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NYT on Education and the Sharing Economy

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Words like “market” and “competition” or — worst of all — “profit” are considered dirty words in some circles, particularly in education. Perhaps that’s why some people prefer the more anodyne (if less accurate) term “sharing economy” to describe how online platforms and apps are enabling people to monetize resources they own by connecting them directly with potential buyers.

Uber and Lyft empower people to earn money from driving their own car. Airbnb enables people to rent out their spare bedroom. And as the New York Times explains, the website TeachersPayTeachers is a virtual marketplace where teachers can buy and sell lesson plans:

...[W]hen Ms. Randazzo heard about TeachersPayTeachers.com... she was curious to find out whether the materials she had created for her own students would appeal to other educators.

A couple of years ago, she started posting items, priced at around \$1, on the site. Her “Whose Cell Phone Is This?” fictional character work sheet has now sold more than 4,000 copies.

“For a buck, a teacher has a really good tool that she can use with any work of literature,” Ms. Randazzo said in a phone interview last week. “Kids love it because it’s fun. But it’s also rigorous because they have to support their characterizations with evidence.”

She clearly has a knack for understanding the kinds of classroom aids that other teachers are looking for. One of her best-selling items is a full-year collection of high school grammar, vocabulary and literature exercises. It has generated sales on TeachersPayTeachers of about \$100,000.

Teachers often spend hours preparing classroom lesson plans to reinforce the material students are required to learn, and many share their best materials with colleagues. Founded in 2006, TeachersPayTeachers speeds up this lesson-plan prep work by monetizing exchanges between teachers and enabling them to make faster connections with farther-flung colleagues.

As some on the site develop sizable and devoted audiences, TeachersPayTeachers.com is fostering the growth of a hybrid profession: teacher-entrepreneur. The phenomenon has even spawned its own neologism: teacherpreneur.

To date, Teacher Synergy, the company behind the site, has paid about \$175 million to its teacher-authors, says Adam Freed, the company's chief executive. The site takes a 15 percent commission on most sales.

TeachersPayTeachers rewards creative teachers with more income and gives them a financial incentive to produce more. It also reduces the amount of time and effort other teachers must expend to create or acquire great lesson plans. And with better lesson plans proliferating, children benefit the most.

Teachers tend to be less enthusiastic about market-based reforms to education, but perhaps some experience with the "sharing economy" will show them how the best teachers stand to benefit greatly from Uber-ized education.

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