

The CRE Curriculum

by Sharon Shinn



Leadership exercises at Cranfield School of Management draw on the lessons of Shakespeare's plays. The experience is enhanced by the fact that the students practice in the renovated Globe Theatre.



Many industry observers maintain that the corporate world is a cold, mechanized environment. **Courses in creativity** are designed to counter this trend, helping executives regain their humanity—and in the process, become more inspirational leaders.

Most executives don't sign up for education courses planning to chase red helium balloons through a conference room. Few MBA students enroll in business school with the expectation that they'll be writing Japanese haiku their first semester. Those who do, however, are usually part of a new wave of business education that seeks to educate the whole person by unlocking the creative potential within.

"I believe there's a disconnect between the work people do in the business world and the lives they lead when they're not in the business world. Creativity courses help these two separate spheres get reconnected," says Mary Pinard, an associate professor of English at Babson College in Babson Park, Massachusetts. She also is a poet and a creativity consultant in the school's MBA program.

"People are starting to understand that one of the new calls in the workplace is to bring more of yourself," says Nicholas Janni, a visiting fellow at the Praxis Centre, Cranfield School of Management, in Bedford, England. There he teaches leadership courses and creativity classes to both MBA students and working executives. "Until recently, some of the softer issues like emotional intelligence were seen as interesting but not central to business. I think that now people realize that these issues are crucial to the bottom line. Research projects have shown that when employees feel their creativity is valued, their satisfaction increases and their whole level of commitment goes up. Companies no longer can focus only on profit or only on emotional intelligence. What's rapidly becoming clear is that the two are interdependent."

A business course that emphasizes creativity teaches participants an entirely different way of looking at the world. It's not organizational behavior or basic accounting—but it could be just as relevant to the way a manager does his job.

Rhyme and Reason


For the past ten years at Babson, a creativity "stream" has been part of the module that first-year students must take during their first five weeks on campus. They're randomly assigned to one of seven classes where they learn poetry, painting, fiction-writing, theatrical improvisation, puppeteering, movement, or music; each module is taught by a "creativity consultant" who is a working artist proficient in that field. From their very first session with their creativity consultant, students are immersed in the principles of the creative process.

"The idea is to expose them, in a very hands-on way, to the notion of creative process," says Pinard. "Students should come away from these classes with a more attuned sense of self, and this will speak powerfully to whatever tasks or decisions they have to make in the business setting."

Harry Vardis, a trainer at Creative Focus Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia, offers a "creativity boot camp" to executives in companies ranging from Yahoo! to the U.S. Army. For the past three years, he has taught creativity programs to MBA students at Emory University in Atlanta and Anahuac University in Mexico City, and he's beginning to work with other schools such as Kennesaw State University in Georgia.

"We teach people how to notice things—how to hear things, how to deal with the senses," Vardis says. He has constructed a creativity curriculum that revolves around the basic requirements of a businessperson's life—dealing with customers, managing employees, creating new products, making presentations, staying ahead of competition—and lays out ways managers can do these jobs more creatively and effectively.

Vardis' classes also focus on the best ways to arrange space to induce creativity. If two employees interact well and seem to spark ideas from each other, should their offices be moved closer together so they can be in constant



Harry Vardis of Creative Focus Inc. leads a course on creativity.

contact, or should they be installed at opposite ends of the hall so that they catch other employees in their nets as they head toward each others' offices? Says Vardis, "Managers need to be aware of the best ways to utilize space and relationships to get people to be team players or more individualistic. We go through four different models of architecture and team-building in this session."

At Cranfield, the creativity instruction usually begins with teaching participants how to relax enough to access their imaginations. "People need to understand that there's a whole part of the creative process that's outside the rational mind," says Janni. "I think of it as a four-stage process: preparation, incubation, illumination, and translation. The first and last are very proactive stages. But the second and third stages require you to go into a different mode of consciousness. The first stage is a mode of doing; the second is a mode of being.

"In a lot of corporate settings, they want you to be creative in the doing mode, so you go straight from preparation to translation and back again," he continues. "But we're teaching them that—if you want to get new ideas and new insights—there's a whole other crucial stage where you really have to get into the being part of the process. It involves learning to be receptive and being able to tolerate not knowing, being out of control. That's very difficult for the corporate mind to understand."

According to Janni, to sink into the incubation stage, executives need to slow down. "I do quite a lot of work taking people into a stage of deep relaxation, where they become more receptive. They listen much better—to other people and to their own imaginations. They quiet down a bit. That's a prerequisite for entering a more creative state of mind." To get participants to achieve this state, he often has them lying on the floor and practicing deep breathing exercises. Eventually, he says, participants will learn to balance the two states of being even when they're in the working world.

