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Developing a Course in Media Entrepreneurship

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1 Developing a course in media entrepreneurship

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Abstract

The objective of this teaching fellowship was to develop a module in Digital Media Entrepreneurship for the fourth year BA Journalism students in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the pilot to run in the Semester beginning September 2012. Part 1 of the research involved a survey of the students prior to the pilot to ascertain their attitudes to, and expectations of a module in media entrepreneurship, as well as their skill sets. Part 2 will take place after the pilot to see whether these expectations have been met and whether the students' skill sets have improved. Unlike other modules on the undergraduate programme which are practice based or have a mainly academic component, this module aims to be at the forefront of new developments in the media industry. The objective of the project is to embed in the curriculum a cross-disciplinary module with accompanying materials, and learning outcomes which will give the final year students a skill set not currently available in their degree curriculum, and enable them to be at the forefront of new media. After the pilot project the module will be assessed and will be introduced into the curriculum on a permanent basis.

Keywords: *creative digital media, gaming, journalism, media entrepreneurship, new media*

Introduction

In its 2009 report on "Entrepreneurship education in Ireland", the Accelerating Campus Entrepreneurship (ACE) Initiative Committee called for

an entrepreneurship education that is "fit-for-purpose" today. That is, an entrepreneurship education (for and about entrepreneurship) for all students that will not only provide theoretical knowledge but ensure graduates develop an entrepreneurial mindset, through developing entrepreneurial skills, behaviours and attitudes and equipping them with the key competencies to enable them to enjoy an entrepreneurial/intrapreneurial career or engage in new venture creation.

The ACE report (2009: 8) concluded that "This can only be achieved through student-centred teaching and learning that employs innovative, experiential learning methodologies".

Journalism educators worldwide are aware that if they do not change their curriculum, then changes in media will make that curriculum redundant. Analysing this Mark Deuze (2006) contends "a journalism studies that fails to acknowledge the evolutionary change expressed in tomorrow's new media ecology will become a zombie journalism studies – alive but dead at the same time."

Looking at the media landscape from 2012 onwards some journalism faculties have decided to lead rather than follow. They have set up digital media entrepreneurship courses in order to allow students to gain the skills which will see them negotiating the changing media landscape by setting up their own start-ups. Some have concentrated just on up-skilling their journalism students. Others have gone a step further and are running cross-disciplinary courses where programmers, gamers, business students and journalists incubate new ideas and then seek funding from internal and external sources. The latter is the model which the author has chosen as the model for her teaching fellowship project module development. DIT School of Media plans to pilot this module in the Semester beginning September 2012.

Project Work

The project involved a number of complementary strands. First it looked at students and entrepreneurship and the academic research in the area, in order to best assess what teaching entrepreneurship at third level should involve. Then it involved carrying out Part 1 of a survey on the students who would be involved in the pilot to assess both their attitudes towards entrepreneurship in general and then media entrepreneurship in particular. Part 2 of the survey will take place when they have finished the course, thus allowing comparison of the changes in skill sets and attitudes after the pilot. The survey will also allow for feedback which will help the future development of the course.

The project also involved researching best practice in the area worldwide in order to design a course which would both aim high, and best suit the needs of journalism students within DIT.

Students and Entrepreneurship

Various studies of students and entrepreneurship have examined the role of entrepreneurship in education at third level (Vesper and Gartner 1997; Charney and Libecap 2000). Others have posited the tension between those who believe that entrepreneurs are born, and not made. For example in their survey of engineering students at MIT, Luthje and Franke (2003) found that as well as personality traits, would-be entrepreneurs are affected by the perceived support they have for entrepreneurial endeavours at college level.

The question may be asked therefore can universities and other third level institutions really create entrepreneurs? In their ten year literature review of enterprise education, (Gorman, Hanlon and King 1997: 63) found that "most of the empirical studies surveyed indicated that entrepreneurship can be taught or at least encouraged by entrepreneurship education".

