

6/28/04

Hi Eston, Manish, and Yaron,

Here is what's going on over here in Ghana:

Travel

We've been to markets, beaches, concerts on beaches, Aburi botanical gardens, a cruise on Lake Volta, Makola market, Ato's aunt's house, and more. We've seen some of the night life, going to bars and clubs and out to eat. We visited other volunteers from GeekCorp (Yaron directed us to them). We've been to a wireless internet café twice, but it's inconvenient. It's about 20 minutes away, and we've been rushed when we go. Sorry for the lack of email and website updates – but it's tough to get these emails out. So I'll try to make this pretty detailed to clue you guys in.

We've been eating all over the place – local places and not-so local places. Cheap and expensive (expensive is 4 bucks max, Lauri, Ato, and Sam would not allow us to go over that amount). We travel using taxis and tro-tros (tro-tros are the buses here, which are like saferides). This weekend, we are giving the students a 4-day weekend for Republic Day (Ghana's republic day on July 1) and we are heading to Cape Coast for 3 days to see the slave castles and other stuff in the area. We have a driver to take us. We also have a driver (our professor's driver) who take us around from 8am-8pm, or whenever we head home from lab. Exchanging money is somewhat of an issue – banks are only opened while we are teaching. We had all been traveling around with 8 bucks or less for some time, but recently, we just got used to heading to the bank on campus during lectures and exchanging traveler's checks. We are taking tons of pictures and videos, so you will see all the happenings here up close and personal J

OCW

OCW is not quite working as we had hoped or planned. There is no internet in the labs we are using, so the only plus the OCW kids have is one book per 4 or 5 people in OCW. We currently have approximately 20 students in OCW, and they are kind of behind compared to students in regular lectures. Tomorrow we are distributing report cards, and hopefully they will realize that they need to get to it and catch up. The problem with the OCW people is that they are grad students defending their thesis and professors and lecturers and TAs and they are not treating the class as seriously as the kids in mainstream. Especially because we are not there every day bringing them through each lecture and each lab. We always try to have at least one person in OCW, and sometimes two, but there are 50 students in the regular class, and it is rough having only 3 people to help them with labs.

Last night we put together a detailed OCW supplement sheet that really defines the rules of the class – that they need to be in class everyday, finish up to a certain lab each week, and we are currently considering having students in OCW give a 20 minute review of the previous day's lab. This will give OCW a bit more guidance, and encourage students to help each other, and give students the ability to really read up on and learn a topic well on his own so that he can explain it to the rest of the class.

We are still thinking about how to get professors and TAs more involved. The main professor seems impossible (Yaron, like you said – sort of on the arrogant side, and very busy). They don't show up to class and don't seem interested in putting more time in. We are working on fixing it, by maybe asking them to lead a review session or something, but they are really being difficult – we will try hard.

We are working on and thinking about having students who took this class to consider teaching their own class (Eston, I think you mentioned this), and definitely TAing next year's AITI team. We have one boy named Diabene who took the class 2 years ago and he has been a great help in letting us know how the students are understanding the material, and whether we are going at an okay pace, etc etc. He also helps us TA the lab sessions and OCW, so it works out great. We will discuss it with the class (OCW and regular) at the end.

Regular class

Our class now officially goes from 9am-5pm. We finally got it to that – the first week or two, it would be from 9am-8pm and we were so exhausted all the time because then, at 8pm, we would first start grading 50 labs (on 50 individual computers, because the computers are not reliably networked), and then go home and prepare for the next day's lecture, announcements, labs, etc. Now we are out of lab by 6:30 or 7, and things are in motion, so we can spend less time when we get home working on the next day's stuff. Teaching is so exhausting!

