

A Community Joint Effort to Inspire K-12 Students to Study in Computing Disciplines in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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A Community Joint Effort to Inspire K-12 Students to Study in Computing Disciplines in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (RTP)

Abstract—This Research to Practice (RTP) poster paper summarizes three computing workshops for K-12 students sponsored by IEEE Computer Society, discusses the findings of K-12 students' learning and experiences of these workshops and briefly shares the project team's reflection on K-12 outreach. The BAD (Byte-A-Dynamo) is a series of workshops to support students (ages 10-16), especially from low-income families in Maryland who have no or very limited computing background or experiences to explore the computing fields especially in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). The participants had opportunities to learn basic Python coding and AI-assisted coding skills, an introduction to cybersecurity, and team-based Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics (STEAM) projects infusing Arduino into art pieces. A mixed method was used to evaluate participants' learning outcomes and experiences of the workshops. The three free computing workshops planted seeds to inspire students to explore computing fields according to the evaluation results. The recruitment strategies and pedagogies of the three workshops could be a model for other computing and engineering educators, researchers of higher education and K-12 teachers. The hosting team plans to continue to broaden the impacts of computing and engineering K-12 education on a larger scale of participation.

Keywords—*computing education, engineering education, K-12 education*

I. INTRODUCTION

This series of computing workshops responding to the IEEE Computer Society Juniors Program to inspire K-12 students to explore and excel in IEEE Computer Society-related disciplines. The three free computing workshops intend to 1) help students (age 10-16) especially those from low-income families in Maryland to explore interests in computing; 2) build a sustainable learning community; 3) establish mentorships between participants and professionals. Specifically, the three BAD workshops focus on the three themes: AI-assisted coding, Introduction to cybersecurity and STEAM. The three workshops were held in July 2025 at two branches of Howard County Library System (HCLS) in Maryland USA. The hosting team includes a professor from Northeastern University as the workshop Chair, several undergraduate and graduate students from Northeastern University and The Case Western Reserve University as mentor leads, high school students from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, VA as mentors and students from Clarksville Middle School, MD as student assistants. The workshops were also supported by the officers from the local section of IEEE, members of Howard County Board of Education, teachers from Howard County Public School System (HCPSS), the Chief Operating Officer, the STEAM outreach director and staff of HCLS, as well as the volunteers from communities. The workshop activities were supervised by the board members of IEEE Computer Society (CS).

This paper is organized as follows: the introduction of each workshop and the main pedagogy used in each workshop are in the second section followed by the planning and implementation strategies explained in the third section; the section four indicates our evaluation using a mixed quantitative and qualitative research method and the evaluation results; we will discuss the team's reflections and future work in the last section.

II. WORKSHOPS

In this section, we will explain how we adopt and adapt the pedagogies and evidence-based practices to design and develop each workshop. An example of each workshop is given to explain how the hosting team worked with students to inspire their learning and enrich their workshop experiences.

A. *Workshop 1: Let's code*

The mentors started with a lecture covering the basic Python coding such as variables (strings), conditional statements and loops. The mentors carefully chose the corresponding examples and exercises to make sure most students can digest the key points and have time to work on coding questions. It is always challenging for beginners to understand the concept of “recursion” when they learn it for the first time. However, the hosting team still decided to cover it as it is very important for students to go further in coding. The team spent a good amount of time discussing how to deliver this concept based on mentors’ own learning experiences of understanding the recursion concept. Finally, the team decided to start with the known game “Tower of Hanoi” to let students play and learn. The corresponding coding exercise was designed based on the pedagogy—“learning by doing” proposed by D. Kolb [1-4]. We introduced Python Integrated Development and Learning Environment (IDLE) first rather than Visual Studio Code or PyCharm so that students can actually code from scratch and learn several basic debugging skills. By the end of the workshop, the mentor lead introduced another software which includes the AI-assisted features to expose students to emerging technologies and emphasized the importance of mastering the coding basics first.

An Officer from IEEE Baltimore Section who is also a system engineer of a company in Maryland was invited to give an interactive talk about computing in engineering design. Fig.1 shows his interaction with our students.

