

COMMENTARY

## Artful creation – How introducing artworks in business education can foster dialogue and creativity

Martin KUPP<sup>1</sup>, Jörg RECKHENRICH<sup>2</sup>, Jamie ANDERSON<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor at ESCP Europe Paris, France

<sup>2</sup> Member of the Faculty, Lorange Institute of Business Zurich, Horgen, Switzerland

<sup>3</sup> Adjunct Professor at the Antwerp Management School Antwerp, Belgium

Address for Correspondence: Associate Professor Martin Kupp, ESCP Europe, 79 Avenue de la Republique, 75011 Paris, France. Email: [mkupp@escpeurope.eu](mailto:mkupp@escpeurope.eu)

---

Recommended citation:

Kupp, M., Reckhenrich, J., & Anderson, J. (2012). Artful creation – How introducing artworks in business education can foster dialogue and creativity. *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy*, 2 (2), 109-117.

<https://doi.org/10.24112/ajsotl.23005>

## **Artful creation – How introducing artworks in business education can foster dialogue and creativity**

### **ABSTRACT**

Creativity is a widely used term in the context of strategic planning, innovation, entrepreneurship, marketing, organisational and leadership development. Creativity is, therefore, a key skill for leaders and organisations, in order not only to adapt to change, but also to proactively shape industries and markets. Art and business have many parallels. We believe that looking into the world of art holds many lessons for business people and provides ample opportunities to find new and interesting ideas for the business school setting. To this end, we discuss the commercial and/or artistic success of the artists Damien Hirst, Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik. We will be introducing three techniques – art coaching, art dialogue and the mission impossible task – that are based on using artworks and art history to create an interactive and experiential learning atmosphere and ultimately make programme participants deal with their own creative potential. We have successfully adopted these techniques in our teaching especially in an executive education context at the Antwerp Management School and the European School of Management and Technology, Berlin.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Creativity is a widely used term in the context of strategic planning, innovation, organisational and leadership development. As managers realise that many strategic questions, leadership issues and complex organisational situations are not manageable in a routine manner, the quest for creative solutions starts. The more a situation tends to be new, in the sense that managers have not faced this or even a similar situation before, and can therefore not draw upon experience or established routines, the more it calls for a creative solution. Artists are trained to deal with that kind of situation and often their work reflects the complexity of various decisions that are made in order to create new artwork. Looking at many different approaches of artists, it becomes obvious that creativity is seen as almost a prerequisite to respond to new and unexpected situations (IBM, <sup>2010</sup>).

But how can we teach creativity in a business school context, especially in programmes with experienced graduate students and senior managers? We believe that introducing artworks and art history into the classroom creates an interactive and experiential learning atmosphere that not only enhances introspective learning,

communication and team building but potentially enables programme participants to deal with their own creative potential.

Some consider artists to be individualists and loners who want to fulfill their ideas or dreams, without any interest in earning money. Businesses, in contrast, are made up of many different individuals and target making a profit. In business, products and services should have characteristics and a use that can be seen and described. The “use” of art is not always visible. A company is structured and functions according to certain rules; an artist is allowed to or even expected to be rebellious and different. At least these are the usual stereotypes.

## LOOKING AT THE WORKS AND LIVES OF ARTISTS

We believe that looking into the world of art holds many lessons for business people and provides ample opportunity to find new and interesting ideas for the business school setting (Schiuma, <sup>2011</sup>; Anderson, Kupp & Reckhenrich, <sup>2006</sup>). From a business point of view, the success of Damien Hirst, who is again making headlines with a diamond-studded skull of a child, is a model for creating a new market (Anderson, Reckhenrich & Kupp, <sup>2009</sup>). In Hirst’s case, this was the luxury segment that he discovered and took over by first asking himself the following three questions: Who would be interested in buying expensive art and why? What should the artist offer this type of customer, and how should they market and sell it? Hirst obviously found answers to his questions, as his art is aimed at collectors such as the Mugar family, hedge fund managers such as Steve Cohen, or the Russian businessman Victor Pinchuk. Hirst uses materials such as diamonds, gold and platinum in his works of art; thereby, raising his production costs way above the norm. In this way, the price becomes a part of the artwork. Being more expensive than others has become a characteristic that makes his art unique. Art critics such as Wolfgang Ulrich have claimed that there is such disorientation on the art market that price is the only constant guaranteeing quality. If you apply Ulrich’s thesis to Hirst, he may be right. Hirst’s <sup>2,15</sup> meter bull sculpture, *The Golden Calf*, is crowned by a solid gold disc, while its hooves and horns are cast in 18-carat gold. The piece sits on a marble base and is encased in a gold-plated box. As a student Hirst organised exhibitions, such as the <sup>1988</sup> *Freeze* in the London Docklands instead of Westend, and he worked from early on with the famous advertising executive Charles Saatchi, who invested a lot of money into the arts and created the so called “Young British Artist” brand. In autumn <sup>2008</sup>, Hirst auctioned his entire annual production at Sotheby’s Auction House London, something no artist had done before. Looking at Damien Hirst’s phenomenally successful career through the lenses of business concepts fosters engaging dialogue with students and we found that this helps to better anchor some of the most fundamental strategies and/or marketing concepts.

