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Suffusing Entrepreneurship Education throughout the Theatre Curriculum

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Entrepreneurship has been a topic of academic inquiry in business schools since at least the 1960s, evolving from how-to courses on starting a small business (Drucker 21). But business schools still consider entrepreneurship to be an emerging—or to be less kind, unrigorous—discipline. Business schools tend not to value entrepreneurship as highly as the more traditional business-school disciplines such as marketing, accountancy, and management when it comes to the ranking of business journals and the tenure reviews such rankings are meant to inform (Kuratko). Perhaps, then, entrepreneurship should not be taught in business schools, but rather within individual disciplines. Engineering schools embraced this intra-disciplinary approach two or more decades ago. Engineering schools develop inventions, and inventors should learn to bring those inventions to market, so engineering schools often teach entrepreneurship. They tend to do so in a way that focuses on the mechanics of entrepreneurship, how to start a business to bring an invention to market. Like inventors in the engineering school, future theatre arts leaders can be educated about entrepreneurship within their theatre curriculum. Theatre artists, be they playwrights, designers, directors, or actors, develop creative products in the form of performances and plays, so they also can be taught—within their disciplines—to bring their creative products to their audiences, and be provided with opportunities to do so while students. Like the “writing across the curriculum” movement of the 1980s, theatre schools can teach *theatre* entrepreneurship across their curricula. Yet, there are significant challenges.

As new as entrepreneurship is to business schools, “*arts* entrepreneurship” is a much newer academic discipline, and one even less clearly defined. In this essay, I will offer several definitions of entrepreneurship, look broadly at academic offerings in the field and how they relate to teaching entrepreneurship within the theatre curriculum, discuss the potential for entrepreneurship education in a theatre arts curriculum, and share some current practices in theatre entrepreneurship education.

One reason that entrepreneurship has not yet matured as a discipline is that the very definition of entrepreneurship is a moving target. French economist Jean-Baptiste Say coined the term entrepreneur in his 1803 *A Treatise on Political Economy* as “the person who takes upon himself the immediate responsibility, risk, and conduct of a concern of industry, whether upon his own or a borrowed capital.” In other words, an entrepreneur, according to Say, is someone who starts a business. Say’s term was translated into the English version of the text as “adventurer.” In Say’s time, “adventurer” may have been taken to mean someone who attends to business, or plays the markets, but for our purposes, the modern connotation of the term, even with its “Indiana Jones” mystique, is more fitting. What are theatre artists if not adventurers? Key to our understanding of the term entrepreneur, and adventurer, is the notion of risk. When one undertakes a “venture,” one undertakes risk in the hope of gaining reward. For the MBA, that reward is measured via the financial balance sheet, but for the MFA, the reward is often the opportunity to practice one’s art.

The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation of Kansas City, which proclaims itself “the foundation of entrepreneurship” and has provided funding to my institution to further entrepreneurship research and education, recognizes the need to define entrepreneurship. It notes in its 2005 “Lessons Learned” white paper that in order to teach entrepreneurship, “[i]t is important to develop a

common definition and understanding of entrepreneurship that is reflective of the school, its goals, and remains true to the nature of entrepreneurship” (Kauffman Foundation 2005). The foundation defines entrepreneurship and related fields as “a set of disciplines interested in the creation, management, and growth of firms in societies” (Kauffman Foundation 2004). The notion of the creation of a “going concern” is popular in the engineering school version of entrepreneurship education. Peter Drucker links entrepreneurship with innovation, writing that “[i]nnovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship. It is the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth” (30). If you substitute “creativity” for “innovation” and “value” for “wealth,” Drucker’s statement becomes both more palatable and more relevant to artists: “Creativity is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship. It is the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create value.” Value can be not only academic, but social and cultural as well. How can I justify such a broad change to Drucker’s statement? By using my institution’s definition of entrepreneurship: “the spirit and process of creative risk taking.” If entrepreneurship is a “spirit”—a “mindset”—backed up by sound management processes, then entrepreneurship is inclusive of mission-based entrepreneurship (entrepreneurship designed to advance a mission rather than generate profit for shareholders) and of arts entrepreneurship.

