

How To Make an Entrepreneur Out of a Towel:
Teaching Creative Process Management in the Academy and in Industry
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You cannot make a chicken out of a towel. Obviously—they are two fundamentally different things. It would never even occur to most people to try. And yet, thanks to a dull night in a freshman dorm, the authors of this essay, with a few deft twists, can do just that. At least, we can shape a towel into a convincing imitation of a chicken. It is a trick that never fails to entertain at parties. We also find it a useful illustration of the essence of creative, entrepreneurial thought patterns. Entrepreneurs and Artists, as “creative personalities,” share a common trait—they both create something of value out of disparate parts.

Both “creativity” and “entrepreneurship” are popular buzzwords in American culture at the moment, and much on the public mind—from the media to corporate boardrooms to the halls of post-secondary education. Reed Hundt, in the online magazine *The American*, ties the latter right to core cultural values: “In American culture, entrepreneurship stems directly from a belief in the virtue of individual liberty” (par. 67). The National Commission on Entrepreneurship positions entrepreneurs at the center of the country’s hopes for prosperity in the post-millennial global market, generating “concrete benefits for our national bottom line” (1), citing job creation, economic growth and wealth investment, and positioning in the world economy as examples. Research on the role of creativity in business has increased steadily since the 1980s; no wonder, since it seems to be a key element in recognizing and exploiting opportunity. In recent memory, the dot-com era was a boom time for the combined use of imagination and technology, though the subsequent bust indicates that, for many of those, people were increasingly entrepreneurial but not necessarily better at business. More recently, traditional “backbone” institutions such as

banking and insurance tried to be more creative and entrepreneurial. (Of course, one can easily argue that this brand of creativity coupled with regulatory permissiveness led to the credit default swaps and other approaches that have caused the current institutional breakdown.)

As a society, we value creativity, particularly if it has practical application for technology, commerce, efficiency, or entertainment. As a consequence, the topic continually increases in importance in institutions aimed at preparing people to contribute to society—post-secondary education and continuing professional education in particular. And it is an increasing source of anxiety for many individuals who do not feel that they have the necessary traits. We may hear it from a student across the desk, a friend sighing over coffee, a stranger complaining on a cell phone on the train—people frustrated by their own perceived inability to innovate, or to generate and use novel ideas in their daily activities. More troubling, they tend to view creativity as a gift of nature that you either have or you do not; one is born an artist or an accountant, and never the twain shall meet. This creates a real problem for adult educators, as a key part of our function is to equip the individual learner with the tools they need to sustain themselves in the marketplace. Innovative thinking and risk-taking are a large part of what defines the Creative character. But can creativity *be* taught? Or only nurtured in those who have a native spark, while the linear thinkers muddle along as best they can? Neither a learner nor an educator can make much progress in developing a trait that both doubt the learner possesses. Universities and businesses face the same persistent question approaching various applications of adult education: How do we teach creativity? How do educators and trainers foster these traits in their students?

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the definition of *creativity* itself. Cognition scholar Thomas Ward suggests that re-defining the term is central to overcoming the “hang-ups” that prevent individuals from finding and using inspiration. Ward describes creative cognition—

thinking that is innovative and problem solving—as an inherent part of human mental activity and “creative ideas as being the natural result of applying basic mental operations to existing knowledge structures” (Ward 2004, 173). Taken at face value, Ward’s claim makes the process of inventing new and novel concepts sound like a simple instinctive behavior. However, his ongoing research on creativity and entrepreneurship reveals that “people’s attempts at creativity often reveal unnecessarily limited thinking,” which must be overcome for inspired ideas and new practices to emerge.

What we would like to suggest here is that there is a practical methodology for helping learners in both the college classroom and the corporate training seminar, beginning with an understanding of creativity as a cognitive act in which humans naturally engage. With that in mind, we wish to suggest that the theatre is a particularly fruitful place to look for inspiration for both, as a model of creative cognition in action. Modern management consulting has already begun nosing at the edge of this field with what it terms “arts-based learning,” using role-playing and the like to enhance sales or customer relations technique (Daum 53). But it is possible, and perhaps even necessary, to expand the territory to which practical training in creative cognition is applied with adult learners. We want them to have what the best and most fruitful artists and entrepreneurs have—a life of holistically integrated work and play, where innovation and problem-solving are part of their everyday experience of the world. And we want to help them equip themselves with the necessary tools to “bring value”—a sense of relative worth, merit, or importance of material or metaphysical character—to themselves and others that will sustain them financially and spiritually.