In his literature survey Kuratko (2004) summarised many of the areas identified as being important in academic research into entrepreneurial education including skill-building courses (McMullen and Long 1987; Vesper and McMullan 1988), sources of venture capital (Vesper and McMullen 1988; Zeithaml and Rice 1987), experiential learning (Solomon, Weaver and Fernald 1994), learning tools including business plans (Hills 1988; Vesper and McMullan 1988; Gartner and Vesper 1994; Gorman, Hanlon and King 1997), consultation with practising entrepreneurs (Klatt 1988; Solomon, Weaver and Fernald 1994), and "live cases" (Gartner and Vesper 1994).

Student Survey Part 1

Using the Red C National Third Level student survey on entrepreneurship Education/Teaching(2011) as a partial model, third year BA Journalism students – who will be the core group for the September 2012 pilot media entrepreneurship course for final year journalism students – were surveyed in order to ascertain their attitudes and expectations towards a course in media entrepreneurship. Part 1 of the survey was a series of questions which attempted to ascertain student's skills sets, attitudes to and expectations of a course in media entrepreneurship. Part 2 will be carried out after the course is finished in order to survey how attitudes/skills have changed as a result of participation in the pilot course. The class is evenly divided between males (14) and females (13). The age levels of the participants range between 19 to 25 (77.7%), 26 to 30 (11.1%) and over 30 (11.1%). It is interest to note that of the more than 50% who answered the question on relatives who were self-employed, 58.3% had a parent (father) and/or uncle (58.3%) who was self-employed.

Attitudes to a course on media entrepreneurship

Out of the total group of 27 students who participated in Part 1 of the survey, when asked whether they had any "entrepreneurial skills teaching" as part of their course all (100%) answered in the negative. A total of 25 students said that they believed that an entrepreneurship module should be part of their course while two said they did not want one. More than two thirds (74.5%) wanted a dedicated entrepreneurship class while the rest preferred it to be a minor part of another course (25.9%). See Figure 1.1 below.

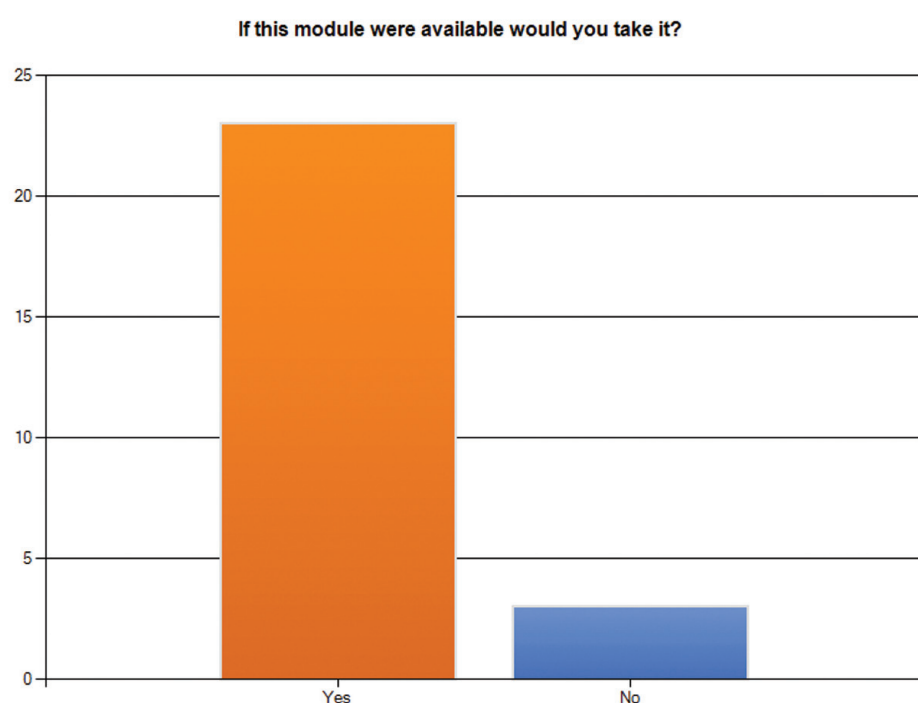


Figure 1.1

Asked whether they would take this module if it were available over 88% said that they would.

