



**F**OR ME, FALL MARKS NOT ONLY THE return of autumn leaves, cider and football, but returning to my role as a college entrepreneurship instructor. Despite this being my third year teaching this subject, I'm still troubled by a gnawing, fundamental question: Can you actually teach someone to be an entrepreneur? Is it a trait you're born with, or can it be instilled through a well-considered pedagogy?

While the debate over whether different traits are genetic or learned has raged for centuries, the study of entrepreneurship is relatively new and on the rise. *Inc.* magazine says the number of universities offering courses has grown from 300 in the early 1980s to more than 1,600. Locally, Duquesne University offers a full major in its Entrepreneurial Studies Program. And almost every local college has at least one course on small business or entrepreneurship.

Over the summer, I decided to travel to Wellesley, Mass., to the Mecca of entrepreneurial education in the U.S. and maybe the world: Babson College. This kingdom of start-up thought is presided over by its all-knowing prophet Jeffrey Timmons, author of the classic *New Venture Creation* and creator of the famed "Timmons Model."

Along with 50 college professors and entrepreneurs making their educational pilgrimage to this quaint, little New England town, I went for a weeklong seminar in teaching entrepreneurship. I figured if I couldn't get an answer to my question of nature vs. nurture, I might as well end my crusade for this philosophical grail.

My seminar classmates ranged from Blake and Dave, the California surfer dudes who are also hard-nosed venture capitalists — to Mark

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illustration by CATHY RUBIN

Entrepreneurship instructor seeks to answer whether original thinkers are born or made

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from Arkansas, a somewhat cynical, yet erudite professor who teaches while running a multimillion-dollar home restoration development company — to Wayne from Wyoming, who freaked me out by sounding just like the actor who plays the shrink Dr. Emil Skoda from “Law and Order.” Wayne also brought sober realism to every discussion because he runs a start-up company in addition to teaching.

I gravitated to the entrepreneurs and investors who teach as a sideline, but I also realized that the more time I spend with professional academics, the more I respect them. Good ones work at least 50 hours a week preparing for classes — three hours of prep for every hour of teaching — grading papers and meeting with students, which is where a lot of the learning takes place.

As soon as we “dropped the puck” as Prof. Timmons said, I started researching the source of entrepreneurship. Are you born with the Right Stuff or can you be trained to be the next Steve Jobs?

Speaker after speaker explained that a key to entrepreneurial training is shedding managerial convention and bringing sanity to what was once perceived as chaos. The goal is to be an anarchist in an orderly fashion.

Think outside the box about solutions to customer problems. Make sure those solutions are unique in big and growing markets and can bring prices that create high profit margins. The anarchy creates open-mindedness to change, tension and conflict and an obsessive thirst for opportunity.

People used to call that thinking on your feet, yet few

corporate executives do it for fear of stepping outside the lines.

Entrepreneurs should constantly learn what customers want and then work as a team to give it to them. Don't take a risk unless it's fully evaluated and promises a big pay-off. The approach is like flying a fighter jet — high-speed and low drag. Above all, have fun. If it ain't fun, why bother. Life is too short.

I agreed with Timmons' approach. What did my fellow entrepreneurs-turned-academics think?

Some believe entrepreneurs are really leaders of a counter-culture movement in American business. Most people don't realize that Apple's Jobs and Steve Wozniak, Microsoft's Gates and Ballmer, and Michael Dell were pretty much hell-raisers in college. They worked on stuff that was “cool” to them, but also lucrative.

This business radicalism isn't born of a disrespect of authority.

Entrepreneurs respect authority — their own and their customers'. And every time their customers give them a gripe, they think of how to fix a problem — provided there's money in it.

Instead of burning down the administration building, they would be more apt to sell the college president a software program that minimizes paper and allows students to download textbooks and take tests online.

If Bobby Kennedy were alive today and you heard him say, “There are those who look at the way things are, and ask ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were, and ask, ‘Why not?’” or “Those

who dare to fail miserably can achieve greatly,” you'd think he was an entrepreneur.

Most people think of entrepreneurs as frantic people — business hummingbirds who flit from idea to idea, throwing possibilities at the wall to see what sticks. The key for teachers is helping entrepreneurs to be logical — turning them from hummingbirds into falcons.

The professors believe entrepreneurial education is really about getting students to focus outward on customers, not inward on processes. By buying your product or service, customers are essentially hiring you to do a job for them.

True success is finding unique ways to do those jobs that pay well in large and growing markets. It is not, as corporate lemmings believe, attending pointless meetings, writing cover-your-bum e-mails and worrying about the fact that your cubicle neighbor is more politically astute than you are.

By the end of my week's Socratic quest, I think that I got my answer. A chosen few are born with all of the attributes of an entrepreneur, but they must be disciplined and molded. Every stallion needs a corral created through a formalized approach to business.

Those without the full-blown start-up gene can be trained to add value to an entrepreneurial venture or make a big company more nimble.

Or in the words of the Bob Fosse-modeled character played by Roy Scheider in the film *All That Jazz*, “I can't make you a great dancer. I don't even know if I can make you a good dancer. But, if you keep trying and don't quit, I know I can make you a better dancer.” **P Q**

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