In truth, most of the individuals with whom we deal are already very creative. The challenge in today’s business and university environments is not that people cannot be creative.

They are consistently creative at finding ways to avoid work, play politics, and stay employed or enrolled while delivering mediocre performance! It is a matter of helping them to engage creative cognition in situations where they are blocked by limited thinking. In essence, we want them to think like entrepreneurs and artists, turning their hard-wired problem-solving skills away from avoidance tactics and towards more productive avenues. Moreover, the same methodological framework is appropriate for diverse situations because it relies on an understanding of entrepreneurship that both embraces and subsumes the standard, capitalist definition. In their work on reviving the academy, centering on what they term “intellectual entrepreneurship,” Richard Cherwitz and Gary Beckman define entrepreneurship as “a process of cultural innovation. At a more profound level, entrepreneurship is an attitude for engaging the world” (16). In that sense, the free exchange of ideas is as much a marketplace as Wall Street or the grand bazaar. Innovation—artistic, cultural, economic, and so on—emerges from an interplay of ideas and experimentation undertaken with an overarching goal in mind: to create something of value for oneself and others, and to disseminate it successfully in the public sphere.

The basic problem that can disrupt innovative thinking is cognitive in nature: Ward describes it as a function of the way human knowledge is stored and recalled in our encounters with the world. In each experience, we take in useful information, look for patterns, develop a bank of effective/ineffective responses to stimulus. We rely on this stored data to assist us in subsequent situations. These banks of extant knowledge, while necessary to help perpetuate an individual’s survival in the world, can also prevent the emergence of novel responses—effectively blocking creative thinking and innovation—by preventing perception of new potential solutions to problems that seem familiar. Even if the existing solution no longer works like it should, one’s accustomed reliance on it creates a constraint to the discovery of new options.

What was once a bridge, according to Ward, becomes a fence. In cognitive studies, it is a paradox: they perceive “creative products as resulting from the application of mental operations to stored information” (Ward 175) and yet familiarity with that same information can prevent individuals from noting new details or initiating novel responses to it. This, not a lack of innate talent, is what the learner must combat if she or he wants to increase their own creative potential: the inertia of their existing knowledge structures.

For academia, much of our pedagogy focuses on content or theory; in business, training addresses product: creating it, selling it, moving it around. The pedagogical model we outline here, which expands on the work begun with arts-based learning, focuses on Process, and emerges from principles connected to those addressed in research on creative cognition. Process is the most applicable technique in creative, entrepreneurial thinking, in business and in higher education. Learners benefit from models that privilege process (to which theory and content can be applied). While they may or may not have the “spark” that gives a natural inclination towards novel ways of looking at the world, all can be taught cognitive patterns that encourage the following behaviors:

1. Identify where creativity is required and beneficial
2. Facilitate the expanding of creative thought (Think environment, structure and stimulation)
3. Have an editing process – Not all creative thought is particularly useful
4. Apply and execute and integrate creative ideas with merit.

Productive artists and entrepreneurs execute this process many times over, with each new project. Their efforts may succeed in some instances, and fail in others. In either case, they accept the risks associated with the project at hand, learning from the experiences of previous projects and moving forward. They have developed the ability to use techniques that, according to Shalley and Perry-Smith: “are aimed at breaking mental sets in that they divert us from

accepting whatever ideas come quickly to us and make us develop and consider other more unusual ideas” (27). They have, in their work on group creative cognition, have identified team situations as potentially advantageous for expanding and developing the “improvisation, flexibility, and imagination” (25) that form the core of creative cognition.

This is where the theatre can provide some illumination. First, it is an inherently entrepreneurial venture: the focus of the project for everyone in the group, seamstress to usher, is to deliver an appealing product to market, draw consumers to experience it, and leave them both satisfied and wanting more. (This is true whether or not any currency exchange is involved.)

Daum describes the corollary this way:

The business start-up process has much in common with arts production, particularly the performance process. In both cases an idea is formed and must be researched in detail. The artist/entrepreneur must extrapolate and explore all the possibilities that can stem from the original idea. Once the idea is developed and articulated, the artist/entrepreneur must recruit a team of helpers to mold the idea into a physical reality. The execution process must be done with extreme frugality and efficiency, since both artists and start-up entrepreneurs typically begin with limited resources. This makes philosophical alignment and effective internal communication critical in the transformation of vision to creation. A shared culture and vocabulary plays a big part in the success of the endeavor. (56)

If more business people could be brought to see how proficient theatre artists are at completing multiple projects in a single year, and more theatre people brought to shake their distaste for the resonance between their activities and mainstream commerce, the resulting collaborations might result in a creative boom that would reverberate throughout our culture!

