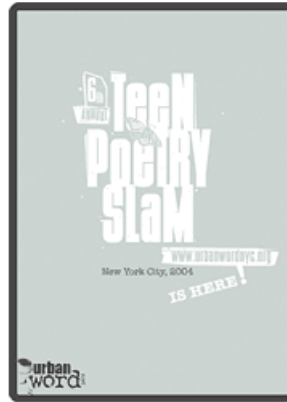
Finalist
Erik Thorp
Graphic Design Certificate Student

Erik's logo and text treatments were what impressed the client — this is a tight, well-developed logo that really works with the Urban Word NYC logo.

Finalist

Stefania Corti
New Media Certificate Student

Besides the fun logo treatment, the back of Stefania's postcard particularly caught the client's eye — panelists loved the graph paper notebook treatment, and the clear, easy-to-read text.



Finalist

Peter Chen
Graphic Design Certificate Student

This entry wowed the client with the overall tightness and cohesiveness of the presentation. With a great logo and type treatment, Peter managed to make all the necessary information prominent and clear, creating a look that works with the client's established identity.



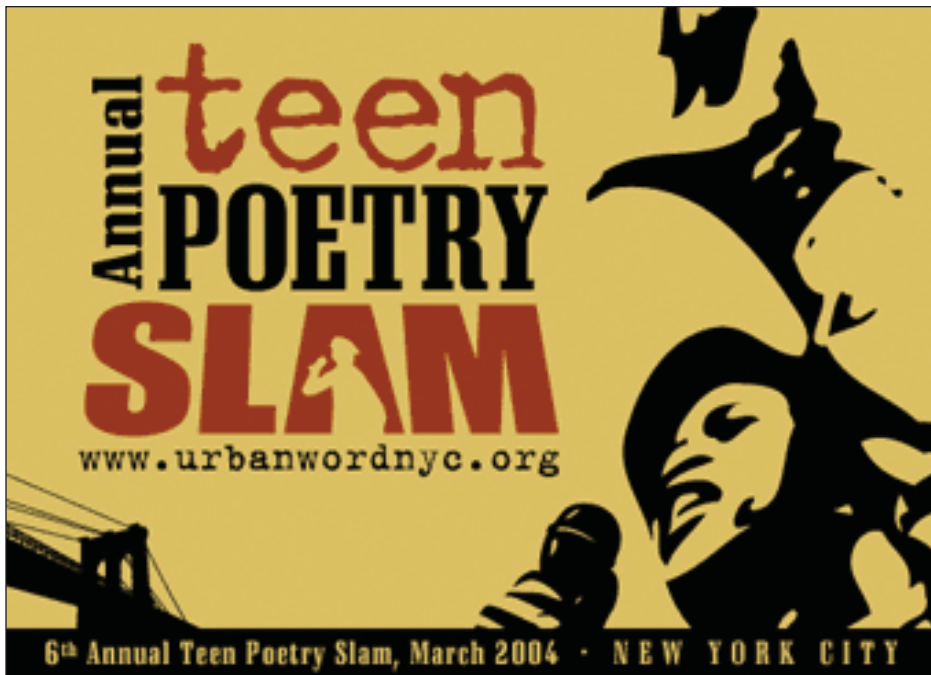
Finalist

Kristian Thibault
Master's Design Certificate Student

The client liked Kristian's color choices here. The logo is sophisticated and intriguing in its use of negative space to define the word "poetry."

URBAN WORD NYC'S TEEN POETRY SLAM WINNER:

The verdict is in: Peter Chen, Graphic Design Certificate student from California, USA, is the winner of the Urban Word NYC winter design competition!



Peter Chen's winning design.

The project was ambitious: Students were asked to design a full suite of promotional and marketing materials for the 6th Annual Teen Poetry Slam, an eleven-day event produced by the New York-based non-profit organization Urban Word.