Embracing Ambiguity

For all these creativity instructors, there is a strong emphasis on what Pinard calls "the messiness of process"—the strange, unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable sense of ambiguity that occurs in the middle of creating something from nothing. Pinard encourages students to embrace this ambiguity. For instance, at the end of their five-week creativity stream, students must do a presentation to the entire Babson community based on what they've learned.

"I try hard to keep them from deciding in the first week, or even the first hour, what they're going to do in their final presentation, which is their impulse," Pinard says. "They want to decide immediately and then perfect—which is completely antithetical to the notion of discovery and process. If I've been successful, by week four they still don't know what they're going to do for their presentation. In week five, I let them think about the presentation. The result is a very fresh presentation driven by the work they've done rather than their idea of what the work should be."

In addition, Pinard says, the Babson staff has decided against employing any complex equipment, like a video camera, that needs some technical expertise. "Such equipment gives students a way out of the difficult task ahead of them, which is to be engaged in a process with no clear end," she says.

Not only is the creative process filled with ambiguity, it

FROM FAD TO VERSE

Educators who still doubt how creativity classes can influence strategies in the workplace might sit in on one of the sessions Harry Vardis orchestrates through Creative Focus Inc. Students are divided into teams of nine each that are further subdivided into smaller teams. The whole group takes an hour to discuss the best way to build a castle for a queen, with each team taking responsibility for a different section of the castle. After the initial discussion period, they are separated, and they cannot communicate with other teams again, although they can continue discussions within their own teams until they perfect their part of the design. At the end, the teams come together for half an hour to try to align the final pieces of their castle, which they then present to the queen using models made of playing cards and duct tape. To be successful, the completed castle has to live up to the queen's tastes and expectations—that is, she has to happily accept it as it is.

Sound ridiculous? Vardis says, "Imagine a corporation where teams work on different products or different parts of the same product, but they never speak to each other. Many times they don't speak to their end consumer, either, yet they go ahead and continue to build products. We don't tell our participants, 'You cannot speak to the queen,' but it doesn't occur to them that they should unless the queen doesn't accept the castle at the end. It's a simple but powerful exercise to demonstrate team-building and cross-team communi-

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how to relax



requires such uncertainty in order to thrive—and it requires an environment that encourages the presentation of unfinished ideas. Few corporate workplaces can claim to be so tolerant. For instance, when Janni is teaching classes of working executives, he asks them to assess their corporate culture.

“I ask, ‘Is yours a culture where people feel free to express half-baked ideas, or the beginning of an idea, or an idea that actually sounds ridiculous? Or will you be laughed at?’ The answer will tell me whether this is a culture where creativity can flourish,” he says.

In a receptive environment, creativity stands a far better chance of succeeding. “People are inherently creative,” says Vardis. “The best teachers of creativity are kindergarten teachers, because they’re always telling kids, ‘This is so great!’ They keep reinforcing what the child does. But when kids turn eight or nine, they start hearing the word ‘no.’

cations and mental fertilization.”

Some of Vardis’ other sessions force participants to think creatively about common items. In one class, red helium balloons are released into a conference room, and participants must discover a functional use for them. “One team figured out that they could attach three or four balloons to a piece of paper ripped from an easel pad, and the balloons would carry the paper all around the room,” says Vardis. “People cannot take their eyes off that paper. They pay attention to what’s written on that sheet.”

Vardis’ classrooms are filled with all kinds of toys, from Silly Putty to pipe cleaners, and the instructors are constantly having students combine and reconfigure elements. “We change perspectives all the time, breaking eggs, making shapes with Play-Doh,” says Vardis. “By changing your perspectives, you come up with new ideas. But here’s the tricky part—knowing the difference between creativity and innovation. Creative ideas have to have some utility; otherwise, they’re useless.”

More unconventional learning experiences are offered in Cranfield University’s leadership classes, which revolve around selected plays by William Shakespeare. While these don’t focus on teaching creativity per se, they definitely draw on a creative medium to teach lessons to the businessperson. Classes are held in Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, a 1997 reconstruction of the original.

“We believe very much in the power of story, whether that’s a myth or a Shakespeare play,” says Nicholas Janni. “A story gives people a whole other framework of thinking that takes

Judgment sets in—and that’s when creativity starts to get squelched. What we’re trying to do is reintroduce freedom of thinking in minds that have been told they cannot do something a certain way.

“The way to do it is to separate idea generation from idea evaluation,” Vardis adds. “If you want to create an idea, for the next 45 minutes just create ideas—don’t evaluate them. Write down anything that comes to your mind. At the end of that period, you can evaluate them based on the criteria you need. But if you evaluate and generate at the same time, you’re going to kill more ideas than you ever put out.”

