Learning Technology Skills Through Social Entrepreneurialism

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The only complaint I heard at the ninth grade Applied Technology final exhibition was, "Only $3,000? But I want to make a donation to every organization!" I had to agree. It was a dilemma, and a frustrating one, at that. Do you give your money to HALE (Hispanic Americans Learning English), the organization which teaches young Spanish-speaking children on John's Island to speak English or to Hoops for the 'Hood, the nonprofit which takes kids off the streets and teaches them teamwork, goal-setting, and a healthy lifestyle by giving them a chance to play basketball? Should you donate to Power for Life which builds wind farms and installs solar panels across the United States or to A Better Life for Abused Women and Children which provides shelter, loans, and a new start to victims of domestic abuse around the world? And what about the other nine worthy causes represented at the exhibition?

The final exhibition was a nonprofit fair, although none of the organizations were real; each had been created over the semester by a ninth grader. Visitors to the exhibition—students, parents, and faculty—were given three $1,000 "donations" to make to the three causes of their choice. It was up to the visitors to decide where their money would go; it was up to the exhibitors to persuade visitors that their cause was the most worthy. The visitors and the organizations' founders quickly learned that whether you're on the giving or the receiving end, you have to work within people's economic realities; very few people have as much money as they would like to donate to nonprofit organizations. It was just one of many "real life" issues the Applied Technology students learned this past semester.

Technology With (and Without) Context

When I first arrived at Charleston Collegiate School, I was handed a college-level Microsoft business applications textbook and told I'd be teaching a one-semester ninth grade technology course. Since the course had never been taught before, I was given little more direction than: "Teach them Office and anything else you think they need to know about computers for the Upper School." I looked at the beast of the 944-page textbook and sighed; I had been teaching technology since 1991, but always in the context of the students' core subject classes. My previous students had learned spreadsheets in math, word processing in English, and multimedia presentations in history—or sometimes, spreadsheets in history, multimedia presentations in English, and word processing in math. Suddenly, in this new environment, I was context-less.

The textbook was full of exercises based on scenarios involving a shopping mall, a business intern, and a travel agency. The students learned the technical skills, but they didn't find the assignments interesting (when was the last time you went to a travel agency?). And I was troubled by the approach: the students sat at computers, and I gave them a task. They were not learning when and how technology could solve problems; they were being given problems pre-designed to be solved by technology. The exercises seemed unnatural, random, and irrelevant.

After a year of this, I decided I needed to change things significantly. Scheduling issues and limited resources made teaching the technology skills in the context of subject areas difficult; I needed to come up with my own context which would help students recognize the many practical applications for technology, as well as those situations where a pencil sketch, a 3-D model, or a face-to-face encounter might be a better approach.

My first instinct was to have the students create small businesses. I looked for curricular materials and found a few textbooks and programs I could use. As I browsed through these, a couple of things hit me. First, I am a nonprofit person. Both of my parents spent their entire lives working for nonprofit organizations, and except for a short stint in the corporate world, I have always worked for nonprofits. As I looked at the

chapters on the production/distribution chain, return on investment, and supply and demand in the small business curricula, I began to feel uncomfortable. I couldn't relate to what I was reading, and while I knew I could learn it all, I thought why not teach what I already know so well? Second, and more important, I realized that this could be a wonderful opportunity to teach a lesson much larger than spreadsheets and marketing or even how a small organization runs. If, instead of creating commercial businesses, the students created nonprofit organizations, they could get some insight into why people choose to work for a cause rather than a profit. At a time in their lives when they naturally put themselves at the center of their worlds, maybe I could help my students to begin to look outside themselves.

Building a Nonprofit Curriculum

When I couldn't find any curricula for creating nonprofit organizations, I went about building my own. I looked at several books on starting your own nonprofit and decided (much to my own dismay because I hate the title) that The Nonprofit Kit for Dummies was the best book for my purposes. My course objectives were that the students would:

• Learn to utilize technology—including Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Internet, Google Earth, RSS, blogs—productively in Upper School and beyond
• Be introduced to all aspects of designing and running a nonprofit organization
• Apply critical thinking skills to all projects
• Demonstrate independent learning and problem-solving

My essential questions for the course were:
• When is a computer the best tool for the job?
• What makes a cause worth supporting?

I started the course with a unit on Wikipedia and validating Internet information. This was my way of letting the students (whom I had not taught previously) know my expectations and teaching style. I wanted to establish a foundation of trust in the classroom so that students felt secure in exchanging ideas freely and discussing issues of importance to them. I knew this would be important when we began talking about the causes that our nonprofit organizations would be addressing. Since there are many opinions on how (or how not) to use Wikipedia, I thought discussing and writing about this would be a great way to let students know I valued all viewpoints. Our discussions were rich and the viewpoints varied; at the end of the unit, each student proposed a policy on the use of Wikipedia for CCS students, secure in the knowledge that, as far as I was concerned, there was no "right" answer.

