



An Essay: Build Your Own from the Ground Up

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ABSTRACT

Which teaching method is best? The answer to this question depends upon whom, what, and when you are teaching; it also depends on where you want to begin a nascent entrepreneur's education: start with business basics or opportunity recognition? The approach recommended in this paper supports the development of rural entrepreneurship by providing an answer for the initial type of entrepreneurship program for people beyond the reach of an urban university. This essay presents an active and personalized approach to learning four essential competencies nascent entrepreneurs need in order to launch their first venture as well as any subsequent ventures; forsaking the passive learning approach wherein teachers lecture while students listen, read textbooks, and complete assignments. The four competencies are imagination, creativity, innovations, and entrepreneurial aspirations; essential competencies for the development of any viable business enterprise. The curriculum can be delivered solely as an online course or blended with the support of a team and facilitator as the "Build Your Own from the Ground Up" curriculum engages students to practice the techniques, skills, and competences required to tap their imagination and to mold the best ideas into the beginning of a via business enterprise.

Key Words: Entrepreneur, education, imagination, creativity.

INTRODUCTION

All innovation begins with creative ideas . . . We define innovation as the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization. In this view, creativity by individuals and teams is a starting point for innovation; (Amabile, et al, 1996)

"Entrepreneurs are pioneers, innovators, leaders and inventors. They are at the forefront of technological, economic and social movements – in their fields, in their forward thinking, in their desire to push forward. They are dreamers and most importantly – doers" (Turay, 2017).

“Follow your dreams” is a common adage used by entrepreneurship educators, but this advice is no more helpful than telling your students to “stay healthy;” as neither advice will tell the student how to stay healthy or how to follow their dream. In order to follow their dreams, the important question for students to answer is “Where does their business dreams come from?” immediately followed by a second, equally important, question: “How will my dreams inspire my entrepreneurial aspirations?”. Also relevant, the top question for educators is how to create an educational environment to facilitate the student’s discovery process.

The business plan has become the backbone for entrepreneurship education; presented in whole or in parts, the business plan is recognized as the indisputable tool for entrepreneurial success. The merits of this claim are subject to debate, but business plans are important at certain times and under certain conditions; so students should learn about business plans and become skilled at writing and presenting a business plan. But will business plans enable students to discover their dreams and to convert those dreams into aspirations? A positive answer to this question is highly unlikely as a business plan presumes that the entrepreneur’s dreams and aspirations have already been solidified into, at least, a rough-cut diamond; the business plan will then polish that diamond to make it appealing to investors, partners, and bankers.

Innovation, creativity, and product development courses are also commonly offered in top entrepreneurship curricula; these courses certainly provide a better environment for students to “follow their dreams,” but these courses equally presume that the student has already established, in at least a robust manner, what their entrepreneurial aspiration is. Similar to business plans, these courses are also valuable and an important learning experience for the student. However, based on the author’s experience, none of these courses engage the student in the personal journey of investigating their dreams by nurturing their imagination as most courses use an analytical and rational approach rather than a more personal and intuitive approach void of any rigid accept-reject criteria. From an academic perspective, delving into a person’s imaginative dreams can be a messy and circular process; certainly too personal for the typical classroom. Yet, dreams, our imagination in its most raw stage, is the source of our inspiration; and imagination as Albert Einstein states, encircles the world:

I’m enough of an artist to draw freely on my imagination, which I think is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.

Albert Einstein

1. BUILD YOUR OWN FROM THE GROUND UP

The approach presented in this article is illustrated by the four steps shown in Diagram 1 – “Build Your Own from the Ground Up:”

Imagination → Creativity → Innovation → Entrepreneurial

Diagram 1 – Build Your Own from the Ground Up

One strong aspect of this approach is that a student can complete the following curriculum within a few weeks, depending upon how long a student wishes to linger on certain aspects of the curriculum. For example, the words “creativity” and “innovation” do not indicate that the student will be taking a course in creativity or a course in innovation. Instead, the program is designed to expose and engage the student in relevant aspects of creativity thinking and innovative behavior in order to achieve the principal objective of nurturing their dreams, stimulating their imagination so as to create the underpinnings for their entrepreneurial aspirations. Rather than being taught creativity and innovation theory and the leading models of each; instead, students are engaged in creativity and innovation exercises in order to transform their dreams in entrepreneurial aspirations. The curriculum is like training athletes to excel; athletes gain few practical skills from knowing the theoretical foundations for their exercise, which is the coach’s responsibility; instead, athletes need to practice, practice, and practice the requisite skills as practice helps them achieve near perfect execution during a game.

