

Paper presented at



Internationalizing Entrepreneurship Education and Training
8th annual conference

26 – 28 July 1998

at the
EUROPEAN BUSINESS SCHOOL
Schloß Reichartshausen
Oestrich-Winkel, Germany

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“How educating junior students to become more entrepreneurial”

paper presented at the IntEnt98 Conference

27th-29th JULY 1998 , Oestrich-Winkel, GERMANY

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2. ABSTRACT

Title HOW EDUCATING PUPILS TO BECOME MORE ENTREPRENEURIAL

Principal topics : on the education of entrepreneurial awareness for younger students

The future for our children is often referred to as being not that rosy. Life time job security seems to be a thing of the past. Some decades ago it is said that one started working for a company or a government agency, stayed there for an almost entire life and retired at a respectable age receiving a watch as a farewell gift. Nowadays the magic words are flexibility, mobility and intrapreneurship. Large companies are talking about rationalization and restructuring almost always being euphemisms for massive dismissals. What can be done to help our youth in its confrontation with these problems and to learn to manage them? Students should become strong independent individuals who can take their future in their own hands. That's why ICHEC-PME and the SME-department of the Vlerick School of Management developed a "Dream&Do"¹-project to improve the students' capabilities to act as independent individuals who can create their own future. During a one day session secondary school students of the third grade (16-18 years old) receive material to learn about the creation of a small scale company, the problems of its management, then create their own fictitious company and test their own creation by practical experience. We have run a pilot project in eight secondary schools and the evaluations by the teachers and the pupils seem to be very encouraging. The Belgian Minister of SMEs is subsidising the project.

Methodology

In the first step similar initiatives especially from Scotland and Canada were studied.² Although existing projects gave us some interesting insights we soon understood that we had to create our own innovative method to be able to comply as much as possible with the needs of younger students in Belgian schools. So with the help of a few of their teachers we created the Dream&Do project. The project contains three major parts : a theoretical part during which the students get a short explanation of management techniques, a creative part during which the students learn to create their own little company and a benchmarking part during which the pupils visit a company which is very similar to the one they wanted to create by themselves. When a school was not yet fully ready for this project there was put more accent on the awareness-creating part.

Findings

¹ Walt Disney, "If you can dream it, you can do it", Epcott Centre, Florida

² The International Institute for Enterprise Education, <http://www.iiee-scot.org.uk> ; Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques en coopération avec l' Agence de promotion économique du Canada Atlantique, "Mise en oeuvre d'une Stratégie de promotion de l'entrepreneuriat au Canada : le cas de la région de l'Atlantique", Paris, 1996, 69p.;

This project fits the idea of a best practice testimony rather than of fundamental research. The evaluation reports, summarising comments from the teachers and the students themselves, show that the project hit the target i.e. the students got a better understanding on the meaning of the SME in today's society but also on the creation of their own business. In a creative, independant way they were taught about the importance of taking initiative and of creating their own future.

3. INTRODUCTION

The Dream project is the result of an increasing concern for the widening gap between the youngsters' perception of the professional world and reality. Young students are said to fear the future. The crisis in the eighties and the early nineties which has struck all Europe has left its marks on today's youth's attitude towards the world. The number of bankruptcies, dismissals, redundancies and as a consequence the number of unemployed has continuously been rising for the last decade. Only the last couple of years we notice there is an economic revival which is translated in a rising employment rate. However large companies which were a safety haven for so long seem to offer less and less job security. In Belgium two major economic failures in 1997 shocked the public opinion on both sides of the language barrier. In Wallonia Forges de Clabecq went bankrupt leaving over 1700 people without a job. In Flanders Renault Vilvoorde closed its assembly line down at the cost of 3000 jobs. This last case was even a harder blow because the plant wasn't making any losses and moreover proved to be the most productive in the world. But one strategic decision at the French headquarters wiped away decades of economic prosperity. Everybody, the press, the government was dumbfounded.³ Unions together with other social organisations organised "marches for work" which took tens of thousands of people onto the streets. But this shocking event made one thing very clear: your economy can better not depend on a few large multinational groups because in the end even the federal government has nothing to say when a board of directors, some 1000 miles away, decides to close down a plant and to reopen it in a low-wage country. All of a sudden the SME was the central point of political decision-making and academic discussions.⁴ All kind of conferences were organised concerning themes such as "On our way to the knowledge society with enterprise and education"⁵ and words such as innovation, entrepreneurship, creativity, independence, initiative, risk capital,⁶ etc. have become daily vocabulary. Our educational system was all of a sudden not reliable anymore. Pupils were taught to be disciplined and to learn by heart whatever a teacher ex cathedra told them. The upcoming generation lacked a healthy sense of criticism, creativity and willingness to go its own way.

