"The turnaround in student attitudes was almost instantaneous."

The Pathways Schools Young Entrepreneurship Program

An interview with Kevin Logan, Entrepreneurship Instructor
Cheltenham, Maryland, USA

Kevin Logan and his partner Charlie Grant are nervous.

"Every year we have to out-do ourselves," says Logan. The two entrepreneurship instructors are about to make their annual luncheon presentation to the sponsors of The Pathways Schools Young Entrepreneurship Program (YEP). "Charlie and I have been running this program at The Pathway Schools going on six years. The program has been in existence for over eight years as it started out as a community-based program for those who didn't necessarily play sports but wanted to be part of a team. We usually bring in a guest speaker that the students can identify with in relation to age, background, and who is also a business owner. But this year we decided to let the students speak for themselves."

The stakes are high, as indeed they are each year. The 60+ attendees, which consist of their sponsors and other business people, help to finance this education program for 16-19 year-old students who have exhausted their options with the public school system. These business owners and executives want to help but also want to see a return on the investment they are making.

And the stakes are higher than ever because this year the program got off to a rough start. "People change," says Logan. "When we started this program several years ago, we would present material using a PowerPoint, and students would use pencils and paper. But that approach wasn't working anymore. I could sense the students weren't getting it."

So Logan and Grant asked around. They heard about GoVenture simulations and purchased a copy of GoVenture Micro Business. With GoVenture Micro Business, students role-play as proprietors of a mobile business cart that sells food, jewelry, or electronics.

"The turnaround in student attitudes was almost instantaneous," says Logan. "Suddenly they wanted to be the ones to make decisions, push the button, and see the results. Suddenly we were all debating the logic of business decisions, and it was the students who were driving the conversation with their questions."

"You know," says Logan, "These students arrive in this program with less learning than their peers. For some of them, the only business experience they have is what they see and know from their neighbourhoods. But they really do want to know how to earn money and to make a success of themselves. The GoVenture simulation allows me to expand their business vocabulary. Batteries become inventory. Hot dog buns are subject to spoilage. There is a relationship between price and demand."

"The turnaround in student attitudes was almost instantaneous..."

This high level of engagement means that the students are the ones driving the learning curve. "I started by projecting the simulation on a screen and leading them through a few simulated days of business. Then I got them to start making decisions like setting prices and inventory levels. By the second class, they were all running their own virtual businesses."

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Logan was especially heartened to see his students learning good judgement from the simulations. "It was interesting watching them make hiring decisions in the simulation. Should they hire someone or do all the work themselves? How much should they pay an employee? Is an experienced employee worth more than an inexperienced one? How important is an employee's reliability? They don't really want to hear what I think. They learn better by making the decisions for themselves and seeing the results."

GoVenture simulations provide detailed reports of student performance, though Logan has chosen not to use those reports with these students. "Baby steps," he says. "I go and talk to each of my students individually. The feedback I want is their understanding of the decisions they have made, and the effect those decisions had on their profitability."

And there is an added bonus to this level of student engagement. Logan himself feels reinvigorated with his mission to teach entrepreneurship.

"Entrepreneurship teaches English, math, social studies, science, technology, you name it and entrepreneurship parallels it. It touches every community and makes every person better for getting involved with it."

Back at the sponsor's luncheon, Logan has found two students to make the presentation: a young man from one class with a young woman from another. They don't really know each other, but they both know GoVenture.

"This is tense for them," admits Logan. "The audience is made up of small business owners, bankers, and corporate executives." These are exactly the sort of demanding professionals that would make anyone nervous.

"I think the role-playing in the simulations helps them with their social skills ..."

The YEP students make Logan, Grant, the Program Director, and the other instructors proud by showing poise and respect for each other. "I think the role-playing in the simulations helps them with their social skills," says Grant. "When students are talking about something that interests them, even the shy ones can speak easily."

Like their first class with GoVenture, the Micro Business simulation is projected on a large screen. Only this time the students are the teachers and the members of the audience are the engaged learners.

When they are done, the students are rewarded with enthusiastic applause from a deeply-impressed audience. The possibility of student internships and paid jobs flow from this event. Over lunch, the sponsors discuss additional resources to support the YEP program. They congratulate the YEP staff and the students and talk about offering twice as many classes next year.
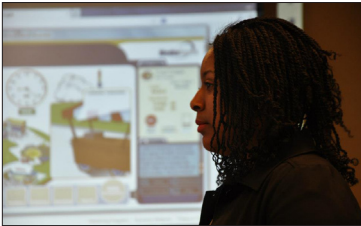
"We are going to do it this way every year from now on," says Logan.

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