



Life Skills Programme at Dubai Men's College

Audrey Renton, English faculty member

Q.1. Tell us a bit about your institution.

The Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) was founded in 1988. The aim of the colleges is to prepare students for professional and technological careers in the private and government sectors of the UAE.

Q.2. Tell us about your role there.

I work as an English teacher in the Foundations programme at Dubai Men's College. Foundations is the first stage for new entry students who need to improve their English and Maths skills before going onto the Bachelor's programme.

Working together with my colleague, Clayton Young, an English teacher and outdoor ropes instructor, we created a life skills programme called 'English Plus' for the Foundations programme. We gave it this name because it gives the students a 'value added' bonus to their English studies. Students get the chance to do a range of 'thinking outside the box' activities, ranging from lateral thinking tasks on the sports field to discussions, games, puzzles and apps-based learning activities in the classroom.

Q.3. Which life skills do you think your students already have a good grasp of? How can these life skills help them beyond the classroom?

Our students have good interpersonal skills. Generally, they are good listeners who listen with empathy and interest. They are also good negotiators. In class, they like to negotiate about everything: from the amount of homework they get to when the class should finish. These are two life skills that would be invaluable in any sales and marketing job that they might get in the future.

Q.4. What life skill would you like to see developed by your students? How would these be beneficial at school, at work, or at home?

We would like to see students get more practice in financial planning. We teach at the Men's Campus where most of our students go onto get their first salaried jobs (and often also get married) shortly after graduating. Sadly, there is little in the current secondary school curriculum here that adequately prepares these students to manage their finances. As a result, many lack confidence when it comes to areas such as budgeting, loans, credit cards, mortgages and so on. If one could integrate this skill into the English and Maths curriculum, it would be a win-win situation for everyone.

Q.5. How are you teaching or covering this at your school?

English Plus is taught by section teachers for 2-4 hours per week. The teacher accesses the activities from our Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard Learn) and chooses from a menu of four topic areas:

- ▶ **Personal Development:** offering questionnaires, discussion tasks and videos
- ▶ **Society and Culture:** presenting quizzes and useful apps which cover geography, cultural awareness and general knowledge
- ▶ **Lateral Thinking:** challenging students with team games and puzzles – carried out in or outside the classroom
- ▶ **Mission Leadership:** providing instructions on the high ropes and team-building activities – facilitated by our sports instructors

Teachers cover as much of these materials as they wish. The resources are all graded according to English level and are accompanied by teacher's notes and a resource bank.

There has been a lot of support for English Plus from our college. Last year, the Higher Colleges launched a 'Learning by Doing' initiative across all its programmes. We felt ahead of the game when we saw that our hands-on reflective learning approach was being used by our colleagues at other colleges. In September, we won the HCT 'Innovation in Learning' award which we plan to use to attend conferences around the region to introduce others to our life skills programme.

Q.6. If you could give one piece of life skill advice to yourself when aged 18 what would it be?

Live, love, laugh. I've always thought that living life to the full with a good work-life balance and a few clear goals to motivate us, gives a person the best start. Love? Well, love what you do. If you don't, give it up. Life is too short: don't neglect to love those around you, your family and all those friends that support you through the difficult times. And laugh. If bad things occur, reframe them in your mind to see the funny or positive side. Doing this actually rewires your brain to give you a better result next time. I didn't know that when I was 18. I didn't know that laughter is like a daily dose of Vitamin C. It gives you endorphins that keep you healthy. There's a school of Positive Psychology that explains all about this and what makes us happy. Look it up – we live and learn.