Getting Creative Again. Awaking Your Inner Creative Self

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Abstract: Imaginary thinking is an important quality within companies, needed for innovation and problem solving. Yet not everyone in a company is at ease when it comes to imagination. Apart from design school graduates, the majority of people are more trained in analytical thinking. Only few business school graduates are at ease in processes demanding a creative dimension. Empowering business students to gain confidence and experience in their creative thinking is a pedagogical challenge for business schools. This paper describes a pedagogical activity that helps business students onto the path of creativity. Pushing them outside their comfort zone through a guided effort, supported by a workbook, repeatedly surprising themselves and others with unexpected solutions. This activity makes them realize that they can further muscle their imaginative mind-set. Some students happily call it the development of their inner creative self. Academic peers awarded the Getting Creative exercise for its pedagogical innovation.

Keywords: Design thinking, Personal Development, Creative Confidence, Imagination, Business Education

1. Introduction

Pablo Picasso once said; “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up” (Davidson, 1976). Others also suggest that curiosity and creativity are discouraged and “educated out of us” (Robinson, 2016) by giving rationality a higher status than creativity.

For companies, analytical thinking is crucial, but it is a combination of imaginary and analytical thinking that shapes a company’s competitive advantage. Imagination and innovation skills are therefore important. Dunne and Martin (2006) suggest that this can have a potential impact on management education. Not a radical change, but adding the design approach to the curriculum, handling managerial problems in a more creative way.

Business students do not know enough about the practical side of the innovation process to be at ease with it, once they start working in a company. Although most business students have placed their creativity on the background, several of them welcome the challenge to work on a study project.
using the design thinking structure. Others on the contrary struggle with the ambiguity and uncertainties that comes with creation. Even when using the structure of the design thinking process (Brown, 2008) they need to be well guided to stay open-minded and curious. In their inexpe

ience with the operational side of the innovation process, they might jump on their first project idea and risk an early solution fixation. They may well look for solutions without thoroughly having investigated the problem zone (Coakley, Roberto and Segovis, 2014; Lee and Benza, 2015). This lack of curiosity weakens innovativeness, because precision in defining the problems they are trying to solve is missing and why this matters; “Are we solving the right problem?” (Spradlin, 2012).

The structure of the design thinking process certainly empowers creativity. Nevertheless the process still needs to be approached with an open mind-set. Suppressed creativity or the perception of not being creative enough makes business students uncomfortable and skip over process steps. According to Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen (2009) senior managers of the most innovative companies are involved in creative work themselves, but the majority of top managers limit themselves in only facilitating the innovation process. Are the majority of managers not involved, because they lacking the background and the experience or because they esteem it is not their role?

Business schools have the task to prepare business students to the challenging task of innovation, since it is too crucial for company success. This means knowledge about the design process and specifically the development of individual creativity. In other words “How might we help business students to strengthen their individual creative mind-set and capability, and to develop resourceful habits? How to build pedagogical “mind-set development methods”, not geared to create “designers”, but to create “managers with an innovative mind-set”?

2. Background

2.1 Design-adverse and design-keen business students

As a consequence of an education system that gives a priority to analytical thinking over creative training, it is normal that business students and executives do not see themselves as principally creative. According to Brown (2009), many people are likely to stay close to what they know to do well. In the case of business executives this could mean making choices by analysing existing solutions and then selecting the best one. He calls this approach of analysing several options and then selecting the best one “convergent thinking”. Of course new alternatives need to be created first to have a good number of possibilities to choose from. This first phase of creating choices is called “divergent thinking”. Only after the phase of divergent thinking, follows the “convergent” analytical thinking to select the best solution. Linus Pauling, US chemist (1901 - 1994) and Nobel Price winner in 1954 expressed his approach to find innovative thoughts in a similar way; “The way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas and throw the bad ones away”.

Idea selection needs to be preceded by a problem exploration and a creative phase, since it isn’t possible to build a sustainably competitive advantage on a deficiency of ideas. Business students lack the awareness and training in creative approaches to be sufficiently aware of this.

In addition to a lack of focus on creativity and innovation in their early education, business students might have experienced negative reactions from their close environment; parents, peers or teachers, on previous creative, possibly personal projects that were not mature, too far out or simply poorly visualised. Remarks aren’t guaranteed to be pedagogical sound and can be taken personal, hindering further attempts. Repeated experiences with badly received ventures, combined with the fear of being judged, can convince someone not to be a creative person (Kelley 2012). Avoiding creative
challenges is then a logical next step. Later in a management career the risk will be higher and consequently the fear will increase.