³ De Standaard, 28 February 1997.

⁴ <http://www.tijdnet.be/forum/kmo/titels.htm> : "For the first time the federal government spent a special meeting of Cabinet on their policy towards SMEs. In a new record time the government passed a 60 pages counting bill in favour of the SMEs with less than 50 employees".

⁵ Vlaams Economisch Verbond, 20 mei 1997.

⁶ De Standaard, 2 October 1997, "Vlaamse ondernemers vinden van zichzelf dat ze innoveren"; <http://www.kmonet.be/scripts/asp/KMOnet...>

In such a context ICHEC-PME and the SME-department of the Vlerick School of Management elaborated a project which aim was to stimulate the entrepreneurial spirit among students of the third grade (16-18 years old). It was hoped to achieve with this project a better common understanding between companies and schools, between the youth and the professional world by immersing the pupils for at least one day in this world of the SME. This was organised by means of a creative process of establishing their own fictitious company. In this way pupils were forced to think about their future, to consider possible entrepreneurial initiative and to look at the future as a huge possibility instead of a big black deterministic hole which one is to undergo and from which every escape is an illusion.

As stated earlier this is, of course, no project with purposes of fundamental research but rather a best practice testimony which could inspire people who are thinking of setting up similar initiatives to create an entrepreneurial spirit amongst youngsters.

First the methodology to get our message across will be explained. Then an overview of the evaluation by the teachers and the pupils themselves will be given on the basis of which can be concluded that the goals were achieved and that a very helpful tool was developed on which could be built for many other Belgian schools in the near future.

4. AIM

In our opinion it has to be demonstrated to the upcoming generation that the future isn't hopeless if youngsters have the right attitude and the knowledge of what the opportunities are in the professional world.

At this moment in Belgium there are over 60000 vacancies which don't get filled although more than 500000 people are looking for a job.⁷ And the vacancies are rising month after month.⁸ Companies are especially looking for computer specialists, IT-programmers and engineers whereas the number of enrolments for these subjects at our universities has dropped by half last year so there is a clear misfit between offer and demand on the job market partly due to misinformation. Also SMEs have great difficulties to fill their vacancies. We have to inform the youngsters about the opportunities in the professional world and persuade them to make a right choice and have the right attitude.

Everybody can create his or her own "enterprise" in life whether it's a business of their own or a nice career as an employee as long as they are willing to develop their creativity, dynamism, perseverance, problem-solving and social skills. We don't want to create little businessmen because a lot of people feel more at ease as an employee and are not willing or not able to

⁷ Vacature, 12 juni 1998.

⁸ <http://www.kmonet.be/scripts/asp/detail...> : "the organisation for Independent Entrepreneurs has done a survey in April of this year which reveals that 20% of the Flemish SMEs expect to hire extra people this year".

take the risk of creating a business of their own. But the message is the same because “intrapreneurship” within a company is more and more a stringent necessity.

By means of an awareness project and a creativity exercise we hoped to help youngsters to think about their future and give them information which should convince them to believe in themselves and not to await the future but to create it themselves.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Preliminary interviews

Starting a project from scratch every project champion can of course think of a thousand questions that should be answered. It is common knowledge that youth has to be encouraged to be more entrepreneurial and that our present method of teaching in secondary schools, i.e. especially transfer of knowledge which is mainly done ex cathedra and which forces the students to memorise the teaching materials, doesn't meet too well with the demands of a dynamic fast changing society. After nursery class creativity is less and less encouraged and gets a sad burial at our universities where students plough their way through thousands of pages of material which they reproduce at the end of the year in the exams. The first question we had to answer was if the schools were at all interested in such a project. So we conducted some preliminary interviews with some headmasters and teachers during which we wanted to sound out their principal attitude towards the idea.

