

Building Bridges Between Artists and Business Entrepreneurs: Facilitating Creative Deviance

Adrienne Callander (University of Arkansas)
Michael Cummings (University of Arkansas)

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A University of Arkansas program aims to show both business and arts students how to think more boldly and deviate from the norm.

Arts entrepreneur. Cultural entrepreneur. Self-employed creative. Freelance artist. Whatever the label or concept, recent years have seen increased interest in the intersection of art and entrepreneurship. *Arts entrepreneurship* has increasingly become a focus of many universities and within the broader arts community.

Yet few artists or business founders explicitly consider themselves as “arts entrepreneurs.” Artists often view commercialization as a necessary evil to get their art noticed and support their livelihoods; businesspeople often think artistry is merely an attractive design element or novel precondition for the venture idea.

These misconceptions that art and business might have about each other can limit their synergistic potential. In some ways, the biggest barrier to helping entrepreneurs tap into their arts side (and vice versa) is a failure to recognize their deeper alignment with one another. The boundary-spanning such recognition entails, while challenging, is essential to the evolution of new forms relevant to both “sides.”

As is the case with many nascent academic fields, boundaries, definitions, scope, and goals of *arts entrepreneurship* are still under negotiation (Essig and Beckman, 2012), but if the disciplines of art and business try to “meet in the middle” without a shared understanding of what that means for both artists and entrepreneurs, it’s possible to miss the target entirely. This article discusses our research and our program at

University of Arkansas, which aim to give both business and arts students a fuller appreciation of how to think more boldly, outside of their comfort zones.

What Our Research Tells Us

In a recent piece in *Small Business Economics* (Callander and Cummings, 2021), we explore how scholars in arts and entrepreneurship research implicitly view the other domain. We also explore how understanding these self-identities and mental models of the other might encourage the integration of arts and entrepreneurship. Below we summarize some of our research findings, as well as how we translate these finding(s) to our broader research and teaching endeavors—with a goal of expanding scholarship and practice in the emerging field of arts entrepreneurship, and in entrepreneurship studies more broadly.

Our review, based on 148 articles in either art-focused or entrepreneurship-focused academic journals, identified and narratively analyzed the breadth of approaches towards art(s) in entrepreneurship scholarship (and vice versa). In the arts literature, the dominant narrative of entrepreneurship focused on the commercialization process. But a significant undercurrent addressed how entrepreneurship can actually be used as a vehicle for resistance and counterculture. Similarly, in the entrepreneurship literature, beyond a framing of the arts as an industry or context for business activity, some of the discourse explored art as “tool of provocation and a challenge to the cultural, socio-economic, or political status quo.”

In both instances, a capacity for dissent is identified as an essential feature of the threshold between art and entrepreneurship. While it can be perilous to deviate too far from core missions of either art or business entrepreneurship, one conclusion we reach is that effectively blending the two requires some degree of

deviation from norms. How might we increase such capacity for divergent thinking, and the confidence to act “deviant-ly?”

How Our School Integrates Business and Art

As faculty members at a public land-grant institution, we take seriously our responsibility for supporting economic and cultural development in the community and across the state. Our region has recently been expanding its arts and culture amenities, education, and outreach. Philanthropy and taxpayers have recently endowed a new [School of Art](https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/stories/home-region/inspiring-art-spirit-in-next-generation-of-students) (<https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/stories/home-region/inspiring-art-spirit-in-next-generation-of-students>) on campus, new museum spaces ([Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](https://crystalbridges.org/)[\(https://crystalbridges.org/\)](https://crystalbridges.org/), [The Momentary](https://themomentary.org/)[\(https://themomentary.org/\)](https://themomentary.org/)), world-class theatre ([TheatreSquared](https://www.theatre2.org/)[\(https://www.theatre2.org/\)](https://www.theatre2.org/) , and emerging art districts ([Fayetteville Cultural Arts Corridor](https://www.fayetteville-ar.gov/3456/Cultural-Arts-Corridor)<https://www.fayetteville-ar.gov/3456/Cultural-Arts-Corridor>) , [Windgate](https://news.uark.edu/articles/54985/u-of-a-school-of-art-breaks-ground-on-windgate-studio-and-design-center)[\(https://news.uark.edu/articles/54985/u-of-a-school-of-art-breaks-ground-on-windgate-studio-and-design-center\)](https://news.uark.edu/articles/54985/u-of-a-school-of-art-breaks-ground-on-windgate-studio-and-design-center) Art and Design District).