Bottom Line

Programs at Babson, Emory, and Cranfield have been quite successful, generally receiving excellent evaluations and high enrollments. Nonetheless, the instructors sometimes find their students skeptical at first. “We get a lot of resistance

them beyond pure data. In addition, there’s extraordinary wisdom in Shakespeare’s plays. We get students and executives to use the different events and characters as a way of looking at their own leadership. While we examine several plays, the main play we do is ‘Henry V,’ which is the story of a man becoming a truly inspirational leader. We’ve had people come back to us and say, ‘In this particular dilemma, I found myself asking, “What would Henry V do?”’ The lessons of the play really stick with people.”

At Babson College, the lesson plans on creativity involve such nontraditional courses as poetry, dance, and painting. Mary Pinard teaches her students the basic poetic forms and designs exercises that will lead the students to create poems on their very first day in class. For later sessions, she makes assignments that force students to stretch their imaginations.

“I might ask them to write a poem that’s set in a kitchen where there’s something green in the refrigerator and a storm outside,” she says. “Or I might want them to write a poem that takes off from a photograph they have. Or a poem that requires them to go to a cafe and eavesdrop on the people there. The idea is to help them feel some facility, some flexibility, some ease with what it takes to be a poet. It helps them tune into the world around them, engage their senses and their intellect and their emotions, and then feel comfortable shaping those experiences into words and sharing them with others.”

In a business world that increasingly requires its leaders to be in touch with their own feelings, such exercises aren’t just interesting side trips down the liberal arts aisle. They’re important stops on a student’s road toward being a well-rounded executive.

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CLASS ACT

At the University of Western Sydney in Australia, business students learn marketing concepts in an innovative elective course that unfolds more like a theater performance than a typical management class. Glenn Pearce, senior lecturer in marketing, uses improvisational drama techniques to convey marketing concepts such as the ethics of new product development, new trends in advertising, and consumer behavior. During the weekly three-hour drama workshop, students study costuming, prepared roles, defined spaces, and still images—and how they apply to marketing.

In one class, students re-enact a real-life situation in which a Mexican restaurant offered free lunches for life to those who had the company’s logo tattooed on their bodies. To explore the marketing issue of “new advertising media,” the class is divided into pairs of consumers and tattoo artists. After non-toxic pens are used to “tattoo” the motifs onto selected students, the tattoo artists become journalists who interview the consumers about their decision. “I then take on the role of editor and debrief the journalists to see what insights have been gained into ethics, consumer behavior, and advertising issues,” Pearce says.

In another scenario, students are divided into roles relating to the music industry, meeting and advising on the international marketing of an Australian rock group. This drama convention explores issues such as export marketing, services marketing, and catering to the youth market. To add to the authenticity of their roles as rock stars, the four students playing band members dress in appropriate costumes that include wigs and musical instruments. Pearce believes the drama convention is particularly effective at alerting students to the cultural differences that sometimes need to be bridged in internationalization. “Some students have even questioned whether the band’s name and song titles would translate in a cross-cultural sense,” he says.

Such drama techniques are highly effective teaching resources, Pearce believes. “When educational drama conventions are used in business learning contexts, students engage with subject matter and learn in a deeper, more

meaningful, and more memorable way,” he says. “Some students have even described the use of drama as ‘disguised learning’—learning you do when you don’t think you are learning.” Since students frequently discuss the drama after class—with other students and with friends and family members—they continue to think about the lessons they’ve learned in class, which reinforces learning, he says.

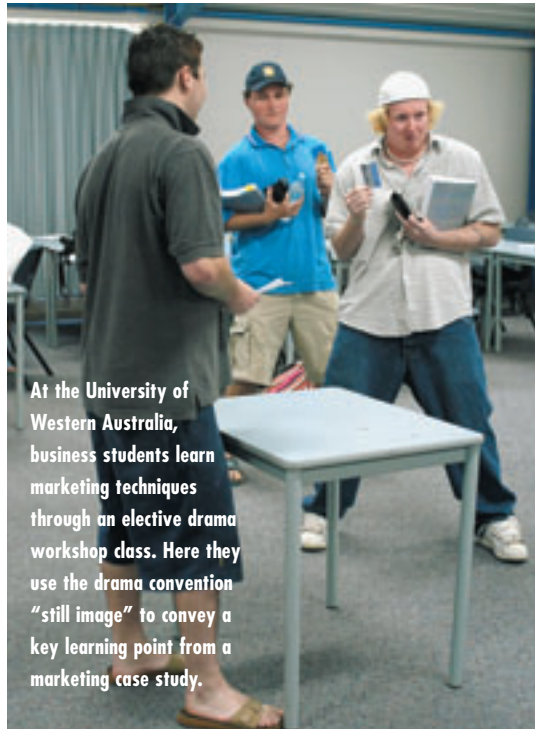
Pearce also believes that, when engaged in a drama-based unit, students read classroom material with a different attitude than they bring to reading for conventional classes. He says, “When reading case studies for a drama-based class, students bear in mind three things: what the case was about, what issues in the case could be brought to life through dramatic re-enactment, and what drama conventions that have been used previously might be applied to this case.”