Some issues we've come across:

- students not respecting us because we are younger, foreign, female, etc
 - students who came one week or even 2 weeks late, and blame us for not being able to catch up (they want individual attention, but there are too many other students in the class who need help on the current day's work that we cannot take an entire day to catch up 10 individual students who are 8 days behind – we had one catch-up day the first week, but we do not have the time to do it every week for students who just don't show up to class)
 - some cheaters, but we'll deal with them once the exam comes this Wednesday (we are considering giving the people who are failing "flag" letters saying what they need to do in the next 3 weeks to be considered for successful completion – aka warn them that so far, they are not doing nearly enough)
 - class getting mad that we are going too fast, but the majority seems to be learning at the pace we are teaching, so we think it's okay for now (we are teaching the advanced track, for now)
 - too few of us to help all of them and do OCW and prepare everything else we are doing/planning (Mondays and Wednesdays 2-6pm Lauri and sometimes Ato head to the high school to work on the Mindstorms project – so there are only 2 or 3 of us left to help 70 students in OCW and regular track)
- Overall though, the class is really going well – a few of them joined the class thinking it was intro to Word and Excel and that kind of stuff, and they are doing so well. Today they had their inheritance lab, and they really had the hang of it – objects and methods and all that fun stuff. They have really come so far from the beginning, and we are all enjoying teaching the class. We alternate lectures and we decided to give short (20-30min) quizzes every Monday, which is a good way to assess their progress, and keep them up to date in learning the material.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship lectures are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2-3:30pm. We've had one speaker so far (in 3 weeks – hopefully another one today) – a millionaire guy from Britain who opened up a wireless internet café called Busy Internet. He talked about how he started in the states with nothing except a computer in his home – and within a year he raised 400,000 bucks. And now he starts businesses (like Busy Internet) with the money he accumulated. It was pretty good and inspiring hopefully. He discussed that a "real" entrepreneur would never use lack of capital as an excuse, which was good because all the students keep using lack of money as the scapegoat as to why they cannot start their own business. Otherwise, Lauri and Ato switch off giving the lectures, and others have expressed interest in presenting because the lectures tend to be fun. Ato has contacted some speakers, and we think the students will like the selection. One problem with speakers was that the first one forgot to come, so now we're calling our speakers constantly to make sure they are on time and prepared. We just had our second speaker now (so now it's been 2 speakers and 3 lectures, so I guess we are on track). He is a Ghanaian lawyer, and it seems like he is talking geared specifically towards law, so maybe he will inspire some of our students to create their own online lawyer database ☺

Assignments that Eston created have produced good results. The group activities have been incredibly lively, especially because groups have had to present their ideas. We still need to work on making the assignments more serious, because some groups produce material that simply guides the class off track (e.g. the class started pondering whether you can still be an entrepreneur if you are dead [Tupac]...) Personal assignments have gone ok, although many people forgot to return the first assignments as they concentrated mostly on their JAVA labs. Grades for the entrepreneurship lectures from our first teacher

evaluation were high, and comments so far tend to reflect that students find the material semi-practical, interesting, and fun.

Final Project

We are planning to have an online store type thing as their final project. They will be able to build on their shopping cart, and user login, and either use JSP or Swing, depending on how far we are able to lecture. We thought this would be a good way to combine the Java, JSP, Swing, and entrepreneurship stuff all in one for their last shabang. We are going to have them working in pairs to learn about coding in groups. We will present the final project to them after the first exam just to get them thinking about it. We also just decided that the JSP labs will be mostly geared towards their final projects, so they will actually be working on their project. We will encourage OCW to work on the same projects, just to expand on them a bit more. Is that too much to expect from the regular class? The ocw track?

Publicity

Ato is working on contacting radios or newspapers, but he says there is too much corruption to get in the newspapers. We met a famous guy named Sammy B (who was on the Africa Big Brother show), and we are trying to meet up with him and see if he can get us any publicity. We want him to help us get in touch with radio programs since he is influential in the media business. Most importantly, we want him to help us get publicity on MultiChoice Network, the biggest satellite network company in Africa. So this is really large scale.