Arts integration broadly, and arts entrepreneurship specifically, have become strategic objectives at the University of Arkansas. Our resource commitments and creative freedom show this is a priority. The Walton College of Business and the School of Art jointly sponsor publication of *Artivate: A Journal of Entrepreneurship in The Arts*; support cross-appointed faculty (Professor Callander holds a 50% appointment in art and business); and foster interdisciplinary curricula designed to build bridges to help both art and business students engage in “productive deviance.”

Two such courses developed by Professor Callander and offered in the department of Strategy, Entrepreneurship, and Venture Innovation are described below.

Creativity and Collaboration explores the creative process, innovation, relationships, and rebellion in a highly interactive classroom setting where students experiment via a range of individual and collaborative projects. With a meta-focus on the “hero’s journey” (Campbell, 1987), students engage venture development as a highly personal adventure that

includes episodes of failure, bravery, shifts in perspective, and transformation. Of critical importance, the ventures are not expected to launch; venture ideation is held two-thirds of the way into the semester, following 12 weeks of self-discovery and relationship-building in the classroom; and only ventures with a degree of absurdity get the green light (\$100). The stakes are low, the bonds are strong, and absurdity—dissonance and dissension—is rewarded.

Imagination examines creative, social, and practical imaginativeness (McMullen & Kier, 2017) as captured in literature, poetry, TV, film, plays, and lyrics to develop a working framework for types of entrepreneurial action and mindset. In addition to investigating works of imagination, this course tests and cultivates participants’ imaginativeness as a baseline for entrepreneurial capacity. From the Garden of Eden to *East of Eden*, and from Michael Scott of the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company to Ozark’s Wendy Byrde, students explore archetypes of entrepreneurial behavior, the contexts in which they emerge and operate, and the role that storytelling plays in guiding students who wander beyond the familiar as they engage in their own (appropriately deviant) world building.

Similar integration efforts are also underway in the School of Art, where Professor Callander teaches *Arts Entrepreneurship* and *Social Justice in the Arts*:

Arts Entrepreneurship introduces students to the arts’ potential to shape philosophies, transform industries, and unite diverse communities in varied modes of cultural production. Students explore vehicles for socially conscious, arts-based, entrepreneurial action as they gain an understanding of the innovative role of the creative process in any venture. With a bias toward action and collaboration, students develop authentic creative content, test the viability of their venture concepts, and practice social, environmental, and cultural accountability as they work independently and in teams on projects that exercise specific aesthetic and entrepreneurial strategies.

Social Justice and the Arts takes a critical look at historic and contemporary models of collaborative, interdisciplinary social practice in the visual arts. Building on the history and theory of engagement scholarship and entrepreneurship in the arts, students examine art as a catalyst for community exchange,

develop strategies for addressing the needs and goals of specific local organizations, and implement practical tools for supporting those strategies. Students practice various principles of innovative arts-based support for community engagement activities, and develop critical abilities to investigate and synthesize practices and concepts outside the arts studio.

The Impact on Students

Business students' exit surveys reflect significant shifts in their perspective on the nature of creative action and on their own creative capacities. Many students have mentioned an expansion of who they are and how they see themselves. Even those who self-describe as "not usually a very creative or artsy person" have appreciated the chance to "embrace my creative side" and "get out of my comfort zone." Others focused on how flexing their creative muscle helped them be "more patient with my thought process," allowing "a few iterations and trial and error," but in the end increasing their ability to "[see] things from someone else's perspective." Recognizing these alternative perspectives gives them the confidence and freedom to deviate by "straying from the baseline," and approaching the creative process using "different and unconventional forms."

