

Teacher thrilled at major award for innovation

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NICCI HAYES

NICCI Hayes, a teacher at Victoria Girls' High School in Grahamstown, is overjoyed after taking third place in the prestigious annual Pan-African Innovative Teachers Forum competition. "It is wonderful to be recognised at that level," she said. "External affirmation of this kind is seldom given in the teaching profession."



Hayes is fresh back from the awards ceremony held in Mauritius last week. She is now preparing for a trip to Brazil to compete at a global level. This is all due to a simple drama class assignment for Grade 9s. Traditionally, such an assignment is a theatrical performance – but Hayes decided to try something new. She sent her pupils out to identify essential community organisations and produce digital video material for these entities. They came back with compelling material from a variety of organisations including NGOs and public service providers, like the SPCA, the police and street children welfare provider Eluxolweni Shelter.

The assignment caught the attention of the judges in the continent-wide competition that forms part of the Microsoft Innovative Teachers Programme. Hayes competed in a category called Innovation in Community. Awarded a bronze, she came after another South African teacher, Fiona Beal, of Fish Hoek Primary in the Western Cape, who took silver. Gold went to a teacher from Lesotho.

Michel Cordani, Microsoft country manager for the Indian Ocean islands, said: "It's one thing to talk about how technology can make a difference in education. But being able to see what teachers are actually doing on a practical level in their classrooms is even more encouraging."

Microsoft Africa chairman Cheick Modibo Diarra said: "Technology in the classroom can transform the way teachers teach and pupils learn. It can extend the walls of the classroom to the furthest corners of the world." Hayes's class assignment would have taken forever had she relied solely on the school's single digital camera. Instead she let the paired girls use their cellphones. Three teams out of the 12 went the cellphone route. "Sometimes, lack of resources pushes us into creativity," Hayes said. "The award also confirms that the work we do at VG is of international standard."

The project places VG at the cutting edge of the media revolution. "When the new media technology explodes into the broader society, my girls will be ready," Hayes said. "They will know that one does not need huge amounts of capital to produce theatrical work and beam it to the public. A simple cellphone can do the job."

"This is the best recognition I have received during my entire teaching career," said the 15-year veteran. She graduated from Rhodes University with a BA (Dramatic Art). She said: "I love this profession but hate it at the same time. "I love it for the human factor. What can be more satisfying than seeing a child suddenly understanding a concept? "I hate the profession because it has stolen my life. I cannot pick up a magazine, or do anything else without thinking of its relevance to my kids."