



Hack school year 1

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Hack School is working, sort of.

At the beginning of the school year we bought some robotics, some electronic gizmos, and a 3D printer, as well as online access to instructional videos to teach coding.

Then we invited students to come once or twice a week after classes, during their activity time. About thirty students signed up. About five had the ability to work independently and creatively. Many experimented a little and went back to the safe habit of gaming. At the end of the fall term, we vowed to give the program more structure when it restarted in the spring.

Then something interesting happened. Because we had a faculty member who agreed to continue opening the space to any students who might drop in, we advertised that we were open twice a week, 90 minutes at a time, during our ski season.

A few students came, irregularly. And one student arrived the minute we opened, every day we were open. He often stayed well after the official 90 minutes ran out. It didn't take too long before we began leaving him after the 90 minutes, unable to wait him out. We told him that he could "just pull the door shut" when he was done.

I ran into him on more than one occasion well into the evening, when I returned to the office to pick something up for the next day. He'd be bent over the Mindstorm Legos or his laptop or some piece of plastic he had just printed. "Hi" I'd say. "Hm m m m m m p h," he'd answer, though I'm not sure of his spelling. "Pull the door shut when you leave," I'd say for the second time that evening, on my way out.

Obviously this kid was taking full advantage of the opportunity to use the equipment we bought. He was tinkering, experimenting, figuring things out. For a while he worked on a project with one of our staff members, coding in SCAD to design parts for a miniature, computerized greenhouse.

He also began asking me if he could take the Sphero, or the Thymio, or any of the other robotics we had in the center home with him over the weekend. "Absolutely," I told him. Why not, no other students were asking to use them on the weekend.

Then one night I was working late when our dedicated hacker silently slid his lanky frame up to my desk. "Ah, Mr. Magnuson," he said. I looked up. He cleared his throat.

“I’ve sort of come to an end of what I can learn with what you have here.” I tried not to look surprised, though the thought flashed through my mind that I didn’t know a fraction of how to use each of the gizmos out there on the shelf.

“So I was wondering if you could buy ... “ And here I can no longer quote him, because I was staring at him through the startling thought that this tall quiet boy was a realization of our vision of students hacking their own education. He showed up, he pursued his interests, he learned all he could from what was available. And like the beatnik poet wrote, when he got to the top of the mountain he kept going, hacking on, coming to me to ask for new purchases because he sensed too deeply his own diminishing returns. A hacker indeed.

And if there’s any doubt left in your mind that this kid is a Hacker, well, now let me come totally clean and tell you that he isn’t even enrolled in our school.

That’s right, our school’s best hacker in Year 1 of Hack School is home-schooled. No doubt he had some help from parental connections, but nevertheless: he hacked his way into the neighboring private boarding school, into the robotics center, and eventually got himself a carte blanche to stay after hours and to take any equipment home that he liked. And then had the chutzpah to ask me to buy new stuff because he had finished with the 5,000 Swiss franc collection of robotics we already owned.

Now we just have to figure out how to pass on some of *that* to our own students.

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