

Who are TSN?

The Timothy Smith Network (TSN) is a non-profit, community-based organisation serving the Greater Roxbury area of Boston, Massachusetts.

Founded in 2003, the mission of TSN is to bridge the digital divide by expanding access to technology, working to develop digital skills, and providing technology education, particularly among communities which have been historically underrepresented in the technology sector. TSN partners with community organisations, schools and industry to provide people of all ages with the tools, training and opportunities needed to pursue higher education and careers in the technology and digital sector.

TSN's flagship programme is the Boston Design Academy (BDA), a six-week internship open to Boston Public School students which provides young people with hands-on experience in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) through project-based learning in various digital disciplines such as 3D modelling, website design, and coding in Arduino. The aim is to allow young people to develop both technical skills and the confidence to see themselves as future innovators.



Figure 1. Explaining the programme to the interns on orientation day

What was my role?

I worked as an instructor in the Digital Design Intensive (DDI) module, which aimed to give interns exposure to 3D modelling via Blender, video game design via Unreal Editor for Fortnite (UEFN), and website design through Google Sites, HTML and CSS.

I taught the website design section, which came last in the programme and served a dual purpose as both a technical project in its own right, and a medium through which the interns could show off their other two projects in Blender and UEFN by building a personal portfolio website. I began by teaching basic web design terminology and design principles, using Google Sites as a more friendly environment to introduce the material. We then progressed to HTML and CSS, which the interns used to build both an About Me page and a Steam Store-style page which advertised their UEFN game.

I covered material from the structure of a webpage and basic coding elements to typography, colour theory, layouts, and responsive design principles. At times, this was challenging as many of the interns had little-to-no coding experience and were not familiar with many pieces of web-design terminology.

I developed and delivered the teaching materials, demonstrated code in HTML and CSS, and supported the interns through troubleshooting bugs with their sites. I also assisted the other two DDI Laidlaw scholars Julia and Peony with delivering their modules in Blender and UEFN and supported interns in the workshops delivered every Friday which added to their portfolio of technological skills.



Figure 2. Helping the interns in one of the Friday workshops



Figure 3. The Laidlaw scholars

How did I achieve my SMART goals?

SMART goals are goals which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. Before beginning my LiA, I set myself three SMART goals which focused on developing my confidence as a group instructor and orator, learning to produce and refine a suitable curriculum, and strengthening my ability to work as part of a teaching team.

I achieved the goal of learning to produce a curriculum in the months leading up to my LiA. I began to develop what would become a set of 75 slides progressing from basic terminology and design fundamentals to HTML and CSS, incorporating multiple website-building tasks like creating a personal portfolio website or Steam Store-style page for a video game. Crucial to this process were the monthly meetings I had with my lead instructor Amanda, where she gave me feedback on my slides and we discussed ideas.

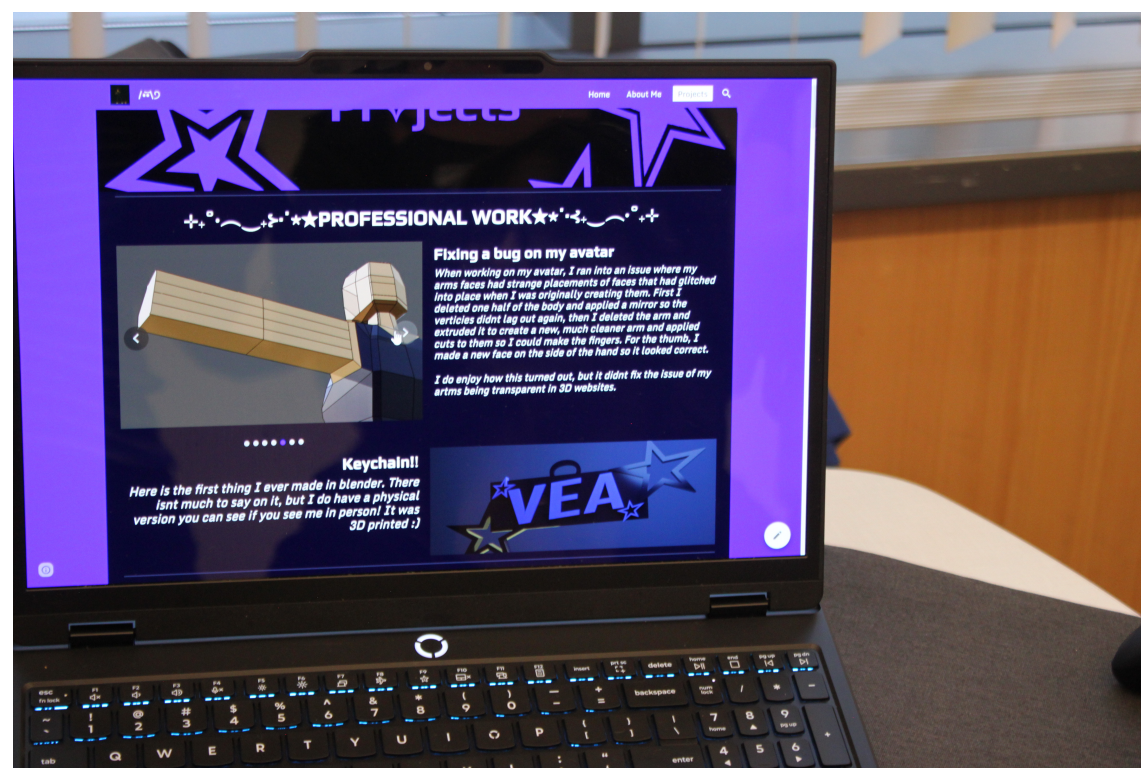


Figure 4. One intern's finished personal portfolio website

In the first four weeks in Boston, I achieved the teamwork-oriented goal by assisting the other two Laidlaw scholars Julia and Peony in delivering their modules. This required me to learn content from their curricula while simultaneously refining my own, and apply this knowledge in real time by answering interns' questions, troubleshooting technical issues and providing on-the-spot advice about various aspects of digital design.

In the final two weeks of the project, I took over from Peony and began independently delivering my own module. During these two weeks, I learned to adapt my explanations of concepts in real time to match the interns' individual technological capabilities and focus on the aspects of technology and digital design that motivated them. For example, I had originally planned to teach all the HTML content first, and then progress to CSS. However, I quickly learned that what motivated the interns were not the technical aspects of developing a website, but the creative design elements, so I pivoted to introduce some of the CSS code earlier in the course so the interns could implement their design ideas. Something that the staff at TSN really emphasised was to 'meet people where they are', and I really think this helped me change my teaching style and build confidence as an instructor.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to the team at Timothy Smith Network for facilitating the programme, especially to CEO Milton for welcoming us into the organisation and for the numerous cultural activities that would not have been possible without his support (Let's go Red Sox!), and to Amanda, my lead instructor, for her help and guidance inside the classroom which helped me grow into a better instructor.

I am also deeply grateful to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their generous funding, without which this experience would not have been possible.