When we moved into the nonprofit curriculum, I started with the question: "What is a nonprofit organization?" "It's a company that doesn't make any money," was the unanimous answer. I shouldn't have been surprised at their initial lack of understanding; most of the parents of my students work for local companies or are in business for themselves as real estate agents, landscapers, house cleaners, and other small business owners. I realized I had a lot of groundwork to cover.

So we started out by comparing nonprofit and for-profit entities. I created a website of links to dozens of organizations and quickly learned that the ones that were of most interest to the students were those created by children as well as those in the Charleston area. International groups with far-reaching missions like Greenpeace and World Wildlife Fund proved to be overwhelming at this point. We analyzed mission statements and the types of services offered, and we looked at how different groups raised money. We talked about why people start or choose to work for nonprofits and watched videos of nonprofit founders telling their own stories. At the end of this unit, I asked the class to brainstorm a list of adjectives that they felt described nonprofit employees. Expecting descriptors like "selfless," "compassionate," and "dedicated," I couldn't keep myself from laughing when the very first contribution to the list was: "tired." That was when I knew they were beginning to get it.

After all this exploration, the students began designing their nonprofit organizations. For most, identifying a cause was easy since they had been thinking about it for a few weeks. Others, however, found this step challenging: they didn't know a lot about the problems in the world, they had never volunteered anywhere, or perhaps their parents had not made such issues a priority. I asked these students to focus on what they cared about or were interested in, or to reflect back on a difficult personal experience that might have been made easier had a supportive organization been available (such an experience served as the inspiration for

the creation of the aforementioned HALE).

Creating an Identity and a Budget
With causes identified, each student created a mission statement, name for the organization, logo, slogan, a title for him or herself, and a business card. They used Word, Publisher, Paint, and GIMP to accomplish these tasks. They signed up for new Gmail accounts with appropriately chosen email addresses. They searched online classified ads to identify an actual piece of property they could rent or buy for their organization, and then looked up that location on Google Earth. The student with the animal shelter chose a house with several acres of land while the student whose organization was providing basketball opportunities found a warehouse in Chicago that he planned to convert into courts. This step gave them a real address for their literature as well as realistic rent/mortgage payments for budgeting purposes. Finally, they found an appropriate, available domain name on a site such as godaddy.com.

Using Microsoft Word's Résumé Wizard, the students then created résumés, which were based on reality except that they included their nonprofit position as their most current employment (some did not have any real employment yet in their young lives, so this was good practice). Not only would these résumés become part of their final exhibition, but this assignment also gave the students an opportunity to take stock of their experiences and accomplishments to date with an eye toward enhancing those in the coming years for college application purposes.

Budgeting came next, and students learned about expenses and income, particularly earned income and contributed income. They created Excel spreadsheets which included the rents/mortgages they had found earlier and estimated expenses according to the services they were offering. They decided how they were going to staff their organizations: whom did they need to pay and what could they use volunteers for? They learned about benefits, insurance, utilities, and all of the expenses involved in running a business. They had to decide on a salary for themselves; in a society that relentlessly sends the message that making a lot of money is the ultimate definition of success, they had to weigh their own needs and desires against the needs of the organization. Every day in the news they were hearing about the multimillion dollar salaries of auto industry executives and the astronomical bonuses of bank employees, yet no one gave themselves more than $50,000/year.

The Cause Becomes Central
By now we were about eight weeks into our study of nonprofits and many things were becoming second nature to the students. They understood the financial constraints that nonprofits were under, and they did everything with that in mind. When they designed publications, for example, they kept the colors to a minimum and the designs simple. More and more, I saw their cause become their primary concern. "I need to hire two teachers that I can rely on to be there every day, so that's two salaries with benefits. Do you think I could make some money if I sold teddy bears and t-shirts with our logo on it? Maybe I should start an adult ESL program and charge a small amount for it." "What if I had the homeless people work in the kitchen and around the shelter? It would help teach them responsibility and give them some job skills, while saving us from having to hire someone else." "If I got a big name like Michael Jordan to be on my board, then maybe it would be easier to expand to other cities so we can help more kids."

The classes began to run themselves. I would introduce the "problem" and the students would use the knowledge they had accumulated—and the technology—to help solve it. You need to communicate with the public . . . "We'll create a newsletter!" You need to raise some money . . . "We'll make a PowerPoint! But we won't make a student PowerPoint with lots of bells and whistles and images zooming around. We'll make one that's appropriate for the business world, for people or companies who might be able to support us." I watched with pride as they became more and more independent, tackling increasingly complex problems with very little guidance.

CES Principles in Action
This curriculum was intentionally built upon the "student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach" principle; it was designed, as the Common Principle states, "to provoke students to learn how to learn and thus to teach themselves." Each day, students added a building block to the structure of their organization, and each student designed each block individually. Each decision they made was based on the decisions they had made previously; their fundraising efforts reflected their budgets, for instance, and their organizational "look" was based on the color and design of the logo they had created early in the semester. Not only did

this structure encourage creative and critical thinking, but it took the dark shadow of cheating and plagiarism out of the picture completely. Everything each student created was original; it couldn't be copied from a classmate or cut-and-pasted from the Internet.

