

FEATURES

Entrepreneurs harness technology boom to encourage writing

By David Johnson
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First it was the invention of the radio in the 1920s and then it was TV in the 1950s: Each new technology was predicted to doom the book.

Yet, the opposite has happened; the printed word is thriving as never before. Technology has simply altered the way books are created and reach their audience.

Now, a local company is writing the latest chapter in the story of technology and books, using the latest electronics to harness creativity, redefine publishing and get people to read.

Like many technology startups, BoomWriter was born to address a problem. In this case, a former Brookline teacher, Ken Haynes, wanted his children to read and write more. With their fascination with the latest computer wizardry, many of the students did not seem overly excited in ordinary books.

Chris Twyman, owner of the historic G. H. Bent Co. and a town soccer coach, had a daughter in Haynes' class. The two men started discussing ways to use technology to stimulate interest in reading.

The result was BoomWriter, software which allows students to each write a chapter in a novel, which is supervised and edited by the teacher.

"The kids absolutely loved it," Haynes said. As teachers have recommended the program to their peers, the company expanded. "Our biggest success has been by word of mouth," he said.

Today the multi-million-dollar company with 10 employees, including a six-member production team in England, produces educational technology used in 30,000 classrooms in more than 60 countries.

The company has worked with the Milton Public Schools for several years. BoomWriter is used in public schools in Boston, Chicago and Oakland and is also a Google for Education partner.

The basic product, which is free to teachers, is geared towards students in grades two through college. "It's a collaborative tool," Twyman said.

The teacher starts by picking from a number of opening chapters, which have been written by numerous authors, BoomWriter staff and others with a creative bent. Jeff Kinney, author of "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," has written an opening chapter.

Topics include treasure hunts, "Why Nerds Don't Make House Calls," or "Monsters Need Heroes Too," — topics designed to appeal to young imaginations.

The teacher uses the software to set the parameters of the assignment, including how long each



Getting students to write is the business of BoomWriter, a local online firm. Employees Aly Daniel, left, Ken Haynes, Chris Twyman and Ashleigh West stand with a poster encouraging everyone, especially children, to unlock their creativity and try writing.

(Photo by David Johnson)

chapter should be and what vocabulary words, if any, should be included.

Using their computers, the students then create a second chapter suitable to follow the first.

Haynes explained students must read carefully in order to use details already mentioned. The students then read the submissions and anonymously vote on which should be the next chapter.

Usually, teachers want to edit the winning chapters with the class, illustrating good grammar, punctuation and various composition styles.

Haynes said interestingly, the same students are not usually picked as the authors of subsequent chapters. Children tend to favor all sorts of twists and turns in their stories, making it tough for adults to predict which chapters will win each time.

Children enjoy the writing projects. Haynes said his third grade son loves writing chapters. "It's so personal to me," Haynes said. "In the middle of a Saturday morning, my son wanted to write."

Since the chapters will be read and voted on, students try to do their best work. They also take pride

in seeing a finished product with their name on it.

There is also a "gamification" element to BoomWriter. As they proceed with their chapters, students earn points which can be redeemed online. They may purchase characters to illustrate their own BoomWriter homepages. Later points can be used for various props, such as fancy hats, skateboards or pets for their character.

Haynes said the gaming is intended to keep children excited, but not distract from the educational purpose.

Another feature, ProjectWriter, allow teachers to use the software to create their own nonfiction projects as well.

A former science teacher, Haynes said assignments can be created on various subjects. For instance, one project asks students to write a narrative from the point of view of a water molecule, using various terms, such "evaporation," "condensation" and so on.

The assignments are geared toward the themes required by standardized testing.

"Each section focuses on a key understanding," which covers material included on standardized tests.

Another feature, WordWriter, is designed to help with vocabulary.

Teachers or other group leaders can upgrade their use of the website for a fee. This allows them to do more with the stories they create.

However, Milton teachers get the services free since they have offered valuable feedback on the program.

"Our relationship with Milton is very, very good," Haynes said. "We like working with Milton." Not only is Milton more technologically advanced than most area districts, Haynes said, but the teachers appear more motivated than in some towns.

He and Twyman said when they conducted their first BoomWriter training for Milton teachers, they noted the teachers were actually listening and not working on their cell phones. At the end of the training, a number of teachers stayed later to ask questions and examine the product. In other communities, some teachers typically leave before the training is finished.

The website www.boomwriter.com has more information.



A PEEK INSIDE — Construction on the new water tank on Chickatawbut Hill is nearing completion. The tank should be operational by Feb. 1, according to Joe Lynch, director of the Department of Public Works. This work is part of the project to remove the town from the Canton water system.