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Selling Lessons Online Raises Cash and Questions

By WINNIE HU

Between Craigslist and eBay, the Internet is well established as a marketplace where one person's trash is transformed into another's treasure. Now, thousands of teachers are cashing in on a commodity they used to give away, selling lesson plans online for exercises as simple as M&M sorting and as sophisticated as Shakespeare.

While some of this extra money is going to buy books and classroom supplies in a time of tight budgets, the new teacher-entrepreneurs are also spending it on dinners out, mortgage payments, credit card bills, vacation travel and even home renovation, leading some school officials to raise questions over who owns material developed for public school classrooms.

"To the extent that school district resources are used, then I think it's fair to ask whether the district should share in the proceeds," said Robert N. Lowry, deputy director of the New York State Council of School Superintendents.

The marketplace for educational tips and tricks is too new to have generated policies or guidelines in most places. In Fairfax County, Va., officials had been studying the issue when they discovered this fall that a former football coach was selling his playbook and instructional DVDs online for \$197; they investigated but let him keep selling.

A high school English teacher in upstate New York said her bosses barred her from selling plans used in her classroom; she spoke on the condition that she not be named.

Beyond the unresolved legal questions, there are philosophical ones. Joseph McDonald, a professor at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University, said the online selling cheapens what teachers do and undermines efforts to build sites where educators freely exchange ideas and lesson plans.

"Teachers swapping ideas with one another, that's a great thing," he said. "But somebody asking 75 cents for a word puzzle reduces the power of the learning community and is ultimately destructive to the profession."

Teachers like Erica Bohrer, though, see the new demand for lessons as long-awaited recognition of their worth.

"Teaching can be a thankless job," said Ms. Bohrer, 30, who has used the \$650 she earned in the past year to add books to a reading nook in her first-grade classroom at Daniel Street Elementary School on Long Island and to help with mortgage payments. "I put my hard-earned time and effort into creating these things, and I just would like credit."

The humble lesson plan has gained value as focus on testing and individualized instruction has increased. At the same time, the Internet has diminished the isolation of classroom teachers. Just about every imaginable lesson for preschool through college is now up for sale — on individual teachers' blogs as well as commercial sites where buyers can review and grade the material.

Teachers Pay Teachers, one of the largest such sites, with more than 200,000 registered users, has recorded \$600,000 in sales since it was started in 2006 — \$450,000 of that in the past year, said its founder, Paul Edelman, a former New York City teacher. The top seller, a high school English teacher in California, has made \$36,000 in sales.

Another site, We Are Teachers, went online last year with a "knowledge marketplace" that includes lesson plans and online tutoring.

Kelly Gionti, a teacher at the High School for Law, Advocacy and Community Justice in Manhattan, has sold \$2,544 worth of unit plans for "The Catcher in the Rye" and "The Great Gatsby," among others, helping finance trips to Rome and Ireland, as well as class supplies.

Margaret Whisnant, a retired teacher in North Carolina, earns an average of \$750 a month from lessons based on her three decades of teaching middle school classics like "The Outsiders," enough to pay for new kitchen counters and appliances.

"I have wanted to redo my kitchen for 20 years, and I just could not get the funds together," she said. "Well, now I'm going to have to learn to cook."

Lisa Michalek, 40, who taught for six years in Rochester and now works for Aventa Learning, a for-profit online education company, said she spent about five hours a week tweaking old lesson plans and creating new ones, like an earth science curriculum that sells for \$59.95.

"I knew I had good lessons, so I thought, 'Why not see what other people think of it?' " Ms. Michalek said.

After \$31,000 in sales, she has her answer. Alice Coburn, 56, a vocational education teacher in Goshen, N.Y., said she saved two to three hours each time she downloaded Ms. Michalek's PowerPoint presentations instead of starting from scratch. "I hate reinventing the wheel," Ms. Coburn said.

Others find comfort in having a class-tested lesson by a more experienced teacher. Lauren Perreca, 24, used a \$10 lesson on the Vietnam War novel "Fallen Angels" as a reference last year while creating her own lesson for her classes at Weston High School in Connecticut. She also revised her reading questions about "Lord of the Flies" after comparing them with two other lesson plans.

"At first I was self-conscious I had bought something, because what did that say about me?" she said. "But I realized I wasn't just taking it and using it, I was adapting it to fill in the gaps of my knowledge."

Now Ms. Perreca has started selling her own lesson plans, like a 54-page "Macbeth" unit with quizzes and homework assignments (\$10) that she wrote in graduate school. She said she spent \$140 of her \$523 in earnings on cookies and books for her students, and used the rest to splurge on dinners out that she could not otherwise afford.

Her students are incredulous. "They're like, 'Who would want to buy those? They're so boring,'" Ms. Perreca said. "I'm like, 'Hey, I'm making money.' "

In Ms. Bohrer's class the other day in Lindenhurst, N.Y., five children were counting M&Ms while she made sure they digested the lesson before the candy. The exercise, which comes with directions, sorting mats and work sheets, has sold 31 times for \$3 a pop. A variation with Lucky Charms is popular around St. Patrick's Day, she said.

"M&M sorting is not a new concept," said Ms. Bohrer, who has been teaching since 2001. "I made it easier for teachers to do. They just have to click and print."

Daniel Street's principal, Frank Picozzi, said he supported Ms. Bohrer's online business because his students reaped the benefits of her initiative and creativity.

Ms. Bohrer recalled that when she used to share her lesson plans at no charge, a poster of her reading strategies was passed around so many times that it ended up with a teacher in another school who had no idea where it came from.

"I'll share with friends," Ms. Bohrer said, "and if anyone else likes it, I'll tell them where to buy it."

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/us/politics/15health.html?hp>