One particularly poignant comment came from a student reflection describing a complete paradigm shift in the definition and scope of what business education and practice is all about: "I feel like before this class, I was pushing my creative side back behind a curtain and not letting it show. I think this is because when I think about the business world and finance, I think of seriousness. I don't know how that thought was planted in my head. But this course has made that thought crumble and vanish."

On the arts side, students similarly came to a different understanding about the meaning of entrepreneurship, and their own entrepreneurial capabilities. Students expressed deep appreciation for "the level of creativity that is fostered from the top down in many businesses," and some described how meeting and interacting with professional creatives demystified the business world. These meetings "broadened my horizons" and "brushed away the initial fears I had about my future career opportunities as an art major."

One student in particular mentioned a "big idea" that they'd never before considered sharing with anyone

else because it seemed completely unrealistic. But by the end of the arts entrepreneurship course, the planning and organizational skills they developed and implemented helped them feel much more confident in their ability to "actually bring ideas and plans into fruition."

How Universities Can Help

Although it is possible for a single faculty member to engage in interdisciplinary research and teaching across traditional academic silos, cross-college collaborations are often useful because each person brings a different set of skills and perspectives, shaped by their educational backgrounds. We speak from experience, as an MFA in Visual Art with an undergraduate degree in History (Callander) and a former attorney with a PhD in Entrepreneurship and an undergraduate degree in English (Cummings).

For example, two of the four classes we describe above are themselves the result of collaborative research and teaching. *Social Justice and the Arts* was first developed at the University of Alabama by Professor Callander (Interdisciplinary Studies) and Dr. Lucy Curzon (Art History). *Imagination* is a newly developed course at the University of Arkansas by Professor Callander (School of Art/Entrepreneurship) in a research collaboration with Professor Cummings (Entrepreneurship) and Kristie Moergen (doctoral student in Management).

How can universities better create environments to encourage these arts and business collaborations? One obvious measure is the formal cross-appointment of individual faculty members across colleges. But universities that are serious about transdisciplinary and collaborative research and teaching also need to address the existing structural issues that discourage it. One way to do this is to create explicitly interdisciplinary programs (certificates, minors, etc.) involving faculty and students from across several colleges on campus. This brings people together by definition in curriculum committee work and planning, and may result in some research collaboration as well. One challenge with this is the allocation of teaching credit for potential co-instructors. Team-taught courses may in fact require MORE, rather than LESS work from each participating faculty member.

Another idea is to expand our current definitions of scholarly contribution. For example, many business

schools have journal lists that specify what “counts” as a scholarly contribution (FT50, UT-Dallas), which is likely not the same as what “counts” for an arts faculty member (an exhibition, performance, or recording is equivalent to publication). One way to partially address this issue is for home departments to recognize as legitimate a scholarly contribution that is recognized in a coauthor’s home department—a formal reciprocity agreement of interdisciplinary scholarship. But interdisciplinarity is more than just publishing in a field outside our discipline: it may in fact require that we recognize new and different types of scholarly contributions. Our institutions of higher education could also recognize the classroom as a legitimate hub of inquiry itself. For example, students, faculty, and community members can explore and identify local issues and trends that may become ripe fields for research that yields practical advice for real-world settings. Interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship, if it is going to happen, should *enhance*, rather than *inhibit*, an individual faculty member’s progress towards tenure and promotion.

Conclusion

In its simplest and most common form, art and business entrepreneurship come together in the commercialization space, where art is created, and value is exchanged. But this overly utilitarian perspective limits what the overlap of art and entrepreneurship can or should be. The integration of arts and business entrepreneurship logics, tools, and world views has much bolder potential. As others have recently argued, a sufficiently expansive view of the entrepreneurship domain may in its ideal form “provide knowledge and skills required for a free person to participate fully in contemporary society” (Baker and Powell, 2019). To that end, in our research and teaching we aim to capture those business or art students at the periphery, increase their self-awareness of their own capacities (including the capacity for useful deviance), and encourage them to be imaginative on creative, social, and practical fronts (McMullen & Kier, 2017). The end goal is not to produce more businesses or more art, but to build a better world.

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