

Community Connections | Tech ninjas teach third-graders coding

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WENATCHEE — An army of Dash robots face off, sharp lances positioned to engage in a jousting tournament. Each robot holds two lances — very long toothpicks, one sporting a marshmallow. The goal: pierce the marshmallow of the opponent and take it away.

Tech Facilitator and Ninja Dojo Ray Birks shouts, “Let the jousting begin!”

The controllers grip their iPads. Shy at first but soon warming to the passion of competition, they begin to attack their opponents with gusto. Before long, a marshmallow is stabbed. The crowd roars. A Tech Ninja swoops in to reset the lance and marshmallow, and the jousting resumes.

Who are these iPad Knights-in-Training, and why are Tech Ninjas involved in the battle?

The Knights-in-Training are actually Coders-in-Training, and they’re third-graders in Heidi Bucholz’s class at Washington Elementary School. For the last month they’ve been trained by Tech Ninjas, eighth-graders from Orchard Middle School.

“We have been coming every week on Thursdays, showing them some simple coding techniques,” says eighth-grade ninja Perla Cacho.

Who are these ninjas?

“The Ninjas were chosen by recommendations from teachers, and then interviews followed to narrow down the list to our current four Ninjas,” explains Birks.

Of being a Tech Ninja, Joanna Castro says, “I like helping people. I also like the fact that we get iPads. Being able to help the teachers and students with technology brightens up my day.”

Birks and fellow Tech Facilitator Mark Woolsey have been bringing ninjas Perla Cacho, Joanna Castro, Ellen Kjobech and Nolan Galvin to Washington each week.

“There’s two things we’ve been trying to accomplish,” explains Birks. “One is to introduce coding to the third-graders, more specifically unplugged coding activities — coding that does not require the use of an iPad or computer or Chromebook. The other purpose is to get the Ninjas some time to be out in the classroom, out in the community, and experience what it’s like to teach others to code.”

The jousting match is the culmination of weeks of learning coding through a number of activities. The third-graders experienced binary coding by choosing two colors of beads and stringing a necklace that spelled out their name in the code. They learned magic tricks with playing cards to practice pattern identification, all with a focus on sequencing.



MORE INFO

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“We’ve been working with Mrs. Bucholz’s third grade class doing non-computerized coding activities for the first couple of weeks,” explains ninja Ellen Kjobech. “Getting them to think about using a sequence of motions or blocks, or anything else. Now they’re putting that into use getting their Dash [robot] to do certain tasks.”

And how did the third-graders feel about the experience?

“I thought coding was really fun,” says Marisela. “You can do lots of cool stuff with the robots.”

“I loved the jousting and all the coding stuff,” says Taydon. “I love coding. I really want to do this every day of my life.”

“I just loved the jousting and the coding robots and it was really fun,” says Jeremy. “I didn’t want to stop at all.”

Birks and Woolsey say that along with coding, the third-graders are learning how to problem solve and think through situations and issues that come up. They’re overcoming obstacles on their own and through collaboration and teamwork.

“It’s been really great,” says Joanna of working with the third-graders. “They’re amazing kids.”

Teri Fink is the communications officer for the Wenatchee School District.
