

Can Entrepreneurship Be Taught?

One Half of a Dialogue

by Helen Mills

Tandis que l'auteure réfléchit sur ses expériences d'entrepreneuse, elle soulève un débat sur l'acquisition possible des compétences nécessaires pour l'entreprise. Elle termine

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son article par une liste de facteurs nécessaires et d'ingrédients utiles pour promouvoir l'esprit d'entreprise chez les femmes.

You've got to understand these people are basically unemployable.

—Linda Lundstrom, addressing the Canadian Bankers Association in 1993

Entrepreneur:

1. a person who organizes and manages any enterprise, esp. a business, usually with considerable initiative and risk 2. an employer of productive labour; contractor 3. one who undertakes (some task), equivalent to "entrepren(dre)" (to) undertake.

Enterprise:

1. a project undertaken, esp. one that is of importance or that requires boldness or energy... 2. a plan for such a project... 3. participation or engagement in such projects 4. a boldness or readiness in undertaking; adventurous spirit; energy.... ...a plan, undertaking, venture. (Websters 3rd International Dictionary)

Many years ago I can remember reading a "profile" of who might be least likely to become an entrepreneur. As I recall I jumped a bit as I definitely fit the bill...the children of academics and teachers were apparently among the least likely to try and succeed at being entrepreneurs. I was indeed the daughter of an academic and, perhaps characteristically, I grew up around a strong set of attitudes about business and business people. Not only was business not my universe, but the business community was actively despised by my slightly left-of-centre parents. In my family, business was a four-letter word, and business people were more or less seen as the scum of the earth.

Middlemen or brokers were especially rotten examples of people who did nothing productive in themselves, but gained vast profits trading on the agricultural goods produced by the honest labour of farmers, for example (my mother being the daughter of a farmer). Business people were perceived as being attached to money above all: their values so to speak, were "in the bank," and this was definitely not okay. I was brought up believing that all business people are likely to be engaged in somewhat sleazy practices, and not at all likely to be as fair and honest in trade as they ought to be.

Despite the authoritarian and patriarchal society I grew up in (South Africa), and plenty of the same within my own family, I was raised with a strong expectation that I would not adopt a traditional female role. I was expected to grow up and get myself a nice profession (doctor, engineer, scientist, architect yes, teacher maybe, nurse no). Business was definitely not on the list of options. Business was for people who couldn't do anything else, or for smart and rich men—no women in this realm—who would be sure to be scoundrels as well.

To my father's horror, I did not do the expected thing and get a profession, but rather chose to study philosophy and then went on to art school. I managed to keep my feet firmly planted on the ceiling at all times, and although I began to support myself at about age 19, I possessed only the most rudimentary survival skills imaginable. Along the way I discovered the women's movement, and this began an internal process of transformation, which in the end led to an unlikely alliance and friendship with Adrienne (who became my business partner), and an even more unlikely career as a business woman/ entrepreneur. Although I see that Adrienne actually places me among the great unteachable masses of non-entrepreneurs, I know that the common sense use of the term definitely covers who I am, especially in terms of initiative, a sense of adventure, willingness to risk, and the will to carry on against incredible odds. But more of this later.

My mother laughs when she thinks of me as a business woman, and I must say that to this day I carry with me a sensation of being an isolated Martian within the business community. I think we do live in a kind of business "ghetto" (another thing that is interesting to talk about but not right now). Yet the fact remains that I am a practising business woman with many of the strengths that make a powerful entrepreneur, as well as some weaknesses that are the enduring legacy of my upbringing, personality, and cultural heritage.

So I think that I am both a good example of the thesis that entrepreneurship can be learned (*ergo* can be taught), and also of the thesis that it is very difficult to teach, or at

least involves changes that are so fundamental as to be beyond the reach of what teachers (and maybe even psychotherapists) normally do. Certainly my experience has been of a transformation that was immense, hard won, and not quite complete. I know well the things that are hardest to change, learn, or be taught, and I doubt I'll ever feel completely at one with my business universe.