Two concepts are common to many definitions of entrepreneurship: “risk” and “opportunity.” After synthesizing the various definitions of entrepreneurship, from J.-B. Say’s through the Kauffman Foundation’s and the characteristics of an entrepreneur as outlined by Drucker or the even more business-oriented Timmons and Spinelli, I developed a working definition as a way of linking entrepreneurship to the arts: taking risks (artistic, financial, or personal) to create one’s own opportunities. For a young theatre artist who wants to initiate his/her work and direct his/her career, learning theories and practices of entrepreneurship becomes an important part of training when entrepreneurship is defined in this way. The skills that emerging artists need to recognize or create their own opportunities are teachable skills. Perhaps as relevant as imparting entrepreneurial skills is a need to create an environment for theatre students in which their own initiatives are supported and the risks associated with student-generated projects can be minimized.

Such an environment will not be created in traditional entrepreneurship programs, such as are found in business schools. Business school entrepreneurship education is often center-based as part of a school’s research or service mission, rather than a core educational focus. There are centers for entrepreneurship based in many business schools that offer services to startups and small businesses or conduct research on entrepreneurship. Arizona State University (ASU) has the Spirit of Enterprise Center, UC Berkeley has its Lester Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, and the University of Maryland has its Dingman Center for Entrepreneurship, to name just three. While centers such as these often reach out into their communities, interaction with academic units—especially arts units—is not their focus.

In addition to business schools, engineering schools are sometimes a university’s locus for entrepreneurship education. Such programs tend to focus on technology venture creation. Penn State University offers a minor in engineering entrepreneurship that focuses on high-tech venture creation. Interestingly for this discussion, the website of Penn State’s minor in engineering entrepreneurship states: “We want students to complete the minor with an ‘entrepreneurial mindset,’ meaning they are more creative, better at handling ambiguity, better at teamwork.” These are three attributes we would want our theatre students to possess as well, especially at the graduate level, where they might be considered prerequisites.

Programs in arts entrepreneurship are few and far between. Programs in arts management are sometimes housed in business schools as at Carnegie Mellon, and sometimes in performing arts colleges as at American University or George Mason University, or sometimes they combine the resources of both. But these are programs in management or administration rather than entrepreneurship—programs that focus on how to run an arts organization, not on how to manage the

innovation, ambiguity, and change required to *launch* an arts-based venture or support creativity in the performing arts. There are a handful of programs in arts entrepreneurship, or arts management programs in which arts entrepreneurship is a significant conceptual touchstone of the program of study. Such programs include the Performing Arts Entrepreneurship program at the University of Iowa, which is essentially a degree in theatre, music, or dance with nine credits of entrepreneurship courses from the university's business school, and the Arts Entertainment and Media Management program at Columbia College Chicago, which offers a more holistic approach to a curriculum in arts entrepreneurship. The University of Northern New Mexico offers a program in arts entrepreneurship focused exclusively on the visual arts.

During the last several years, a variety of cross-disciplinary, university-wide programs in entrepreneurship has been developed to meet both student and industry demands. In their white paper "University-wide Entrepreneurship Education: Alternative Models and Current Trends," Deborah Streeter and colleagues describe entrepreneurship programs in two broad categories as "university-wide" and their opposite as "focused" (i.e., housed exclusively in the business school). They proceed to categorize university-wide programs as either "magnet," in which courses are taught in one school or college though taken by students from across the university, or "radiant," in which "the teaching of entrepreneurship is diffused throughout the university" from a central locus (9–10). However, both of these models imply one central organizing administration for entrepreneurship education. Another model for entrepreneurship education combines elements of all three models (focused, magnet, radiant) while maintaining disciplinary autonomy. In such a model, departments or schools teach entrepreneurship principles and practices as appropriate to the discipline of each department, with the financial and marketing support of the central administration—or even without it. Let us call this model "suffused," because as such, entrepreneurial practices and curricula pervade each academic unit. This is the model at ASU, where entrepreneurship education happens in the arts, education, biosciences, and nursing, as well as in the more traditional areas of business or engineering.

