

Entrepreneurship – an inherent ability, or a subject that can be taught?

At the recent ADM-HEA organised conference on 'Effective Creative practice' many questions were raised on how Art, Design and Media should be taught and how this can be done most successfully. However, one question raised by two teaching fellows from 'The Arts Institute at Bournemouth' (A.I.B) remained in my mind long after the event had finished – should entrepreneurship be an integral part of the curriculum?

Sarah St.George and Zuleika Beaven, from A.I.B have taught entrepreneurship as a creative subject successfully for a number of years and joined us to speak of their findings, successes and failures. Immediately involving their audience, we were asked to answer, "What characteristics define an artist or designer". From the array of answers put forward the expected responses such as problem solving abilities, a questioning mind, creativity and risk taking were offered – to which the room cordially agreed. Following these responses we were then asked, "What characteristics define an entrepreneur?" As expected the responses weren't far away from the previous question, and consequently making their first point very well – the Art, Design Media sector is inherently entrepreneurial. Summarising the fact beautifully, Sarah quoted from Dr. David Rae, Director of Enterprise Development at The Derbyshire Business School by saying that entrepreneurs "act creatively to do new things". Exactly what a successful artist or designer strives to do.

If it were as simple as this however, we would be inundated with entrepreneurs. So why doesn't every individual with these skills attempt start-ups and schemes based on their transferable talents. St.George and Beaven would argue that it is because they have not been taught to do so, and do not realise the possibilities that lie before them. At A.I.B they take a perspective to teaching business and entrepreneurship within their design course that will not scare off or daunt their pupils. Instead of a strict 'Business School' approach where a broad business knowledge base is built, they're more interested in making the learning specific to their pupils and their needs.

Students are encouraged to engage with industry, critique themselves, produce a business plan for an existing product and most importantly be allowed to fail. With subject specific teaching on areas that they will be subjected on a daily basis when trying to run an event or company a lot of the less relevant, more intimidating information isn't necessarily filtered out, but not made the priority. Real environments are also crucial to their teaching model, letting students go into companies and organisations to get an insight into how every day logistics are handled in other companies – which inevitably also supports student employability at the end of their course.

There's no doubt in my mind that the motives of these courses are valid, and that it is admirable to be addressing what is obviously a very important part of an artists or designers education that is frequently overlooked. However, from the opinion of a young designer having set up a small creative business, I fear for the future of creative events and projects if it is believed that we can teach an individual to be entrepreneurial.

Entrepreneurship in its very essence is something embedded in a certain type of person. Someone that is outgoing, inspirational and motivated with an astute grasp of business. I don't believe that these skills are traditionally teachable. It's admirable that the A.I.B are making headway into what is a neglected area of education, but if a student signs up to their course believing that they are going to walk away a fully fledged, risk-taking, dynamic entrepreneurs then there is most definitely a problem. In my eyes their course should be targeting students who already have a base of these skills, or show the potential to enhance said skills. There is most definitely a place for making students within the ADM sector aware of the talents they possess – but I don't think this can be seen as teaching, but more as making students more aware of how their abilities can be applied to a real-world environment.

A case study mentioned in the talk illustrates this perfectly. One of the more successful projects completed by one of the A.I.B's students saw a large-scale event put on in the centre of town. To stage a successful event many things need to be taken into account including marketing, costs, audience, and the logistics of physically making an idea reality. This is where the course at A.I.B excels. By making the student aware of local venues, companies and individuals to get in touch with, suddenly a daunting amount of work becomes achievable. What cannot be taught however is the motivation as a student to then pick up the phone, arrange meetings, win sponsorship and have the drive and desire to bring all these different elements together – this takes a naturally entrepreneurial individual.

My biggest worry is that courses similar to this undoubtedly successful one at A.I.B will crop up everywhere, creating a pool of homogenised 'entrepreneurs'. The last thing we need to encourage young creatives to do is set up businesses and live projects just for the sake of setting them up, without any real desire or belief in their product or service. A successful start-up is one that is well conceived, thorough and led by a dedicated, inspirational individual – not something that can follow a set formula that is taught in an educational institute. In the current climate we must be incredibly careful what we produce – it is no ethically sound to back unnecessary products and services with no longevity.

The merits of the course at A.I.B are clear – to give students the support and encouragement needed to fulfil their business potential when they leave university. However, if these courses start to believe they can teach young creatives to be entrepreneurial, I don't hold out hope for the long-term future of either the new businesses set up, or the courses used facilitate them.