A second strong aspect of this approach is the use of imagination as the source for discovering new horizons as an active mind filled with dreams. “‘The content of dreams,’ says Stickgold of Harvard, ‘is part of an evolved mechanism for looking at the larger significance of new memories and how they could be useful in the future’” (Finkel, 2018). Experts tell us that our human brain is running 24 hours a day, even while we sleep; we cannot turn off our brain. In fact, our brain works especially hard during sleep, processing your ideas and solving our problems with no explicit effort on our part. Likewise, experts tell us that sleep improves our performance, memory, and learning: “The waking brain is optimized for collecting information, the sleeping brain for consolidating. At night we switch from recording to editing. . . . Like an artist ensconced in a secret studio, our mind appears to experiment without inhibition, let loose on its own personal mission” (Finkel, 2018).

Our brain is such a rich source for our dreams, stimulating our imagination, because our brain is a vast resource containing many regions that are connected by some 100,000 miles of fibers called white matter, enough to circle the Earth four times: “Neurons, some 86 billion of them, are the cells that form the World Wide Web of the brain, communicating with each other via

electrical and chemical signals” (Finkel, 2018); each time you learn something new a physical change occurs in the brain by forming a new connection between neurons.

Following is an explanation of each step in the “Build your own from the ground up” process; followed by a suggested curriculum for the students.

Imagination - We all have imagination within us; that is what makes us human. *Imagination is the ability to form images, ideas, and sensations in the mind without immediate input of the senses: hearing, seeing, or touching. Imagination, not being limited to the acquisition of exact knowledge, is largely free from objective restraints. (Wikipedia, 2018)* We rely on the imagination for knowledge of possibility and that imagining is perhaps clearest in dreaming, where our minds churn up an entire virtual reality for us to experience when we sleep; dreaming is the awareness of being in an imagined world in which things happen. Day dreaming is routinely dismissed as a waste of time but there is profound power in make-believe.

Experts also tell us that imagination is the source of fresh, new ideas which feeds creativity as imagination draws on our experiences and knowledge of the world around us, without restraints, friction, or barriers, and combines them with the yet-to-be-discovered thoughts; to create a new idea of something that could be made. In addition, imagination allows us to modify and develop our surroundings and to create and invent new ideas, new structures, and new technologies.

“Nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible” (Hume, 1739). Whatever can be conceived is possible; whatever is possible can be conceived.

Imagination’s Link to Creativity - Imagination provides viable ideas; ideas not tried before but are within the realm of possibility. “The best way to come up with creative ideas is to come up with a lot of ideas. Ideas for the creative mind are like buying lottery tickets: The more tickets you buy, the more likely you will succeed.” (Sawyer, 2013) A very large proportion of the time the idea will fail; even failures themselves can be valuable and the source of more ideas (Matthews and Brueggerman, 2015, p152), because creativity is an iterative process of trial and error; it takes a large number of ideas to generate a small number of high-value and viable ideas. Imagination is the leading source of fresh and viable ideas.

Creativity - Creativity is identified as one of the leading competencies needed to successfully navigate our increasingly complex world. In this program, creativity is the ability to assess a particular idea, produced by imagination, to expand on it in an interesting and novel way as creativity is commonly as “. . . the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, (and/or) relationships (in order) . . . to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, (or) interpretations . . . “ (Dictionary.com).

The key distinction between imagination and creativity is input from the senses: Imagination is most productive when free of any constraints from the senses; whereas, creativity thrives on the abundance of input from the senses. Imagination and creativity share the same attribute as an innate ability present in every human being, and both imagination and creativity benefit from experience and education.

Five creativity competencies that drive creativity are playing, association, and choosing, making, and pivoting. Creativity is a dynamic, interaction process that can be improved through deliberate practice; creativity can be cultivated through curiosity, training and specific exercise designed to foster the assessment of imaginative ideas; likewise, we know that creativity can be inhibited through rote memorization and overemphasis on standardized testing. (Matthews and Brueggemann, 2015, p158)

Playing: Play is not just kid stuff: it's a complex behavior that is driving the creation of life-altering technologies and companies (Matthews, 2015, p159). By adopting a more playful mindset we're more willing to take risks, explore possibilities, and learn to navigate uncertainty. During the early stages of idea development, we should emulate children at play as children play at two levels: first, they use role playing to act out what they have developed in their imagination, and at the second level they play again with their make-believe situation by acting as if what they have developed an actual reality (Goldman, 1998). We could call this the "imaginary prototype" and would certainly be much cheaper than building an actual prototype for every imaginative idea.