In the classroom environment this means that some, lets call them “design-adverse”, business students will take a distance from imaginary projects and stick to the first possible solution that comes to their mind without really digging into to the root causes of a problem and without putting sufficient effort into the creative phase. They are not in their comfort zone; it is as if they are thinking “let’s try to get rid of this as soon as possible - I am going to be a manager anyway, in the future we will hire a designer for this”.

Others on the contrary, more “design-keen” business students, have a hunger for creativity and are very pleased to take on the challenge to develop, as some of them happily call it, their “inner creative self”, thereby becoming more innovative managers. Within this category of students, some might have liked to select a more creative study, but are following business studies as a safer option in the job market or because parents thought this to be the best option.

2.2 Towards design-keen business students

Kelley (2012), founder of the design agency IDEO and the Stanford d-school, says; “The world seems to divide into creatives and the non-creatives, and too many people resign themselves to the non-creative category”. He suggests that we learn being creative in small successive steps of success, calling these baby steps; learning to take on a bigger challenge each next step. Success during a project is an enjoyable experience, giving the encouragement for the next project. He also defends the idea that creativity and creative confidence is not for designers only, but also for the other disciplines. The Stanford d-school is therefore bringing non-designer students in contact with the way of thinking and tools traditionally used by designers.

Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen (2009) also support, that innovative behaviour can be developed and strengthened through practice. According to their study, the idea development process that is used by the most innovative managers, is based on associations, questioning, observing, experimenting and networking. These steps have similarities with the Stanford design thinking process.

When placed in front of a design challenge, the first reaction of business students often is; “Yes ... but we are not designers”. With some re-assurance they can take the challenge wholeheartedly. Certain conditions appear important to make business students constructively engage into a creative process.

- Trust in the classroom between students and teacher is of utmost importance. The teacher needs to be with the student and build a positive, constructive class atmosphere. This has implications for the maximal group size and the background of the teacher (for example in new product development practice). It is important that the students understand that they have to try how far they can work on the challenge in an attempt to do this in the best possible way. It will not be the end result that leads to a low grade. This is something they also do for themselves – “try to surprise yourselves and develop something you can be proud of”.

- Students need to be encouraged in the classroom to help each other with projects in a positive, inspirational way, instead of treating it as an individual competition – “if one of you is good with a computer or with hand drawings, then help each other, even with individual projects. Learn from each other, make projects great”.

Students compete for access to higher ranked business school, often selected on analytical
and communicative skills. Then clearly they do not want to look “incompetent” when asked to work on a project that requires abilities from their weaker creative side.

- They need to be challenged at the right level; a tough project challenge, but one that allows them to come up with a solution that makes them proud and one with which they can surprise themselves.

Once business students are involved in a design project, there are some basic traps, even when the design thinking process is well explained and almost “hammered in”.

- The emphasis on problem finding in the inspiration phase is often taken too lightly. Of course rarely a “to be solved problem” is presented on a golden plate. Finding innovative solutions, starts with identifying the real problem that needs to be solved. At the start of the design exploration process one often deals with unknown, uncluttered situations. One needs preparedness to deal with uncertainty of the innovation context and an optimistic belief in the possibility to find an improvement (Gliniska, 2015). Buchanan (1992) calls these ill-defined problems “wicked problems”. They are part of the design challenge and need to be explored with an open mind-set to find the root causes of a problem. Identifying and seeing the real problem, ultimately gives the foundation for innovation. Designers are aware of this, because they have gone through the innovation process multiple times; business students lack this experience.

- Over and over again students quickly move to the ideation phase and imagine to have found the ideal solution, they “fall in love ... with their first idea”. Or as Lee and Benza (2015) explain to their students “do not be married to the outcome”. The students might feel relieved to have a solution and then start selling their idea, instead of staying open-minded, testing, further digging into the roots of the problem and questioning whether they are looking at the right problem for their user after all.

- Rough prototyping truly is great to get the ideas from the head, into the real visible world; from “thinking with your head” towards “thinking with your hands”. This is appreciated by the students and helps further idea development and testing. Unfortunately students often feel handicapped by their lack of visualisation skills. They feel their drawing of concepts is clumsy and look for ways to visualize their end ideas in a more enhanced manner.

