Middle School Computing Academies
March 28, 2009

On Saturday, March 28th 2009, INSPIRED hosted the first of 3 Middle School Computing Academies this year. The academies are held on Lamar University’s campus, and consist of the main Robotics session, and 2 additional sessions: Scratch and Website building.

The following INSPIRED and STAIRSTEP members participated: Vanessa Brown, Iris Garcia, Ric Guidry, Kelli Hall, Kelly Harbour, Valerie Juarez, Kelley Lester, Sean Skelton, Jigar Solanki, Girish Thombare, Daniel Vincent, Crystal Wettingfeld, and Cynthia Willis.

This first academy for 2009 was purposely held during the school semester to see how much more participation we would receive. At first we were unsure if we would have any students participating, but Central Middle School in Nederland decided to partner with us, bringing about 20 students. We also got some participants from Vidor Middle School, as well as some individual participants from various schools, including Vidor MS and Marshall MS. The total count of actual participants was 36.

Since we had 13 participants in INSPIRED and STAIRSTEP, we decided it would be the perfect opportunity to test running dual sessions for the academy, since it would be the only time we would have so many people.

This is the regular academy schedule:
08:30 - 09:00  Registration
09:00 - 09:30  Opening Session
09:30 - 11:30  Robotics
11:30 - 12:30  Lunch
12:30 - 01:30  Scratch
01:30 - 02:30  Web Lab
02:30 - 03:00  Closing Session

With the dual session, we were able to hold the Robotics and Scratch / Web Lab alternatively, since the length was about the same. However, we would need the students to all complete their journals at the end, so we set aside 15 minutes at the end for them to do so.

This was the resulting dual session academy schedule:
08:30 - 09:00  Registration
09:00 - 09:30  Opening Session
               Group A       Group B
09:30 - 11:25  Robotics  Scratch / Web Lab
11:25 - 12:20  Lunch          Lunch
12:20 - 02:15  Scratch / Web Lab  Robotics
02:15 - 02:30  Finish Journals  Finish Journals
02:30 - 03:00  Closing Session

For the most part, having the dual session is possible, and an effective way to give more students the opportunity to come. However, some things had to be rushed a little since we didn’t want to run over time. This was especially noticed after lunch, when the students’ attention spans were a little shorter than in the morning. I think extending the academy until 4pm would help alleviate this problem, and make the dual sessions much more feasible.

Having 36 students was a little over-whelming, but it was a lot of fun. I presented both robotics sessions, and enjoyed seeing how excited the students were when learning new things. One of the questions I asked the students was “What animals do you think use ultrasonic waves?” I received a variety of answers, some of which were very unsure of the concept. However, I was proud to hear several students answer with bats and whales. Some students were very enthusiastic when answering questions based on the robot, or sensor functions.

Some of the students were a little slow to understand how to edit their programs to make the robot turn more correctly, but most of them seemed to pick it up pretty quickly. This year, almost all of the robots completed the maze really well. There were, of course, a few that tipped over, or
got stuck in a certain part of the maze. Only one robot did not fully complete the maze, mostly because they didn’t have the time to go back and edit their program.

Last year, we asked the students to answer some questions about the academy in the closing session. However, most of the students didn’t write very much. So this year, we tried to fix this problem by adding these questions to their journals. Again, a large amount of the students didn’t elaborate much on their answers, but we had several students that wrote quite a bit.

This academy was definitely a success, and I am sad that I will be unable to attend the next two we are having this year.

~Crystal Wettingfeld

As usual, the Middle School Academy was a success! Especially this one because it has been the largest one we’ve held so far! I was really excited to see so many kids come out to participate! My younger sister, who participated last year came again this year and even, invited some of her friends from school! It just goes to show how much fun the kids have when they attend the MS Academy.

The dual sessions went pretty smoothly considering this was our first time to implement it. Valerie and I were presenting the Scratch and Web presentations while Crystal did Robotics. While, I was a little disappointed that I didn't get to watch the kids interact with the robots, it was fun to see the funny things they did with their animations and webpages. Although we did have some technical difficulties at the beginning of the first session, and some behind the scenes transition work, I don't think it took away from the kids’ experience and the team handled things pretty well.

I do agree with extending the Academy to 4pm, just so we won't feel too strapped for time in the afternoon. And for next time, especially if we run dual sessions, there needs to be more planning involving the whole team. Things would've have been a little smoother had everyone been on the same page. And for the Academies in June, since most of us experience team members are unable to participate, I suggest to ALL New Members (even if you've already participated in this Academy), to have a more active role in scheduling and preparations for the Academy, and to REALLY know your instructional materials, even if you are not presenting, in order to effectively help the students.

Again, in agreement with Crystal, this academy was a success! And I am heartbroken I cannot participate this summer, but hopefully I can come back and visit in the future!

~Iris Garcia