What does it mean for a theatre department to teach entrepreneurship within its discipline? There are basic skills of venture creation that can be taught across all disciplines. But to teach arts entrepreneurship *to artists* means to teach them to recognize or create opportunity, manage and direct their careers, and launch their artistic "enterprise."

When I was a freelance designer without academic affiliation over two decades ago, my actor friends and I used to wait for the proverbial phone to ring while waiting tables or working temp jobs. In a good year, the phone might ring often enough. But times change and the climate for theatre artists changes as well. There is more competition and fewer opportunities in traditional theatre forms in the major theatre cities of New York, Seattle, and Chicago than there were then. Yet, as small and medium-sized cities (often on the outskirts of these larger ones) build performing arts facilities, new opportunities arise to produce, perform, direct, design, or teach theatre as these new venues seek community-centered programming. If, for example, an actor is driven to play a specific role in a play he or she loves, why not find a way to mount it him- or herself in such a venue? As educators, we can teach that actor the skills needed to create that opportunity.

One example of a theatre student taking advantage of just such an opportunity is the founding of Progressive Theatre Workshop. With talent, passion, and a new performing arts center in Mesa (the third largest city in Arizona), undergraduate theatre student John Caswell founded the workshop. Caswell had material that he and several collaborators had devised. He recognized that the new Mesa Arts Center was seeking programming and so was able to negotiate a residency for his fledgling company's first season. He formed a 501(c)3 (nonprofit) corporation. Following a successful run in Mesa, the company announced a second season, featuring three new works. This second season was, however, in a different location—another new performing arts facility—in south Scottsdale, an area geographically closer to the company's alternative-theatre audience base. The opportunity afforded by a community arts center in need of programming helped Caswell to launch

his company, and his understanding of his audience base will help him sustain it. As a measure of the company's artistic as well as entrepreneurial success, I note that it has been accepted into the New York Fringe Festival.

Recognizing opportunity usually involves an understanding of market need. That recognition can happen on a local level. Two graduate theatre students, Jonathan Beller and Patrick Demers, recognized that downtown Phoenix lacked a means for showcasing performances that were not connected with the institutional theatres in residence at the Herberger Theatre Center. While the visual arts community of downtown Phoenix had a tradition of "first Friday" art-walk showcases, there was no analogous outlet for alternative performance. To meet this perceived need, the pair launched the Phoenix Fringe Festival. The inaugural festival featured fourteen artists and theatre companies, seven of which played to over 85 percent capacity. Based on interest generated by the inaugural festival, the team scheduled the second annual Phoenix Fringe Festival to accommodate twice as many performances and to expand its artist base nationally.

There are numerous ways in which a theatre curriculum can support the creativity and initiative of students like Caswell, Beller, and Demers. Courses in audition techniques are not new to the theatre curriculum, but there are few courses that teach students how to manage their careers. Theatre artists intent on starting a company or on a freelance career—itsself a form of entrepreneurship—can learn about marketing, negotiating contracts, legal and tax issues, and even wellness techniques for sustaining their careers. Furthermore, in teaching marketing to designers, actors, and directors, the students have the incentive to clarify their vision of the theatre and their potential to make unique contributions to the discipline. It is in finding their uniqueness that theatre artists will find their marketability—talent being a necessary prerequisite, of course. A class, or at minimum a workshop, on marketing communication can convey the importance of clarity of message, of identifying the audience for the message, and of developing an effective strategy for bringing the message to their audience of casting agents, producers, directors, and other potential collaborators or employers.

