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How this school is breeding the next generation of technology experts

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Flying through Google Earth, finding solitude in an enigma portal, virtually touring the cosmos in a VR-enabled telenaut centre. These are hardly the quintessential images we conjure up when thinking back to our primary school years. But for students at Wooranna Park Primary, they are part of everyday routine.

That's because Wooranna recognises that the best way to make students employable for next generation industries is to simulate them as accurately as possible in its pedagogical environment. And if that means throwing its students, quite literally, into the helm of deep technology, so be it.

Among the futuristic furnishings that comprise its internationally-acclaimed "STEAM Centre" are dragon boats, spaceships and shipping containers. In many ways it is unrecognisable as an education institution, more closely befitting some sort of new age theme park or creative laboratory.

It may sound like an extravagant way to kit out a classroom, but the state school says it stuck to a modest budget in purchasing the raw materials. "The shipping containers which we used to create the "making station" modules in our STEAM centre cost us in the thousands. When you compare it to the multi-million-dollar investments into technology hubs deployed by some private schools, that's pretty miniscule", said Principal Ray Trotter, ahead of **The Age Schools Summit** (http://www.theageschools.com.au/).

"We've also been lucky enough to receive some philanthropic bitcoin donations, from our international 'fans' to support our educational technology procurement. Our main funder donated one percent of the total bitcoin blockchain", he added.

The school's curriculum is not to be underestimated either. Classroom facilities may visually resemble a fairground attraction, but within its blockchain-, virtual and augmented reality-enabled confines, students will work autodidactically on projects such as game making, 3D printing and coding, and leave as self-taught technology experts, says Trotter.

"Sit students behind a desk and tell them they are going to learn how to build a simple computer network from a Cisco text book and many will switch off and become disengaged, either because its sounds too boring, too difficult, or both", said the school's Educational Technologist, Kieran Nolan.

"Place them in an experiential learning lab, where they have access to a full range of platforms, cloud, and blockchain technologies – and give them free reign to learn from both practical experience and from one another – and you see not only better engagement, but significantly better learning outcomes", he added.

An inclusive pedagogy

The school's unique model accommodates budding technology experts from all ability levels. Seth, a gifted student aged ten from Singapore, who was found it hard to stay engaged in the traditional school system, has flourished in Wooranna's unique environment.

In his former school, Seth already knew the lesson content before it was taught to him and became restless and a distraction to his peers. At Wooranna, no longer confined to the prescriptive nature of traditional pedagogy, he has been able to actively pursue his passion for quantum physics, in a way which continues to stimulate and stretch him.

But equally, the educational model works well for those who are less-accustomed to complex technology concepts, says Kieran. "The personalised, self-directed and experiential learning components really enable children to consolidate their academic knowledge in a meaningful and memorable way", he said.

A leading example

The schools open source model is designed so that other schools can replicate and implement it within their own facilities. "We have about 18 schools currently connected to our server", said Trotter. "And with our VR technology, students in these schools can take a tour of our grounds and vice versa. The children love it and gain so much from this interactivity".

In addition, the school is pioneering its own homegrown technology platform which will enable students to create, publish and maintain ownership of their digital content creations and other forms of intellectual property.

The "Rocketshoes" infrastructure, a form of blockchain technology, is being developed by Kieran and will ensure that the students can look back on their creations for many years to come, whilst maintaining agency and rights to it.

Hear more from Ray Trotter and Kieran Nolan at The Age Schools Summit (http://www.theageschools.com.au/)– 9 October 2019 in Melbourne – where they will talk more about the school's unique pedagogy and what it plans to do next with its homegrown technology applications, including an upcoming eSports tournament.

Learn more and register here. (http://www.theageschools.com.au/)

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