Association: "Creative minds are always bouncing ideas together, looking for unexpected combinations. Successful creativity never comes from a single idea. It always comes from any ideas in combination, whether we recognize them or not. The creative life doesn't box its concepts into separate compartments; it fuses and re-fuses them" (Sawyer, 2013).

Choosing: The act of choosing is the process of prioritizing the imaginative ideas that have value to progress forward (Matthews, 2015, p161). "A creative mind is lived in balance, held steady by the constant tension between uncritical, wide-open idea generation (brainstorming, done right) and critical examination and editing. Choosing is essential, because not all ideas and combinations are ideal for your purposes. The key is to use the right criteria to critique them, so you can cull the best and discard any that would prove inferior, awkward, or a waste of your time" (Sawyer, 2013).

Making: In making, you transition from a low-resolution to high-resolution prototype; in making a draft, a drawing, a prototype, a plan, helps you fuse your ideas, choose among them, and build on what you like (Matthews/Brueggemann, 2015, p162).

Pivoting: Pivoting refers to a change in strategy or direction brought about by the ongoing search for the solution to a problem that adds value for potential customers. . . . Pivoting occurs when individuals . . . sense there is a need for change, and the time is right to take the risk and change direction. . . .When you pivot, you are making a jump with the expectation that you will land successfully.” (Matthews/Brueggemann, 2015, p163).

Imagination and Creativity’s Link to Innovation: “Imagination is the cultivation of ideas that are not present in our senses. Creativity is the ability to generate ideas that have value – aesthetic, cultural, economic, legal, political, societal, environmental, educational, and technological. Creativity is achieved through expertise, questioning, observations, networking, experimentation, and association resulting in actionable insights; creations. Imagination and creativity are predecessors to innovation, the transformation of ideas into results” (Matthews/Brueggemann, 2015, p30).

Innovation - “Innovation creates change; it disrupts the status quo, but it does not automatically translate to entrepreneurship or a new business. . . . innovation is only achieved when the idea has been transferred into an outcome which has value” (Turay, 2017). The innovation process tests the creative ideas for its commercial viability. There are five commonly accepted standards that a creative idea must meet in order to be considered viable as a commercial product or service, i.e., diffusion of innovation: relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 1995). These thinking skills are critical to successful innovation.

Also, according to Matthews and Brueggemann, the innovation process exposes the pull-push tension that is in all of us, and this tension directly impacts our thinking. The pull consists of the myths, mistaken beliefs, and misperceptions we acquire during life experiences; the push is the skills we use to think. Our greatest challenge to being innovative is the myths, mistaken beliefs, and misperceptions we acquired from our life experiences; the pull is our developed skills of innovative thinking.

Innovation’s Link with Entrepreneurial Aspirations: “Innovation and entrepreneurship are two closely related words used in today’s global village. Some may think they mean the same, but using them interchangeably would be making a big mistake” (Turay, 2017). Turay explains that innovation is applying your creativity to come up with a unique solution as progress depends on innovation. Whereas the ingredients of an entrepreneur include the appetite for risk and the ability to spot opportunities; to minimize red tape and other procedural hurdles; to continually challenge the status quo.

Entrepreneurial Aspirations - An entrepreneurial aspiration is described by Professor Howard Stevenson as “. . . the pursuit of opportunity beyond the resources you currently control”

(Stevenson, 1983). What does this tell us about the entrepreneur? An Entrepreneur has specific competences in order to make a successful pursuit; pursuit means that the entrepreneur has the skills to implement, take action, thereby create structure, i.e., a firm; to implement the innovation; “beyond resources controlled” makes the entrepreneur an arbitrageur of underutilized resources in one market for use in pursuit of opportunity in another market to capture value. All this action emulates from the opportunity identified via the innovative process.

Many scholars have linked the entrepreneur’s actions with the opportunities they pursue: “. . . opportunities are created endogenously by the actions of entrepreneurs (Alvarez & Barney, 2007); an opportunity represents a stream of continuously developed and modified ideas (Davidsson, 2003; Dimov, 2007b); an opportunity cannot be separated from the individual (Companys & McMullen, 2007; Dimov, 2007a; Sarason, Dean, & Dillard, 2006); an opportunity is intertwined with individual beliefs (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Shepherd, McMullen, & Jennings, 2007); and an opportunity exists only in the entrepreneur's imagination (Klein, 2008; Shackle, 1955)” (Dimov, 2017).

However, does a person become an entrepreneur by simply printing a business card? No. An entrepreneur’s journey starts with their dreams and imagination, refining their aspirations through creative and innovative thinking, to create a vision for their new venture. The path to creating the vision is ambiguous, circular, and fuzzy, at times, but the vision, i.e., the entrepreneur’s aspiration, unfolds with clarity; identifying the opportunity to be pursued.

