

Teaching creativity to the next generation of entrepreneurs is not as wacky as it sounds

By Hilary Wilce Thursday, 9 October 2008

¹ It used to be so simple. You did your MBA and a glittering *career* in banking or consultancy beckoned. Not any more. All those old financial certainties have suddenly vanished, and today an exciting and successful future is much more likely to depend on your ability to *carve out* your own path.

² But can an MBA help you do this? Is it possible to teach creativity and entrepreneurship as easily as you can teach accounting and project management?

³ Plenty of imaginative entrepreneurs offer living *proof* that an MBA can set you off *in a different direction*. And increasingly business schools are working hard at getting their students' creative juices flowing. At Lancaster University Management School, for example, Sabine Junginger, a visiting expert in product design management, has given MBA students a masterclass in creativity and innovation.

⁴ People make and design things all the time, she points out, whether it is a business plan or a recipe from

what is in the fridge. 'But people often don't learn to engage with their creativity,' says Junginger. 'I try to encourage them to do this by making them more aware of how they think,' she says. Students in her recent class were given a mound of objects – from kitchen equipment through to staplers and hammers – and asked to sort it out, thinking about their category judgments as they did so.

⁵ At Bristol Business School students are encouraged to develop their indigenous entrepreneurial spirit, reflecting the high level of business creativity in the region. 'A lot more students now want to start their own business rather than work for someone else,' says Nicholas O'Regan, professor of strategy, entrepreneurship and innovation. 'You need some innate entrepreneurial ability, but when you are aware of your mindset you can become much more entrepreneurial and competitive.'

⁶ Jonathan Wareham, director of research at Esade Business School is using techniques from design

thinking and creative play in association with the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. For example, he says, if someone gives you 30 white circles and tells you to make as different designs as possible, you quickly draw a clock and bike wheel and a smiley face. 'But then your eyes glaze over and you start worrying about, "Are we allowed to combine things? Can I count a happy face and a sad face, as two separate items, or are they in the same category?" Your mind starts raising all sorts of *questions* about rules and categories and limits.'

⁷ You can think creatively about everything, he says: how to design a mobile phone; how to donate money to the Red Cross; how to do medicine delivery in sub-Saharan Africa.

⁸ MBA students often arrive with set views about themselves. 'A lot of people in finance and accounting don't see themselves as creative while people in sales and marketing tend to think they are,' says Tudor Rickards, professor of creativity ➡

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➡ and organisational change, at Manchester Business School. 'It's important that we help people to push out the limits on their thinking. In fact, unless we can do this, we are going to be in trouble as business educators.' He also says creativity is moving away from product innovation towards creative leadership and social innovation.

⁹ 'Entrepreneurship and creativity and innovation are killed not born,' says Shailendra Vyakarnam, of Judge Business School, in Cambridge. 'We all have it in us – it is just that society, schools, family, institutions and employers gradually kill it off.' He says that much of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation are skills-based – and everyone can learn skills when they find self-confidence and inspiration in role models.

¹⁰ A Judge student recently commercialized the research he had done for his PhD in engineering and developed a micro-antenna after being exposed to teaching about entrepreneurship and hearing inspirational stories from people who had created their own businesses. 'His father is a school teacher and he had never been exposed to the ideas of entrepreneurship before,' says Vyakarnam. 'It was there under the surface and the role of the entrepreneurship education experience was to open his mind to what is possible.'

'My MBA brought out what was inside me'

Jo Morey, 29, is planning to open Haute Chocolat, a combined shop and café

¹¹ 'I had a degree in English and French and four-and-a-half years working as a headhunter when I started my MBA. I wanted to do it to develop my entrepreneurial experience, with a view to starting my own business.

¹² Ashridge Business School seemed to focus on developing the whole person, and gave me great tools to enhance my skills and bring out what was inside me.

¹³ I had a rough idea about my business plan, but I used different tools and frameworks. I did market research and used focus groups, and it was a question of making all the pieces fit together.

¹⁴ My idea is to set up combined chocolate cafés and boutiques, known as Haute Chocolat. These will be aimed at affluent women and be the sort of place you go for a real treat.

¹⁵ I expect to set up about three or four in the UK and then go international. My first one will be in

Brighton, next year. I have already been short-listed for the Girls Make Your Mark award, run by the website handbag.com.'

'Our minds went racing at the possibilities'

Sarah Wightman runs Revel Outdoors, a cycle shop based in Newmarket, Suffolk, with her husband Jamie

¹⁶ 'I did my MBA at the Judge Business School at Cambridge University. I had done engineering product management for seven years, but I'd decided that I wanted a change of sector. So after I finished the MBA, I went to Citigroup, joining their MBA graduate programme. Then I realised it wasn't what I wanted to be doing. But I thought that to start a business you needed a big, new idea and I didn't have one.

¹⁷ Then it started to dawn on me that you didn't have to have that; you could enter a traditional business and run it more creatively. So my husband and I – we met on the MBA – looked at this great website, businessesforsale.com, and our minds went racing at the possibilities.

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¹⁸ We now run a cycle shop in Newmarket, called Revel Outdoors, and we are developing its website.

¹⁹ The MBA, more than anything, gave us both the confidence to know that we were considering all the necessary areas. We had learned about marketing, finance and

accounting, and done quite a lot on entrepreneurship and creativity. We had particularly looked at questions such as, “what is entrepreneurship?” and “how it can be introduced into any business?”

²⁰ I’m not sure that you can turn someone into an entrepreneur, but

you can certainly give them more tools, or a taste of it. We’re running a traditional business but we are definitely more creative in the way we are doing things and are looking at new methods for stock control and new point-of-sale systems.’ ■