Creative Freedom:
Arts Entrepreneurship as a Mindset

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Prospective art and design students have little doubt that entering the creative sector is their purpose and calling. However, one of the main concerns for students and their families when deciding whether to enroll in a specialized college is the ability to earn a living wage upon graduation. Colleges and universities, particularly art and design schools, respond to this concern by increasing access to arts entrepreneurship programs. Arts entrepreneurship offerings provide practical guidance students can apply in business development and more broadly while seeking financial self-sufficiency working in the creative sector. This essay offers insights into how faculty teaching arts entrepreneurship courses can best engage students in colleges of art and design.

Specifically, this writing explores the unique dynamics of an art and design college and how the fundamental practices of these institutions can inform arts entrepreneurship educators in their classrooms. First, I consider the role of self-reflection in the development of artists and designers. Next, I explore how critical thinking and creative problem solving are present in art and design curricula. Then I reference the core practice of critique, which is present across creative disciplines in art and design pedagogy. Last, I conclude that when considered together, self-reflection, critical thinking, creative problem solving and critique all connect with teaching core entrepreneurial theories, methods and skills to prepare art and design students for a financially sustainable creative life after college.

Empathy and Observation

The journey of artists and designers is to discover themselves, develop competencies in one or more creative disciplines and combine these skills to express their experiences and views. For anyone on a journey of self-awareness and exploration, there is significant introspection as well as reflection on where you came from, where you are and where you are going. This growth process occurs while living through the shifting external contexts such as familial pressures, cultural expectations, current events and societal norms.

Artists and designers couple their personal awareness journey with exploring and developing creative practices centered on keen observational skills. Students spend years learning how to represent what they are seeing, hearing and feeling through drawing, painting, illustration, film, photography and other media. In this way they develop

a means for communicating their inner emotional landscapes and responding to the world. Often, feelings are complex and unresolved and this practice can be lonely and sometimes frustrating. The act of displaying work can feel very vulnerable to the creator. Many early-career artists and designers feel misunderstood, lost and alone as they are finding themselves and developing their technical skills. This state of vulnerability, especially while developing technical prowess, is common to the artist's journey. Over time, artists and designers become more technically adept and have the ability to shape messages more clearly, but the self-exploration never ends. This ongoing introspective journey is both the joy and the curse of the artist and designer.

One of the benefits of self-exploration and acutely-developed observational skills is that these experiences can lead to greater understanding and empathy toward others. Arts entrepreneurship practitioners can leverage these skills in solving problems for others. Arts entrepreneurship educators can emphasize just how valuable students' self-explorations and observational abilities are when applied to entrepreneurial contexts.

Critical Thinking and Creative Problem Solving

As stated earlier, artists and designers are often keen observers of the world; they see, hear, feel and then creatively express. Yet it can be challenging for some art and design students to shift the application of their observational skills or lived experiences from their personal work to creative problem solving for others. To help with this process, faculty can assign "design challenges" to students.

As the Arts Entrepreneurship Department Chair at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), I teach various courses in the Entrepreneurial Studies (ES) major. One of the design challenges I present to students is performing a SWOT analysis. This is an assessment tool designed to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as related to an organization. A SWOT analysis provides key insights into an organization and is one way to assess its current state before developing strategic recommendations. In my courses I ask students to perform a SWOT analysis on themselves. As part of the assignment they are required to create a two-dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) piece of work that could be included in their portfolio. 2D works must be at least 11″ x 17″ and 3D works must be at least 12″ x 12″ x 8″. Students create works in a variety of media, from illustration and graphic design to comic art, photography and small sculptures. In class, we offer critiques of the work and talk about how each student has represented their own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

By introducing the SWOT tool in this way, students are able to experience how personal an assessment like this can be for a business owner or senior manager at a nonprofit. The exercise also allows students to become familiar with the tool and prepares them to conduct a SWOT analysis for a small business or nonprofit later in the semester. This is one example of how arts entrepreneurship faculty can incorporate the creative practices of art and design to introduce common business assessment tools that will prepare students for critical thinking and creative problem solving.

Culture of Critique

Colleges of art and design foster a culture of critique, which is common in the study of many creative disciplines. Faculty outline an assignment and students respond through their creative discipline. Typically, the assignments seek to advance technical skills and develop competency in visual, auditory and written communication. The resulting works are presented to the class and peers and faculty respond, offering observations and feedback, with the goal of generating constructive perspective for growth. This practice informs the maker on how well their intention was received and provides feedback on their technical skills. Often the project is reworked and presented again as the student internalizes all or part of the critique and reshapes their work in response. It is through reworking projects based on critique that iterative practices are developed. Iteration based on feedback is also endemic to entrepreneurship.

