



TURNING A COMMUNITY IDEA INTO LEARNING SUCCESS

BY MIKE WOLFE

BRITISH INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL ABU DHABI WON THE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE AT THE 2020 INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL AWARDS FOR A LEARNING COLLABORATION WITH ABU DHABI UNIVERSITY. HEAD OF PRIMARY MIKE WOLFE EXPLAINS HOW THE SCHOOL TURNED AN IDEA FROM THE COMMUNITY INTO A SUSTAINABLE LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR STUDENTS.

Like many colleagues across the world, my normal school day would start by welcoming students as they enter the school premises, with the younger students often accompanied by one or both of their parents. On one such day last year, a parent asked if he could see me to discuss an idea he had that would benefit our students. That's how I ended up having my meeting with Dr Apostolos Kyriazis, an assistant professor of architecture at Abu Dhabi University, which neighbours The British International School Abu Dhabi, part of the Nord Anglia Education Group.

Architecture is an acquired taste for many, but Dr Kyriazis was unaware that my son is also an architect and by association, I also had an interest in building design and how spaces are used. The meeting was very productive and the ideas suggested clearly stemmed from a desire to educate and offer our students real-life experiences of the design process.

We were keen to make our students think about what urban spaces should look like for them when they become adults themselves, taking into account sustainability and aesthetics.

MANAGING IDEAS FROM THE COMMUNITY

- Manage expectations of the individual proposing the idea. Welcome their idea but also help them to understand the complexity of turning a concept into rigorous learning with outcomes so that they have realistic expectations.
- As well as considering the idea for its learning potential, consider its visibility and community relations value. Will this help to develop important relationships or public awareness of the school?
- If an idea has potential, seek the support and engagement of relevant staff, and give them time to turn the idea into reality.
- Build in enough time to manage all logistical challenges, such as safeguarding or risk assessment, and allocate time to achieve this.
- Track and evaluate the initiative to assess learning value and potential sustainability.



THE PASSION AND IDEA OF ONE PERSON, COUPLED WITH EDUCATORS' VISION AND DRIVE, RESULTED IN AN EXPERIENCE THAT WILL IMPACT STUDENTS FOR YEARS.



TURNING AN IDEA INTO RIGOROUS LEARNING

As we all know, having an idea is fantastic, but to maximise its potential it needs to sit comfortably with the year group engaging with it and enhance the provision we are currently able to offer.

There was an ideal opportunity to incorporate this idea with a sustainability project our Year 6 students would be researching but this was not for another three months.

It gave us time to address several challenges that would need to be overcome before we were able to proceed in executing the plan. This included detailed paperwork that Dr Kyriazis would need to submit to be allowed into school, and the agreement of the Year 6 team who would ultimately oversee the project. A series of meetings were facilitated between all the academics involved and between them, a joint research project between Abu Dhabi University and BIS Abu Dhabi was forged, placing the

students at the heart of this partnership. This was unique in the context of where we are based and is a testament to the determination and resilience of all involved to make this work because we knew it would be of benefit to our students.

LEARNING IN ACTION

Over a two-month period, a series of lectures and hands-on studio workshops took place at both academic institutions. This created great excitement as our primary students descended on the university creating curiosity value from undergraduates and the academic team.

The students were tasked with redesigning a superblock concept in Abu Dhabi with the focus being on developing their understanding of sustainable lifestyles, and the importance of communities and social spaces. As we suspected may happen, the student's curiosity led them to independently start researching urban farming techniques, water collection through fog





harvesting, why socialising is so important and entertainment options, proving yet again that we cannot impose artificial ceilings on their learning. Students also found it fascinating discovering the methods that were traditionally used to keep homes cool in the harsh Emirati desert climate and incorporated many of those concepts within their own urban planning designs.

We were now exploring areas and concepts that do not appear in any curriculum and it is a testament to our outstanding team of Year 6 teachers that they were able to respond to ideas that students were researching and be the ultimate facilitators in moving the students' learning forward.

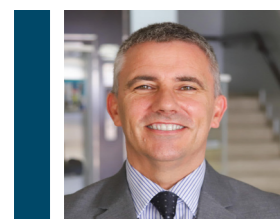
UNIVERSITY PRESENTS STUDENT WORK

The project culminated in a four-day exhibition of students' work hosted in the main entrance of the university entitled 'Sustainability, Architecture and the City'. The students' learning incorporated scale architectural drawings and models together with prototypes of sustainable and environmentally friendly design.

The students' pride in having their work displayed at Abu Dhabi University was tangible, resulting in the team incorporating this idea into future planning for year groups, enabling more students to unleash their innovation capabilities.

Despite initial challenges, the passion and idea of one person, coupled with the vision and drive of a team of educators to take a risk and try something different, resulted in an experience that will impact students for years to come.

I am delighted that Dr Kyriazis took the time to share his passion with us. Just as his initial idea grew with the support of the teaching team, who knows how this initiative will be taken forward in these students' future careers.



THE AUTHOR

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