Future Thinking Innovators Award 2021

Winning Initiative

American Community School of Abu Dhabi, UAE

Overview of the school:

Established in 1972, the American Community School of Abu Dhabi (ACS) is a nonprofit, US accredited, college-preparatory school based in the United Arab Emirates serving a culturally-diverse student body of 1,200 students ages 4-18 representing more than 60 nationalities. The American, standards-based curriculum provides excellence in the four foundational pillars of academics, the arts, athletics, and service learning. The school's mission is to empower all students to define and shape their futures for learning, service, and global citizenship with a belief that a compassionate, student-centered community of learners engages, prepares, and inspires.

Summary of initiative:

Imagine a classroom that has a radio station, a TV studio, robotics arena, animation station, and a small stage for performance, where students are so engaged in learning the bell for dismissal is ignored. The ACS Technology Team had the incredible idea to re-imagine the tech program and its existing space to motivate students to be active creators giving them a voice and giving them a choice. The basement underneath the stage was transformed into the Backstage Techttoo Studios, an inspiring space where students innovate, create and try out new things. The room looks as though middle schoolers found an old warehouse and reimagined it for themselves with exposed brick, graffiti and neon signs. The ACS Backstage Techttoos Program was launched and incorporated into the 2019-20 Middle School curriculum as an elective course called Exploring Technology for Grades 6-8. Students in the Exploring Technology class pick their own path of adventure, whether they want to try filmmaking or animation. There are no deadline constraints and they are free to move at their own pace. So, if they want to take their time with a digital art project or jump right into mobile photography, they can. Students earn small "techttoos" which are physical representations of the new skill they have mastered. In Exploring Technology, students are not only rewarded, they are celebrated for their creativity and innovation. At ACS, we believe the future belongs to the creators and the innovators and this is the place where they find their passion.

How the initiative has encouraged students in lateral thinking for a specific purpose:

What if students used technology to elicit change? As educators, we want students to see tech as a tool that can be leveraged to problem solve, accomplish more and bring about positive change in the classroom and the world we live in today. Previously, we found that students used their technology as a passive device for entertainment, and in some cases, something that caused unhealthy addictions and comparisons to others. We discovered Middle School was the critical age to teach students a new way to utilize technology. We focused on teaching students to be ACTIVE creators instead of PASSIVE consumers with technology by giving them a VOICE and CHOICE. In the ACS Backstage Techttoos Program technology becomes the hook for deeper learning and greater

engagement. Students are encouraged to broaden their perspective and enrich their own learning across a range of academic subjects and topics, identifying creative solutions, and presenting evidence of their knowledge. For example, if a student chooses Podcasting Level 3 to learn how to create podcasts, and in social studies class they are studying about the plight of refugees, they could use their new tech skill to bring learning to life for their peers, present solutions, and raise awareness about the cause. Thus the podcasting lesson becomes more than a digital skill; it becomes a tool for change that inspires future global citizens. Techttoo projects teach students to innovate, problem solve, collaborate, and discover their own creativity, which are the most in-demand skills of the future workforce.

How the initiative had impact on student learning with potential for longer-term development as a sustainable initiative for the school:

Nearly 50% of Middle School enrolled in the Backstage Techttoos program. The program's positive impact is evidenced by students' greater engagement and achievement. Students were motivated to complete so many Techttoo projects that additional curriculum needed to be written during the term in order to keep up with their pace and interest. The projects were so engaging that students often completed them outside the classroom, without having the work assigned.

Students were undeterred even as ACS transitioned swiftly to remote learning in March 2020, leaving their beautifully-designed classroom empty. Students earned Techttoo stickers by accomplishing new tech projects designed especially for Remote Learning. Even during the pandemic, the Backstage Techttoo program thrived. Today, more than 50% of Grade 6-8 students have elected to take Exploring Technology with Mr. Flick, even though the Middle School remains in Remote Learning.

Given its success, the Backstage Techttoos Program has been modeled for Grades KG-5. Our new Elementary Innovation Lab opened this year with 24 new ipads, TV studio, podcasting studio, animation lab, and a new program called MyTechBadges. Dash, the robot, greets our young students as they adventure into robotics. The new MyTechBadges program will spark students' imagination, rewarding them for exploring new ways of learning through technology. From the new Innovation Lab for Grades KG-5, to the Middle School Backstage Techtoos program, to the 10 Design and Innovation courses in High School, ACS students of all ages have opportunities to build the necessary digital skills to be competitive in a dynamic world.

How the initiative demonstrates student commitment and a rigorous process for effective learning:

The Backstage Techttoos Program meets the diverse individual needs of each learner and is flexible enough for each learner to progress at their own pace. According to Brad Flickinger, the Middle School Technology Teacher, Exploring Technology is the most popular course in the Middle School, with a waiting list of students. Techttoo students are rarely disciplined or reminded to stay on task as they are the committed drivers of their own learning. The program is both rigorous and effective. Each project, aligned to the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE) standards, was designed to show students how they can be creators and not just consumers of technology. Through the program, students' mastery of digital tools also provides them with greater knowledge across academic disciplines. In order to earn full marks, students must earn at least 7 points each

semester. Students log into an open-platform system and select a Techttoo project they are interested in. Each project, depending on the rigor, earns a student a certain number of points. For example, Level 1 Techttoos earn 1 point, whereas Level 3 Techttoos earn 3 points. Last year, the Exploring Technology class earned an average 8.9 points, demonstrating the student commitment. The new program has elevated technology education at ACS by providing an interactive model that encourages students to drive their own learning achievement.

How the initiative includes student voice and/or student action:

Through Techttoo projects, students ask the deeper question of "How can this skill be applied to another class, a cause that I believe in, or to a career that I'm interested in?" Students are completely in control of their own learning, selecting Techttoo projects that, by design, allow them to continuously improve existing skills and acquire new ones they are interested in. For example, a student who earns their Podcasting Techttoo, could be inspired to create a Podcast about the California Gold Rush for Social Studies class, or launch their own podcast in high school, which may spark a passion to study broadcast journalism at university. Another example, the Digital Music Techttoo challenges students to watch a two-minute video describing a charity, and use those details to write and produce a song in the genre of their choice in Garageband. The purpose of this tech project is to bring awareness to the charity and motivate people to donate. The name comes from the "techttoos" stickers that students earn that represent the tech skills where they have proven their competency. Each student earns Techttoos by learning new tech skills, proving they fully comprehend the skill by creating projects that demonstrate their new tech knowledge, and recording a video reflection about the skill they learn. The ACS Backstage Techttoos Program is built on voice, choice and action for students to leverage technology as a tool to become active contributors, lifelong advocates, and changemakers.

Sharing beyond the school community:

Brad Flickinger (also known as Mr. Flick) is not only the new ACS Middle School Technology Teacher that developed the ACS Backstage Techttoos Program in 2019, he is also the author of a best selling book about how to motivate students using the badge system called Reward Learning with Badges: Spark Student Achievement. The American Community School encourages Mr. Flick to generously share the ACS Backstage Techttoos Program with educators from other international schools through an open-source website platform with no password and all videos can be found on YouTube. Mr. Flick designed websites easily accessed by students, substitute teachers and the broader world:

Backstage Techttoos (for Middle School students ages 11-13) https://www.mytechttoos.com/the-techttoos.html

MyTechBadges (for Elementary School students ages 5-10) https://wwyy:mvtechbadges.com/

Mr. Flick is often asked to speak at international conferences and recently spoke at the 2019 Future of Education Now

Conference (#FOEN2019) at the Western Academy of Beijing China about ACS' newly launched Backstage Techttoos Program to share with peers at other international schools in attendance.