

The innovation-focused curriculum in Don Wettrick's Noblesville High School class allows students to dive into projects of serious interest.



NEW CLASS

By Matt Ottinger

Innovation Course Puts Bold Twist on Norm

Stepping into the Innovation and Open-Source Learning class at Noblesville presents an obvious deviation from the traditional high school experience. But that's sort of the point.

Don Wettrick opens this particular class by explaining to his students that he's been contacted by the developer of a new app focused on real-time sports discussion – or more specifically, trash talking. Wettrick discusses the developer's challenge of attracting users and informs his charges they are welcome to help out and offer feedback if they're interested.

But for the most part, they're focused on their own projects. It's a year-round course, and Wettrick begins the adventure by teaching fundamentals of innovation.

"I spend the first seven weeks or so

teaching about project management, how to think for themselves, how to use social media and build professional profiles and associate with people, and deliberately think differently," he relays.

"Our projects are two weeks long – and if they're good, continue beyond that," Wettrick adds. "I'm a big fan of quitting though. If you're on a project and it's not working out, stop. Or some kids will say, 'I started working on this because I thought I was passionate about it, but now I hate it.' After two weeks, you adjust and stop and go on to something else. So for the rest of the course, I'm a project manager."

Wettrick spent 10 years as an English teacher and noticed tendencies in different types of students. It's proven to be an apt illustration of why some previously labelled as "the bad kids" have had success in his course.

"I discovered straight A students were really good at being told what to do," he

points out. "But when I said, 'What do you want to do?', they would ask, 'What are you talking about? That doesn't compute.' I said, 'What are you passionate about?' and they'd say, 'Getting an A.'"

Hardest third

The students' projects must be broken down into a "rule of thirds." This consists of: serving a personal interest, acquiring technical skills and serving others.

"That hardest third is that last one," he tells the students, before they break to focus on individual work. "I know you want to make money, but who else benefits other than you? Make sure that's a part of it."

"Some kids may say, 'I just want to learn to make money in the stock market,' he adds in an interview. "That's cool, but who are you helping other than you? Then you're forced to think, 'Maybe I can have a club or go to an elementary and teach them how to do some basic stock portfolio stuff.'"

Robert Jones (left) and Jack Caroselli reach out to their peers and far beyond through their podcast focused on today's hot topics.



'Solutions Matter'

Two students, seniors Robert Jones and Jack Caroselli, have used the class to create a podcast to reach listeners of all stripes.

"Most of our (listener) demographics are 18- to 24-year-old males," Caroselli quantifies. "Although the women we have are middle-aged."

The duo, both have faced personal hardships, consider themselves unique for their stations in life. Their podcast, titled "Solutions Matter," reflects their libertarian-leaning viewpoints, although they seek interviews with notable policy minds encompassing various perspectives.

"We're trying to not shy away from tough topics or taboo things, but also be professional and show maturity," Caroselli reports.

Earlier in his high school career, Caroselli had been consumed by anxiety and depression, and dropped out of traditional schooling only to find online courses further enhanced his feelings of isolation. He notes that Wettrick's class was an essential building block to getting his life on track again.

"For someone in my shoes two years ago, who couldn't see past tomorrow, the class gave me hope and the confidence that I'm not just destined to be a death waiting to happen," he offers. "It's showed me you can really be something if you want to."

Furthermore, Jones enjoys how the podcast allows him to reach out to thinkers from all walks of life.

"After (graduation), I want to keep the podcast going," he remarks, adding he'll also take some courses through Ivy Tech Community College. "I currently have a marketing internship lined up

in Noblesville, and I want to get my insurance license and sell insurance, and do a couple of other things and be entrepreneurial."

Beyond podcasting, one of the most successful endeavors to come from the class emerged from student Zack Baker. Now studying at the University of California-Berkeley, Baker earned a 2016 TechPoint Mira Award as an entrepreneur Rookie of the Year for his patented app, Passwhiz. The app eliminates the need for paper hall passes in schools.

Other students acquired patents for a transparent solar panel and a children's language development toy.

Real gamification

Another technologically-savvy endeavor blooming as a result of the course is a budding e-gaming team. Wettrick notes Madison Square Garden was sold out recently as gaming fans watched the "League of Legends" finals live on large video monitors. The event had a global viewing that dwarfed American professional sports championships like the World Series and NBA Finals.

"It's my job to prepare them for the future," Wettrick explains. "There's a huge future in gaming. I interviewed a guy the other day who's made \$1.5 million playing 'Counter-Strike.' We bought everything (empty cases, processors, keyboards, headphones, etc.) and the students assembled it. We'll have enough for two teams."

