

REAL: Entrepreneurship Education in Rural North Carolina, U.S.¹

(by Brian Dabson, U.S.)

Description of the approach (aims, delivery, budget etc)

REAL – Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning – was first conceived in the mid-1970s as a response to rural youth leaving their communities due to declining job opportunities, while at the same time being ill-prepared to compete for good jobs in urban areas. Co-founder Dr. Jonathan Sher saw the need for youth to become job creators, not just job seekers, and developed the idea of school-based community development corporations. School students identified opportunities and unmet needs in their communities and set about creating businesses to serve these markets. Over the years, REAL has expanded beyond high schools to working with younger children from kindergarten onwards, and with adults in community colleges and community-based organizations. There are REAL member organizations in 10 states as well as Thailand and Norway. In 2004 REAL became part of CFED, a national non-profit organization dedicated to asset building and economic opportunity in poor communities.

According to CFED's website, the REAL program is taught in 43 states and countries, and 290 high-school, 151 post-secondary, 92 community-based and on-line, and 420 elementary and middle school facilitators use REAL curricula. Each year, REAL provides hands-on entrepreneurship education to over 10.000 students of all ages, and 1.668 instructors have been trained in the REAL program.

The most extensive implementation of REAL is in North Carolina. This is a very diverse state with, on the one hand, successful cities, world class universities, and research parks, and on the other, large regions of high rural poverty. Since North Carolina REAL began in 1985, over 10.000 entrepreneurs have received training and more than 392 high school, post-secondary, and community-based educators and administrators have participated in professional development seminars and week-long institutes. In addition, more than 550 entrepreneurs, bankers, accountants, and other professionals have provided assistance to REAL Entrepreneur-ship participants and graduates through community support teams. The current year's programs activities extend to all of North Carolina's 85 rural counties.

In high schools, REAL Entrepreneurship is offered as an elective course within business or marketing programs, in which students can assess their entrepreneurial capabilities, analyze their communities, and research and plan enterprises of their choice, which they then may open, operate and own. In community colleges and universities, REAL provides training and helps to expand and strengthen existing programs through integration of REAL curricula. REAL also provides 14-16 week courses for aspiring and new entrepreneurs. Other programs include a Spanish REAL, a program for younger children, school-based enterprise workshops (for example, in-school shops), youth camps, and on-line courses.

Why the approach is relevant to East Germany?

One of the more effective ways to change the entrepreneurial culture of a community is to expose young people to the possibilities of entrepreneurship. This is one of the key components of campaigns like Mecklenburg-Vorpommern's *Einfach Anfangen*. REAL is a tried and tested model for instilling entrepreneurial attitudes within the formal education system and for maintaining momentum beyond high profile marketing campaigns.

¹ Source: Discussion Paper "Entrepreneurship in the Districts Uckermark (Brandenburg) and Parchim (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania)", in: *OECD LEED Local Entrepreneurship Series*, October 2006.

Reasons for the success of the approach

REAL was created as a response to a critical problem that faces rural communities across the world – the migration of rural young people to the cities in search of economic opportunity. The essence of REAL is that it based on experiential learning – the cycle of experience, reflection, expansion, and application. Entrepreneurship does not lend itself to traditional teaching and learning methods and REAL encourages students to get directly involved rather than reading about it. The curricula, whether for children, youth, or adults, is based on six factors: collaboration between students and instructors, the role of instructor as facilitator and coach, the achievement by students of core competencies, an emphasis on peer teaching and cooperative learning, direct engagement with the local community, and encouragement of creativity.

The obstacles that were faced and the quality of the response taken

After 30 years of development and implementation, REAL has still not been implemented at scale outside North Carolina and Georgia. As mentioned earlier, there are REAL member organizations in ten states but their activities tend to be limited in scope and scale. Although there has been significant interest over the years in entrepreneurship education – which shows strong signs of increasing across rural America – there are some major obstacles to widespread adoption. The two main obstacles are resources and curriculum constraints. Entrepreneurship education can be expensive to introduce and maintain and although there is evidence of positive educational achievement and student motivation outcomes, there has been little interest by public or philanthropic organizations in providing the necessary resources. The second obstacle is the increasing emphasis on test-based teaching in the United States that is leaving less room for non-core activities within the school system.

Considerations for adoption of this type of approach in East Germany

Effective and widely-available entrepreneurship education is an essential component of creating an entrepreneurial culture. The U.S. experience has shown that there is strong support among some teachers and those interested in economic and community development, but there has been substantial resistance from educators, education administrators and policymakers to an approach that requires a different pedagogy, additional resources, and which has still to be fully evaluated for impact on educational outcomes. For the model to work in rural areas in East Germany there will need to be a close cooperation between educational and economic development interests to create an approach that will be effective in better preparing young people and in creating increased economic options in their rural communities.

Contact details and website for further information

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