

School gets all hands on deck

AMELIA TAN

Sunday, Apr 17, 2011



Crescent students using the Heumi touch-screen gadget to pick out Chinese words to form idioms (above) and to discuss water sustainability issues. -- ST PHOTOS: CHEW SENG KIM

Computers are great teaching and learning tools but there can be drawbacks when students do group work.

The 'fun factor' may be missing if there is no total participation, or if some students end up being less involved.

That observation, by several Crescent Girls' School teachers, led to their solution: a touch-screen gadget that facilitates group participation.

Crescent Girls' is a forerunner in classroom technology.

It is one of eight Future Schools that test educational technology, determine what works and share the lessons gleaned with other schools.

The school's students all own tablet computers which they use in class and at home.

The five teachers who hit on the idea of a multi-user gadget - Mr Lee Boon Keng, Mr Sebastian Goh, Ms Tan Siew Huang, Mr Zhu Haibin and Ms Eileen Lin - wanted to bring back the fun students had in working together.

But they found, during group work sessions in their own classes and when visiting other schools, that students who had their own computers had some difficulty working together on the same task.

Or they would gather in groups around a unit. With only one person handling the computer, the others had to take a back seat in the discussions.

The school has now developed a large-screen device - 46 inches - with multi-touch capability, which it thinks

will do the trick.

The five Crescent Girls' teachers worked with two local tech companies HeuLab and Amdon for almost a year to develop the device, given the name Heumi, and its applications (apps).

They also created apps that facilitate group work.

Yesterday, the Heumi was launched at Crescent's Speech Day by guest of honour Ho Peng, the director-general of education and a Crescent Girls' alumna.

Mr Lee, one of the teachers behind Heumi and Crescent's information and communication technology head, said: 'We found that computers are great for self-directed, individual learning and when students are not physically together.

'But we believe that other technologies can further enhance the face-to-face collaborative learning experience.'

The Tanglin Road school has 11 Heumis placed in a dedicated room for group work sessions. Crescent Girls' paid for them via different sources of funding including school funds and contributions from industry partners.

HeuLab declined to give the cost of each Heumi but said it plans to promote the device in more schools.

The Heumi is mounted on a table and four students, each on one side of the table, can use it by letting their finger tips navigate across its screen.

The school has apps for the Heumi that infuse thinking and collaborative strategies. All apps will be ready by the end of the year.

There are also tools such as timers that indicate the time limit for discussions, as well as collaborative games.

Secondary 3 student Ng Pei Qin, 15, said: 'When we do group work in class, we might split up the work because it is more efficient. But with the Heumi, we can work together from the start.

'I can easily share my work with my classmates as I can just flash what I have done on the screen.'

Ms Ho also launched Crescent's programme of sharing with staff and teachers from other schools on how technology can be a teaching and learning tool.

The school will do this by running workshops, conferences, school attachments and discussion sessions for schools from the middle of this year in partnership with the Education Ministry and other industry partners such as Microsoft.

ameltan@sph.com.sg