



FAST FACTS

Project title: Writing with Impact: Making a Difference

Teacher: Cameron Shinn, cshinn@psdschools.org

School: Preston Middle School

Location: Fort Collins, CO

Website: prestonmiddleschool.org

Start/End date: September 2013-May 2014. This is a semester long course (taught twice annually).

Mentors provided by: Accenture; Agilent Technologies; Foxconn Technology Group; Google; Hewlett-Packard Co.; Intel Corporation; Kyle David Group, LLC; MasterCard; Merck & Co., Inc.; Thomson Reuters; and University of Colorado Health

Benchmarks:

Students use cognitive processes to generate and link knowledge across disciplines.

Students locate, select and synthesize information from a variety of sources.

Students use available technology to produce, revise and publish a variety of works.

Students cite references using various formats.

Contact: David Neils, ITP Founder/Director, davidn@telementor.org

WWW.TELEMENTOR.ORG

The International Telementor Program ● David Neils, Founder/Director

Students “Get It” When Learning Is Real

“Raise your hand if you care about our world!” This is how one of Cameron Shinn’s 6th-grade English students began her end-of-semester presentation which indicates his students “get it.”



“It” is Shinn’s philosophy that “when students learn to see from multiple perspectives and the other side of an issue, they learn how to be understanding. And I hope by having students engage in critical thought and then take action, we can have a better world. One where people care about one another enough to learn what someone else thinks and what they value. One where people are dedicated to improving society as a whole, not just for their opinion or group of people.”

Learning becomes real.

Students “get it” when learning connects them to real issues and ways to address those issues.

To help his students get it, Shinn enlists mentors through the International Telementor Program (ITP) who are experts at research, project management, collaboration, and reflection skills, so they can help students develop those same skills to bring about the change they would like to see in the world. Mentors push students to think and rethink the purpose, methodology and audience of their projects. And mentors provide students with one-on-one support, allowing Shinn to serve as a facilitator and director of learning rather than as a dictator.

“I choose ITP for my students because I want an opportunity for them to get something different for their education,” he says. “I want my students to have the chance to be part of an authentic inquiry, learn to collaborate and problem solve while practicing some out of the box thinking.”

Even though Shinn teaches English, most of his students work on projects that are science or technology based. Project topics range from “upcycling” and repurposing used items rather than throwing them away to chemical brain imbalances that lead to mental issues like sociopathy and societal issues like child abuse to conservation of Siberian tigers and other animals which are vital links in the food chain.



“You have to have administrators who are very forward thinking, who aren’t worried just about items on a test, but who are worried about preparing kids for a future that’s quite uncertain. And finally, you need teachers who are willing to take some risks. If you’re just going to play it safe, you might as well stay home.”

—Cameron Shinn, 6th-grade English Teacher, Preston Middle School, Fort Collins, Colorado



Students communicate with their mentors.

Adult professionals assist students with research, project management, collaboration and reflection.


In the process of researching real needs in their community or the world, students learn how to generate and link knowledge across various disciplines and in a variety of contexts. They also learn to identify, locate, select and use a variety of resource tools to analyze, synthesize and communicate information.

Shinn says he expects students to be better at researching, communicating over email and thinking, but every semester, his students far exceed his expectations. “The amount of independence and self-direction my students exhibit after completing this course, and how great they are at talking about their thinking and reflecting on their thinking, is incredible. When working on a project they select, one they care about, my students invest so much energy, I never have to prod them into action. All I have to do is direct their learning. It’s fantastic!”

Every successful endeavor has its challenges, however, and for Shinn, several stand out as inherent in the type of education offered by ITP.

“I think the biggest challenge is that students are asked to think in a very different way,” he says. “The amount of collaboration required to do authentic work, not simply divide and conquer, but true collaboration, is constant, and students sometimes get ‘fixed’ in their mind to one idea. Students struggle at first to consider other ideas, but it’s good to struggle. For me, it means students are being pushed to learn.”

Funding is another challenge. “It’s a sad reality in education. If there’s no funding, programs like ITP that use authentic learning can’t happen,” adds Shinn.

Also, Shinn says, “You have to have administrators who are very forward thinking, who aren’t worried just about items on a test, but who are worried about preparing kids for a future that’s quite uncertain. And finally, you need teachers who are willing to take some risks. If you’re just going to play it safe, you might as well stay home.” 

STUDENT REQUIREMENTS

Students in the Writing with Impact: Making a Difference project at Preston Middle School are required to work with their mentors to:

- Maintain a digital file containing all correspondence with mentor and drafts of their work as it progresses
- Reflect at least twice a week on their progress, share their thoughts with mentor and clarify or deepen their thought processes
- Write a 300-word letter to their mentor that serves as a self-evaluation about what they (student) did well, what they could have done better and what the mentor contributed to the project.

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