One of the most common pitfalls of a young entrepreneur is when they fall in love with their idea, even if it lacks the desired impact to solve a problem, and they refuse to listen to constructive criticism. A failure to pivot, or revise a project based on feedback, often results in entrepreneurs losing thousands of dollars, leading to collapsed ventures, blows to reputation and possibly career endings. And while the artist and designer can be just as resistant to feedback on a personal project, their training is steeped in revision based on a culture of critique—they at least recognize the practice, and hopefully the value, of feedback. Arts entrepreneurship faculty can easily help students become more comfortable leveraging the iterative process from their art and design practices and shift it to client-based work.

The MCAD ES program references the Design Thinking methodology championed by the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University. This methodology places the end user in the center of the problem to be solved and keeps them engaged throughout the entire design process. Empathy for the end user is the first step in this process and helps guide the designer in finding how best to solve the problem. The innate observational skills of artists and designers coupled with an empathetic perspective results in creative problem solving that has higher levels of adoption by the end user. A client-based design challenge also allows students to apply their critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills to solve for the needs of the end user while adapting to the constraints of an organizational framework.

One-third of the required courses in the Entrepreneurial Studies (ES) major include working with 12-16 clients each academic year from the for-profit, nonprofit and government realms. They are selected based on their work in the areas of sustainability, social justice and/or community engagement, with two to four doing work internationally. Past clients include

- a successful for-profit sustainable fashion business that wanted to strengthen its commitment to a no-waste operation by initiating a clothing take-back program;

- a US-based nonprofit working in Sierra Leone building schools and practicing permaculture farming that wanted help in developing social enterprises; and

- a government agency that received $900,000 to raise public awareness and participation in planting pollinator gardens to help save the endangered rusty patched bumble bee from extinction.

Similar to other design challenges, client-based work employs multiple critique or feedback sessions. In the case of the Sierra Leone group, students presented an idea for branding. While the overall strategy and design was embraced by the client, one critical note was brought forward. The specific color of green that the students had selected for the campaign was the same color as a radical political group in Sierra Leone. Of course, changing a color is easy and the process of critique is applied as a client review process when working for others. However, the students also learned a lesson in cultural responsiveness that, when working with clients from a country they are not familiar with, their research needs to be more thorough and go beyond their personal aesthetics to consider the context in which the end product will be experienced.

Working with external clients affords students the opportunity to see the inherent value of their critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills and how to shift them to be applied to an external problem. Additionally, it helps them gain experiences in developing client relationships and project management skills. It is essential for arts entrepreneurship educators to provide students enough opportunity to be comfortable in applying feedback in a client-based context to prepare them for similar work after college.

Conclusion: Working Anywhere, for Anybody, Doing Anything

Observation, empathy, critique and iteration are all essential elements of the creative process. These skills are also valued at various stages of entrepreneurial endeavors and within various settings in the creative sector. Arts entrepreneurship educators often guide art and design students to appreciate the transferability of their training to various roles in the creative sector.

By applying the training, methods and skills present across art and design curricula, students can become confident that their critical thinking and creative problem solving are core to their value to a wide variety of projects. The skills they develop through a practice of self-awareness, acute observation, empathy, critical thinking, creative problem solving and comfort with critique and iteration are all easily applied within an arts entrepreneurship context. Art and design students must become confident that business theories, methods and tools are simply a means for them to communicate the inherent value of their creative solutions to non-creatives. When they achieve this level of understanding, students will grow more comfortable knowing they are not simply working in service of business, but are creative collaborators essential to the success of any project.

The 21st century student of art and design is preparing to be a creative collaborator who operates across for- and non-profit platforms, works full-time, freelances and approaches creative production and expression in a variety of mediums, in a transdiscip-

linary manner. To serve the needs of today's students, MCAD's Entrepreneurial Studies degree program is a well-rounded arts entrepreneurship curriculum that places the artist and designer at the center of all learning. The emphasis across the curriculum is to position the creative student as having inherent value because of their adept critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills, which are enhanced by a creative practice and a keen understanding of the creative process. The ES curriculum also balances the presentation of traditional business theories, methods and tools needed to support new venture creation and starting a business with those needed to prepare for life as a professional artist and for freelance and contract work.

A few years ago, an anxious ES major approached me wanting to meet as soon as possible. When we met, I asked her what was so pressing and causing her such anxiety. She announced to me, "I feel like I could work anywhere, for anybody, doing anything!" I flushed with joy for this graduating student. "That's great!," I replied. "What's the problem?" "Well," she said, "I don't know what to put on my resume!" We both laughed. This student had done the work. She had taken a journey of personal exploration and development, enhanced her observational skills, became comfortable with critique and iteration and mined the client-based projects for real world experiences. Indeed, she fully absorbed our arts entrepreneurship curriculum and was comfortable applying the tools, methods and skills of business as a creative collaborator in her internships and part-time work. She achieved a level of freedom that is due every creative, and she did so early in her career, while still a student.

An arts entrepreneurship program that emphasizes the inherent value of creative contributions, coupled with the ability to speak the language of business, results in students feeling they have the freedom to work anywhere, for anybody, doing anything. Freedom for artists and designers is the ultimate goal of arts entrepreneurship programs.