Pearce also uses drama as a way to assess learning in his international marketing class, which he calls International Business Theatre (IBT). “IBT involves grouping students into theater troupes, randomly assigning each troupe a country, then getting them to write and perform a play that integrates unit theory and highlights key aspects of doing business with that country,” says Pearce. “My research suggests

that, in terms of student learning, this technique is more beneficial than conventional assessment tasks such as the presentation of a written or oral international marketing plan.”

Students in a drama-based course tend to view the instructor as more of a theater director than a lecturer, says Pearce, which contributes to “a relaxed and supportive classroom that is conducive to learning.” Not only do students appear to be having fun in class, he says, but high levels of weekly attendance suggest that they enjoy the course and don’t want to miss any part of it.

Many business schools are looking for ways to enhance active learning by making students more responsible for what happens in the classroom. If he were asked to name his most effective tool for interactive learning, Pearce no doubt would say: The play’s the thing.



At the University of Western Australia, business students learn marketing techniques through an elective drama workshop class. Here they use the drama convention “still image” to convey a key learning point from a marketing case study.

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—Glenn Pearce, University of Western Sydney

CREATIVE CAVEATS

If a business school is considering adding a creativity module to its curriculum, Babson's Mary Pinard has several suggestions. First, she says, administrators should be clear about their goals.

"If you're doing this as a marketing ploy, you're not a good candidate," she says. "There are too many unknowns and too many surprises for such a program to pay you back in that way. If your focus is the risky business of changing people's perceptions and acclimating them to a richer way of being in the world, you're probably a good candidate."

A school also must be sure to allocate adequate space and money for the program, Pinard says, which includes being able to compensate the working artists for their time and effort. In addition, she advises administrators to choose these artists carefully. "It's very important that they be working artists *and* experienced teachers." It is not important that these artists have a formal business background, she notes, because "all artists are entrepreneurs in a sense, and all of the consultants understand the challenge of getting their work out into the world."

She also recommends a forward-thinking attitude that anticipates a successful program designed in a way that allows it to grow. "It's much easier to imagine those spaces

as you're beginning rather than having to build yourself out of a box later," she says.

Next, she says, prepare the regular faculty and the creativity consultants for the rigors of the program. "There must be a real clarity about what creativity or art means in a traditional setting," she says. "Sometimes these worlds don't meld. For example, it's really difficult to evaluate outcomes around creativity using traditional grading methods, because that assigns value in a way that is antithetical to the creative process. People need to think through these things so they don't become barriers to the success of the program."

In fact, she recommends planning an evaluation system from the very start. "Know what kind of feedback you can request of the students at the end of the process. What did they learn, how were they changed, how do they expect the principles they've learned to apply to courses across the program? Ask them to evaluate the work they did with the consultant."

Pinard notes that the evaluation system in use at Babson not only gives her student feedback—what works and what needs to be changed—but also gives her years' worth of information about the program and how successful it has been. "It helps me justify the existence of creativity in this program," she says. "Especially at the beginning of a program, especially if you think it might be threatened, an evaluation system is a really important strategy," she says.

and quizzical looks," Pinard says. "Some students will say, 'I came here to learn business principles. What does this have to do with anything?' Others will say, 'This doesn't mean anything because it's not graded. It's pass/fail, so how could I possibly value it?' Depending on what the resistance is, there are points along the stream that will address those resistances. Most students are transformed by the end."

This is particularly evident during the Q&A sessions that are part of the presentations students give at the conclusion of Babson's creativity program. "The Q&A is really critical, because it gives students a chance to say, 'This is what happened to me, this is why it's important.' Those are a profound ten minutes. The students become almost textbook speakers on the nature of creativity," says Pinard.

All the instructors hope that their MBA students and high-level executives go on to incorporate principles of creativity into their daily working lives. Says Janni, "We'd also like them to be much clearer about what we call their presence as lead-

ers. They should be more vulnerable to people, know how to communicate in ways that inspire people, be more authentic, and be more transparent. Emotional intelligence is a part of great leadership as well, so we hope they will have learned how to manage their own emotions and be more sensitive to the emotions of others."

In fact, researchers at Cranfield are considering a project that will enable them to track the increase of productivity in an organization after some of its members have been through the creativity sessions. Janni believes they'll find proof that creativity makes employees more productive and companies more profitable, either "through improved customer service or through generating new ideas about the business," he says.

In a business world where competition is fierce and innovation is fast, the corporate executive who can constantly generate new ideas is a valuable commodity. The goal of creativity classes is to loosen up closed minds and let the corporate imagination run free—and help the company's profits soar with it. 