So how did I make the long journey from nice upper middle class girl to businesswoman? Or, to put it another way, what are the most necessary ingredients for a transformation of this magnitude? Was my experience of a difficult transformation atypical, or is it true that for many or

business, and capital, I know on a personal level I wasn't thinking much about the big picture at the start of my life in business. It really had more to do with my relationship with Adrienne, and what Adam Smith calls the "invisible hand": brute survival (the economic desperation described by Adrienne in her article)—combined with an acute allergy to having a boss and a job in a large regimented organization (Raphael 70). On the other hand we probably should do a lot more thinking about what we are doing in relation to the big picture, and to consider deeply the nature of the new direct mediator of our economic existence—the all too male world of capital and finance.

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most people there would be a very steep learning curve? Is it somehow different if you are a woman? ...And why do we care anyway? Is this the kind of transformation we want to see happening? Why, as women, do we particularly care about this question right now? Why is this such a fashionable question right now, and who is asking it... teachers of business administration, the feminist community, the developing world? Is the question about whether we can teach entrepreneurship in a school or university context, or is it about whether the skills of entrepreneurship can be learned in any way at all? Is entrepreneurship just a bunch of skills, or is that a bad way of looking at it to begin with? What, after all, do we really mean by the word "entrepreneur"? Is an entrepreneur someone who starts small and builds a business empire, or is an entrepreneur anyone who runs a little mom-and-pop business that puts along and gets them a living? If I try to build something big and fail, am I still an entrepreneur?

"A woman must have money and a room of her own"
—Virginia Woolf

I'd like to start with the question "why do we care?" I suppose we care because we see that women need to do this to survive. Women the world over desperately need some economic clout, some personal independence, and some control over capital. In terms of the big picture it makes sense to do things that will get us going in this direction. The strategy of encouraging economic enterprise among downtrodden groups is very popular with policy makers at many different levels, and I think with good reason. It's definitely very popular with those who are downtrodden, also with good reason.

This may be a good way for us to go about developing a different relationship to the world of economics, busi-

On learning to become an entrepreneur

When I told a friend that I would be writing about the question "Can entrepreneurship be taught?" she exploded "What a ridiculous question... who's the moron who thought that one up!" Despite what I have already written about my own difficult experience of becoming an entrepreneur/business person I do really agree that it is ridiculous to seriously entertain the notion that people/women can't learn business skills/entrepreneurship, especially since trade is a human invention, and has been one of the hallmarks of all human societies since the very earliest times, and since women have traditionally engaged in or been the primary traders in large numbers of societies throughout history.

So what are we really asking when we ask this question? I think I detect a number of sub-texts. Certainly the question could be interpreted in a number of different ways, depending on the assumptions you are starting from. One sub-text seems to be a version of the great genius theory: the ultimate in nature versus nurture theories. Great artists, musicians, and entrepreneurs are born not made; there is greatness lurking somewhere in their DNA just screaming to get out. Somehow, regardless of the barriers encountered in the real world, this genius will find a way to manifest itself. (Interestingly, the great genius hypothesis about artists is strongly associated with a time in history when artists lost their traditional patrons in church and state and underwent a major identity crisis, combined with a crisis of finances and survival. The idea of the great genius became a marketing tool for artists, probably allowing them to cope with a lot of dissonance about being starving artists in garrets, and about the general poor treatment that was being dished out to them by society.) We don't really have to think strictly in terms of nature or nurture: perhaps some people just have the right kind of personality to be entrepreneurs, whether it is learned or genetic, and there's no way this special creative drive can be taught or instilled in anyone by normal teaching methods.

In the very act of framing this question we might be buying into some version of the great genius sub-text (or am I just being paranoid now?). Somehow the very question reeks of the despair of the teacher trying to teach those

who cannot be taught, and of the superiority and arrogance of those who think they don't need to be taught. There's another little bit of sub-text in this, which has to do with how we see teaching and learning: the idea that we might be passive recipients of training that would be installed in us and lead us to become entrepreneurs or turn us into entrepreneurs. This image of what teaching and learning are all about reminds me of my early experiences in public school, or at least it resonates with how I think my teachers understood what they were doing. Of course an important part of this view is the pessimism born of the belief that the teaching will never work, the learning won't take, since it is being transmitted to people who are inherently limited with regard to the material being taught.

Someone somewhere wrote about teaching language to primates and suggested that the progress we have made could be compared to the progress of someone who has climbed a tree and announces that the human species is now much closer to being able to reach the moon. If we are really dealing with a set of unlearnable attributes then we must be dealing with unteachable skills. Or, if we set out to teach the unlearnable, we will just end up with despairing teachers and people who feel really bad about themselves. The great unwashed masses' will remain untaught, except for those who were born with the right stuff anyway.