The outcome of these interviews can be summarised by means of the following catchwords :

- self-support (translation of the Dutch “zelfredzaamheid” which really is the key element of the project) : as job security is considered to be more and more a thing of the past, youngsters have to show resistance, have to take their future into their own hands. The message is : don't wait and see, but create, anticipate your fate! Most schools contacted were conscious of the importance of this message and already organised several events for especially their older students (third grade) such as company visits, publishing of a school paper, anti-drug testimonies by former drug addicts, exchange programs with foreign schools, etc. The project was overall welcomed as being very valuable and school principals and class teachers spontaneously were attracted to support it and co-operate for it.
- involvement : as one principal put it : “There is only one good project and that's a project that is organised by the students themselves”. Because of the particularity of the theme i.e. learning pupils to be more entrepreneurial by augmenting their knowledge of the SME, it was understood that this project could not be left in the hands of the pupils themselves but still their active involvement in the program would be crucial.
- consultation : a project could only be run with success by involving many parties such as the school principals, the teachers, the SMEs and the pupils. This has worked out very well.

- level : you should offer to the parties involved in the project a program that rises the common level of education in the schools. The project needed to have an important added value.
- realistic context : the project should confront the pupils with a situation as realistic as could be possible. It is not enough to bring an entrepreneur in front of the classroom. Entrepreneurs are no teachers. As it is not enough to let the teacher give a theoretical course about the SME and entrepreneurship. There should be a combination of theory and practice.
- planning : schools finalise their teaching schedule one year in advance. So if you want to get your project to fit into that schedule you have to plan it very carefully and contact the schools as early as possible.
- pilot project : Belgium has over 2000 secondary schools which contain over 500.000 pupils. If one wants to develop a project that can cope with these numbers one has to be very carefully prepared. The project has to be as solid as a rock. That's why it was decided to conduct a pilot project first in 8 schools to make sure it works as planned. These interviews formed the framework within the project was developed.

4.2 Creating the project

The authors are academics used to work with entrepreneurs and SMEs and university students but the secondary schools were, apart from the fact that everybody has spent quite some years of his life on its desks, rather unknown territory. So the first thing that had to be done, was getting to know the secondary schools, the way teachers work, the way they behave with their pupils, the decision-making process within a school, the needs of the different parties which were to be involved in the project, etc.

Therefor a steering committee was established in which representatives of seven schools have a seat advising the team on several subjects and operational questions. At the same time team members scanned abroad because Belgium is not a pioneer concerning entrepreneurial education. We found out especially England, Scotland and Canada pay quite some attention to the matter. A visit to Durham University Business School taught us numerous initiatives have already been taken in the North East of the UK to stimulate entrepreneurship, already in primary schools. But after thorough consultation of our steering committee we learnt we could not simply copy and adapt a foreign project but on the contrary we had to develop our own tailor-made project which could answer the needs of the Belgian educational system.

4.3 The Belgian educational system

In Belgium education is a federalised competence. The two regions, the French-speaking Community and the Dutch-speaking Community, can organise their own educational system. But of course the system still relies largely on the basics which were installed when Belgium was still a unitary state. At the end of the fifties Belgium knew what is called in Dutch “de Schoolstrijd” (battle of schools) which resulted in a compromise which should ensure both the

catholic and the liberal block of their own educational network. The catholic block is a traditionally very powerful group which translates this power in a huge socio-economic and political network. The liberal schools totally depend on government support and are commonly called “state schools”. In Flanders the catholic block is by far the strongest entity whereas in Wallonia the free-thinking socialist block is the strongest. Both blocks balance each other out.

A second balance to be taken into account was the balance between the three major directions in education in Belgium : general education, technical secondary schools and vocational secondary schools.

The third balance to be respected was the balance between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking schools.

