

STUDENT|profiles

Philip Chrzanowski

This High School Student Is Keeping It Real

It's a familiar story. At 13, Philip Chrzanowski disliked school. It's not that he struggled with his studies or that he clashed with his teachers. He was just plain bored.

"I was always a good student, but school just didn't interest me," he says. "I would answer the questions, but not in depth, because I just didn't care."

So when one of his teachers suggested that he attend high school at Nex+ Gen Academy (<https://sites.google.com/a/aps.edu/nex-gen>), a magnet school within his Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA, district, he jumped at the chance. The academy is different than most public schools. Its focus is project-based learning with a strong technology component. All students get

and access to software that they use to make movies; learn programming; and study math, languages, and more. They work in teams, and the students decide how to handle their assignments.

So how does Philip like school now? "I've learned so much from this school in such a short period of time," he says. "Our school offers a way for you to come and challenge yourself. The creativity comes from us, and we make our own education."

Take the award-winning film that Philip, now 15, created last year with three teammates, Adelle Blauser, Deven Mettling, and Hannah Couse. The assignment was to make a film that would be a sequel to a popular children's book that they could show students at a nearby elementary school. Philip's team chose *The Rainbow Fish*, a story about a conceited fish with beautiful scales who loses all his friends, until he chooses to share his glimmering scales with others.

Philip's team wanted to do something different. Instead of making a sequel to the book, they created a prequel. "We decided to take the story in an alternate route and make him an ugly fish and explain how he got his scales," he says.

Under Philip's leadership, they wrote the script, created the artwork and animation, and narrated the video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSyVGG24SMg). Philip, who has experience in graphic design, worked on the colorful underwater backgrounds.

"We all worked together," Philip says of his team. "Without one person, it would have been difficult to pull off."

Julie Lopes, the teacher who assigned the video project, says Philip thrives on authentic, hands-on projects. "He loves how 'real' our projects are," she says. "He is quickly disengaged if he perceives work is simulated."

Lopes entered the video into the Digital Desert Youth Film Festival in Albuquerque, where it took third place last spring. After the film was complete, Lopes asked Philip if he and his team would discuss the project-based learning process with dignitaries from the New Mexico Department of Education, and he immediately agreed.

"Although this required a great deal of preparation and work above and beyond all his other responsibilities, he willingly gathered his group and developed a presentation," Lopes says. "He took a leadership role in scheduling meetings and work sessions with his team to get the job done. And he did this as a freshman!"

Philip's passion is design and programming. He's learning C++ mostly on his own, with some guidance from teachers. He wants to design video games one day.

"I was never good at art or writing, so this is my art. I know a lot about video games and programming," Philip says.

And he's lucky to attend a school, he adds, that takes his passion seriously.

—Diana Fingal is senior editor of L&L.

Student Profiles highlight kids who use technology in creative and authentic ways.

