A Match Made in Heaven: The Integration of Entrepreneurship and Language Arts

By Cindy Quinlan & Angie McLane

When I approached language arts teacher Angie McLane about an innovative integration of entrepreneurship, my area of specialization, and hers, language arts, McLane respectfully declined the opportunity with a quick “no.” At first glance, it seemed that career and technical education (CTE) and language arts had nothing in common. However, my persistence opened the door for an eventual collaboration that would innovate K-12 classrooms at Brookwood cluster schools, in Gwinnett County, and beyond.

Entrepreneurs solve problems; they are trained to innovate. On the surface, my successful entrepreneurship program appeared to have it all. The program’s philosophy, based on elements of the Lean Start-Up Approach, encourages students to launch an authentic business rather than to learn only theoretical entrepreneurship principles. Most of the student businesses focus on creating value by solving a problem or pursuing a passion using the skills and abilities they already possess. Through an “Entrepreneurship Alliance” with the City of Snellville, student businesses are provided local entrepreneur/business professional mentorship, a special-issue business license, and an opportunity to pitch their business startup for angel investment funding. To date, nearly $15,000 has been awarded to student entrepreneurs in the program. However, I realized that my entrepreneurship program had a distinct weakness. While students were motivated to succeed in their business venture, they fell short on the literacy skills needed to be successful moving forward. Using the very problem-solving skills taught to my students, I found an innovative solution—integrate the entrepreneurship program with language arts.
On the language arts end, McLane noticed that reluctant learners often work diligently to avoid anything associated with literacy. In an age where “SparkNoted” is now a verb to the average high school student, few students are reading long, difficult texts. Some students actually read four or five long summaries in order to avoid reading one short chapter in a novel. No matter how much language arts teachers enjoy literature, creative writing, literary discussion and literary analysis, we cannot seem to transfer that excitement to all of our students. Some just do not see the relevance of language arts. We can talk about the nebulous “someday” when students will need to have writing fluency and reading stamina to be successful in careers and in college, but that rationale does not translate to a student’s fervor for writing a paper about symbolism in Lord of the Flies.

The Integrated Solution: We Innovate to Motivate

How can we innovate to make language arts instruction more relevant to the disconnected learner? In the workplace, language arts skills are essential to a successful career. In the 2016 workforce skills preparedness report “Leveling Up: How to Win in the Skills Economy,” PayScale highlighted the disconnect between hiring managers and college graduates when it comes to skills necessary for success in the professional world. In the report, 60 percent of hiring managers noted that college graduates lack critical thinking and problem solving skills. Forty-four percent saw communication as a weakness. Writing proficiency is lacking, note 44 percent of the managers, while 39 percent cited public speaking as a weakness in college graduates. All these deficiencies are skills associated with the language arts curriculum. Clearly, literacy skills are necessary for success in college and in the workforce. In our program, we motivate students to see the relevance of literacy by integrating language arts and entrepreneurship to provide students with a real-life application of language arts skills.

The Brookwood Entrepreneurship Program: An Integrated Learning Pathway

Education must constantly change to meet the demands of the dynamic world around us. Lessons taught must be authentic, engaging and entertaining. Our program offers students an opportunity to earn their language arts course credit through entrepreneurship education. This integrated classroom includes a unique approach to language arts instruction; students develop all the skills of a standard language arts class in a non-traditional project-based, technology-rich learning environment. Critical thinking and reading
skills, communicative arts and research techniques—all relevant to entrepreneurs in the business world—are taught through the development of their small business plans. Students are also exposed to literature with a unique twist; all literature is examined through a business lens, and all projects have a deliverable focused on teaching entrepreneurship.

For example, while reading Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, students practice recognizing business opportunities by developing and pitching a business that Pip, the lead protagonist in the book, could start in London. After analyzing the text for evidence of problems that could be solved by private enterprise, students showcase their solutions on an online website. By adding language arts, the students are truly receiving a unique learning experience by bringing together CTE, specifically entrepreneurship, and core curriculum in a meaningful, real-world format.

**Program Layout**

The Brookwood Integrated Entrepreneurship Program offers options to students during all four years of high school. During the first two years of the program, students complete an entire CTE pathway while earning their core ninth- and 10th-grade language arts credit. The first year (ninth grade) focuses on building foundational knowledge of business, marketing and free-enterprise. The second year (10th grade) focuses on the communication, development and launch of the student’s own small business. For each of these first two years, students earn three units of course credit during a two-period block.