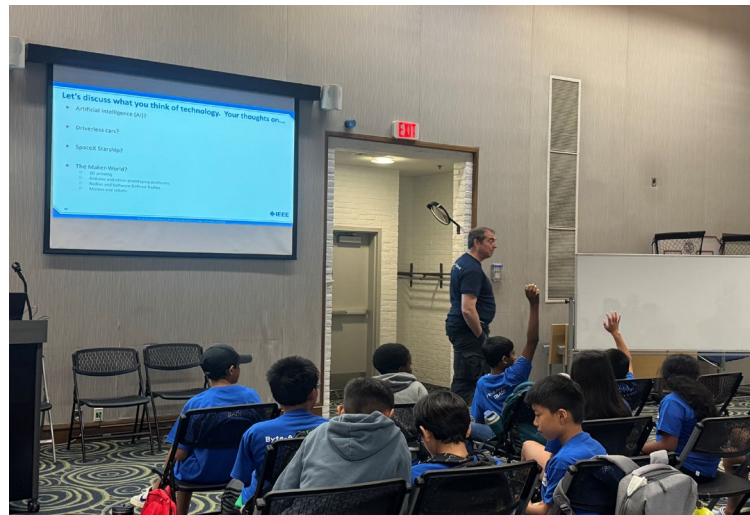


Fig.1. Industry Speaker's Talk

B. *Workshop 2: Introduction to Cybersecurity*

This game-based workshop started with an ice breaker—mentors prepared and printed the “secret names” or say “fake names” based on participants’ names and the Caesar cipher (shift 7). Then the secret names were selectively handed to students carefully so that students did not get their own names. After the Caesar cipher was taught, the students began to decrypt the secret names to figure out participants’ real names with the help of a cheat sheet of the Caesar Cipher. Through the workshop, three ciphers (Caesar, Pigpen, which looks like alien words, and Vigenère) were designed and developed built upon the game-based learning [5-6].

We were fortunate to have Dr. Hironori Washizaki, the current President of IEEE CS, to virtually give an opening remark around mid-night in Japan to welcome and inspire student participants. Fig. 2 shows his opening remark moment. We also invited one speaker who is the CEO of the Global Foundation of Cyber Studies and Research to introduce the possible careers of cybersecurity. The second speaker, a senior student who majored in Computer Science at the University of Maryland College Park, shared his experiences of working on an undergraduate research project about the cybersecurity of drones sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

C. Workshop 3: STEAM

The STEAM stands for STEM+ART. This workshop was designed based on the evidence-based practice—project-based learning (PBL) [7-12]. The workshop mentors first delivered the circuit basics and Arduino key functions and pins using an existing Arduino with LED setup. A STEAM work example shown in Fig. 3. was presented to help students to understand the meaning of STEAM and have their own designs. After mentors explained what to be expected by the end of this workshop, the students were divided into small teams to do brainstorming about their art pieces and how to integrate an Arduino setup with their art design. The mentors facilitated brainstorming to make sure the students' designs would be feasible and guide the teams to their project plans. The teams were guided based on the PBL and they spent most of the time on finishing this project in each team. The participants had a chance to watch a short video made by Dr. Kathleen Kramer, the 2025 President and CEO of IEEE at the beginning of the workshop, listen to a talk given by the Chair of Student Activities of IEEE Baltimore Section, and interact with Dr. Caroline Walker, the Chief Officer of Equity and Innovation of HCPSS in the end of this workshop.



Fig.2. An Opening Remark by IEEE CS President

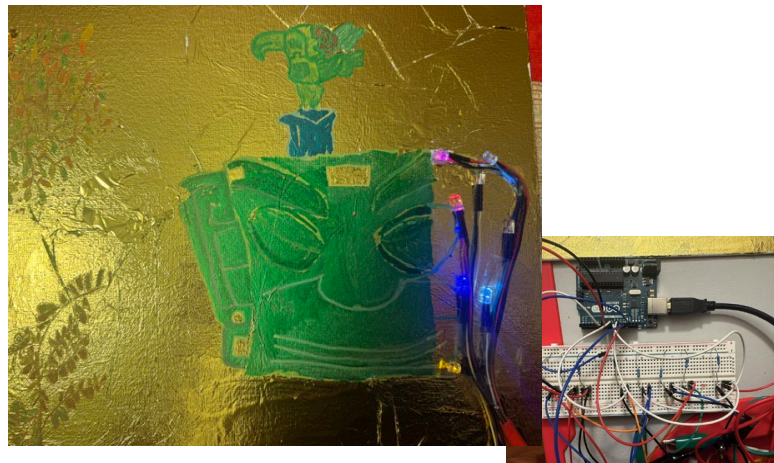


Fig.3. An Example of STEAM Project

The students of three workshops presented their teamwork by the end of each workshop. In the end of each presentation, two specific questions we asked them were: “What did you learn from this workshop?” and “What did you learn from your peers?” Their work and presentations were evaluated by mentors and volunteers.

III. PLANNING AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

The hosting team did not only design and develop each workshop based on the pedagogies and evidence-based practices, but also carefully planned how to implement each step of key topics. As this was the first time the whole team worked together, it was pretty important to have a thoughtful collaboration plan to pair graduate students with high school students to lead each workshop according to their computing backgrounds, project experiences and their interests.

Recruitment is always challenging for any new program or initiative. A lot of efforts were made to reach out to various organizations and communication channels to spread words to recruit student participants. The Workshop Chair in collaboration with various local entities such as IEEE Baltimore Section, HCLS, HCPSS and K12 schools, published the workshop information on the community websites, Canvas, and school newsletters, dropped the workshop flyers in two branches of the HCLS, and Title I schools, which receive extra federal funding to help students from low-income families succeed academically. In a month, we got 103 applications and finally about 60% of the applicants participated in the three workshops.