Attitude to course content

When attitudes to course content were broken down by subject area interesting patterns emerged. Topics such as creative thinking, product innovation, project work, mentoring from real life entrepreneurs, and how to generate a business idea scored highly, with an average of between 80% and 90% of students being very interested and/or fairly interested in all of these. Topics which did not rate as highly, averaging a score of 60–70%, included how to write a business plan, and what entrepreneurship means. Though it is extremely important in terms of entrepreneurship, learning how to deal with banks saw only 37.1% of students giving a response of being "very interested", with a higher level, 58.3% being interested in monetising content, and 54.2% being interested in global media opportunities. Again managing intellectual property is a huge part of digital media entrepreneurship but a little over 30% of students were interested in learning about this (see Fig 1.2 below).

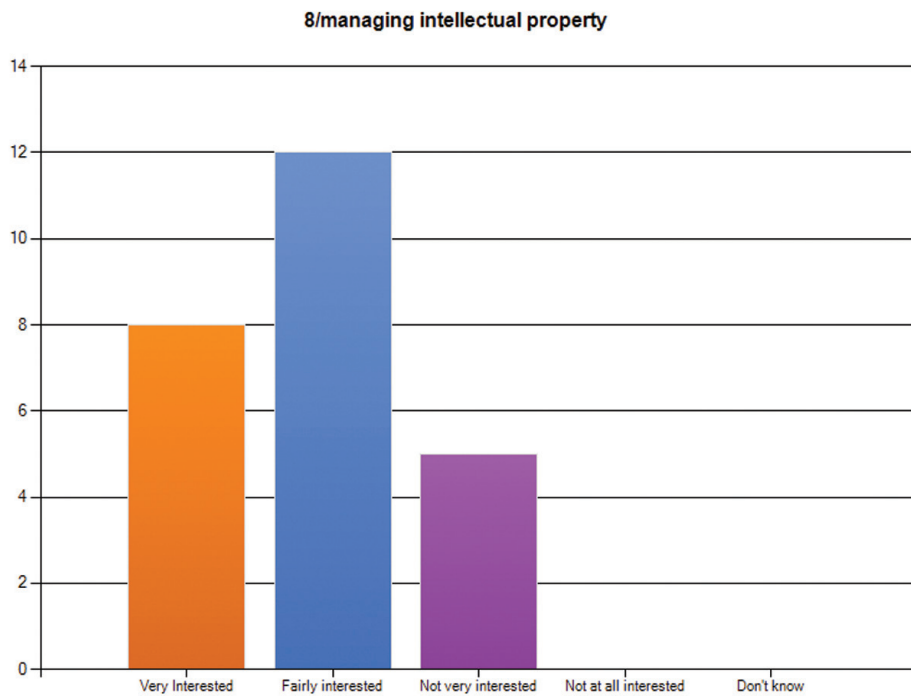


Figure 1.2

Over two-thirds of students (66.7%), however, were interested in having advertising and public relations covered on the course. The highest score in terms of levels of interest was conversely for the topic of the future of media (see Fig 1.3 below).