Negotiation is another important skill for artists undertaking a freelance career. Designers and directors are often in a position to negotiate their own contracts with production companies or independent producers, even when they have the benefit of union or guild membership. Actors may need to negotiate with casting agents and managers, as well as with producers or directors. Negotiation skills can be taught in a workshop or as a unit within a class on career development. Role-playing is an effective means of teaching negotiation skills, and actors are particularly successful at learning through role-playing.

A workshop on legal and tax issues for freelance theatre artists is another unit to include in coursework on career management. A CPA can be brought in, often on a pro bono basis, to provide theatre students with a primer on estimating a freelancer's quarterly tax burden, expense deductibles, and the like. An entertainment-law attorney can introduce students to intellectual-property issues, contracts, and the various business models and organizational structures an entrepreneurial theatre artist may want to undertake. Many larger communities have lawyers willing to do pro bono work for artists through affiliation with "Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts," which also operates a hotline. A theatrical designer, for example, may find it advantageous, after consulting with an attorney or tax professional, to form a limited liability company (LLC) or, if his or her practice becomes large and diversified, a type-S corporation.

It is in this last area, starting an arts-based business, that traditional entrepreneurship education can be useful for the emerging theatre artist. Traditional entrepreneurship education focuses largely on venture creation: assessment of risk, development of a business plan, financing, marketing, and management. The student serious about starting an arts-based business, beyond the individual artist trying to limit his or her liability, may want to take that course in traditional entrepreneurship; or, if a course specifically in arts entrepreneurship is available, the requisite skills can be introduced in that format.

Several courses on theatre entrepreneurship have been offered by ASU for as long as a decade. Therefore the climate was ripe to expand its theatre and arts entrepreneurship offerings when the university received a substantial grant from the Kauffman Foundation in 2006. While both the spirit and practice of theatre entrepreneurship had been suffused throughout its curricula for many years, the grant enabled the ASU School of Theatre and Film to expand its course offerings and initiate an arts entrepreneurship incubator program. The foundational theatre entrepreneurship courses that predate the receipt of the Kauffman Foundation grant to ASU include Theatre Organization and Management, Audition Techniques and Career Development, and, in the most experiential of its theatre entrepreneurship classes, Student Production Board (SPB).

In the SPB class, twelve students, chosen from approximately twenty applications each semester, form a collective board that produces a season of plays in a black-box theatre. Essentially, the students run a theatre, albeit with some guidance from a faculty associate. Additional students participate on a project basis as actors, designer, directors, and staff. Although the core group of twelve students operates under collective artistic leadership, students choose or are assigned to key positions such as general manager (responsible for fiscal operations), marketing manager, literary manager (responsible for soliciting proposals and the season selection process, if not the selection itself), technical director, and production managers for each production. Students holding these positions have generally been involved with SPB for more than one semester, and they are each assisted by a student new to the program. In this way, there is a built-in succession plan as well as a fair amount of peer mentoring. The faculty of the course introduce content that complements and enhances the experiential learning component of the course. These topic areas, which vary from semester to semester, may include grant writing, personnel management, marketing strategies, or facilities planning, this latter undertaken while the black-box theatre was undergoing renovation. Significant time is spent at the beginning of each academic year on evaluation of the mission of the board's Prism Theatre, and the students' vision for achieving that mission. Each semester, time is devoted to the programming of and marketing plan for the subsequent semester's season.

The productions mounted by the group, while sometimes rough in their execution, often sell well (upwards of 80 percent capacity). Unlike the box-office receipts of the school's subscription or "mainstage" season, the student production board retains 100 percent of its box-office receipts. Students can therefore be taught to see the direct relationship between season selection and budget, a relationship they will encounter in the notoriously underfunded arena of professional not-for-profit theatre. Student feedback on the class is uniformly positive. Student evaluations often include comments like "I learned SO much about running a theatre company"; "Helped us become better problem solvers and communicators"; "I loved the grant work"; and "This class is an invaluable experience that cannot be had with any other class."