Junior Ryne Haas is spearheading the gaming effort as his class project. He plans to not waste the opportunity.

"I love video games and my brother plays professionally," he says. "(A friend in the class and I) thought it'd be cool to do a hypothetical



Students collaborate with not just each other, but also with some of the top names in entrepreneurship.

pro organization. ... That's now the project for this class.

"We're trying to show proof of concept before we can expand, so we want to secure Noblesville," Haas outlines. "But this idea just came about before winter break; I was working on something completely different

for the first four months (of the class). Since we don't have competition around here yet, we'd focus on online leagues."

According to Wettrick, the potential for Noblesville to embrace gaming could have benefits beyond just entertainment, learning and camaraderie among students.

"There are so many kids that aren't necessarily athletic, but this is their sport, so why not have them look into e-sports?" he ponders. "Statistically speaking, we'll spend a lot of money on football, baseball and basketball, and many schools will never produce a pro athlete. But the chances of producing a pro gamer are way higher. And frankly, there's marketing, development, hosting events; there are 10 universities now that offer full-ride scholarships for gaming."

Beyond the tech talk

Granted, technology plays a major role in much of the coursework, but the class is not only based on coding, app development, podcasts and propagating new tech innovations. In fact, one student's project revolves around learning to quilt and do patchwork with her grandmother.

And Quentin Morris' focus is on a practice reminiscent of Indiana's early settlers on the actual frontier – not the digital one.

"When I started this class, I didn't have any idea what to do," the junior admits. "I decided I wanted to work with my hands. Then I found some woodworking stuff and some old chisels. The first thing I did was a bench, which I gave to (Wettrick)."

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Wettrick's students are laying the foundation to launch an e-gaming team, a thriving business opportunity for those with savvy in this area.

"It's sitting on my back porch," Wettrick interjects.

"I've done some smaller projects and cabinet work," Morris continues. "I really like it and I'm learning to do it more. The woodworking career is hard to make a living in, but if I can, I will. But I'll keep it as a hobby or a way to make extra money."

Projects can truly be about big ideas as well.

"We had a girl (in a previous course) write a local ordinance on light pollution," Wettrick reports, noting the project was covered by WISH-TV. "She worked with local lawmakers and ended up voting down her own policy, because it got so watered down in committee."

He adds that another student worked with a farmer's market in Noblesville.

"She wanted to get people (who are) on food stamps to get a matching program through currency she created here," Wettrick explains. "She laser cut her own currency so people on food stamps would eat healthier, trying to spur the local farmer's market economy and get people on food stamps to eat healthier. That was so freakin' cool."

Projects currently in the works include developing tactile aids for people with high anxiety and stress, self-publishing a children's book and cultivating vegan food recipes.

"The nice thing is we get to try (the recipes)," Wettrick quips.

The producers

Wettrick believes exposure to those who've had success, both locally and beyond, is an important factor. He's taken some of his students on a field trip at the request of Stanford University, which yielded visits with iconic Silicon Valley companies like Google and Facebook, and some smaller start-ups.

High-profile entrepreneurs like Tim Ferriss and Daniel Pink have called in to chat with students. The class also welcomes outside visitors and observers every week. In fact, as our interview concludes, top officials from the Indiana Commission for Higher Education stroll in to observe the course in action and talk with students.

"It's weird. For a while, we were collaborating more with people in other states than in our backyard," Wettrick asserts. "That's changing, and I'm appreciative of that."

He views the course as a weapon against the status quo that has bogged down the American education system.

"There's so much compliance in the course of a day," he notes. "But if you think about school, the point is about learning, not compliance."

Critics, he says, ask how his course helps boost standardized test scores, but Wettrick believes it's essential that students also be made employable.

"No one has hired anybody off of a great ISTEP score," he states.

"I don't want to make it seem like I'm devaluing other classes; I'm not," he clarifies. "Foundational learning is foundational learning. I'm just asking for one period a day to be about learning on their terms."

For him, the main thrust of the course is to change pre-existing attitudes that lead to complacency.

"I want my kids to be running toward the problems," he concludes. "Instead of saying (about a challenging situation), 'Oh, that sucks,' it needs to be seen as an opportunity. I don't want them to be waiting around for the government to create their opportunities or have things handed to them."

"Ninety-five percent of people are consumers and 5% are producers; I want my students to be the producers."

RESOURCES: Don Wettrick and students, Noblesville High School, at www.noblesvilleschools.org and www.theinnovationteacher.com

Wettrick also hosts an innovation-themed podcast called "StartEdUp," available on iTunes and Soundcloud, in which he interviews notable entrepreneurs and policy experts