- With some teams or individuals, there isn’t enough drive for excellence. This might be based on the idea that in the future they will be managers and someone else will work it out. Or maybe this has to do with not being at ease with the creative process and not understanding how good finally an idea will need to be, to have success in the market place. In such a case a tactic is to “intimidate and inspire” those students by showing outrageous good work from previous projects.

3. Method

3.1 Explaining the Getting Creative Workbook

The Getting Creative Workbook challenges students every day to identify one item that needs improvement. This can be any product, service or situation that they come across in their daily life. This first phase takes place over a period of approximately ten days. After further exploration of
these “problem or need” zones, they select one problem and follow a structured approach to move into the creative phase to find solutions.

Most students need to get challenged to develop a creative mind-set. Repeatedly aiming to find solutions and to surprise oneself and others with these results might help to turn a creative mentality into a creative habit. The message to students is: “Train yourself in improving things, objects or situations in a creative way. Just try ... you will find your inner creative self”.

The Getting Creative Workbook specifically targets the initial observation phase of the design process. It forces students to look around and to identify what could be improved. And then, in successive steps, it develops into a concept to work out in further detail. The Getting Creative Workbook originated in the first place on this idea of repetition, secondly it is heavily inspired on the directive structure of the Stanford d-school Wallet exercise and thirdly on pedagogical experience that builds on trust in the classroom, a clear structure and at the same time a lot of creative freedom. The Getting Creative exercise takes place over several class sessions.

- It deals with the exploration and the ideation phase.
- It forces students to come up with multiple observations – one a day, followed by solution finding for a preferred problem to be solved. Space to indicate problems and first solutions are clearly indicated in the Getting Creative Workbook. If this stays empty, this doesn’t feel good and others can see it.
- Multiple solutions are claimed. One quick solution is just not enough.
- Ideas need to be tested and enriched in contact with others
- Reflective feedback on this activity is asked at the end of the exercise

Of course one successful project doesn’t turn an individual into a designer. Repetition is needed to learn and develop a creative habit. Even in the best design schools, students learn design by doing one project after the other with different topics, levels of difficulty and focus points, often 4 to 5 years of these projects.

The Getting Creative exercise was initially targeted as an individual exercise towards a small group of 9 Bachelor students in one of our international programs. It concerned a 15-hour Design Management module in the Fashion & Design undergraduate major. A few weeks later, parts of it were used at an off-site campus in Vancouver with 36 Master business students participating in a “New Product Development” semester program.

As a third trial, the Getting Creative exercise was targeted towards 32 master students in a participative, experimental program, in which our Business school tests pedagogical innovations. This time the class was titled Getting Creative. The Getting Creative exercise started as an individual exercise, but then developed into a team project.

### 3.2 Getting Creative for the Bachelor Fashion & Design major

At the start of the 15 hours Design Management module of the Fashion & Design major the student received two projects; the individual A3 format Getting Creative Workbook and a Team Project. Emphasis could be placed on the second project, in case the Getting Creative Workbook would turn into a fiasco. In fact the student liked both projects and while we were running the two projects simultaneously, positive and unexpected things happened. The students took tools from the team project, like the visualisation with mood boards and the stronger user empathy focus of the team project, and used it to improve their Getting Creative individual project.
All together this gave them quite lot of work, but the students were really captivated. A few teacher-less sessions were planned in their schedule, allowing them to work on projects, without having other classes at the same time. During these voluntary “laboratories”, they liked to stay at the school, often working together – even for their individual projects - at a large table in the cafeteria or on the mezzanine. They indicated to feel less inspired when working on their own at home.

While using the Getting Creative Workbook, the students were asked to work with pen and paper and not to use their computer. This hands-on “pen and paper approach” is likely to result in more creativity and less distraction, in particular caused by emails and social media. They seemed pleased with this focus – (re)discovering life without a computer. Only at the end of the assignment they felt that using their computer could enhance their work. They therefore received an electronic mask, which they could use freely to make any modification that would improve their project.

The A3 Getting Creative Workbook was given to them in a protective weather-proof envelope. The A3 format has its conveniences and handicaps. Parents and friends see it, ask what it is and then often help with feedback. One student called her mother, living on the other side of the planet, via Skype every day to discuss her “idea of the day”. The students brought their large A3 Getting Creative Workbook to the classroom in an envelope that clearly looked well used at the end of classes. The visible A3 format seemed to give them pride; demonstrating to work on something different and contributing to their artistic feeling.