Combining content with experiential learning is challenging—there are pitfalls. One is the problems that will result from the operational inexperience of the students. For example, a fall 2007 production had to be cancelled when the student literary manager neglected to secure the production rights to a script. Another pitfall is less concrete and arises from the fact that twelve students are selected from twenty or more applicants to join the SPB. Such internal selectivity breeds a certain amount of elitism that can be poisonous to the morale of a large theatre school. Yet there are remedies for this problem as well. Students may only take the course two semesters in a row, for example, which ensures that the makeup of the board changes and shifts at least every year, if not every semester. Another problem that has developed—and is being remedied—is the need to teach the students some essential though quite basic skills of budgeting, scheduling, and personnel and production management in order to enable them to operate a working theatre. This leaves little time in a given semester for addressing topics such as leadership, development, and policy. We recently instituted a prerequisite to the SPB course titled Theatre Organization and Management. This latter course, which like SPB preceded ASU's "Kauffman Campus" designation, is also part of the overall suffusion of theatre entrepreneurship into the curriculum, but until now had not been connected to

the experientially based SPB. The board leadership, about half of the twelve to fifteen students, will take SPB as an upper-division course with the management prerequisite, while students who have not had Theatre Organization and Management can participate in SPB by taking a lower-division course that does not include leadership or management duties of the theatre.

Since its inception, the course has a good track record of producing self-motivated and successful theatre artists and managers. Student production board alumni have gone on to careers both in the region and nationally in cities such as New York, where an alumnus has been working as a designer with Basil Twist; San Francisco, where another works in the administration of the San Francisco Mime Troupe; and, of course, Phoenix, where another is associate director of the state arts commission.

The Theatre Organization and Management course, taught by the faculty production manager, covers topics such as not-for-profit status, incorporation, human-resource issues, boards and organizational structures, budgeting, development, marketing, FOH (front-of-house) operations, career management, and others. Given the breadth of the course, students are introduced to key concepts though are not able to explore any one of them in great depth. A student interested in an in-depth study of marketing, for example, would have to go to the marketing department. Yet this broad study of Theatre Organization and Management is foundational for a student pursuing a career in the performing arts, even if the student has no intention of founding or managing a theatre. As the syllabus states: "We will look at most topics from the perspective of an individual working in an organization, either as an employee or a contractor, *and* from the perspective of an organization's management, and the various rights and responsibilities included therein" (Coffman). Many alumni of this course have gone on to careers in stage management, while others have applied the organizational and management principles learned in the class to their careers as actors or designers.

Arguably, the most narrowly focused of our formal courses in arts entrepreneurship is Audition Techniques and Career Development. What distinguishes this course from a straightforward audition-techniques class is that three of the five course objectives are to: 1) formulate a career objective and plan; 2) establish contact with professional theatre and/or film companies; and 3) demonstrate the ability to write an arts grant application. These three objectives are clearly entrepreneurial, as they involve seeking, recognizing, and *creating* opportunity.

As a stand-alone course, however, Arts Entrepreneurship was taught for the first time during the fall 2007 semester. This trans-disciplinary course relies heavily on guest arts entrepreneurs, who share their start-up stories with the class. The case-study approach is a common method for teaching entrepreneurship in business schools, and is adapted here for the arts-oriented student constituency. Another focus of the class is development of mission and vision: the culminating project of the course is not a full-blown business plan, as one might expect from the business school model of entrepreneurship education, but rather the development of a thoughtful and well-articulated mission and vision for an arts-based venture.