The competition unfolded in several stages. First, the 120 competition entrants were asked to design a logo and postcard. A deluge of creative entries flooded in, and five entrants with outstanding submissions were selected as finalists. Each finalist received a round of feedback from the client and Sessions Faculty members, then competed against a tight deadline to produce the winning solution. That's when the real work began.

Here's the story of how Peter Chen won the Urban Word design competition:

Round One: The Five Finalists
Five design competition Finalists were selected by a panel of Sessions Faculty and by a team at Urban Word.

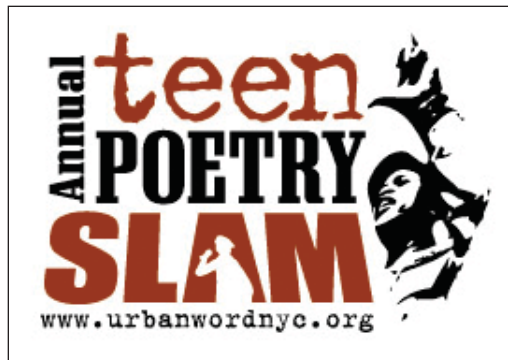
As the Finalist page shows, the Teen Poetry Slam event inspired some very creative and diverse responses. Even at that stage, Peter's work stood out because of the very strong logo treatment. As Peter said: "I was trying to express an event whose spirit is urban and gritty, but also exuberant and poetic. And I wanted to make sure that the postcard went along with the identity of Urban Word NYC—it had to make sense with the look of their Web site."

"The logo was so bold", says Jen Weiss, the Director of Urban Word NYC. "It was like a stamp: you could take it out of the postcard, put it on a sticker or a flyer or anywhere, and it would completely encapsulate the spirit of the event all on its own, with no need for other images or even for color." K-Swift, Urban Word's events coordinator, adds, "We loved the figure of the poet inside the A. It just makes the logo so memorable."



Peter's first postcard design had great potential...

and nabbed him a place among the five finalists.



The logo seen here features an illustration of a poet—

in the next revision, this would change...

Round Two:

Back to the Drawing Board

Even with all this positive feedback, Peter still needed to go back to the drawing board and make revisions. “We wanted to see if he could shake up his design on the postcard a bit”, says Weiss, “make it more bold. The Teen Poetry Slam isn’t a conservative event at all—it’s very in-your-face, and we wanted to make sure the postcard had that feeling.”

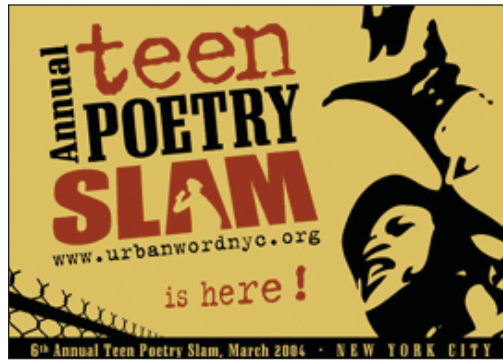
Peter’s second submission definitely achieved this goal. He enlarged the logo and image, adding diagonal elements to make the composition more dynamic. He also broke apart the logo from the image of the poet on the right, fulfilling another one of the client’s requests: “We wanted the logo to stand alone and not be dependent on that image for recognition,” says Jen. The integrity of Peter’s logo was clear even when separated from the image. It could stand alone on the strength of the type choices Peter had made.

Along with the revised postcard, Peter submitted his poster and sticker designs. These showed how well he was able to translate his original vision to these other pieces. “The finalists are all at a level of craft where they are able to create a cohesive look between pieces,” says Sessions Faculty member Nomi Altabef. “Peter did this and also added ingenuity to his new pieces, using the extra space of the poster to include thumbnail images mapping the location of each slam event.” That especially caught the client’s eye. “Not only was it informative”, says Jen, “but the way it looked really reinforced the NYC vibe, which is so important to the event and to the organization as a whole.”