Once the vision, the opportunity, has been identified, two important questions must be answered: “Does structure beget action? Or does action beget structure?” In other words, should the entrepreneur write a business plan prior to initiating the action of creating a new venture, or if the entrepreneur just begins to create his or her new venture without a written plan, will that action create structure? The answer to both questions is: “It does not matter whether an entrepreneur begins with a plan or action.” An entrepreneur can certainly delay implementation until he or she has completed a business plan as that plan will certainly be a guide for implementation; or the entrepreneur can simply start implementing; develop a prototype and begin contacting potential customers as this action by the entrepreneur will create a structure upon which the future development of his or her firm will be built; as it is impossible to act without creating a structure for that action. Successful ventures have been started using either method as many businesses have been started based on a sketch and notes written on a restaurant napkin while other ventures were started based on a detailed business plan.

Dimov provides insights regarding the effect of an entrepreneurial pursuit: “. . .the opportunity which the entrepreneur pursues becomes instituted in existing market structures . . . (with)

newly forged market relationships by the entrepreneur—that gradually coalesce to reveal the newly established venture. Through these footprints an opportunity becomes realized—it moves from being a product of the aspiring entrepreneur's imagination to becoming a self-sustaining, organized set of market exchange activities that gradually becomes independent of its progenitor” (Dimov, 2017).

2. CURRICULUM: BUILD YOUR OWN FROM THE GROUND UP

Following is the curriculum for the “Build Your Own from the Ground Up” program. The following curriculum is intended to be the shortest path between dreams and venture creation; the time to complete each course is only a function of the student who is taking the course; measured in weeks rather than months or years as are many university entrepreneurship programs.

Step One: Tap the resources of your imagination - During the next few days, let your mind wonder about what the most attractive version of your idea would look like. Let your mind wander, dream, and imagine. What thoughts come to your mind? Keep a notebook and pen within reach and write down every thought you can image about your idea. This will be your private notebook, so write down all your thoughts; without filtering or editing them. Some of those thoughts may make you smile, because those thoughts bring you pleasure; other thoughts may make you laugh, because they seem so foolish; some thoughts may make you scared, because they seem so unrealistic yet exciting; while some thoughts may make you sad, because you see some people are hurting due to the lack of your idea.

Do the above during your daytime hours, but your mind is active 24 hours a day; it is running constantly; you can't shut it off. So before you go to sleep at night, give your imagination something to do. Tell your imagination the most difficult task that you see to bringing your idea to life; or, you can tell your imagination what you really want to achieve, asking your imagination for advice. Before you turn off your bedroom light, be sure that your notebook and pen are beside your bed. Be assured that your imagination will awaken you with an answer. You may be awakened during the middle of the night or early morning; in either case, you will have your notebook and pen next to you so you can record your imagination's answer.

Continue to let your imagination work until you are exhausted from writing down all the great ideas your imagination has given to you.

Step 2: Let your creativity assess your imaginative ideas - Creativity is a deliberate act of assessing the ideas provided by the imagination as well as other sources.

There are many creativity exercises available to develop the student's creativity skills, but the five skills of play, association, choosing, making, and pivoting are a great starting point. If the student wants to dedicate additional time for the assessment of their imaginative ideas, other creativity techniques can be offered to the student. A good approach is to include only a few skills for the course, but provide them with other exercises that they can do on their own or with their team members in order to continue developing their creativity skills.

Step 3: Is your creative idea an innovation? - This step will apply rigorous thinking to the best ideas assessed by creativity. At this step in the process, students' critical thinking skills will be developed, and the students will be expected to apply the five variables used to determine their innovative product's rate of adoption, i.e., a marketable innovation: relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and observability.

Step 4: Building from the ground up – The “Business Model Canvas” (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010) is fun to use as Canvas still allows the use of the five leading creativity skills; unlike a more serious attitude used when writing a business plan.

Comment: Students could begin with the Business Model Canvas, but to make effective use of the Canvas, students would still be engaged with doing the previous three steps of imagination, creativity, and innovation simultaneously in order to gain the full advantage of using the Canvas. Some students may have the capability to do a terrific job of creating their Canvas while simultaneously doing imaginative thinking, creativity assessments, and the critical thinking required by the innovation process, but proficiency is also an objective; and proficiency in imaginative thinking, creativity assessments, and critical thinking are best learned as individual skills, rather than simultaneously with the development of a fourth skill: entrepreneurial aspirations.

