

PassTheNotes links technology, education

By Nancy Dahlberg
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CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Frank Coletto, right, and his team, Marisa Zeppieri-Caruana, Ibram Gaston, and Sean McClure, left, won third place in the FIU Track of the Business Plan Challenge for their tech company PassThe Notes. The group is photographed near FIU's business school.

While studying at Florida International University, Frankie Coletto noticed how students seemed disconnected, even though they often had to work in groups. He wondered how he could leverage his interest in technology to create a virtual desk with access to tools students could relate to and where all students could connect?

Then one day at FIU's entrepreneurship center, Coletto met Ibram Gaston. They instantly clicked, sharing a passion for the concept.

"We built our platform from the students' perspective — we went to them to ask how can we help you learn? And poof, PassTheNotes," says Gaston.

PassTheNotes.com, which won third place in the Business Plan Challenge FIU Track, is a platform for schools to license that gives every student a

virtual desk to learn through video, notes, documents, learning games, chat and pictures, and then ties in people to collaborate with. It takes the best way each individual can learn and shares that with the world, explains Coletto. Revenue streams would come from licenses to schools based on the number of students and revenues from brands that will be shared with the schools.

"PassTheNotes is particularly interesting because it is in the education market and focused on developing a new student interface. Education is attracting a lot of interest from VCs for the first time in years and user interface development is a key area of interest," says Robert H. Hacker, a Business Plan Challenge judge.

Setting it apart

While there are other platforms that schools use on the market, the team says a key differentiator in the PassTheNotes model is the virtual desk. Others are really just file systems, says Coletto, founder and chief executive of the company.

Also, PassTheNotes brings in brands to support the platform itself. "We've pitched to brands and they are all about it. If the brands can make up some of the costs for the schools, the schools are excited, too," says Coletto, who earned his bachelor's in business administration from FIU.

Coletto, who is also a freelance video producer, explains that perhaps a brand could sponsor an

app for a calculator or an algebra lesson. It's integrated into the experience and would not be intrusive.

Gaston, PassTheNotes' client manager who also works for the Miami Heat, said these brands could potentially sponsor rewards.

For example, Gaston says, "You have students that may not relate to Shakespeare. We said what do they all love as of right now, and that's products like Nike. ... If I am a 15 year old and I can get a pair of Nikes for straight A's, I am all for it. We're not there just yet, but we envision this."

The team, which also includes Sean McClure, lead designer, and Marisa Zeppieri-Caruana, media relations, has signed up two schools so far — Greater Miami Adventist Academy in Miami, signed up earlier this year, and just recently, Arthur I. Meyer Jewish Academy in West Palm Beach.

Luis Cortes, principal at GMAA with 400 students K-12, says he was immediately attracted to how the teachers can easily use video as a teaching tool. "If we can motivate our students to do better than they have been doing by using technology that is attractive to them, I'm all for it. We're past two-dimensional teaching. It's all three-dimensional now."

Giving feedback

As the first school, all the GMAA teachers have accounts and have been giving feedback to the PassTheNotes team, which creates the "themes" or apps that the teachers request. It's still in its testing phase, but Cortes says if it does work the way his school expects it will work, it will be very attractive to many schools.

"The teachers are all for it, and the young men behind the company are very passionate and always available," Cortes said.

As the platform grows and spreads to more schools, teachers or even the students themselves could create apps to share with the world, sharing in the revenue, too. Schools could also opt to keep their network closed if they wish.

For these entrepreneurs, the future is wide open. Says Coletto: "Our goal is to create an education operating system. We're trying to create the Windows for education."

Gaston adds that he hopes that the company will have a role in raising graduation rates: "We want PassTheNotes to make a difference."

So far, PassTheNotes has mainly been powered by the team's passion — and about \$40,000 in loans from friends and family — but is seeking angel investors with industry expertise to help take it to the next level.

"We want students to collaborate worldwide and our platform makes that possible," Gaston said. "We just need a little help, a little backing, to make all these possibilities happen."