The third and fourth years (11th and 12th grade) open up a variety of options for students to apply their entrepreneurial skills. During the third year, rather than entering back into traditional language arts, students take an entrepreneurship-infused version of 11th-grade language arts in a single class period. As a component of the course, students utilize their CTE knowledge along with their entrepreneurial mindset to further increase their literacy skills through CTSO competition events. During the fourth year, students have three different school-based enterprises in which they can apply their talents, including a print shop; apparel store; and a science, technology, engineering, math-focused enterprise that sells products produced from the aquaponics program (opening in the 2017-2018 school year). For those students who successfully launch a business, they can continue to operate their startup with mentorship and incubator space (coming soon) provided by the City of Snellville during years three and/or four.

The program course layout for each year is outlined below:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>9th GRADE YEAR</th>
<th>10th GRADE YEAR</th>
<th>11th GRADE YEAR</th>
<th>12th GRADE YEAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong> Building Foundational Knowledge</td>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong> Launching a Business</td>
<td><strong>11th Grade Language Arts</strong> (Infused with entrepreneurship concepts and CTSO competition)</td>
<td><strong>School-based Enterprise Operation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• 9th Grade Language Arts</td>
<td>• 10th Grade Language Arts</td>
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<td>• Work-based Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Marketing Principles</td>
<td>• Marketing &amp; Entrepreneurship</td>
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<td>• Marketing Management</td>
<td>• Oral and Written Communication</td>
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<td>= 3 units of credit in 2 class periods</td>
<td>= 3 units of credit in 2 class periods</td>
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Producing Results

Preliminary data indicates that students in this program are potentially improving in reading comprehension and writing ability at a faster rate than their peers in standalone language arts courses. We hypothesize that this improvement revolves around the uniqueness of our program. First, students experience increased rigor since they synthesize information to apply to both language arts and business in a performance-based environment. In addition, language arts standards are being emphasized by two teachers who blend the two disciplines with an emphasis on written and oral communication, research, cultural perspective and entrepreneurship. Additionally, students are more motivated to succeed and to perform at a higher level. They finally understand “the why” behind needing to communicate effectively, whether it be the written or spoken word, since the learning environment has become real.

From the language arts perspective, students recognize how literature is the model for communicating ideas and the impetus for discussions that are relevant in the formation of our core values. They want to emulate great authors to practice craft and structure for effective communication of their entrepreneurial dreams. For some students, this program is the reason they continue to come to school.

K-12 Alignment

The contagious enthusiasm generated by this unique learning experience is creating interest in the Brookwood cluster...
schools and our community. Close to $300,000 in awards and grants has been awarded to the Brookwood Entrepreneurship Program (K-12). The implementation of a successful program at the high school level has encouraged the spirit of entrepreneurship to spread to our feeder middle and elementary schools. A K-12 vertical alignment of integrated teaching was developed to focus on age-appropriate business concepts. The intention is to expose the entrepreneurial mindset to all students at a very early age and ultimately groom them for enrollment in the high school program, and beyond.

At the elementary school level, students learn basic entrepreneurial concepts through real-life experiences that are integrated across the curriculum. Through a token economy, students look for opportunities to create jobs throughout the school. After interviewing for potential jobs, students earn weekly salaries for performing their job duties and responsibilities. Students explore their interests in order to plan, market and launch their own small business ventures that will be showcased at a culminating Entrepreneurship Expo. In addition, Brookwood Elementary School now offers an Entrepreneurship Special for third- through fifth-graders.

At the middle school level, through project-based learning, students study entrepreneurship by developing a real business concept to be critiqued by community business leaders who act as venture capitalists. At Alton C. Crews Middle School, every student develops a detailed business plan and pitches his or her idea to local business professionals. Through this process, each student embarks on a road to self-discovery while developing essential social and employability skills needed for their future.

With the successful integration of entrepreneurship and language arts, we look to infuse the entrepreneurial mindset into other disciplines. At the middle school level, sixth- and seventh-grade social studies classes are incorporating entrepreneurial concepts into the social studies curriculum. The aquaponics program taught by science teachers at Brookwood High School is now starting a school-based enterprise to incorporate hands-on entrepreneurial concepts. Moving forward, all Brookwood cluster schools will continue to transform teaching and learning to meet the diverse needs of all students, while developing authentic entrepreneurs.

Remove the Barriers
Entrepreneurial lessons can be utilized in all subject areas. One should not be limited by a label printed on a teaching certificate. True teaching and learning is understanding how all of the pieces of the academic world fit together. Teachers must create innovative, experiential and cross-curricular lessons with real-world applications to challenge students to be problem-solvers in an ever-changing world. Tech

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REFERENCE