An appropriate analogy is the training of a basketball player: A basketball player can practice the three important skills of dribbling, passing, and shooting while playing a pre-season game, but that same player will excel if practice time is dedicated to the development of each skill individually; as there are many different types of dribbles, passes, and shots, and it unlikely that a pre-season game will allow sufficient time for the player to become proficient at each skill or practice all variations of the particular skill.

Consequently, the educational program should be designed to include the first three steps: In order for a student to do a terrific job using Canvas, they will still have to learn the imagination, creativity, and innovation skills; failing to engage them in the first three steps, will cause a delay in completing the Canvas in order to engage the students in learning about imagination, creativity, and innovation.

3. CONCLUSION

The first and most important question for the education of a nascent entrepreneur is “Where should the education begin?” The answer provided in this essay is that the education should begin with helping the nascent entrepreneur tap the most valuable resource they already own, their imagination, and guide them through the development of those imaginative ideas into a viable business concept that will inspire their entrepreneurial aspirations.

Imagination is the cultivation of ideas that are not present in our senses. Creativity is the ability to generate ideas that have value – aesthetic, cultural, economic, legal, political, societal, environmental, educational, and experimental. Creativity is achieved through expertise, questioning, observation, networking, experimentation, and association resulting in actionable insights: creations (Dyer, et. al., 2009). Imagination and creativity are predecessors to innovation, the transformation of ideas into results (Matthews and Brueggemann, 2015, p30).

The second important educational question concerns the type of business start-up. Is the education intended to help an individual start a me-too business, i.e., hot dog stand like others in the neighborhood or start a business offering a product or service with an improved feature or new in some manner so as to create an immutable competitive edge? The second option is the intended outcome of the recommended program.

The third important aspect of this program is the vast array of techniques that can be used to facilitate the student’s learning during each step; combined with the fact that the student needs to master only a few techniques. Consequently, the vast array provides a rich cache of techniques to draw upon which presents many alternative techniques to draw upon so as to meet the needs of the students in any time, place, or situation; making the techniques adaptable to nearly any culture or situation.

The recommended curriculum is deceptively simple, easy to design into an online course, yet produces powerful results as the curriculum seeks to tap the most powerful and uniquely human resource: imagination.

Imagination is an extraordinary power. Creativity expert Ken Robinson defines imagination as “the ability to bring to mind things that are not present in our senses.” Our imagination provides us the opportunity to travel through time, looking back to *what was*, to the present to *what is*, and into the future to *what*

might be. According to Karen Weintraub of *USA Today*. (Matthews and Brueggemann, 2015, p30)

Academics can certainly design a more in-depth and comprehensive curriculum for the aspiring entrepreneur as there is a wealth of material, actually an abundance of material, about each of the four steps in the recommended “Build Your Own from the Ground Up” program. At urban universities, academics have the advantage of having a captive student and time measured in 16-week semesters rather than 24-hour days. By its very nature, academics are drawn to their responsibly to be thorough and comprehensive; doing their best to convince their students that their teachings are well-grounded. The public expects no less. However, academics driven in this way are likely to create a professor-centric, passive-student course design. Such a design may be appropriate for certain topics, at certain times, and in certain places.

However, such a professor-centric and passive-student approach would make the program boring for the nascent entrepreneur in a rural setting. Instead, the academic should behave like a coach, e.g., a basketball coach, who understands the theory and maintains a cache of all possible drills, but uses theory and experience to select the best drills for dribbling, passing, and shooting; drills designed for players at each stage of their development; the recommended curriculum is designed for the nascent entrepreneur in a rural setting with few abundant and self-evident resources and beyond the wealth of resources provided on the typical university campus.

SUGGESTIONS

The Build Your Own program can be implemented on a university campus, but the program is intended for nascent entrepreneurs in a rural setting where the abundance of resources are scant; educational opportunities severely limited; and new business start-up emulate existing businesses creating oversupply rather than diversity. This program taps one abundant resource residing in all rural settings: people’s imagination; with their imagination, scant resources are viewed with abundance to create many and varied opportunities; the limited educational opportunities are greatly expanded via self-selected, self-motivated, and self-paced learners with the help of a facilitator, mentor, and peers; the nascent entrepreneur learns how to emulate creative thinkers rather than existing businesses.

LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this essay is your imagination. If you, the professor, teacher, or instructor, desire to improve the effectiveness of your entrepreneurship courses, then begin with your imagination; feed your imagination with your experiences, knowledge, and passion for teaching; continue feeding your imagination with new knowledge and experiences; expect challenges and barriers created by the status quo; give your imagination the freedom to overcome those challenges and barriers.

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