Because the school year had passed away for its half when starting the operation there was no time to afford a stringent selection of the schools. A mailing was sent to some 40 schools and between the ones that offered their support there was a large majority of catholic schools.

Several state schools were contacted and although they were very much interested they did not manage to fit the project into their schedule.

So in the end the selection of schools looked like this :

- 4 secondary schools in Flanders, 2 in Wallonia and 2 (French-speaking) schools in Brussels
- 3 general education schools, 2 technical schools and 3 who are both technical and vocational schools
- all schools belong to the catholic block however two state schools have their seat in the steering committee and one state school was a close spectator at one of the project days.

Next school year we are planning to reach a much more representative group of schools. It is now planned to run the project in 10% of Belgium’s approximately 2000 secondary schools and reach some 5000 pupils.

4.4 Developing the project

The education system leaves the schools with some freedom to fill up the curriculum. So it was found out that most Flemish schools answering our mailing were what one could describe as project schools. They collaborate on a rather regular basis with enterprises in the neighbourhood and organise all kinds of small projects in which pupils can give their creativity free rein. Illustrations are the organisation of a school pop concert, the publishing of a school journal, the “help your fellow humans”-day (some work for a weekend in an institution for the disabled, others organise a collection for the benefit of a relief centre for the homeless, etc.).

These so-called project schools seem to work together with the companies in the neighbourhood and visit them on a regular basis or invite an entrepreneur to testify in front of a class. You can of course argue that typically the project schools respond to a project such as ours. But most Walloon schools didn’t seem to have a regular contact with the business community (except for one school in Gosselies) so we had to develop two projects : a basic one oriented towards creating awareness, getting to know the business community and a more developed one in which the pupils can already go one step further and think of their own project they want to realise in life and try to concretise it.

4.4.1 The basic project

As pointed out a lot of schools did not have a tradition of working together with companies. For these schools and their teachers and pupils the first step is to bring them together with the business community. We have to confront them with the business reality by means of a company visit accompanied by a testimony by the entrepreneur and several of his/her collaborators. This company visit must of course be thoroughly prepared.

First there is the meeting between the project champion and the school representatives which has several goals :

- explain the aim of the project, the motivations, the tools we use
- create a positive working spirit for co-operation
- adapt the project to the specific needs of the school or class
- make some practical agreements like which teacher will be the internal co-ordinator, the date of the visit, which type of company fits the school best, transport from the school to the company...

Then the school or the project champion contacts the appropriate company, which was selected to be a SME with 5 to 50 employees and 250.000 to 2.5 million ECU turnover, where things can be seen, sensed (i.e. not a sales office, but rather a production plant or a wholesale because you have to offer the pupils something impressive) and which is lead by a charismatic, open-minded entrepreneur who can bring the message across and who has preferably spent his secondary school time on the same school desks.

During the second meeting, between the teachers, the entrepreneur and the project champion the company visit is prepared as well as the contents of the testimonies.

Then of course the project is presented in the classroom. To prepare the company visit the pupils all get a questionnaire which can be adapted by the pupils themselves. We also spread a bilingual album which has the following contents :

- an introduction to the project;
- 15 portraits of Belgian starters, in which they talk about their own school memories, their first job experience, the origin of their business idea, the motivation for starting their own business, the first years in business, the successes and the pitfalls, the demands they place on young applicants...;
- an introduction to the more developed project in which they can create their own fictitious company (cf. infra);
- a reflection on today's economic situation;
- some tests to find out if they have got the right entrepreneurial attitude, followed by a rebus and a crossword with regard to entrepreneurship;
- a guideline for writing their own CV
- some useful addresses (e.g. of export services, consulting initiatives, banks, governmental services...)

- some good advice by some of Belgium's leading businessmen

One week after the company visit the teacher spends one or two hours on a debriefing of the project with the pupils on the base of a questionnaire we developed and which deals with the company visit, the skills of the entrepreneur, the attitude towards their future (which can be compared to the answers they gave during the preparation)...

The basic project was run in 4 schools : two in Brussels and two in Wallonia and more than 200 pupils participated.