Second, and more immediate to this discussion, the process of creating a production, from script selection, to concept, to rehearsals, to closing night, all of the players involved (onstage and off) engage in continual creative cognition. Play selection requires an understanding of an audience as well as one’s own inclinations (identifying need or desire). Stage concept and design involve continual negotiations between multiple participants to

develop a unified look and feel. Obstacles and limitations must be confronted along the way—budget constraints, a set piece that does not fit in the space, a technical element that shorts out, a challenging special effect, a change in cast—and overcome by a non-negotiable deadline.

Theatre training provides a regular drill in practical skills of problem solving, finding novelty in the familiar, and delivering a product based on both research and original interpretation. Theatre artists-in-training use the techniques they learn over and over, in similar but disparate laboratory situations, beginning with short moments or scenes and progressing to full-length productions. Similar techniques can be brought to bear on each play, but each has its own unique world that must be explored; existing knowledge structures may be brought into all performance spaces, but each will be different and will require the artist to make accommodations. Theatre artists are taught to analyze scripts for important themes, research the content to flesh out their understanding of the historical and cultural context, look for symbolism that can be made visible on the stage, and to add their own unique interpretations to these. Because every object (including people) on the stage can have richer and more complex meaning than what it carries in ordinary life—a white dress can signal purity, a red light can create a feeling of imminent danger, a teapot can become a tempest-tossed boat in an actor's hands—they practice recognizing and exploiting associations of color, shape, and symbol and work them into costume, lighting, gesture, sound, and set. When a desired element is unavailable or too expensive, they are required to find alternatives that will achieve a similar effect. If an idea does not work—an actor's delivery of a line does not communicate what he and the director intend, a lighting combination clashes with the ingénue's dress, a flat will not stay standing at the desired angle—it is then cast aside and the search begins for an alternative; there is no room for an element that distracts the audience or conveys a meaning other than the one the production team has agreed to

communicate. These all require creative cognition: using and building on existing knowledge structures, refining and abandoning outmoded patterns, seeking new uses for familiar things.

Developing a skill set that learners use in progressive encounters, each with increasing complexity and difficulty is the key to transferring these practices to the university-at-large and to the corporate training room. The processes taught in this training amounts to a highly effective form of micromanagement. Often business struggles with managing fine detail due to centrist control and poor communication. It is overwhelmingly common to approach a project with the end goal in mind but little care for the detail of getting there. In the theatre, the creative team that develops and runs the show attempts to create and control the complete environment for the duration of the performance. For the world-at-large, 10 seconds in some circumstances can be a lifetime to control... and yet the most basic theatre training accounts for every detail in a much longer period. We must be responsible for 100% of the periphery during a 2 hour period (or 3600 seconds). Any college level production exemplifies the how effective the training is, as it will (or should) reflect choices made with very little left to default. (Of course all the choices aren't necessarily good.) And the environment is one that tends to stimulate creativity in its participants: the vision of a common goal, pressure to create something new using existing information; a time limit that adds motivational urgency; encouragement to use familiar things in uncommon, unexpected ways; the necessity of responding to unexpected stimulus (which can happen before or after the production opens) in order to meet an audience's needs and expectations.

These same principles can be used to create exercises for stimulating creative, entrepreneurial exercises in a variety of circumstances. It should be noted that we are not advocating that learners should be taken through vocal warm-ups of scales and tongue twisters,

or that they should be asked to pretend to be animals, furniture, or picnickers. But there are a number of exercises that will transfer to many disciplines. Characterization asks that actors identify imaginatively with the people they portray, fleshing out their experiences, motivations, and emotions; learners in other disciplines can apply the same to their own subjects. Design and analysis research require that theatre practitioners familiarize themselves with both the factual context of the play and resources for aesthetic inspiration, researching form as well as content; the same process can help expand any learner's imaginative palette. The theatre also places heavy symbolic value on objects, gestures, placement, color, and other aspects of the stage environment. Exercises can help adult learners consider the symbolic value of every day objects, the relative positions of bodies in space, color—things they might not typically notice on a conscious level, but that form part of their experiences.

It is the process of theatrical creation that is the relevant model, which we have distilled into six major components. Exercises with different designated outcomes can be created.

