Ten Years of Junior Professors

Matthew M. Maurer, Associate Professor, Butler University
Laura Baker, Teacher, Indianapolis Public Schools
Jacqueline Noel, Teacher, Indianapolis Public Schools

Abstract

The Junior Professor project has been in operation for ten years. It is a project in which elementary school children teach lessons in a college level class on computers in education. The project requires little in the way of funding, and only reasonable arrangements and effort to organize. The elementary school students have benefited substantially as have the college students and the university program.

History

The project was initiated after it was noticed that a number of college students would complete the introductory class, and make comments like, “this is hard for me, so it must be even harder for little kids.” A powerful experience was needed that would make the point that many aspects of using computers is actually easier for children than it is for adults. Over the ten years of the project, that objective has been met consistently. In the process, other benefits have been derived, for the college students, for the elementary students and for the teacher preparation program.

The project has consistently worked with children from the inner city. Many of them have little knowledge of colleges and what attending college entails. The children selected were from a school with which the professor has a strong relationship. Over the years of the project, the professor, has developed a strong relationship with the classroom teachers.

The content the elementary school students taught was selected on the basis of what they knew best. In the earlier years of the project, younger students (first through third graders) taught a simple graphic program (Kid Pix) and the older students (fourth and fifth graders) taught a hypermedia program (Hyperstudio). Later in the evolution of the project, we switched the graphics work to younger students (kindergarteners and first graders) and we switched the older children to teaching web page design. The primary reason these topics were taught was because it provided a reasonable teaching opportunity for the children to teach the young adults. The children intimately knew the software and processes they were teaching and the college students did not.

Flow of Instruction

Prior to the children coming to campus to teach, the professor would meet with them to outline the task and to discuss some specific issues related to teaching college students. The children would be instructed to allow the college students to do their own work, and that the children must always “help with their mouths, not with their hands.” This was a point that had to be enforced actively during the instruction time. We sometimes had to enlist “sit on your hands” activities, or “hands in pockets” activities.

Depending on the way classes were scheduled, the day flowed somewhat differently. The class is scheduled either just before lunch, just after, or both. Regardless, the students would eat lunch on campus. Lunch on campus was considered their primary “payment,” and was always well received. After lunch, the students are taken on a short tour of the campus.

During instruction, the task was introduced briefly by the professor and the children showed examples of their finished work. Then the children began tutoring the college students through the required task. As the children needed help, their teacher and the professor stepped in to fulfill that need. During the tutoring session, there was ample opportunity for the children and the college students to interact informally.

Upon completion of the task, the college students and the children had an opportunity for further sharing. The children were asked to give the future teachers advice on teaching and the college students were asked to tell the children one thing they enjoyed about college.

Outcomes

Beyond the primary outcome of demonstrating the abilities of young children, several other benefits were derived. Possibly the most important outcome it provided was the opportunity for the children to demonstrate their technical skills and develop teaching skills. In the ten years, the ability of each group of children has varied, but never has a group failed to be able to accomplish the task. The impact of that accomplishment has been powerful.
over the years. It has noticeably raised the attitudes of the children, giving them a concrete source of pride.

The visit to campus, the campus tour, the informal and formal discourse with the college students all contributed to a new awareness of the possibility of college for the children. Many of the children had little or no experience with college life. They frequently asked questions about what life in a dorm or a sorority house was like (e.g., “Do they have TV?”). They were curious about schedules and rules (e.g., “You can really sleep until noon some days?”). During the visit, many children said things like, “I am going to go to college here.” This was clearly a new thought for many of them.

The tutorial session provided the professor with an early observation of the college students’ interactions with children. This was a useful way to begin to see the future teachers’ dispositions toward children. More than once, experiences like a small child climbing into a college student’s lap prompted them to rethink their decision about teaching or the grade level they were considering. The few college students who simply could not appropriately interact with the children were identified and counseled.

Over the ten years of this project, the results have vastly outweighed the time, money, and effort needed to accomplish it. The relationships that have formed have been invaluable for all involved, professor, teachers, college students, and children.