Start-ups focus on creating tools for teachers

Web entrepreneurs, many of them in Mass., try to ease way for educators

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**Entrepreneur Sarah Cherry Rice described her curriculum-mapping tool for teachers at a recent Waltham event.**

Molly Levitt thought the only thing she would ever be was a teacher. But soon after taking charge of her first classroom in 2010, she became frustrated with the bureaucracy, the paperwork, the “structural things” that kept Levitt from her students.

So she started tinkering, building a website that lets teachers more easily monitor student progress, giving them more time for teaching.

Along the way, Levitt’s effort morphed into a start-up business.

She joins a growing movement of young people — many of them former teachers — using technology to improve education, but from outside the classroom. They bring the wide-eyed enthusiasm they once had for teaching to writing code and designing Web pages.

And like the Cambridge resident, many are starting those businesses in Massachusetts, which has become a hub for education technology start-ups.

“We have investors, we have the educational institutions, and we have this culture of entrepreneurship, so it makes sense that this is happening here,” said Eileen Rudden, cofounder of LearnLaunchX, the first business accelerator program in Boston just for ed-tech companies, which launched in June with seven start-ups.

Massachusetts — long a Petri dish for new thinking in education — has more than 150 fledgling ed-tech companies, including Levitt’s BrightLoop Learning, and many other, more established firms, such as Lexia Learning in Concord, which recently agreed to be purchased by Rosetta Stone.

Most recently some of the biggest names in publishing, including Pearson PLC, McGraw-Hill Cos., and Houghton Mifflin, said they would invest heavily in related businesses or build their own technology operations in Boston.



The start-up activity has been particularly robust. The first gathering of LearnLaunchX’s umbrella organization in Boston drew some 450 people in February, suggesting to Rudden and other organizers that there was a tremendous amount of pent-up energy for making school-related technology products.

And like the teaching profession, these start-ups aren’t drawing people looking to strike it rich with a hot new social media site.

“In the classroom, I would see opportunity all over the place, but there wasn’t enough room, space, or time to see a problem and solve it quickly,” said Levitt, who taught first grade at Bridge Boston Charter School in Dorchester. “I think about our start-up in much the same way I wanted to think about my classroom.”

For Benjamin Levy, who taught middle school science in California, starting an ed-tech business “parallels the choice of becoming a teacher.” The 25-year-old relocated to Massachusetts to attend MIT’s Sloan School of Management, but dropped out to pursue his start-up full time before he was accepted into LearnLaunchX’s inaugural class. He expects to have a leg up on entrepreneurs who haven’t been teachers.

“I know what works in the classroom,” said Levy, whose company, eduCanon Inc., helps teachers convert videos into interactive lessons.

Each business at LearnLaunchX received $18,000 in seed funding, free office space for four months, and access to experts in the field. Rudden, for example, is a seasoned veteran of technology companies, including Lotus Software, and previously was a public school administrator in Chicago.

Still, many of these entrepreneurs face the same barriers to success as when they taught: Try to sell a school district on a new app, and you will likely face a long wait for an answer, or the required funding. School bureaucracies are slow to innovate and short of money.

Sarah Cherry Rice, whose start-up helps teachers navigate curriculum standards, said school districts are “scared to implement new things. People see our product and they are like, ‘Yes, this is what we need.’ But often it’s finding the right person in the district who has the purchasing power to make the decision.”

She should know. In her day job, Cherry Rice is a school administrator in Lawrence, and she understands the reluctance to embrace new technology just for the sake of it.

“At the end of the day,” she said, “you have to show that your product increases student achievement.”

The other reality facing ed-tech companies is that, even today, schools remain woefully low tech; many don’t even have wireless Internet access, let alone the latest tablets.

Indeed, at a recent LearnLaunchX event in Waltham at which 33 start-ups got to showcase their products before a roomful of Massachusetts educators, the teachers’ initial enthusiasm was soon checked by the realities in their classrooms.

“The problem is when schools don’t have computers,” said Lynn Holloman-Pressley, a substitute teacher in Lexington. “Maybe that has to be the first thing that happens.”

Still, many local start-ups hope that by appealing directly to the teachers, they can create a groundswell for their products that school administrators cannot ignore.

“When we tell teachers we can help them with their workload, they get really excited,” said Parul Singh, founder of Gradeable, who developed a technology for grading papers using a smartphone app.

Excitement aside, ed-tech start-ups remain as risky as any other new business, maybe even more so. They attract only a fraction of the billions that venture capitalists spend on other young technology firms, such as those making social media tools or mobile apps for consumers, so it is much harder for them to find enough money to overcome the obstacles particular to their industry.

“Oh, I’m terrified,” said Levitt, who is now working full time on BrightLoop.

But, she said, “I feel like at this point in my life, I’m ready to take that risk.”