

Opinion: Enterprise education or entrepreneurial graduates?

Neil Warnock

There are a lot of misconceptions about 'enterprise', and a lot of people in universities who mistakenly think it doesn't concern them – people for whom words like 'enterprise', 'business' and 'entrepreneur' are distasteful, required only to describe and further pigeon-hole an apparently necessary evil.

Like it or not, enterprise education concerns us all, more so now than ever, and we can all benefit by embracing it. Just as good enterprise teaching isn't necessarily promoted through an 'enterprise' module, genuine enterprise in the workplace often isn't branded or celebrated as 'enterprise' either. Fully paid-up supporters of enterprise are probably quite enterprising at work already, and it's those skills, that attitude and that perspective that we need to contextualise and encourage in our students.

Enterprising \diamond Entrepreneurial

It is not about teaching students to start their own business. I'll come back to the entrepreneurship and business contexts, but leaving those aside, what does 'enterprise education' actually mean? I'm a member of the Institute for Enterprise Advisory Board and I always chuckle when I remember – or rather try to remember – our not very sharp nor pithy definition which runs to 75 words or more. A marketing failure, perhaps? No. If I could be more concise I would, but I can't. Apart from the obvious business-orientated definition, enterprise education is about setting learning in a context which encourages and illustrates initiative, taking responsibility, seeing possibilities for improvement and acting upon them. Enterprise can manifest itself as identifying gaps in processes, techniques, products, tools, safety, documentation or whatever and acting upon it, not just moaning about it. There is no silver bullet, no magic formula, but enquiry-based learning can be a very useful approach in order to achieve this.

Where you come in

It all depends on the context, and only the training providers and module designers will know what is appropriate. For example, Healthcare doesn't immediately spring to mind as an environment attracting enterprising people – but why not? Is the Health Service perfect? Are tools and processes ideal? Of course not. It's just the place for aspiring 'intra-preneurs' to make a real difference. We really need to teach all our students to be enterprising.

So, how about jazzing up those tired old modules by setting them in a context that illustrates and encourages initiative, if only by describing the initiative, tenacity and enterprise of the person behind the theory that you are expounding? Perhaps there are new or existing case studies and assignments that can be set in a more enterprising context. You're not alone. If you need help you can call upon the Institute for Enterprise whose job it is to help you put more enterprise into the curriculum.

(As an aside, how about your own workplace situation? Are there things that really need changing and you can see just how to do it? What's stopping you?)

Putting enterprise into the curriculum is not the responsibility of the Faculty of Business & Law and Innovation North. You've heard the cliché 'Quality is everybody's job'? Well, in a modern university, so is enterprise. Leeds Met has always excelled in providing vocational education, which in today's world means providing enterprise education as well.

Leeds Met is a leading university in supporting entrepreneurship, which is clearly related to but not the same as enterprise.

What about that darker side of enterprise – entrepreneurship? I hate *Dragons' Den* yet it's one of my favourite TV programmes; I positively loathe *The Apprentice* but try never to miss an episode. Why the apparent conflict? These shows have raised the profile of one very obvious aspect of enterprise – entrepreneurship – but let's not forget that they are provided for our entertainment. I have met three of the 'stars' of these shows, and each has commented that the tasks and apparent *raison d'être* are completely secondary to the director's appetite for good footage. Remember, we're seeing what the producers and editors choose to broadcast. They are not 'real world' and don't represent 'common business practice'.

How does entrepreneurship work in reality, then? I used to think that if you need to be told, then you're simply not cut out to be an entrepreneur, but I'm no longer so sure. It's the nature/nurture debate once more. Can you really teach someone to be an entrepreneur? What I now believe is that just as with any other discipline, the right nurture (education) can lead to an otherwise unrealised blossoming of nature. There's an art aspect – innovation, creativity, passion, tenacity, social skills – and a science aspect – finance, compliance, legal, operations, and even psychology. Most of the 'science' and some of the 'art' can definitely be taught.

Fertile ground

There are many routes to building a successful business, and many definitions of success. I'm no expert but I've successfully built and sold several businesses with less than £10 million turnover, and I'm a mentor to a number of Leeds Met Incubator start-ups. I have also invested in a number of regional technology businesses, so I've seen many shapes and sizes of entrepreneur come and go. There is no formula. Everybody's story is different. As a member of the Yorkshire Association of Business Angels (YABA) and the Viking Investment Club, I witness regularly something that appears to come close to *Dragons' Den*, but going into business is not like *Dragons' Den* for most of us. Even those start-up businesses who do a ten-minute pitch at YABA seeking funding don't get a take-it-or-leave-it offer. What you see happen on TV in three minutes takes months to investigate and close, building a close relationship between investor and investee along the way.

For those passionate enough about their proposition to risk setting up in business, support in the Yorkshire and Humber region is second to none. I'm pleased to report that things have moved forward, with the Regional Development Agency itself exhibiting some of that initiative and enterprise I referred to earlier – real passion and 'intra-preneurship'.

Incubation – the Business Accelerator

Even better, Business Startup@Leeds Met and the Queen Square Incubator (QU2) make the 'science' aspects of setting up in business very straightforward. My first sizeable venture was a technology services business inspired by a lecturer's attitude and encouragement five years earlier (isn't there a key lecturer or teacher who shapes every individual's life?). Setting up the business was slow and painful, and learning how to run it was excruciating (VAT fines and Revenue inspections are particular lowlights), but I got it to 70 staff with three offices, a decent turnover and a healthy profit before selling it on. A few years later, when I set up a business through the Leeds Met Incubator, it was plain sailing – a dream in comparison! They provided an instant office with a respectable address, access to the internet, phones, fax, photocopier, help with finding sources of funding, legal help, start-up-friendly advisors and camaraderie from like-minded enthusiasts. Within a year I had achieved with this business what it took four years to achieve previously, and that is in no small part due to the Incubator.

Final word

My own story is one of business success, inspired by an enterprising Leeds Met lecturer. Leeds Met leads the way in greasing the wheels for business start-ups, but enterprise education isn't just for budding entrepreneurs. It's for creating enterprising graduates. What industry, what society, doesn't need enterprise at every level?

Neil Warnock

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IoD Entrepreneur of the Year for Yorkshire & Humber 2009