The sticker presented another unique challenge, because the client wanted the sticker to serve two functions: to convey the branding of the Teen Poetry Slam and, more importantly, to represent the Urban Word NYC organization as a whole. The Urban Word NYC logo had to be prominently featured. Fortunately Peter had done his homework and made sure that his work fit with the already-established look of Urban Word NYC as shown on the client’s Web site.

Round Three: Some Client Concerns

In the course of making many vast improvements, the changes also raised some new concerns with the client. “He added the wire fence, which was this great diagonal that made the composition work really well, but we were worried that the fence made it look like the poet was on some kind of military base,” comments Jen. Compounding that concern were some problems with the image: “In the image of the poet he used, there was no microphone, no evidence that this was an image of a spoken-word performance—it just looked like an angry youth with his fist in the air.”



Round 2: a bolder, more dynamic postcard....

and he separated the logo from the illustration.

These two elements took the design too far from its goal: communicating the idea of a competitive poetry event. Jen explained, “As an urban youth organization, we really have to be sensitive to this—it’s crucial that we make it clear we’re an organization that promotes creativity and community through performance. We didn’t want it just to look like he was shouting; it had to be clear that he was performing.”

Round Four: Back to the Drawing Board (again!)

Peter was presented with the client’s concerns and asked to make more revisions, and for a moment he felt completely swamped. “I understood what the client was saying, and I had even wondered about those same issues, but felt like I was going to have to redo my whole design, and I just didn’t know how I could possibly begin again after I’d come so far.” Working under extreme time pressure—only one day to submit the revisions—Peter showed problem-solving skills that will take him far in his career. “He came back with such strong solutions, we were really impressed,” says Jen Weiss. Rather than scrap the image, he simply added a microphone to it, and swapped the wire fence for an image of the Brooklyn Bridge. “I tried to keep the same diagonal element”, says Peter, “but go for something that was more quintessential New York.” Bingo—it came together exactly as the client hoped, and elevated the design to a much higher level of communication.

What does Peter have to look forward to now? Four more hectic days of finalizing the designs before the work goes to print. And then, of course, there will be the excitement every designer treasures: seeing his work in printed form. “Thank you for choosing me!” Peter told the client. “I’m so excited to work with you on the Teen Poetry Slam. Having previously worked with urban youth, this project has special meaning to me.”



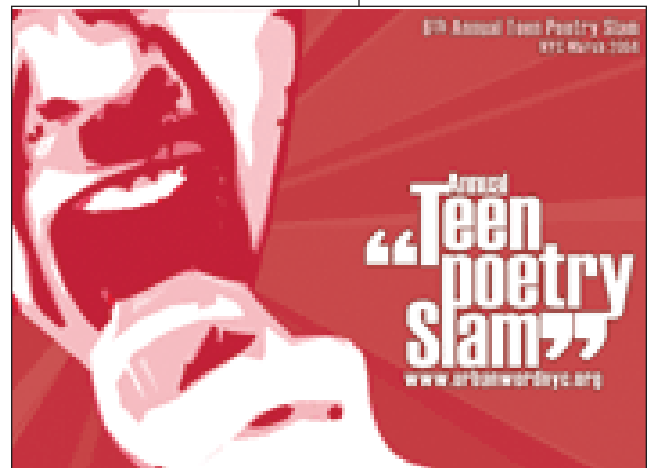
At left is the complete suite of products—a few minor text changes, and then they go to print!

THE RUNNER-UP:

David Nodal
Master's Certificate Student

We couldn't talk about this competition without making note of the Runner-up, David Nodal. When the initial designs came in, the client was especially drawn to the theatrical energy displayed by his piece. "That face was absolutely riveting," says Jen Weiss. "And we loved the color."

In the Round 2 and 3 revisions, David made great strides with the piece, working on the logo and type treatment and adding a background texture that intensifies the impact of the image. He is to be congratulated on his hard work and the excellent results. Great job, David!



*David Nodal's
poster design.*