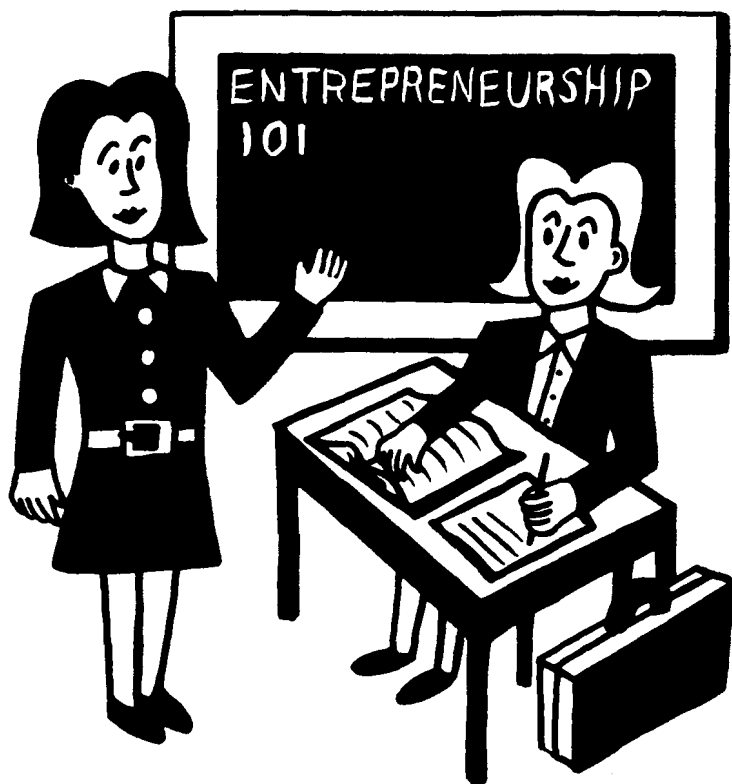
The very act of teaching from this framework contains the seed of its own failure: the power of negative expecta-

tions and a completely wrongheaded view of what human learning and genius are all about. If this is what is meant by the question then the answer must be that we cannot and should not try to "teach" or impose entrepreneurialism on the great unwashed masses of women, or on any other kinds of great unwashed masses.

We could, however, look at the question from another perspective about learning and genius altogether. Learning is an act of free choice based on need/desperation/desire. What really happens is that people learn about what moves them, is interesting to them, and is important for them to get by in the world. How we decide on what to learn, what is important, and how we develop interests, let alone consuming interests, is very much a function of our circumstances and the possibilities that we read from the culture/context we live in. Steven J. Gould speaks of our ability to learn and the malleability and adaptability that arise from this as the seminal characteristic of the human species. If culture is the transmission of learned knowledge and ways of doing things from one generation to another, then we must understand learning as a phenomenon that is hugely conditioned by culture, as well as being the main process for defining what culture is. Learning and human invention take place in and are embedded in a very large matrix of circumstance and culture.

I recall the words of an old friend visiting from South Africa when Adrienne and I had started our first business. He told me: "Helen, I really admire the way you've absorbed the culture! You've really done well." Did I feel fraudulent! I was so out of control at work, feeling so much that I did not know what I was doing, and that Adrienne was the real driving force of that business! But he had made a very interesting observation. He was watching an immigrant become acculturated, and the essence of the culture he saw was the North American spirit of free enterprise. In an entrepreneurial culture or climate, entrepreneurial activities will thrive and people will do and learn about entrepreneurial kinds of things. North America is definitely such a culture, and lately the value of and the benefits of small business have been much vaunted. We are steeped in a culture where it is both fashionable and necessary for many people to go it alone. At the present moment there is a widespread belief that this is the way to go in terms of building the economy, and for women it certainly presents itself as an attractive option for survival. Certainly many, many women and others are choosing to start a business and then setting out to find out what to do and how to do it.

