HACKATHONS

Hackathons are innovation marathons. Students of all varieties come together to learn, build and share their creations. But there is a catch – hackathons provide a limited amount of time. The point is to solve a problem in a short amount of time by working with others. They are a vehicle for creativity and ingenuity. Hackathons are not just limited to students who can code. They are much broader in practice. They can be integrated into any curriculum or can be done in little chunks over a few months culminating in a hackathon event.

THE-PLAY-BY-PLAY

A typical hackathon starts with students forming a group and deciding to solve a problem. After collectively deciding on an idea to work on, students on the team spend a majority of the event transforming this idea from concept into reality. Whether the idea is a hoverboard or an app to teach you to drive, hackathon teams bring a project from epiphany to completion all within a short timeframe. Expert mentors from professional development backgrounds often come to help students with their projects.

Don't think hackathons are malicious! Not to be confused with illegal and unauthorized programming, "hacking" in this context means quickly and intelligently creating a real application that others can use. Although the term "hacking" has previously been associated with gaining access to a computer system with a evil intent, "hacking" has started to transition into a positive term describing the actions of innovators who are creating prototypes of their ideas. Students have rallied around the term "hacking", as a term to mean innovating ways to improve their lives and their efforts to build the future.

HACKATHON EXAMPLES

A school can host a hackathon where students review classes and offer advice to future students on how to study for certain things. An English class can host a hackathon where students can hack on top of an existing Shakespeare play and modernize it by adding videos, pictures, and music to make it come alive.A computer science class can spend a month to teach students the basics of a specific coding language and then have each student make a small project at the end of month like making hangman or checkers.

HACKATHON SUCCESSES

Hackathon projects like a service allowing individuals in third-world countries to connect to the internet through text messages (Cosmos) or an app that makes group chats more engaging (GroupMe) have gone on to be successful companies that are worth billions. The real success, though, are the over 100,000 innovations made by tens of thousands of students across the country - the business viability of these ideas is not important.

HOW HACKATHONS IMPROVE EDUCATION

Hackathons teach you to build, design, pitch, create and innovate. To work well under deadlines and to give it your best shot. Students have a chance to gain time management skills, along with technical expertise and new connections. In addition, students get to spend one-on-one time with expert mentors who spend the hackathon teaching students new technical skills and helping students with their projects. Hackathons help students build up their resumes and learn the latest and most popular technologies and techniques.

Hackathons allow students' intrinsic interests to drive their education. Every time a student encounters a new challenge at a hackathon, they must learn how to fix the problem through independent study. By giving students an opportunity to individually build a project from start to finish, students develop increased critical thinking skills and have a chance to become better prepared to enter the workforce. This in turn improves the education of the student themselves and helps drive better education in the future.