When considering the systematic advancement of creativity, students as well as managers should consider the installation artist Joseph Beuys. According to Beuys, individual creativity is made up of three components: inspiration, intuition and imagination (Reckhenrich, Kupp & Anderson, <sup>2009</sup>). Inspiration is the short moment

that we divine something new, a vague idea that we recall as the moment it went “click”. Intuition means that we pursue the idea and begin to check its practicality in our minds. Imagination is the development of a bankable picture that fills the idea and gives it power. Organisations have to actively try to incorporate all three elements in designing their products and services, and also their internal processes. Innovative companies such as Pixar and IDEO that produced films like *Nemo* or *Toy Story* and products like the first computer mouse, mobile offices and Oakley ski glasses used these three elements to generate and implement ideas.

The artwork of Nam June Paik, a Korean American artist, also offers lessons. He worked with a variety of media and is considered to be the first video artist. How he deals with complexity – putting one layer of meaning on top of another – is an excellent example of innovation through complexity rather than simplification. In “Video Fish”, from 1975, Paik arranged a row of 20 aquariums in a horizontal line in front of an equal number of monitors. The monitors showed fast-paced videos of moving objects such as airplanes, fish, or the purist dance moves of Merce Cunningham. The observer looked through the aquarium alternatively at the changing video sequences or at the fish until the point came where the two levels melted into one. Especially when watching the video of the fish similar to those in the aquarium, the viewer could barely tell the difference between a virtual fish and a real fish. The line between real and virtual was almost completely erased.

Similarly, Mettler-Toledo, the global leader of precision scales, innovated by increasing complexity. At the end of the 1990s, the company’s management noticed that the timeframe between market entry of their own innovations and the first copies kept getting shorter. In the end, it was only six months. As a result, they tried to speed up research and development but could not make it much faster. So what now? The usual patent protection period was too short, and taking legal measures took too long. The copycats simply produced in different countries as soon as there was a conflict. The solution lay in the product itself. A scale is a mechatronic system, which means that mechanics, hardware, and software all work closely together. At Mettler-Toledo, R & D was divided into the above three areas. In the end, they decided to combine these individual areas to develop new complex technologies for the weighing cell, to place the know-how of the cells in the software, and to move certain algorithms from the software to the hardware. The entire scale became harder to copy. Mettler-Toledo has since developed products that no one has been able to completely copy (Reckhenrich, Kupp & Anderson, 2009). In this sense, Mettler-Toledo was able to innovate by adding complexity – a concept that can often be observed in the art world.

Thus art not only provides rich stories and key learnings, but also offers business schools opportunities to open up to new and different ideas. The following are three techniques that have been developed for use in business management studies in reference to Joseph Beuys’ concept of the “Social Sculpture”.

## **ART-COACHING**

Art-Coaching is an approach we developed for the MBA at the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT), Berlin. It is a technique to enhance introspective learning and key communication skills.

In that setting, the coach goes with the coachee to a museum and asks him/her to choose an artwork for the session intuitively. Experience shows that the intuitive selection often leads to a perfect choice. For example, one coachee was speaking about her insecurity in demanding situations at her former job and wanted to know how she could deal with the situation more efficiently from a leadership point of view. She offered so much on a very personal level and often found that she had bared herself too much. Reflecting on the situation, she chose Rembrandt's painting of "Susanna at the bath".