1. Use Group/Team dynamics
According to Shalley and Perry-Smith, team settings (properly managed) can create a creative gestalt: “ how team members approach problem solving and how member creative problem solving approaches transfer from the individual to the team and become collective, synergistic cognitive processes of the team” (24).
2. Impose Time Limits
While the “real world” may or may not reflect the existence of a bounded temporal framework, exercises intended to develop creative cognition should. Give learners a fixed amount of time to complete any given project, if it is fifteen minutes, one class period, or six weeks. Make deadlines firm, even though students may encounter greater leeway when they move on. Knowing that a fixed time is fast approaching can create a sense of urgency and will encourage groups to prioritize, and to avoid spending too long on unfruitful avenues.
3. Inspiration comes from Information
Directors, designers, actors, and technicians all understand the importance of being well-informed. Encourage learners to bring in information from a wide variety of outside sources when confronting a new project. They need to familiarize themselves

with who it's for (audience), what it's like (history and cultural background of the thing in question, like a play), and any previous incarnations (former productions). As developmental possibilities arise, team members should also research potentialities like the technical and budgetary needs of any proposals.

4. The Rule of Improvisation: Always say Yes.

The first rule of improv is to “say yes” to whatever ideas your partners offer during a performance. Learners should embrace the same philosophy when hearing and considering any suggestions put forth during an exercise. This does not mean that all ideas are equal, of course. And just as an improv comedy group quickly abandons a thread that does not draw laughter, ideas that are impractical, impossible to execute, or otherwise off the mark should be cast aside in an exercise, after consideration.

5. B.Y.O.P (Bring Your Own Perspective)

Encourage group dynamics that demand every team member to consider and articulate their own perspective. Encourage them to look for connections on emotional and aesthetic planes as well as those connected to the surface context (the “raw” facts). Let them bring in materials that reflect personal taste and instinct. As Daum observes:

Artists spend their lives exploring their unique and individual perspectives on the human experience; inevitably, they often approach the world in an unorthodox manner and exhibit unconventional behavior they consider necessary to unleash the creative flow. Managers, on the other hand, function within corporate environments designed for predictability and built on conformity. (56)

Groups will be inclined to establish hierarchies (see Shalley and Perry-Smith), which is natural. This only becomes a serious problem when the dominant voices are blocking creative cognition with inflexibility or treating unique viewpoints as suspect. Find ways for each group member to share their interpretations of the material in a neutral setting.

6. Practice Flexibility

Learners should not cling to ideas or methods that do not produce fruit in a timely fashion. They need to learn to jettison that which does not work for that which works best. This is a skill best learned by doing, and a facilitator serves most effectively as a coach in these cases, monitoring the action from the sideline and encouraging or discouraging actions as necessary, and helping learners connect choices to consequences in a logical fashion.

While we encourage facilitators to place learners in teams, components 2-6 can be used with individuals, as well. We recommend the former method because individuals gain the benefit of immediate feedback from one another as they work. At the end of a given exercises, time can be

set aside for the larger class to respond to every group's output. It will be advantageous to keep the following in mind while applying these methods: "Creative ideas represent the foundation from which innovations can arise, but innovation requires political resources, emotional support, and gaining buy-in to the ideas, as well as obtaining the necessary resources required in implementing these ideas." (Shalley and Perry-Smith 24). For an artistic or entrepreneurial product to succeed, it must gain acceptance in the public sphere, and learners ought to have the opportunity to test their skill development in a lower stakes setting. Peer commentary provides a quick and measurable source of progress for the individuals involved.

A variety of team exercises can be developed using the basic framework, and exponentially building complexity and difficulty as learners progress. As teams, or individuals, work on projects, their ability to adapt can be tested by changing certain features of the assignment rules (do this with caution), removing a previous advantage such as a material resource, introducing obstacles mid-project, or shifting group members into new teams without advanced warning. Taken as a whole, this methodology creates circumstances in which creative cognition can occur, introduces students to tools that deepen their perception and imaginative capacity, and block the mental sets that inhibit novel responses from emerging.

In the final analysis, the educator uses methods derived from theatre production to help the learner develop the ability to achieve specific, but broadly applicable, outcomes:

1. Identify disparate parts.
2. Formulate a vision of how they can work together to provide value.
3. Organize whatever process and resources are required
4. Execute and share with others who can gain the value.

These are the hallmarks of creative, entrepreneurial thought patterns and practices. They are applicable to the daily functions of the office, the interactions of family life, the nonprofit boardroom, and any cognitive situation that the adult learner encounters. They need not become

professional entrepreneurs or artists to develop creative cognition or to benefit from its practice. Ideally, the problem solving skills that they learn can result in a deeper sense of satisfaction in their own daily lives, and positive outcomes for their social networks as they become more fully engaged in creating and disseminating material of value in collaboration with others around them.

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