

Teachers aim to build students' resilience in an online world



By Brock Weir

You might call it combating fake news in the classroom, but it is an everyday problem for local teachers.

‘They think they are way more tech savvy than the old ladies,’ says teacher Ann-Marie Hulse of her students. ‘When students are looking at their own devices for research projects, it is critical they evaluate what they are looking at. When you Google something, they only look at the first three things that pop up and never go any deeper. Although they are getting information in their hands, is it the best information?’

The answer, she says, is no – and she has the proof to back that up. Have you ever seen a picture of the elusive Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus? Chances are, you probably haven’t, but a pretty authentic looking hoax website had kids delving deeper into the make-believe critter.

‘We had them for a good 20 minutes before we let them know it was a hoax because it looked real, it had the links, but they were not being critical thinkers,’ she says. ‘They are taking things at face value.’

Ms. Hulse was recently at Regency Acres Public School for their STEAM Conference, a school-led initiative focusing on building – or re-building – resiliency and these all-important critical thinking skills back into the minds of students.

It is an initiative brought into the Regency community by teacher-librarian Robin Morrison-Claus.

‘Our kids in this day and age, everything is Google this and Google that, and they don’t have any critical thinking skills because if it doesn’t come from Google, they don’t know how to do it,’ explains Ms. Morrison-Claus. ‘It is really that resiliency and critical thinking skills that is the purpose behind all this. The mission is to get them thinking critically, to get them going through more than, – If it didn’t work the first time, I’m done.’

Even the younger students, says Ms. Hulse, are apt to walk away from a challenge, always looking to a teacher for the next steps instead of exploring and testing out new things.

As such, the STEAM event brought together teachers and community leaders to steer students through projects designed to exercise these somewhat atrophied muscles, from robotics sessions, to D-I-Y kaleidoscopes, to sessions with the Aurora-based Brainy Games.

Students’ creative juices were tapped early in the day, however, with a talk with MDA’s Natalie Panek, whose robotics company is currently working on a Mars rover.

‘When you’re up in space a lot of things can go wrong and a lot of things go wrong all the time,’ she told students. ‘You’re working with a team in order to improvise and come up with new solutions to overcome those challenges and obstacles in order to explore some of the farthest reaches of our galaxy.’

Speaking to The Auroran after her talk, she added, ‘I think usually two things: one that it is okay to fail, that in life we’re often going to run into challenges and roadblocks and it is important to keep persevering. The second is even adults don’t have it all figured out. Kids will often see a rocket scientist or a geologist who seems to have their career in order and they seem to have it all figured out or are afraid to go down the wrong path. I think it is reassuring for them to hear that we’re just figuring out our way, that there are

moments we have vulnerability here as well.?

With three decades in education under their respective belts, both Ms. Morrison-Claus and Ms. Hulse say they have seen this problem increasing and they are determined to do what they can to stem the rising tide.

?One of the things we're hearing from teacher-employer is the kids who are coming out of schools and going into jobs is kids don't have that critical thinking, they also don't have the creative side of working through it because they are just so used to having everything given to them,? says Morrison-Claus. ?Employers are looking for places, kids and people who have those thinking capabilities, those processes they have to apply to do their job. If we don't develop it now, it is too late by the time they get to university those skills are gone.?