Technology Inspiring Peace
Benin
Agnes Scott College
Aba Quagrainie ’15; Ghana, Maureen Klein ’13; United States, Agnes Scott College

Section I:

Project Goals:

Technology Inspiring Peace was a project aimed at providing students at a technical school with the necessary tools and infrastructure to excel in whatever environment they find themselves. By using the Internet and providing them with computer program literacy and effective communication skills, we believe that these students have the tools to not only thrive peacefully but also to impact others to follow in their stride.

Project Overview:

In the time we spent at the school, there were three main phases of our project; safe internet navigation, computer program literacy and effective communication. After providing the school with the necessary computers, printers, scanner and the internet, we were ready to kick off. For most of the students, the internet was an ideological phenomenon that was of no value to them. With the surge of social media, they all had their own ideologies of the internet but couldn’t identify any of its uses beyond Facebook and Twitter. Mainly via Google, we walked them through the many uses and advantages of search engines and their importance today. We also taught them things to be careful about while browsing.

Concerning computer program literacy, our discourse with the students brought to light their desires to know how to use programs such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint etc. The problem with this however was that without any effective communication skills, their knowledge of these computer programs especially Word and PowerPoint would be rendered useless. This was the point where we were able to recast vision; focusing more on effective communication tools like resume and letter writing that would empower the students even more.

These lessons were all very interactive and individually centered as the students were all at very different levels with regards to computer literacy and communication skills.

Challenges were introduced, as student/teacher ratios were very unbalanced so on days where we had to be one on one with certain students, the other students were left unattended. On a good day they would sit behind a computer and practice what we previously taught, otherwise the chatter with the other students could grow loud become distracting to the session we were having.

Another unanticipated difficulty presented itself when we became very familiar with the students. This presented us a dilemma because they sometimes saw us as friends hence changing the classroom dynamic when there was a need to put one’s foot down as the leader in the class.

We would have loved to hire other instructors for added perspectives on the topics we taught especially in the effective communication phase. However, that wasn’t in our original budget and by the time we got this idea, considering the short amount of time we had left, planning and organizing fundraising events would have been counterproductive to our classroom time while we weren’t guaranteed to actually find teachers that would suit our criteria within that short period of time anyway.
Our students ranged from primary students to high school graduates, 15 in all, who were just hungry to see beyond the world they knew. We expect that the project will ultimately benefit more than the original 15, as those students will hopefully spread their knowledge and skills to others.

For the time we spent at the school, we could tell how empowered they had become by a boost in their confidence level, the questions they asked and/or the research they had done in their free time on the internet. By the end of the project, all our students had brilliant ideas about how they could organize fund raising events all year round and implement similar projects in different schools in the surrounding towns and even in their own school, when new students enroll.

Section II:

Our Definition and Contribution to Peace:

Too often the word peace is thrown around in reference to the absence of war. Although this stands to a certain extent, it undermines the very essence of peace. Especially in the Western African sub region, with wars being so rampant, it is so easy to believe that peace is the absence of war. But peace is more than that. Peace can also be a state wherein one has a sense of tranquility and the happiness that can come from being equipped with knowledge and effective communication.

In this age of technology however, the internet affords the opportunity to access a wealth of information within seconds. Making this powerful tool available to the students allows them to think with a global perspective. 80% of our students had never been out of the Bohicon town before and thus were robbed in their thinking by the wealth of opportunity the world has to offer. By allowing them access to the Internet, we equipped them to be abreast with current pace of what is going on in our increasingly globalized world.

With the broadened perspective, computer program literacy and effective communication skills that they’ve gained, short term wise with all the ideas and projects they have in the pipeline, we see their potential being tapped into thus continuing in a peace building cycle. In the long run, we believe there will be a new generation of mobilized Beninese youth who understand peace as we’ve defined it and are ready to take on a mantle of not only changing their surroundings but also effecting change in the world at large. This project brought to light the value of time invested in the lives of people brimming with lurking potential waiting to be accessed.

Personal Statement:

*Going to teach in Benin opened my eyes to the reality of how being born into different circumstances can shape your life and determine your future. It however proved the reality that when empowered with the necessary tools, one can change and break whatever unfortunate cycle he or she has been born into and rise above all odds.*

–Aba Quagrainie
Aba sharing a few shortcuts in Microsoft Word with the director and a student

Maureen with some primary students after school

Maureen and Aba with two students and the director of the school.