4.4.2 The advanced project

This project was conducted in 4 Flemish schools which already had an intense co-operation program with the business community. Together with the school principals and the teachers it was concluded that a more demanding program for their pupils should be developed because company visits and apprenticeships were already part of the existing curriculum.

Therefore we developed a "create your own business"-project which is an exercise which works on the following skills :

- planning : you cannot start a project without a decent preparation. The pupils have to decide, together with the teachers, on which type of company they want to found and for which they have to make a business plan. To be able to fill up a business plan they have to visit a similar company in advance, ask the manager for all kinds of information e.g. about hiring people, finances, costs, selling prices, promotion actions, etc. At the same time they learn to work under time pressure.
- creativity : it is, of course, impossible to foresee all the questions which the start-up of a company contains; so often the pupils haven't gathered all the necessary information in advance so they have to be very creative and logic at the same time in their actions to fill up the plan.
- teamwork : they have to work in groups of maximum 5 people so a division of tasks, co-ordination and sharing of information is necessary.
- responsibility : the pupils can not hide behind each other. Everybody has to do his part of the job, if not they will not be able to get the job done.
- self-knowledge : they have to figure out their stronger and weaker characteristics on the base of which they can appoint tasks amongst the members of the groups.
- social skills : during two hours they have the opportunity to ask all sorts of questions to external specialists (e.g. a banker, an entrepreneur, someone from the administration, a marketer...). They have to come out of their shells and address these professionals with relevant questions.

First a general meeting is held with the interested teachers of all schools to talk about the purpose of the project, the contents, the practical arrangements...

One month before the project each teacher is asked to explain the project to his pupils and to give them a couple of days to decide upon the type of company they would like to establish. At the same time they are handed over the album and the assignment to gather as much information as possible about the working of a company.

The project day is planned as follows :

	DREAM&DO-project schedule
08.20-08.30	A short introduction to the project and its purpose.
08.30-10.15	<u>Interactive course</u> on entrepreneurship, the importance of creativity, independence, teamwork, ... and the aspects of starting your own business. Then the project champion explains the operational aspects of the “create your own business”-part and clarifies and illustrates all relevant management concepts and techniques they need in order to fill in the business plan. We also go shortly through the album and inquire the pupils after their preparation.
10.15-10.30	Pause.
10.30-14.00	<p>In the “Create your own business”-game we stage the start-up of a fictitious company by means of the fulfilment of a business plan.</p> <p>10:45-12:00 u. To fill up the plan the pupils depend on the information they gathered in the weeks preceding the project, on the info we supply them with but in the first place on their own creative ability and the skills of the group.</p> <p>12:00-12:45 u. Pause.</p> <p>12:45-14:00 u. From 12h45 on the pupils are advised and assisted by a “<u>Team of professionals</u>” that will act as a sounding board for the pupils’ plans. In casu the school contacted for each project a banker, an entrepreneur, an amination (social security, taxation, notary,...) expert and a marketer.</p> <p><i>Remark:</i> The pupils make a business plan for a type of company they agreed on, together with the teacher and the principal, in advance.</p>
14.15-16.15	<p>When the pupils have finalised their plan we take them on a company visit to confront them with the real operational aspects of starting a business and the entrepreneur will testify about the attitude an entrepreneur needs to have and the skills an employee needs to have to be employed by him, about the preparation for starting on your own, the support, guidance from those who surround you, the successes and the pitfalls etc.</p> <p><i>Remark:</i> In the mean time the teacher takes a quick look at the business plans to prepare the feedback session.</p>
16.30-17.00	After the company visit a feedback session is held to evaluate the plans ⁹ , the company visit and to see if the aims have been reached.

⁹ The evaluation of the plans is very superficial because the plans are only a means to an end.

17.00	Finish.
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A couple of days later, when they have had the time to let all the information sink in, the pupils fill in an evaluation list with the aim to check the results compared to the objectives of the project.

The objectives are to show these pupils of the third grade that they are able to at least think about starting their own business and to explore for themselves how creative, problem solving, risk-willing, independent, flexible, resistant to stress, well thought-out, innovative they really are.