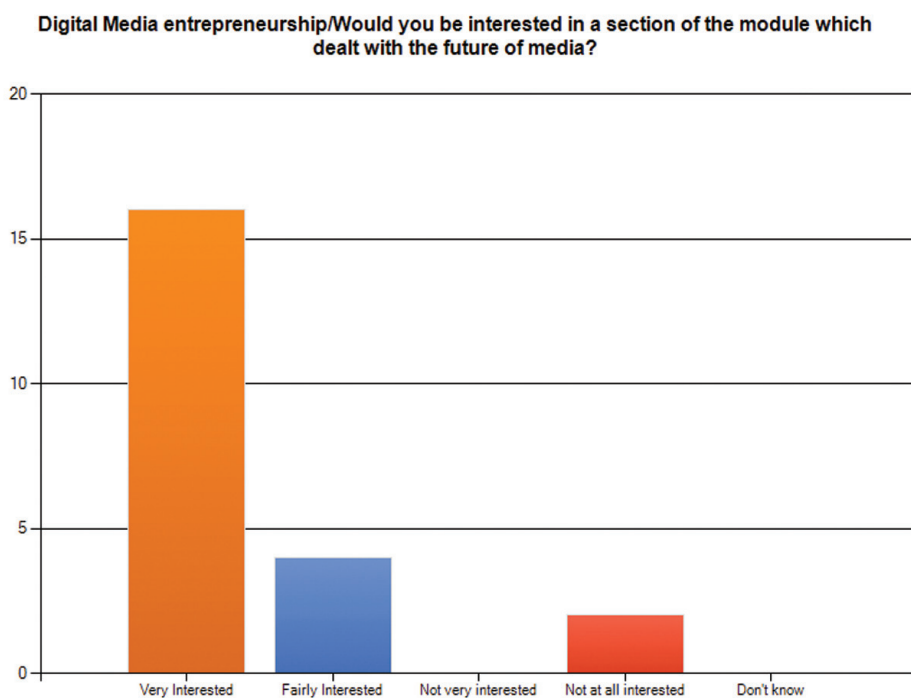


Figure 1.3

Attitudes to own skill sets

Part of the survey also questioned student beliefs about their own skills. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "I have a good understanding of what it takes to start and run a business", only 40% agreed strongly or slightly, the rest disagreed or did not know. They were much more positive about the issue of creative skills however with over 80% agreeing strongly or slightly with the statement "I often think outside the box, get ideas that other people do not get." While most agreed with the statement in relation to team work, "I often inspire other people", they were more ambivalent when asked whether they preferred working in a team or alone, with 38% agreeing with the statement "I prefer to work alone rather than in a team", but 46% saying "neither". More than 80% believed that a class in media entrepreneurship would make them more likely to start up their own business.

Attitudes to future employment

Although the students had different aspirations as to where they would work in the future, the breakdown showed a majority (over 60%) opted to work online. The rest divided equally across magazines, radio and television. Traditional print journalism, for example newspapers, was the least favoured option.

Conclusions

From its original template, where the course would have been solely for the BA Journalism fourth years my research concluded that it should be expanded to a cross-disciplinary course as per the University of Stanford digital media entrepreneurship course. The support of Hugh McAtamney, (Head of Digital Media), and Barbara O'Shea (Head of the School of Media) has been key to this project. The course will be taught to both the fourth year BA Journalism students and the M.Sc. in Creative Digital Media and Digital Games students. This involved extensive negotiations and consultations across disciplines as well as liaising with colleagues and Heads of Department in the School of Media in order to fit the course into the existing academic schedule, and seek academic council approval for the same. (See course outline in Appendix C.) Students on the course will be expected to incubate and later showcase new media ideas to an industry panel.

Convergence in media is being met with convergence in journalism practice. But as Bob Giles (2007) pointed out when sounding a warning note about these changes: "journalism educators should be wary of using grafting tools to solve their curriculum problems, grafting a course on here, or there, they might instead head for the plough, and indulge in a little creative destruction".

Creating a cross-discipline course where journalists and practitioners of creative digital technologies can collaborate and come up with digital media start-ups – which is the model this project opted for in DIT – is part of that "creative destruction". It should also lead to new research which will add to our theoretical understanding about what is happening as media evolves.

Analysing this, Stephens (2006: 151) posits: "If our future journalists are encouraged to experiment and stretch conventions they will either come up with a more relevant and more interesting form of journalism or they will have a better understanding of its traditional form".

The DIT students surveyed about this pilot project want to learn the skills needed to become a media entrepreneur and are positive that such a course will benefit them. Many of those changes involved developments in digital media technologies; therefore allowing our students to collaborate with fellow-students from creative technology disciplines should benefit both cohorts.

Recommendations to DIT

This project has shown both the need for entrepreneurial education among journalism students and the benefits of adopting an interdisciplinary approach in order to maximise the learning outcomes. It could be a model for future collaborations within DIT. Our graduates when they leave DIT will work in increasingly complex environments. Allowing students to work in small cross-disciplinary teams as part of their undergraduate or post-graduate courses could drive both entrepreneurship and innovation across DIT.

Evaluation/Proposed Future Work

The students involved in the pilot project will be surveyed again after they have done the course in order to see how their skill sets have changed/improved and how being on a cross-disciplinary course has affected learning outcomes. This research will form the basis of future entrepreneurial courses in journalism.

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