Along the chosen artwork, the coaching session starts. After a while the coach starts to link the issue that the person being coached wants to talk about to the artwork and invites him/her to combine his/her narrative with the painting or the sculpture. If the coaching setting turns into a solutions phase, the coach again asks if there are offerings in the artwork that could help to open up a new perspective to the topic. What happens here is that the artwork offers an understanding of processes at a meta-level. Instead of talking about his/her own story, the person being coached can play with the story of the artwork. The coach conducts the whole situation in the form of a shared communication or a dialogue. As the session progresses both the coach and the person being coached explore and discover different options and solutions. The most important result of Art-Coaching is that the person being coached gets a unique insight and finds in the artwork a kind of meta-level to discuss his/her personal or work-related issue. This is after all the overall goal of Art-Coaching, to generate a powerful image that helps to define a new understanding – i.e., how to face challenges in life and turn weaknesses into opportunities – in a personal way. In the case of the woman that chose "Susanna at the bath", the coach and the coachee discovered that it was not just the case of the naked woman with the two men staring at her in the literal sense, but that the bathing woman seemed to be looking at the observer, potentially for help. This opened the discussion to an analysis of who else was involved and helped the coachee to better understand the situation.

## **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE**

Another creative format that is dedicated to the creative process itself is what we call the "Mission Impossible Task". The Antwerp Management School runs a research programme on the creative industries. Within this framework, the task given is often used to teach participants how to foster collective creativity. The setting is dedicated to the dynamic of the creative process, generating unusual ideas first and

then redefining them in order to make them real. The goal of this exercise is to preempt too early operational and sceptical thinking. It aims to unleash the creative potential and interaction of the different team members in order to accomplish something a single person might think it is impossible to do.

At the beginning of the Mission Impossible Task the team will be introduced to the artist Jean Cocteau. Cocteau was once asked: “Why are you so incredibly successful in all these different areas?” He worked as painter, filmmaker and poet. He said: “I tried, because it was impossible”.

Using this answer, students are then assigned to teams with the following task: “Conceptualise a project that you think is impossible to do, but which you will finish successfully after all, in a given time period”.

The experimental setting challenges the creative ability of the team and each team member. During the task the teams have to realise the three core steps of the creative process:

- Define the impossible
- Redefine the original idea
- Execute the idea

During the first stage, the team is asked to come up with wild ideas to start with. The team brainstorms and generates all kind of different ideas. One of the hardest things to do during this stage is to withhold judgment and criticism – to refrain from arguing about what seems promising and what is not. Instead the team is encouraged to build on each other’s ideas. What is most important is that there is an inspiring atmosphere and good team synergy. Then the team has to decide which idea is the most interesting and possible to realise. During the second stage, the idea is redefined in order to make it happen. At this stage the idea process ends and the team must organise the resources they have in order to accomplish the task. Having seen the idea givers during the first stage of the project, one now sees people who are good in getting things done. The third stage is the execution of ideas. Often people think that this stage does not belong to the creativity process. But not before an idea is clearly shaped and ready to be presented is the process really completed.

For example, participants of the “Open Innovation Program” at Antwerp Management School were confronted with a Mission Impossible Task – to make someone famous in a given time of three hours. During the first stage, they brainstormed and came up with ideas. During the second stage, they redefined their ideas and rethought the notion of what it meant to be famous. While at first they thought about “world famous”, they now thought about different levels of fame; for example, regional fame, fame for a certain group of people, etc. Accordingly they decided to make Antwerp street musicians famous – famous at least to the participants of the “open innovation course”. So they invited two street musicians to come over to the school and be part of a small competition. The singers were told that the winner would

be invited to the end-of-course party and would be paid. While the search for the street musicians was ongoing, the other members of the team started to organise the stage back at the school. Finally, a concert was played and the filming team went around to video tape the performance.

In three hours, the team not only achieved their “mission impossible” task but also learnt three core lessons about collective creativity. First, a practical experience of the dynamics of the creative process, namely its ups and downs, which are an essential part. Second, the impact of creating a balanced team. We all know that putting the right team together is key to most of the success stories. In the Mission Impossible Exercise, we can see that in the first instance we need good idea givers who are able to inspire the team. In the second phase, the team needs “down to earth” people, who can ascertain if the team has all appropriate resources at hand. In the final step, we often need the practical thinking people, who are able to get things done and accomplish the final goal. But the key driver of the whole process is the team leader. The person selected to be the team leader must have good interpersonal skills and not merely because he/she is the most senior person. His/her task is mainly to orchestrate the flow of the creative process, to know when it is a good time to close one phase and open up the next phase. Finally, he/she must summarise the views and pull all the activities together. We call that “Artistic Leadership”.

## **ART-DIALOGUE**

How can we share our different understanding and the way we see things in a much more effective way? How can we build upon each other’s ideas if we have to face new and challenging situations? These questions emerge in business companies, often during a rapid change in the market or if they have to innovate in a systematic way.