The application form was thoughtfully designed in order to get enough information about student participants in terms of their grades, schools, computing backgrounds, their dietary restrictions and their T-shirt sizes. We particularly asked for their preferences of each workshop so that we could best assign students to their most favorite one and balance the number of participants of each workshop. After the hosting team assigned students to three workshops, another email was sent to inform the students of their assignments. In the email, the parent or guardian of each student was required to submit a release form required by IEEE so that the workshop photos can be posted on social media. The final email was sent to students' parents to include more details of each workshop, logistics and their to-do-list several days before each workshop. We found several emails sent periodically to communicate with parents helped us to get a better response rate and make the workshop go smoothly. We tried to invite three different cohorts of students to three workshops. The first two workshops (Let's code and Introduction to cybersecurity) targeted at middle school students while the third workshop (STEAM) focused on the fourth and fifth graders in elementary schools. We did minor adjustments based on participants' availabilities.

IV. EVALUATION AND SURVEY RESULTS

A mixed qualitative and quantitative research method was used to design the two surveys in order to have a baseline to identify students' preparedness before each workshop and measure their learning outcomes of each workshop [13-17]. Our mentors tried to use the ChatGPT to generate evaluation rubrics first and then they tuned the rubrics based on the pre-workshop survey results and their observations of each workshop. Student mentors compared the evaluation rubrics generated by AI with the evaluation rubrics designed by themselves. They did not find so many differences in terms of students' learning outcomes.

The pre-workshop and post-workshop surveys were designed on Poll Everywhere. The pre-workshop surveys included questions about students' rising grades, coding level, and their expectations towards the workshops so that the project team could have a baseline about the workshop participants. Fig. 4 shows students' expectations from workshop 2 as an example of our survey. The post-workshop surveys included seven questions (five Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions) about students' experiences of the workshops. The results indicated that about 85% of the students from each workshop were in favor of the topics of each workshop, and satisfied about their interactions with peer mentors and enjoyed the teamwork. All were in favor of the food of workshops.

On average, the response rate of the pre-workshop surveys of three workshops was about 80% and that of the post-workshop surveys was about 97%. The response rate of the Likert-scale questions was higher than that of the open-ended questions. Student learning outcomes of each workshop were

assessed based on the questions students answered when they presented their projects and mentors' observation. The survey results showed that 31% of the workshop 1 participants had already either heard of several computing concepts or Python, 43% of the workshop 2 participants knew Caesar cipher, and 20% of the workshop 3 participants used Arduino before, but most of them did not use Python so much nor had a deep understanding of those computing concepts. However, we observed that all teams finished all exercises or projects before the end of each workshop. The peer mentors observed that most students mastered basic coding in Python or c/C++ (Arduino language), and understood several foundational cryptographies. Finally, four awards were given at each workshop to recognize the best teamwork, best presentation, best achievement and rising stars in computing.



Fig.4. A Survey Result—Students' Expectations from Workshop 2

V. REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The hosting team met on Zoom after each workshop to have reflections on what we did well and what did not work well due to our workshop design, logistics, and other factors. As our workshop was held on three Saturdays, the team had time to adjust our plan and details for the next workshop. We found it was wise for a team of members who worked together for the first time to build trust, find common elements of each other's work styles and adjust our steps. We also found such a non-consecutive workshop schedule can give the hosting team some time and flexibility to figure out who did well in the previous workshop so that we can invite them back to the next workshop as an incentive to them. Those returning students also helped us to run the workshop smoothly as peer mentors.

After hearing the suggestions from middle school students and high school students, we deliberately separated the sixth graders from the seventh and eighth graders due to their different levels of computing knowledge and skills. We found such a grouping was correct. Student participants indicated that they liked this team setup so no one can dominate in any group. Fig. 5 is a group photo showing participants' enjoying experiences. Another thought from the hosting team is this grouping could indicate a possible gap or a jump between the six grade and the seventh grade.

The pairings between graduate students and high school students proved the power of mentorships. They also learn from each other in terms of technology knowledge and communication skills. The hosting team was inspired especially after our workshops were highlighted by IEEE CS news on their website [19]. We have already started working on other proposals to continue our efforts to broaden computing and engineering participation in a larger scale.

We are happy to share the workshop materials and code files with other educators who are interested in K12 outreach. All workshop materials and code files can be found at Notion [20]. We are looking forward to sharing lessons and answering any questions other educators maybe will have when they adopt and adapt the materials.



Fig.5. A Group Photo of Workshop 2

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Acknowledgements given to IEEE Computer Society for funding these three computing workshops and IEEE Baltimore Section, Howard County Library System, and a non-profit company TECH BREAK for their in-kind support.