

# Teacher takes the plunge into world of online learning

Article inspires switch from classroom to development on new frontier

AS PEOPLE start thinking about making career moves in 2017, we hear from a teacher who discovered she had unrecognised entrepreneurial talents.

**Name:** Ann Attridge.

**Age:** 50+.

**What is your business called?** Klik2learn.

**Where is it based?** Glasgow.

**What does it produce, what services does it offer?** We developed the first fully digital SQA course for non-native speakers of English that can be accessed on smartphones, tablets and laptops. The course works as a self-study consumer option but an enterprise version can also be used with a set of integrated digital tools. This allows organisations to provide a complete qualification remotely using Klik2learn's e-assessment software.

**To whom does it sell?** Further education colleges, councils and schools, along with individual learners of English in the UK and overseas. Renfrew and Argyll and Bute councils use the software to help Syrian refugees to learn English.

**What is its turnover?** £120,000.

**How many employees?** Six.

**When was it formed?** 2011.

**Why did you take the plunge?**

I was a teacher, experimenting with technology in school whenever possible, but felt the chances of a digital revolution in education were slim. One day the University of Strathclyde Alumni magazine arrived in the post and an article entitled Do you Have a Business Idea? caught my eye. The Royal Society of Edinburgh was looking for applicants for an enterprise award. I entered, got to the final and that's how the journey started. That enabled me to give up my job, develop my ideas and test various business models.

I'd been involved in English language teaching in France, Cambridge and Aberdeen, so I



**IN AT THE DEEP END:** Ann Attridge entered an enterprise competition which led her to give up her job and develop her ideas.

## SME Focus

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knew the market well. I also knew that the major publishers were still working out what exactly to do with the digital revolution. It seemed an ideal time to do something digital that bridged the gap between formal classroom learning and random online learning.

I wrote the course from the ground up, including a grammar guide, as a digital product and fortunately found a great creative and development team to bring the whole thing to life. We don't depend on any third-party software, apart from an online dictionary that we've integrated. It's been a long, hard road – more than three years now, as we've

recently re-programmed the course to enable mobile delivery.

**What were you doing before you took the plunge?**

Teaching English at Portree High School on the Isle of Skye.

**How did you raise the start-up funding?**

The RSE Fellowship support was followed by seed funding from the Gabriel Syndicate and the Scottish Investment Bank via Strathclyde University Incubator. It's a hard road for most start-ups in the technology sector. You can burn money fast while you're developing a product.

We were also fortunate to win

two awards under the Innovate UK programme totalling £150,000, which enabled us to take things forward.

**What was your biggest break?**

I met our technical adviser Robert Rennie almost from day one of the RSE Fellowship. He still provides incredible support, hands-on programming and troubleshooting. Securing Professor Nick Kuensberg as our chairman and business mentor was another coup. His experience, contacts and financial support have been invaluable.

In operational terms, negotiating a deal with a major distributor in the Middle East comes high on the list.

Getting our first students through to an SQA qualification after only three months of using our software was a major step forward and led to councils contacting us about offering our services to Syrian refugees.

**What was your worst moment?**

Too numerous to mention. Our first foray overseas on a trade mission to India two years ago ranks quite highly as a learning

experience. It was then that the truth of the predictions about a lead time of two to three years for emerging markets hit home.

**What do you most enjoy about running the business?**

There's a lot of satisfaction in just having the freedom to be creative, try out ideas and build a team of people to share the journey with you. No two days are the same so, although I'm putting in far more hours than I would in paid employment, I enjoy the unpredictability and the challenges of making things happen.

**What do you least enjoy?**

The endless form filling that accompanies fundraising. At the startup stage, a disproportionate amount of time has to go on administration and fundraising. When the team's small, you inevitably end up doing a range of things that divert attention from the core business.

**What are your ambitions for the firm?**

I aim to double the size of the team as soon as possible to allow us to

grow. I know that there are more deals in the pipeline, more markets to enter and more products being developed. We're working on an exciting collaboration project with Strathclyde University, which will take us into a new market for speech analytics growing at 35 per cent a year. We already have some key industry players involved in that, including KPMG and Tata.

**What are your five top priorities?**

Making sales, growing the team, using our technology to develop more products, raising finance for growth and driving value into the company towards an exit strategy.

**What could the Westminster and/or Scottish governments do that would help?**

There's a lot of support available in Scotland for start-ups but that in itself can be bewildering – navigating your way round all the schemes and organisations that exist. A more co-ordinated approach would greatly reduce the time spent on finding out about what support is relevant. Each scheme has its own administrative requirements, so you can find yourself re-writing similar information time and time again.

There's a role for governments to examine the reasons why the failure rate is so high in the start-up community. There appears to be no real communication channel between government and the start-up community. There's lots of rhetoric about how important SMEs are to the economy and how important innovation and export is, but it doesn't always trickle down to the entrepreneurial sharp end of making that happen.

From a national perspective, more tax breaks on National Insurance contributions for micro companies would be a big incentive to taking on more staff.

**What was the most valuable lesson that you learned?**

The importance of getting a proper insight into what your customer really wants or doesn't want before you develop your product or launch into telling them about how wonderful it is. Nothing is more valuable than seeing your products from their point of view.

Conversations with real potential customers are always worthwhile. With hindsight, I would have set aside a much larger budget for marketing early on and given as much thought to marketing strategy as to product development.

**How do you relax?**

When I get a few moments, I escape to the gym, try to stay on a horse during riding lessons and disappear into the hills for the odd week of skiing.