

## Chapter 13

# Setting the Stage for i<sup>2</sup>Flex: The View from the Elementary School

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter is about setting the stage for i<sup>2</sup>Flex with reference to implementation in the elementary school. The fifth grade teacher and the technology specialist discuss and share specific examples of their practice supporting young learners with the foundational skills that they will need in order to use the i<sup>2</sup>Flex program successfully in the middle and high schools.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

American Community Schools (ACS) Athens is committed to inspiring young learners, through face-to-face and guided instruction, to independently extend inquiry based learning while exploiting the flexibility of current educational technologies. This is the innovative educational program we refer to as i<sup>2</sup>Flex (Avgerinou, Gialamas, & Tsoukia, 2014).

### **BACKGROUND**

Looking ahead to the future, it seems self-evident that education will inevitably become very different in the digital ages to come. In a world where computers are able to use data analytics based on our every click, our personal computers will come to know our interests and be able to connect us with related resources much more effectively than any teacher. Materials created by the “best” teachers will be available to all who can access technology. Khan Academy already claims to be filling this niche. Their clear explanations can be played over again and again with no sense of embarrassment for the

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student or time constraints on the part of the teacher. How can teachers help students make use of this ubiquitous infrastructure to enhance their learning skills and gain independence and flexibility in how and what they learn?

The i<sup>2</sup>Flex program at ACS was originally targeted at middle and high school level. The main focus was to integrate the use of technology in a cross-disciplinary effort to enhance independent inquiry and learning skills in all students. In this paper we propose that both goals are relevant, interesting and challenging not only for secondary, but also for the elementary level. If elementary students can acquire age-adjusted experiences with using digital media to engage in basic digital citizenship skills and norms, not only will they gain in learning ability, they will be much better prepared to make use of the program in middle school.

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

Our classroom practice is based on the belief that learning occurs as learners are actively involved in the process of constructing meaning and knowledge rather than passively receiving information. We also believe that the process, techniques and skills of constructing meanings can be greatly enhanced by teachers' guidance in face -to-face rich interactive situations where students learn how to learn both individually and in social settings. The use of all this digital infrastructure and resource availability to which we initially referred, is not automatically going to lead to independent flexible learning without face to face teachers' presence. In this chapter, we share our philosophy about the use of technology with young students working within such a constructivist paradigm (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Harel & Papert, 1991) and share our classroom experience in implementing this approach. We also provide an overview of the technology skills that are introduced in our elementary school. Our goal in this paper is to describe the skills which must be taught at the elementary school level for the later successful implementation of i<sup>2</sup>Flex. These include:

- Asking meaningful questions and thinking critically in the context of independent research projects;
- Blogging as a medium to promote student writing, giving and receiving feedback and developing Netiquette;
- Familiarization with Moodle as a resource for homework and further independent study.

We describe the teaching processes we have developed and report on a case study with 5th grade. Although the full spectrum of the i<sup>2</sup>Flex program is not implemented at the elementary school level, we consider these three strands essential preparation for training students to become independent and confident learners in using i<sup>2</sup>Flex in the Middle and High Schools.

We, the authors, are both elementary school teachers at ACS Athens. Penny Kynigou teaches 5th grade homeroom while Helen Sarantes is the technology specialist. We collaborate closely to provide essential foundational experiences that enable our students to participate successfully in the full i<sup>2</sup>Flex program at ACS. We have each contributed to this chapter individually and have revised and edited each other's work.

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