The other CES principle that was central to the curriculum was "less is more." With a few digressions, we stuck to the nonprofit curriculum all semester. By keeping the content narrow, students were able to explore the same issue from a variety of angles and perspectives (i.e., depth over coverage). For instance, we had the luxury of looking at our organizations through many lenses: What is the founder of this organization concerned about? What are the clients' concerns? What do the donors care about? What do these have in common and how do they differ? How can you, as the founder, address all three? We weren't bouncing from shopping malls to business interns to travel agencies; the students learned one cohesive system in depth.

A Demonstration of Mastery—With Some Technology Backup

The final exhibition, ironically, didn't include any technology at all. It was exclusively face-to-face salesmanship and tri-fold display boards. The boards displayed the products from the semester: business cards, résumés, budgets, graphs, newsletters, mission statements, etc. Some students brought in props and incentives to lure visitors to their area. Hoops for the 'Hood had a small basketball hoop where visitors could make a basket and win a Hershey's Kiss. It was brilliant marketing, especially when a lot of the audience was younger than 15 (although the adults enjoyed showing off their basketball prowess too!). In two 45-minute blocks, H4H's founder received more than $50,000 in "donations."

The most common question I got from visitors to the exhibition was, "Are these organizations real?" It was the ultimate confirmation of the Coalition's sixth principle: "demonstration of mastery." By the end of the semester, the students had constructed their organizations so solidly and had internalized their messages so completely that visitors to the exhibition found it difficult to differentiate between our real and invented worlds. The nonprofit founders could speak with confidence about specific people or animals that their organizations had served. They could outline the biggest challenges that they were facing. They could hypothesize about what the future held and what the attendant financial implications might be. They could formulate an answer to any question, and they did it with great composure. They believed in what they were doing, and they got potential "donors" to believe in it too.

And everything they talked about was supported, resolved, or illustrated by technology. Graphs and charts showed their current and projected financial status. Newsletters told the stories of those who benefited from their services and announced upcoming events. Business cards gave contact information should someone want to make a future donation. Résumés answered questions about the backgrounds of the founders. The curriculum redesign had succeeded; the students learned the technology skills, all within a much larger context, one that was rooted in real life and positive global citizenship.

New Students, New Ideas

As I begin the second semester with a new group of ninth graders, I am excited to introduce them to nonprofit organizations and explore their ideas for making the world a better place. One boy has decided that his organization is going to be affiliated with HALE and will offer free translation services to adults who need them when visiting doctors, legal offices, and other offices and agencies. Another student is trying to figure out a way to rescue the abandoned female Chinese babies they've been reading about in English class.

I hope that this social conscience stays with them through their school years and into adulthood. For now, I can say that they've already been successful in turning around one life: mine. I was a teacher trapped in a dissatisfying curriculum who now feels renewed and reinvigorated by the engagement with learning, innovation, and genuine empathy I see in the classroom every day.

Nonprofit Organizations Created by CCS Ninth Graders

The nonprofit organizations created by the ninth graders broke down along gender lines, with the girls creating organizations that helped children and animals and the boys creating organizations involved with sports or alternative energy. Having recently heard Michael Thompson speak on how schools can unwittingly be hostile environments for boys since they often squelch some of their natural instincts and interests, I was thrilled to be able to give both boys and girls a chance to pursue something that was personally meaningful.

Their organizations included:

• HALE (Hispanic Americans Learning English) – Providing ESL services for young children
• Hoops for the Hood – Giving low-income youth an opportunity to play basketball
• Thoughtful Threads – Improving self-confidence through giving students nicer clothing
• A Chance for Childhood – Providing opportunities for homeless children to participate in athletics
• A Better Life for Abused Women and Children – An international organization providing shelter and loans for women who need a new start
• Backwoods for Kids – Providing hunting experiences to underpriviliged youth
• Make a Goal Foundation – Bringing soccer equipment, coaches, and training to the children of Africa
• Race 2 a Change – Giving retired race horses a chance to live out their natural lives peacefully
• Power for Life – Providing alternative energy solutions to towns and businesses
• The Nuclear Environment Center – Lobbying for a reduction in the use of nuclear power
• Organizations sheltering abused and abandoned animals:
- Peace 4 Pets
- NEFFA (No Excuse for Animal Abuse)
- HASC (Helping Animals in South Carolina)

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Charleston Collegiate School is a preschool-grade 12 independent day school with an enrollment of 275 students. Located just outside Charleston, SC, the school is one of the most progressive in the area. CCS's mission is to have a positive impact on its students, so that they may positively impact the world around them. The school prepares students to face life's challenges with confidence, strong problem-solving skills, and a solid ethical foundation. CCS is a community of cultural and economic diversity which fosters compassion, social awareness, and respect for community and environment.

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