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Entering Contests Inspires Students!

get notices about dozens of contests a year, and most of them land in the recycle bin. But two years ago, one competition intrigued me—a web design contest sponsored by the Michigan Council of Women in Technology (MCWT)—and I encouraged my students to apply for it. Three of my students entered, and each came away with impressive recognition for their efforts: Two placed in the top 12, and one received an honorable mention.

As an educator, I am constantly looking for ways to connect my teaching to context, and this experience made me appreciate the real-world application that contests provide. Kids want meaning—not subtle or hidden meaning, but in-your-face meaning.

After the positive results in the first go-around, I decided to make entering the MCWT contest mandatory for all of my female web design students (the contest was open only to girls). My male students did not enter the contest but did design websites as if they were contestants, and they were

perfectly happy supporting their classmates, knowing that women are still outnumbered in the world of computer science.

The theme of the contest was "Magic Genie in a Bottle: Three Wishes." Entrants were to create a five-page website that captured their most desired wishes, and they had nine weeks to do it. On the day of the judging, students presented their websites to a panel of five business executives with the hope of becoming one of 12 finalists selected in their category.

Their countless hours in class and at home paid off. Two seniors, Jacqueline Buffa and Brooke Dombrow, took first place in their categories; juniors Eva Smith and Mallory Burr won second place in their categories; senior Christina Denomme won third place; and senior Lisa Nye took fourth place.

Reflecting on the process, I learned quite a bit from this experience. Here are my top five insights gleaned from working with these young adults throughout the competition:

1. **Social networking can fuel success and engage students.** Aside from the sheer amount of work done in class, students also sent 89 emails, 26 tweets, and 22 Facebook messages to me asking for feedback. Many students just wanted me to read a paragraph or check an edited photo. They wanted quality at every step. It makes me proud to see this type of learning engagement surface through the use of social networking.

2. **Students take pride in their work.** They spent significant time before school, after school, and at home modifying their work. Depending on whether they entered the beginner or advanced category, the first-place prizes were $450 and $750, respectively. Sure, they wanted to win the money, but the generous prizes also indicated that this was a serious contest and they would have serious competition. This motivated them to do their best work, and they rose to the challenge.

By Tasha Candela

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3. **The latest tools aren't required for high-end results.** While some entrants used Adobe Creative Suite 5, my students worked with Notepad ++, a free download, to create their websites and Photoshop Elements 9 to manipulate graphics. The contest results prove that students do not need the most expensive tools to produce high-end results. Solid instruction, critical-thinking skills, and creativity are the ingredients of a job well done. Finalist Sarah Woolsey commented, "The lack of equipment and software did make creating our sites and going through the class much more difficult. However, if we all accomplished such great things with so little, the things we could accomplish with newer equipment and software are unthinkable."

4. **Girls like web design too.** Because technology career fields are male dominated, the MCWT contest was open only to girls. When explaining this to all students enrolled in web design, the boys simply shrugged their shoulders and didn't let their lack of participation in the contest deter their enthusiasm for learning course content and completing websites of their own.

5. **The extra effort makes a difference.** I cannot begin to count the number of unpaid hours I spent helping students on this project. But the time spent was well worth the joy I got out of the enormous smiles, warm hugs, and you've-changed-my-life thank-you's.

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