The Getting Creative assignment takes place over several class sessions;

- Session 1: Introduction of the individual Getting Creative exercise and the Team Project
- Session 2: Takes place approximately two weeks later. Students come to class with their 10 Getting Creative ideas. They discuss their ideas in groups of two and help each other to improve their preferred three ideas. This takes place in two rounds with different partners. It became clear that is was important to let them help each without intervention from the teacher. They wanted their ideas to be better, before involving the teacher.
- Session 3: The Team Project and a short discussion around the Getting Creative exercise.
- Session 4: The Getting Creative exercise: Students present individual prototypes (1h30), within the small group of students.
- Session 5: End the Team Project and update on progress for the Getting Creative exercise.
- 1 week after the last class: Handing in of the individual Getting Creative exercise

### 3.3 Getting Creative for the Master program

Our Business School has a program, in which students participate in pedagogical innovations. The Getting Creative project became part of this program. The project kick-off for Getting Creative took place in a mountain chalet at the end of the afternoon after a days mountain walk. For this larger group of 32 master students, some changes to the above structure were made. These master students only worked on the Getting Creative exercise with an A4 booklet. They had not chosen to follow a creative class, although most were at least curious about innovation and were confronted with the exercise as part of their schedule. The class duration was 12 hours in total, plus the day trip in the mountains, which helped to create a good contact with students and staff.

Session 1: Stanford d-School Wallet exercise & explication and how design from Arts & Crafts and other historical design movements moved towards design thinking.
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Session 2: Mountain day trip starting early in the morning – at the end of the day; explanation of Getting Creative exercise plus idea creation based on observations and experience on this mountain trip; “what kind of product, or organizational issue can we think off, inspired by this day in the mountains”?

Session 3: First 3 Getting Creative ideas and discuss these ideas in teams of 4 students, during 2 rounds.

Session 4: Next 7 Getting Creative ideas and discuss these ideas in pre-formed teams of 4 to 5 students, during two rounds. They helped each other to make each individual idea as good as possible.

Session 5: Creative Festival; The teams, formed in session 4, had to prepare their best 4 ideas in a coherent way (like a design agency). The team grades were individualized using the Catme smarter teamwork

4. Results & Discussion

Within the Business School’s on-line evaluation of classes this module for the Bachelor Fashion & Design major received the rare evaluation of 5/5. For the participative Master class the evaluation isn’t available yet, but direct feedback from the students was very positive, as was the class participation. They filmed for example the evening they spent together to build their end prototype and used it for the final presentation, clearly having an excellent time working at this.

The learning experience for the Fashion & Design major was also tested with an additional questionnaire. In the questionnaire, reaction from one of the students: This activity made me more reflective of being creative in my daily life as well as in my student life. The fact that we needed to develop 10 ideas forced me to think creative in every situation and on how to solve problems in a creative way. This can be leveraged into my professional future by thinking creative when problems arise and solve them in ways I would not have thought about before. I think this assignment challenged me to think out of the box and being creative in ways I did not know that I was creative before.

Potential improvements of the Getting Creative exercise are;

- The structure of the Getting Creative Workbook could be renewed in the end idea phase, e.g. by integrating the mood board and visualization of the user target.
- An improved electronic mask could be provided to the students, to be used for the end assignment to be handed in after classes.
- Possibly an electronic mask could be created to allow a “small exposition” in the classroom. This exhibition (inside the classroom or for a wider public) could be used for a silent vote by peers.

The Getting Creative Workbook is likely to stay in the A3 format for smaller groups, but an A4 format might be more practical for large cohorts.

6. Conclusion

Business schools have a role to play to help business students (re)discover that they can be creative. Pedagogical innovation is needed to design the best approaches to create a future generation of
imaginary thinkers with a solid business background and sensibility to creative persons and design activities.

Kelley (2012) suggests that we learn being creative in small successive steps of success and defends the idea that confidence in one’s own creativity is not for designers only. Additionally, Aristotle left us with the empowering statement that “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit”. Following these thoughts, being excellent in imaginary thinking can be the fruit of multiple exercises; getting better and better, over and over again.

Let this be NEXT in education.

“If you hear a voice within you say you cannot paint, then by all means paint and that voice will be silenced.” Vincent Van Gogh

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