It is not the aim to turn the pupils into starters but into “small entrepreneurs” whatever working situation they will get into, as an independent or as an employee...

The advanced project was run in four schools, two technical, one vocational and one general school. The vocational school is an agricultural and horticultural school. Independence is a natural thing for these pupils because 90% is the son or daughter of a farmer or market gardener. So we stressed the fact of taking over a business (with all the problems of buying out the rest of the family, valuing the company, etc.) Moreover the economic situation differs from the normal supply and demand. This sector is strongly subsidised and protected, not only on a national basis but also by the European Union. So we adapted the business plan and invited some experts from the agricultural sector.

All together 95 pupils took part.

5. FINDINGS

As we worked out two different projects we will evaluate them also separately.

5.1 The basic project

The evaluation by the pupils of the different tools of the project was as follows:

(1 = bad; 2 = average; 3 = good; 4 = very good; 5 = excellent)

- the album : 3,6
- the company visit : 4
- the entrepreneur's testimony : 4,4
- the extra documents : 2,8
- in the classroom : 2,6

On the question “Would you advise other pupils to take part in the project next year?” 91% answered positive; 5% was negative and 4% had no answer.

So the project itself has been welcomed by the students. Although most of them are still not that anxious to create their own business they almost all say their attitude towards the future

has been changed in a way they are convinced they can influence their own professional career in a positive way and they are willing to do so.

5.2 The advanced project

We presented the students some propositions concerning the project they could evaluate. In footnote you find the score given to the project by the teachers.

73% of the students agreed the project came up to their expectations.¹⁰ Only 10% rather disagreed. These expectations were : “getting to know the professional world”, “how to start a new venture”, “what can we do to improve our future”.

Three out of four approved highly of the project’s schedule¹¹ and 78% preferred the part in which they could work out their own business¹² and would have liked even more time. (We can explain this latter reaction by the fact that most youngsters consider the project a test which they have to perform as good as possible. They cannot make an abstraction from the project itself and consider it a means rather than an end. For them the fulfilment is an end on its own like any other test they have to do at school. It is our task to straighten this out.) 20% considered the company visit as the most important part of the project and 3 out of 4 students considered the company visit as very valuable.

91% of the pupils said the Dream-project gave them an important insight in entrepreneurship and the professional world.¹³ They said they learnt it is not easy to start a business of your own but with a lot of determination you can achieve a lot in life.

40 % said they were now more attracted to an entrepreneurial activity whereas 36% disagreed. Almost one out of four had no opinion.¹⁴ This is a very significant answer. In most surveys you don’t find more than 10% of the youngsters who are attracted to independency. Giving up security is for most of them too much to ask.

90% said they were conscious of the fact a youngster can take life in his/her own hands!

Most of the pupils agreed that the creativity exercise of starting a fictitious company had improved their ability to work out a creative project (81%), to work as a team (71%), to take initiative (77%) and to plan and prepare yourself (58%).¹⁵

5.3 Conclusion

¹⁰ 92% of the teachers agrees the project came up to their expectations.

¹¹ 84% of the teachers

¹² 77% of the teachers

¹³ 100% of the teachers

¹⁴ 42% of the teachers doesn’t know but 41% agrees.

¹⁵ Only 67% of the teachers agrees that the pupils have had the chance to work out a creative project. They stress the fact that most pupils weren’t enough prepared. The necessity of getting the project done before the end of this school year has forced us to go very fast in a couple of schools so preparation time was limited for a number of students. But for next year preparation will be one of our major concerns. But every teacher agrees that the pupils sense of teamwork and initiative have been improved.

As a result of this project we are convinced that showing youngsters a glimpse of the economic reality and convincing them they can create their future as long as they show the right attitude and develop some skills is an immense and important task. Involving the education system, the school principals, the teachers, in this way of thinking is also of vital importance.

The idea of creating awareness through contact with the professional world, of getting the message across by means of a creativity exercise, a company visit, a testimony by an entrepreneur has proven to work in an excellent way.

The enthusiasm amongst all parties involved, the students, the teachers, the school boards and the entrepreneurs has given us the motivation to expand the project to reach as much students as possible in the years to come.