Mobile Learning

# A Class Full of Geniuses

For many districts, having students do tech support as part of their classwork has helped create a culture of trust and innovation.

- By Andrew P. Marcinek
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In the summer of 2011, I was handed an opportunity to design and teach a course loosely based on Apple's in-store Genius Bar. The driving force behind this course was the impending launch of our 1-to-1 iPad environment. That summer, the **Burlington Public Schools <http://www.burlington.org/residents/schools/burlington_public_schools/index.php>** (MA) tech team was preparing to deliver iPads to every student in the high school. We were a five-person team, and three of those positions covered every school and device in the district. We were taking on these additional devices without additional support.

The key in all of our 1-to-1 planning was developing a way to integrate tier one support on a daily basis. We knew there would be a demand for consistent support from both students and teachers. We also knew that our standard ticketing system would get backlogged very quickly — not to mention that we would still have to attend to other tickets districtwide.

The solution was to create a student Help Desk as part of a graded, half-year elective. Students could opt to take the course, called Student Technology Integration, twice. The course description was the following: "The Student Technology Integration course is a hands-on study of technology integration in an educational context. Students will be required to assess problem sets throughout the day and define the best approach to addressing or solving the problem. In addition to solving problems for students and teachers, students will be required to complete and maintain several running projects that address problems or solutions in educational technology integration. The course also asks students to have a prior understanding of Apple OS, Microsoft Windows OS, Chrome OS and iOS. This course seeks students who are self-motivated learners and use inquiry to drive their exploration and experiments in order to reach greater discovery. It is the one course where failing is an option on occasion."

## Looking for Troubleshooters

Initially, we opened the course to any student who wanted to sign up for it, but then we implemented an interview process. Students could sign up for the course, but had to go through a formal interview process and participate in a battery of tests that assessed their awareness when troubleshooting a problem on the spot. We didn't seek out the most tech-savvy students: We wanted students who could easily grasp the idea of self-directed learning, were well-organized and could maintain composure in an interrupted learning environment.

During the first few weeks that the course was operating, we had significant traffic coming down for support. Many of the issues had to do with tier one support issues like a forgotten password or WiFi issues. Eventually, this traffic subsided and the course needed a new direction. I developed a course outline <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tsvNRjO4YuL1OAsIDQsfpDg2hxg2nFi1nYOkLMpxwXE/edit> that was deliberately novel. I wanted the students to be engaged in the course and working on both individual passion projects and collaborative research projects. In short, I asked students to serve as a Genius at the Genius Bar, a journalist for Mashable and a TED talk presenter.

Students also started developing resources for our staff. They would look at the applications we were using and break them down into video training modules and scripts. Many students used AirServer <http://www.airserver.com/> to mirror their iPad on to a Mac and then used Snagit <http://www.techsmith.com/snagit.html> to produce a screencast of their application. They created storyboards for each segment and then posted to the help desk blog, which had a global following. Some schools even wrote to us saying that they were using our student tutorials in their faculty professional development. I'd say that's a pretty authentic, purposeful learning experience.

## Spreading the Word

I wanted the original course outline to be simple so that other districts could take it and remix it and make it their own. When I eventually handed the course off to Jenn Scheffer at Burlington, I told her to adhere to the founding philosophy and principles of the course, but to make it her own. And, since 2011, I have shared this course outline with many schools and districts around the world in hopes that there is a student help desk course in every school in the world. A lofty goal, but this course is very important to me, and equally important to schools that integrate it.

I have also witnessed the growth of this course throughout the state of Massachusetts and beyond. **Reading Memorial High School** has the Rockets Help Desk <http://rmhshelpdesk.blogspot.com> run by Kerry Gallagher <https://twitter.com/KerryHawk02> , **Andover High School** has the Andover

Innovation Lab & Help Desk <http://andoverhighschoolstudenthelpdesk.blogspot.com/> run by Daniel Downs <https://twitter.com/danieldowns> and **Grafton High School** has the Tech Force <http://techforce.grafton.ghs.schoolfusion.us/modules/groups/integrated_home.phtml?gid=3057838&sessionid=383c23398a171e1e0edddfa7395d01e1&t=1673138ece9adc04e1c6d51cd92bf736> run by Cyndy Engvall <https://twitter.com/cengvall> and Neil Harrigan.

The exciting part for me is to see what the students ultimately contribute to their schools and communities. It's gratifying to be on the forefront of designing such a course, but the real excitement is seeing how many schools have leveraged the creative genius of their students.

**Innovation Begins With Trust**

When I began my new role as director of technology for **Grafton Public Schools <http://gpsedtech.org/>** (MA), I was elated to hear that the high school was using my student Genius Bar model. I have had several opportunities to speak with students and work with them throughout the course of this school year, and what I see are students eager to solve problems and help their school community. I also see engaged, active learners seeking out answers and asking all the right questions.

We recently opened up our ticketing system to our Tech Force students so that they can help address logged help tickets at both our high school and middle school (which are on the same campus). Within a few days, I received this e-mail from our middle school principal: "In the past 24 hours since Tech Force has been able to come over, they have addressed issues quicker than ever! The students have been cordial and courteous when trying to help. Job well done!"

When schools I consult with ask why they should consider offering this course, I don't really elaborate too much, deferring instead to the students. Designing this course was never about me getting credit for it or about the technology, but rather about giving students a place that allowed them to be active participants in their learning and make a difference in their school communities. This is a course I would have signed up for immediately when I was in high school. It's driven by inquiry and curiosity, and it yields creative, innovative experiences and outcomes that align with many of our Common Core standards (and those standards not so common).

Ultimately, this course was part of a broader initiative to create a shared culture of learning and trust. Innovation in schools begins with trust. School leaders must embrace this concept if they want their technology initiatives to thrive for years to come. One of the biggest mistakes a school leader or district technology director can make is to think that they can honestly control every aspect of a students' digital life. It's an impossible task. Instead of working within a culture of restrictions and redactions, school leaders should develop and design paradigms that empower students to use technology.

This is not to say that district leaders should be cavalier with filtering and privacy policies. We should all put forth our best efforts to close off the dark corners of the Web and ensure student privacy, but students and teachers should be trusted to work in a culture of openness and have access to resources that will empower, educate and amplify students' voices.

I encourage everyone who reads this article to take the philosophy of the student help desk course and design a space customized for your school and for your students. I can't quantify how lucky I am that I had the opportunity to not only design a course, but to launch a movement around student-driven technology courses. Every day as students left my class, I asked them simply to reflect on this quote, "Did I make a dent in the universe today?" My hope is that they walked away each day thinking that they did.

About the Author

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