

01

STORY + TECHNOLOGY: DEVELOPING A POSITIVE MINDSET WHILE HAVING FUN

AESIR – CHAN HO SING ERNEST

STORYTELLING IN 3D MAKES LEARNING ENJOYABLE

A graduate of PolyU's Department of Land Surveying and Geo-Informatics, Ernest has formed an inextricable bond with children with special educational needs (SEN) by serendipity. As a volunteer, he met a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who seldom communicated with others. Until one day, on a trip around Hong Kong Island, they ended up telling each other stories throughout the trip and both enjoyed it thoroughly whether the stories were real or fictional. "He really enjoys listening to stories, and I realised that the way he looks at things is different from others – he's more observant – like, he'd pay attention to the colour of the tiles in a restaurant." To his surprise, the kid told his mother about their trip after going home. This brought Ernest immense satisfaction, planting the seed of his forthcoming project.

Upon graduation, Ernest started working at a large corporation in Sweden. On the surface, it seemed like everything a fresh

graduate could ever ask for. However, Ernest could not find his purpose in life through his work and experienced an existential crisis, after which he quit his job and returned to Hong Kong with determination in search of a new direction. He found out by chance that he could incorporate technology into storytelling to make it a communication tool between parents and children. "Sometimes, parents may not know exactly how to keep the conversation going with their kids. In such a case, AR can help." During the development of his project, Ernest kept asking himself what message he wanted to convey and what impact he hoped to create. In the end, he decided to target children with learning disabilities, ASD, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

“ Storytelling is the best parent-child activity. A lot of research suggests that telling stories to children can boost their imagination, improve their attention, teach them to control their emotions, let them acquire everyday knowledge, and strengthen parent-child relationships.

That is why Ernest, teamed up with researchers of positive psychology, published the first interactive storybook in Hong Kong aimed at nurturing a positive mindset in children using a 3D AR mobile app. ”



“I wanted to make something practical, something that really helps.” The project aims to use AR to explain the theories of positive psychology in a way that is easy to understand, with the hope that the book can become a useful reference tool for parents, teachers, psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and healthcare professionals. The book includes evidence-based exercises to help children experience positive emotions and become more aware of them. In the long run, it can encourage proactive behaviour and build positive values. “Kids are sensitive to pictures, and we can explain to them why they should or should not behave in a certain way through the story.”

To Ernest, SEN is just a label – everybody

learns and gets along with others in their own ways.

“The most traditional and ‘efficient’ way is for children to listen when you speak. But why can’t we do something or read something together? It’s at least better than making them lose interest in learning.”

He believes that different people have different learning modes, and his partner is a good example. “He dropped out of school when he was in Form 4 and worked different jobs. He then went to night school, the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE), the Vocational Training Council (VTC), took distance learning courses, got a higher diploma, and then acquired a bachelor’s degree. We still

work together just fine.” Labels are for commodities, not people. Ernest hopes that the AR storybooks can someday bring joy to learning as much as Disney does. “People are most willing to listen to stories. In the past, stories could only be told orally. Now, I want to use a more effective way to get messages across. I hope the centre can be transformed into a playground, a place where even kids with special educational needs can learn something happily.”

From preparation to implementation, from printing the first edition to having it sold out and needing to reprint, Ernest felt the happiest about gaining recognition while doing good for society. “I remember this from a talk I once attended – ‘whether an organisation is for-profit or non-profit, it should do something good for society and create value.’” Creating value means doing something useful. Ernest also made friends while planning the project, got to know people who share similar values, and gained recognition from others. He has even received a “love letter” professing support for the project. In this commercial society, however, Ernest still feels a little insecure.

“Social enterprises face the same problems as for-profit organisations. We’ve had people pretending to be clients asking for information, and we’ve faced false accusations – all sorts of curious incidents. So, we need to set a proper boundary.”

He stresses that whether one engages in social innovation or not is not important; what matters the most is not doing harm to society. It is difficult enough to do something well – isn’t it even more challenging to make sure that it is also a good deed?

“ Everything is challenging, and that’s why it’s worth doing. If it’s too easy, I’ll be like, it’s not for me. To achieve breakthroughs, we need to challenge ourselves constantly. ”