For customised programmes at ESMT, we introduced Art-Dialogue as an instrument to teach participants how to open up for an effective exchange of different thoughts and perspectives in order to find new solutions. Imagine that a group of people is taken to a museum and is asked to talk about something, let us say a modern painting they do not have a clue about. They are introduced to a simple dialogue guideline, which runs along three phases:

1. Gathering all the facts
2. Sensing the emotional side of the artwork
3. Creating a shared understanding and building emotional commitment

An appointed dialogue leader starts the process by asking questions to the participants. Thus he collects as many “facts” as possible through what the participants observed. Facts such as the colours, the forms, the figures and the composition plan the artwork is made of. His task is to facilitate the dialogue, to keep up the flow of observation and to ensure that none of the participants starts to judge the artwork

too early. There should be no room for “I like it or I like it not” in this phase. After a while the participants might think that all relevant facts are collected. Now, the task of the dialogue leader is to stretch that time, because often new and unseen aspects come up through a deeper observation.

Then he carefully guides the group from the first to the second phase. Here the dialogue turns into sensing the emotional side of the artwork. What kind of emotional impact does an artwork provide? As an example, a painting of the romantic artist Casper David Friedrich could offer a very existential point of view of the human condition or the famous painting “Guernica” of Pablo Picasso could open up the unpleasant and disturbing view on the disasters of war. During this phase, the dialogue leader guides the participants to build a personal relation towards the artwork, by asking questions like: how do you make sense of or how are you touched by the work? In other words, he starts to explore the emotional impact. By balancing the different personal experiences, he lays the ground for the next step.

Now the dialogue reaches the third phase. The dialogue leader is tasked to generate, together with the participants, a shared understanding of what the artwork is all about. He uses all perceptions and thoughts as resource “material” and creates an image that has meaning to the whole group. The art of dialogue is to align all the different perspectives (including their own) to an understanding that the group can share. It does not mean that everyone has to have the same point of view. What is more important, there should be enough room for various points of view. The challenge for the dialogue leader is how to create space for a shared understanding, so that different opinions can find their place.

Two examples show the impact of this technique. At a HR conference, a group of <sup>60</sup> people from different companies ran the art dialogue exercise. The group was split into three sub-groups and each group gathered around one painting. The paintings chosen were “Schauspieler” by Max Beckmann, “Las meninas” by Diego Velasquez, and “Napoleon at the Saint-Bernard Pass” by Jacques-Louis David. Each picture shows different leaders in specific situations, with Napoleon being the most obvious one. Within seconds each group were having lively debates about what they saw (colour, structure, format) and how they felt (what kind of leadership do they see, is this appropriate for the situation, do they like what they see). While the discussions were centred around the artworks, participants were talking about their assumptions on leadership attributes, leadership behaviour and organisation context. And this of course then opened up the dialogue about what shape these elements might take in the companies of the participating HR executives.

On another occasion we used this technique during an offside meeting of a major German Research Company. We worked with a group of <sup>12</sup> senior R & D managers. Once again, we chose “Schauspieler” by Max Beckmann, but this time we asked the group how they thought the artist had dealt with complexity in his painting. While at first the group tended to focus on the use of colours, composition and the number of figures in the picture, they soon started to delve into questions such as “How do we feel when we see this complex picture, how is the artist able to emotionalise

complexity?”. This enabled the group to intensify the exchange of thoughts to the level of individual assumptions regarding complexity; for example, “How much complexity is needed in R & D”, “Should we reduce or embrace complexity” and “How do I personally deal with complexity?” This proved after the workshop to be most relevant for the coordination and cooperation within the R & D group and created a better working environment. Looking at our experiences with the Art-Dialogue technique, we see that it enhances introspective learning, communication and also team building.

## Conclusion

We believe that the creative and careful use of artwork and art history can help business education to enhance introspective learning, communication and team building and through this strategy support students and executives to unleash their creative potential. The careful analysis of the artistic approach of individual artists and new techniques such as art-coaching, art-dialogue and mission impossible are only three such formats that we have tried extensively over the last five years but we are sure that there are many more to be discovered and developed.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, J., Kupp M., & Reckhenrich J. (2006). Entrepreneurs on a dance floor. *Business Strategy Review* 17 (4), 26-31.
- Anderson, J., Reckhenrich J., & Kupp M. (2009). The shark is dead: How to build yourself a new market. *Business Strategy Review* 20 (4), 40-47.
- Reckhenrich J., Kupp M., & Anderson J. (2009). Understanding creativity: The manager as artist. *Business Strategy Review* 20 (2), 68-73.
- Schiama, G. (2011). *The value of arts for business*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- IBM. (2010). *Capitalising on complexity*. Insights from 2010 IBM Global Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Study. Retrieved from <http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/ceo/ceostudy2010/index.html>