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WebSLAM: Real-World Problem Solving With Civic Focus

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Students are sick and tired of solving made-up problems. It doesn't matter how you present them -- multiple choice, short essay, free response, multiselect -- they just want to move on to something else as soon as they can.

As a classroom teacher, I saw this first-hand and, like so many others, sought ways to do things differently. And so it happened that one evening after attending a tech community event, I was sharing my frustrations with friends when I simply asked the question, "What if just we gave youth a real-world problem to solve?" Together, we imagined a number of ideas that would fit the known realities and constraints of the classroom. Relatively quickly, we landed on the notion of giving students a taste of the digital job market by building websites for nonprofits. As I worked on the idea, knowing that I didn't want to wait for curricular approval to include this in school-day instruction, the answer became obvious: after-school clubs. The idea matured into a plan for six club meetings over a number of weeks with a tech mentor, all of which would culminate in a hackathon-style finale on the last weekend. It didn't take long for me to build on the group brainstorm from that original evening spitball session to having five teams paired up with five tech professionals and a space at a local university with access to a computer cart.

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Since that first web-focused SLAM (Student Learning Apprenticeship Model) event, 300 or so youth have participated in a dozen WebSLAM events in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Columbus, creating more than 60 websites for nonprofits, small businesses, and student projects. These youth have spent significant time not only learning web development for WordPress, but also working hard to understand their client's needs,

articulate the organization's purpose visually and through text, and work collaboratively with others to get the job done in the limited amount of time available. The value of the real-world skills that the youth have learned through participating in WebSLAM is equally matched by the intrinsic motivation that they bring to the job at hand when sitting across the table from a real person whose real need they are in a position to really serve.

Since that first WebSLAM three and a half years ago, I've stepped out of the classroom and now work to extend even more real-world opportunities to young people through the Digital Harbor Foundation (http://www.digitalharbor.org/) . It's an honor to inspire and support educators all over the country who want to organize and run their own real-world, civic-hackathon WebSLAMs!

Do you want to bring this kind of event to your school or community? Here are a few practical pointers and how-to's:

1. Pick a Date and Commit

It's amazing what simply picking a date will do to help you organize your own WebSLAM. Give yourself two to three months' lead time (six weeks to recruit the youth, educators, tech mentors, and non-profit clients; and another six weeks for young people to meet once weekly leading up to the weekend hackathon). The most important thing? Pick a space that has reliable internet and flexible, sufficient seating. We've found that tables which can fit small groups work the best. (Traditional student desks are not ideal.)

2. Talk About It. . . With Everyone

You never know who will get excited about this idea or which people will know someone else who's willing to become a key volunteer or supporter. The more people with whom you discuss this, and the more that your community understands how young people can be real-world problem solvers, the more excitement and commitment you'll generate. When spreading the word and recruiting volunteers, however, be grateful but not desperate for help -- people follow confidence.

3. Fake It Until You Make It

The first time doing anything is an exercise in exploration. You have to believe that you can get there, make it, deliver, and come back to tell the tale. The goal of running a WebSLAM should not be about perfection but process and empowerment. You *will* want to make sure that the pieces are in the right places, but don't let the uncertainties stall the execution.

4. Show Your Stuff, Regardless of Completion

The value of showcase presentations cannot be over-emphasized. The experience of succinctly presenting one's work (no more than five minutes per team) and openly discussing goals, challenges, solutions, and each team member's role is critical to the overall impact of a WebSLAM. Celebrate your shortcomings. You should also be sure to document (and share via social media) as much as you possibly can along the way.

5. Under-Promise, Over-Deliver

When working to find your nonprofits or small business partners, it's best to communicate both the vision and the limitations. WebSLAMs are generally geared toward organizations that don't have a website, don't have the funds for one, or otherwise would not be able to build one. Although it can be easy to do otherwise, properly managing expectations and over-delivering on those is the best way to go.

6. Rinse and Repeat

Running only one WebSLAM is like only using a dish or piece of silverware once. Small events are OK, and repeating it again and again will allow for a better experience for everyone involved! There are numerous ways of modifying the structure (including having two or three teams work on creating their own version of a website for one organization), but the more you work to organize and support it, the better the outcomes for everyone involved.

What are your experiences with or observations of SLAM-type activities and hackathons? Please tell us about them in the comments section below.

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