

# DESIGN ENTREPRENEURIALISM: EVOLVING PEDAGOGY FROM LECTURE TO ACTION

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## In the Beginning

For the past five years I have been introducing design students to career opportunities outside typical channels of employment and into the realm of entrepreneurialism. This idea started when I noticed so many exceptional student product ideas would never reach consumers hands but rather find a home packed neatly into portfolios. To address this, I enlisted my own entrepreneurial experiences and began a lecture course highlighting “design” entrepreneurialism. The course introduced students to the opportunities and realities of pursuing self-employment and entrepreneurial ventures as Industrial Designers.

The course was the second in a two part series titled “Career and Professional Development”. It focused on introducing students to lawyers, private funding specialists, and designers who have taken the leap into entrepreneurial ventures. These classes meet once a week and featured speakers with unique messages relating to self-employment and entrepreneurialism. Below is an example of a course schedule.

Week 1: The Future of Design - Craig Vogel, author of *“Creating Breakthrough Products”*

Week 2: Legal – David Wilbrant, *legal specialist representing entrepreneurs, emerging companies, early-stage investors and venture capital funds.*  
<http://www.thompsonhine.com/lawyer/DavidWillbrand/>

Week 3: Freelance – Steve Doehler, *sole proprietor of IDWorks LLC*

Week 4: Starting a Firm – Greg Davis, *founder and partner of Design Central*

Week 5: Private Funding – Elizabeth Edwards, *venture capital investor, strategy consultant, author of “Startup: The Complete Handbook”, and CEO of Metro Innovation, a catalyst for innovation and entrepreneurship.* <http://elizabethedwards.com/>

Week 6: Starting a Company or Licensing: JB Kropp, *founder of The Brandery, Vine Street Ventures, and Smarty Tags.* <http://brandery.org/>

Week 7: The Furniture Business: Shawn Barrett, *contract furniture designer*  
<http://shawnbarrett.com/>

Week 8: Working with the University: Geoffrey Pinski, *director, Office of Entrepreneurial Affairs & Technology Commercialization at University of Cincinnati*

Week 9: What's a Business Plan? – Dr Charles Matthews, *internationally recognized scholar and innovative teacher in the field of entrepreneurialism*

Week 10: Movie : ) “Flash of Genius” - *Robert Kearns takes on the Detroit automakers, who he claims stole his idea for the intermittent windshield wiper.*

After each lecture we conducted a Q&A session with the presenter. For homework, each student was required to contribute to an online discussion. The online discussion created a space where students could voice their opinion or read and build off existing comments. Evaluation was based on quality of participation in the various discussion threads.

### **Need for More**

As the lecture series grew in popularity and our economy/job opportunities declined, students wanted more options to keep their design dreams alive. To accommodate these needs, I developed an independent study focusing on expanding their Senior Capstone project to a commercialization level. In this class I developed a curriculum that enabled senior students to treat final academic projects as career paths in entrepreneurial ventures.

To be considered for independent study, students had to display a true passion for their project area and a strong desire to transform concepts into a commercial venture. To ensure these criteria were met, I conducted interviews with each student and asked pointed questions regarding their commitment to entrepreneurial endeavors. The course was designed to be an open forum of information sharing and group progress assessment. Areas covered were elevator pitch, promotion, partnerships, funding strategies, build techniques, and manufacturing strategies. Because each project is unique, each student's deliverables were unique.

#### **Elevator Pitch**

Getting serious about an entrepreneurial venture means verbalizing ideas in a clear, concise, and detailed manner. Students were instructed to develop a statement that would fully describe their intentions and effectively deliver it in 90 seconds. Once completed, each student was asked to give their pitch to our group. Refinements were made as needed.

#### **Promotion**

Next we focused on promotional material. At this point, the student's projects were still being conceptualized. Promotion focused more on strategy vs. implementation. Benchmarking of similar products to assist the formation of their own unique strategies was critical in this exercise.

### Partnerships

A critical segment of the process was getting students to understand their capabilities and to determine what partnerships were key to their success. Students were asked to make a list of professional contacts needed to reach project goals.

At this point, we were 3 weeks into the 10 week quarter and had three opportunities to share progress as a group. In our group meetings students bounced ideas off each other and gave insight on how to improve their pitches, share contacts and give overall feedback.