It is also the North American way that entrepreneurship is being actively marketed all over the place. There are now tons of courses and programs out there designed to address this need and to further stimulate people to move in this direction. This is really an extension of the more general development of managerial sciences since the turn of the century and of the concept that any kind of business skill can or should be formalized and taught in an academic



Nancy Reid

environment. Certainly a dyed-in-the-wool old academic like my father would see it as anathema to the true meaning and use of a university education. This part of the debate is really about whether and how we could take the basic ingredients of trading and business and turn them into a kind of science. Despite the views of my father, schools of management science or business have achieved real legitimacy in the past 50 years and are accepted and respected even in bastions of tradition like Cambridge University. Why should the study of entrepreneurship be different? We can certainly look at what successful entrepreneurs do and describe it, we can use the same social science techniques to study and understand what entrepreneurs do. There is no reason to think that we can't get a lot of formalized academic-style knowledge about entrepreneurship. In fact we already do have such a body of information.

But this is different from training people to practice management or to be entrepreneurs. There is a widespread belief that there is a vast difference between management science if you are training "corporate clones" and management science for a would-be entrepreneur. Maybe this is true, given the great cultural and organizational differences between big business, small business, and academia. I think there is a big problem with training corporate clones at all. Lots of things are wrong with what goes on in business schools and education in general, but the basic skills that can be learned in business schools sure would have made a huge difference to us when we started out in business. There is no doubt that you can teach people lots of the basic management skills that are needed to start and run a business. Business schools can't change people's personality, but they can be a place where we can learn to think strategically about what we do and don't have, build on our strengths and go to others to help fill out the weak spots—as Adrienne says, get a partner, and/or hire someone. Lots of changes could be made to try to prevent the corporate clone syndrome, but I seem to have run out of time at this moment, just when things are getting interesting and where Adrienne and I might find ourselves converging about how to go about teaching entrepreneurship.

Regardless of what happens in management schools, right now many people are setting out to start great and small enterprises and are going to learn how to do it whether there is a course being offered or not. As Adrienne says, it's all about desperation and survival. As I say, it's all about how we read or interpret who we are and what is possible and desirable from the messages of the larger culture. Teaching in the context of business schools could help reduce some barriers such as lack of basic business skills, but this is only one issue that needs to be dealt with if we are going to foster economic development for women and other groups. Teaching that destroys the human spirit and produces rigid law abiding clones is not what is needed. We need to take back our power to learn and do for ourselves, and be demanding consumers for what is on offer from the schools.

Creating a climate that fosters entrepreneurship

Here's a possible list of helpful factors and necessary ingredients for fostering entrepreneurship:

- financial need (ambition, greed, and avarice might do just as nicely);
- learning to be disobedient, to park in a no parking zone, to be bad in general.; a healthy disrespect for rules
- endurance or tremendous luck;
- feminism, or anything that allows you to see yourself/ women as empowered, self-directed, responsible, capable of making things happen, knowing if you don't know it you can go out and learn it or figure out a way to make it happen;
- friends/partners to work with to make it happen and give support;
- a powerful need for independence and self-determination, or a powerful aversion to having to lead a life that's structured for you by someone else;
- courage, heart, chutzpa;
- sense of adventure;
- people skills, ability to persuade, sell, negotiate;
- conceptual skills: being able to think, understand, and interpret what's going on, figure out the implications, and decide what to do;
- creativity;
- willingness to take the heat and to be the place where the buck stops;
- self-help networks with other businesses, maybe even credit clubs or other innovative financing instruments.

Here's a possible list of major barriers:

- shyness, dread of contact with clients and others in business;
- fear of men, and an impulse to obey them rather than treat them as peers. (Maybe this sounds really way out to some of you but believe me that's how I started out, even with all my privileged background);
- numerous mental blocks resulting from a general sense that this is not my realm, or any woman's;
- lack of true blue attitudes to money and financing; thinking in terms of survival rather than profit;
- total ignorance about the basics of running a business, financial planning, marketing, etc.;
- lack of mentoring, isolation from peers in industry;
- lack of networking and mutual aid;
- actual or imagined bigotry from anyone in the outside world;
- lack of funding and capital/lack of knowledge about how to get these, how to plan, make presentations, etc.;
- general alienation, isolation, and a sense of otherness.

Helen Mills was born in South Africa, and moved to Canada in 1966. She studied philosophy and physical geography at the University of Toronto, and art at the Ontario College of Art. Since 1984 she has been the Vice President of The International Courier in Toronto.