Because our program defines entrepreneurship, in part, as opportunity creation, we want to provide our students not only with courses that focus on the skills they will need to create their own opportunities, but also provide the actual possibility for doing so. Many business schools have small-business incubator projects that supply startups with office space, coaching, and a small amount of financial support for initial operations. Modeled on such programs, ASU has launched "p.a.v.e.," the performing arts venture experience, which is an incubator for arts-based ventures and projects. This program has several facets, including enhancement of the formal courses described earlier, a guest-speaker series, and the incubation of entrepreneurial activities or direct investment in student creativity and innovation. What this means is that students can apply to the program and receive up to \$5,000 in funding to help launch an arts project or arts-based business. The Phoenix Fringe Festival and Progressive Theatre Workshop described earlier are two projects that were successfully launched

with seed money from the p.a.v.e. program. While it may be possible for a theatre program to offer entrepreneurship coursework without additional resources by refocusing its electives or reassigning faculty internally, an arts-venture incubator does require additional financial resources.

The p.a.v.e. incubator encourages both innovation and interdisciplinarity. Proposals need not come from a student in the theatre program—the program is open to all students at the university. In evaluating proposals, the project team counts for 25 percent of the overall score. Applicant teams are asked to demonstrate that the team has the ability to carry out the project, from artistic creation through fiscal management and marketing. Interdisciplinary teams rank more highly than narrowly focused or one-person projects. (Other factors are project description, innovation, sustainability, and budget.) We want to provide an incentive for students to collaborate with one another and across traditional boundaries, because the emerging artistic visionary will need to engage with experts in other fields such as marketing or accountancy in order to sustain a successful arts-based endeavor. We teach this lesson to our students, in part, by providing the incentive to collaborate across traditional disciplines in the application process.

The teaching that takes place is not only via the granting and oversight of funds. Although not linked to a specific class, the p.a.v.e. program offers formal workshops for students interested in applying to it. These workshops explain the focus of the program and walk students through the application process. The workshops also cover grant writing more generally and introduce students to not-for-profit management principles. Many students who attend the workshops, especially those from fine arts disciplines, comment on how important these skills are as a complement to their studio training.

Asking and expecting students to be innovative is challenging for teacher and student alike. Is it possible to “teach” innovation? Or should it be our intent to create an environment in which innovation can happen and be supported? The p.a.v.e. program strives to do the latter. Project proposals must do at least one of the following:

- Advance innovative forms of creative expression through filmmaking, live performance, or artistic expression.
- Combine existing disciplinary knowledge in unique and original ways.
- Make innovative use of existing technologies to support the creation of filmed or live performance projects.
- Develop new technology for the creation, delivery, or dissemination of filmed or live performance.
- Initiate the creation of new business models to advance and support the arts.
- Create and develop innovative arts-education concepts and programs, either within the university or in the broader community.

Examples of student projects that have been launched with start-up funding include the theatre company and festival described earlier, a film- and video-marketing company, and an interactive art installation exploring sustainable energy sources. Projects still in their formative phases include a collaboration between a dancer and software engineer to develop a software interface to record and provide real-time feedback to dancers/choreographers and a music video—production firm.

Once funded, the student arts entrepreneurs are closely mentored. Many projects are funded in phases to ensure that the project meets individually designed benchmarks for progress. For example, the Phoenix Fringe Festival team received a small amount of funding initially, but after submitting its marketing plan for review by the steering committee, received more substantial funding to actualize and implement the plan. Team leaders meet monthly (at least) with a project mentor, usually a member of the selection committee, who has been matched with the team due to his or her own unique skill sets.

Sustainability of a project is another factor we consider in determining funding. Will the venture be a sustainable entity as the Phoenix Fringe Festival and Progressive Theatre Workshop appear to be? If so, then we will achieve the twofold goal of advancing the performing arts as a discipline and enriching the culture (and economy) of our city.

Entrepreneurship is not a dirty word. To be entrepreneurial, a theatre artist does not need to “sell out” to business interests. On the contrary, the theatre artist instead can *exploit* business knowledge and business practices to create opportunities for creative practice. As theatre educators, we can provide our students—the next generation of theatre artists and scholars—with skills to harness an entrepreneurial spirit to further artistic goals. By suffusing entrepreneurship education into the theatre curriculum, students will be better prepared to manage the complexity and ambiguity of a theatrical career.

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