### Funding Strategies

After project components were in development, I had students think about how they were going to fund their venture. We reviewed many options such as traditional avenues including friends and family, angel and venture investors, and community grants. We also discussed the nuances of non-traditional avenues such as Indy-gogo, Kickstarter, Quirky and other crowd-sourcing options. As we discussed these options it was apparent that each unique project required a unique funding strategy.

While business, planning, and strategy are a large part of this process it was only fifty percent of our activities. Our class would have an initial discussion period then students would work on pressing items. Typically these activities were continuing their product development. The class was a balance between strategy and development. I found when integrating business components early on, it had a positive effect on later stages of product development. This process created a concurrent development cycle with business solutions occurring simultaneously with product development efforts.

As students progressed in developing their products, the group's attention refocused from strategy to materials and process. I made it clear to students that what ever is developed conceptually must be manufacturable. This process is reinforced by University of Cincinnati's intense CO-OP program, that is designed to expose students to many forms of materials and processes. We used this knowledge and applied it to each project so students learned that working with others and sharing information could only enhance outcomes.

As this course progressed through the 10-week quarter, two supporting courses were running concurrently: Career and Professional Development, a lecture course and Senior Product Studio. These two courses supported our independent study. Each week the lecture course exposed students to professionals who could directly assist them in getting connected to the right people or work directly with them.

## **Move to Action**

In the fall of 2012 the University of Cincinnati had completed transitioning from a quarter to a semester curriculum. In this transition my lecture class was eliminated. I was able to modify and continue my independent study.

The modifications morphed the lecture series into the independent study activities. The new structure kept the existing selection process but the lectures were condensed and positioned at strategic points in the semester. To expose more students from various backgrounds to this entrepreneurialism, I opened the lectures to the public. My hope was to gain a broader audience and attract individuals from various backgrounds to make the course more cross disciplinary. Since making this change, I've attracted two students from Graphic Communication Design and one from our masters program. The graduate student was an exciting addition. Her interests in assisting design students in entrepreneurial endeavor's mirrored mine. For her thesis, I assisted her with the development of a business strategy tool that would help designers understand all aspects of a start-up venture.

## **First Batch**

In the past 5 years, my activities in design entrepreneurialism have helped start 8 companies from our Industrial Design Program. Six of those companies have made their home in the Cincinnati area. Below is a list of the companies:

Losantiville: Design collective providing shop and office space for design related start-ups

Atomic Number 10: Vintage clothing and accessories

Smart Fish Studio and Sustainable Supply: Hand crafted footwear and sustainable art supplies

Such & Such: Product development, prototyping, and design-build interiors

Amirite: Contemporary furniture design

Sindrian Arts: DIY CNC Router systems

The Launch Werks: Independent product launch and industrial design consulting

Ampersand: Furniture and home accessories



Figure 1. Losantiville workspace



Figure 2. Atomic Number Ten presentation



Figure 3. Atomic Number Ten brick and mortar



Figure 4. Ampersand



Figure 5. Such & Such



Figure 6. Ampersand and Such & Such





Figure 7. Amirite sketch models



Figure 8. Amirite production



Figure 9. Amirite on site



These businesses are gaining strength every year and inspire students currently in our program to achieve their own entrepreneurial ventures. These companies assist the growth and revitalization of our inner city and retain talent in the region.

Recently, I partnered with two graduates from our masters program who are successfully conducting entrepreneurial activities through their company the Launch Werks. This partnership also includes US Bank's Haile Foundation's "Haile's Kitchen" program. Haile's Kitchen program funds multiple activities that spawn economic growth in the Cincinnati area.

Haile's Kitchen funds our program called First Batch (FB). FB funds designers who have scalable physical product ideas and who have a passion to have them manufactured. At FB we have developed a curriculum that systematically guides participants through all phases of the research and development process with end deliverables being small batch mass-produced products. Participants are put through a rigorous discovery phase that is translated into a support system of mentors in the areas of user advocacy, manufacturing, and sales and distribution. Our two initial tandem of FB participants are recent graduates from our Industrial Design program. They are well on their way to becoming our next entrepreneurs, and will continue the trend of branding Cincinnati as fertile ground for design entrepreneurialism.