More info from Ato:

“Aight, this is as far as publicity is concerned.

I was thinking of having interviews on two radio stations. The object of this is to make our publicity interactive, let the people know what students are doing with their brains and how much value can be created for Africa as a whole by empowering students. I am in touch with both radio stations. The problem is these interviews are held early morning, 8 -9am. I have not been able to fix times due to the constraints of teaching at Legon. I am working on this. I mean, it's not like we want more students to come join the course in the next week, it's some information we want to disseminate and make sure it stays with the people.

For newspapers, I have contacted the major national daily but haven't gotten someone to write the article yet. I am working on this too.”

Mindstorms

Lauri and Ato began work with high school students last Wednesday. The course objective is to use the lego mindstorms toys to teach basic concepts in mechanical, computer, and electrical engineering. 18 students from three different high schools (6 per school) are taking part. They are meeting every Monday and Wednesday, from 3-6pm. The start was slow because two schools were an hour late to the first session. But, the course is picking up, and we've now given the lego sets home to each group and will assign homework on Wednesday. We hope to give students challenges to complete at home, then come to class to learn theory and compare their robots to the ones others built. We have created demanding curriculum objectives, and depending on how fast the students advance, we will cover either all of the stuff or adjust the lectures to be more appropriate. All students have enjoyed the course, although those without lego experience seem to be more stressed and perhaps not understanding the legos as toys but as courseware. We're working on getting the atmosphere a bit more interactive and creative, which should be easy once the students get to work on their own things. The whole team is going to head there this Wednesday to try to get things more exciting and upbeat. We are all very excited to go.

Visiting high schools

Ato has organized one high school visit so far to his high school Presec. He organized it during class, so only he and Lauri were able to go. More are planned, but it is difficult to organize a time that works for us and the entire student body of a school. We are aiming for about 3-4 high school sessions. At Presec, Ato spoke to about 1000 students about MIT. The speech ended up a bit MIT-specific, so next time we'll make sure to keep the pitch motivational and general, oriented towards international application and the benefits/excitement of studying abroad. Many students did enjoy the speech, though, and Ato got many personal questions from students afterwards.

I have been keeping a list of things (and encouraging my teammates to do the same) people might want to know in future years before coming, and ways to improve the program, and other thoughts we are having throughout the process. I will send a comprehensive list at the end of the summer.

One thing that is difficult, is that we need to depend on Ato for a lot of stuff that is specific to knowing people and having connections (contacting entrepreneurs, booking trips, contacting the press, etc) – so it's frustrating not to be able to tackle some of these things myself or have other team members work on them. And Ato insists that things must be done "Ghana-man time" which is always an hour late, or a week late. So we are doing as best as we can with what we have. Overall though, I think the whole program has really been a success.

Advice you could give us:

- Students seem to be confused and averages on quizzes are on the low side, do we keep pushing them? Or do we slow down and forfeit some of the end lectures (even though many of them are here to learn to make websites, which is only taught in the last few lectures)?
- Do we have a final project that is more involved and practical and risk their not having a finished product, or have one that might be a bit simpler and ensure they will at least have a basic project up and running? (Keep in mind, most do NOT have computers at home to continue working on unfinished projects after the class)
- How do we deal with students who are so behind/failing by mid-way through? Do we speak to them and tell them they are not likely to pass? Or just keep them in the class and not say anything?
- How do we treat OCW grades as compared to the regular track grades? Should we expect them to learn to the same level as the mainstream? Right now, as I explained earlier, they seem to be behind the regular track kids. Do we give them leeway because they are sort of getting the short end of the stick not having lectures and not having internet? Do we expect more from them?
- How strict should we be with giving out certificates? What about the students who work really hard, but are not quite getting it to the level of "java competence"? Many of them may be here only for the certificate, and will be mad if we don't give them one? Should we be semi-lenient, or really make sure to require some good understanding of the concepts?