

# How Arts Education Can Develop Impactful Entrepreneurs

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There's never been a better time to get creative.

Over the years, the government has taken away funding for arts programs in schools, I suppose, because they see it as frivolous. When faced with making budget cuts, water-coloring and musical instruments are seen as less essential than math, science and social studies. Some years ago, Chicago public schools dealt a fierce blow to arts education by laying off more than 1,000 teachers, the most affected area being arts education. And things are getting worse. The new administration announced tentative plans in January to reduce spending by \$10.5 trillion over the next 10 years.

This reduction in spending will be achieved by “targeting waste” across the board. What are the first areas in line for the chopping block? You guessed it, arts and humanities. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and of course, the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) will all suffer if these spending cuts go through. Society as a collective just doesn’t place as much importance on these creative subjects.

When I was growing up, there was this notion that painting, singing, acting, dancing, creative writing, or playing an instrument is “fun,” and therefore could not lead to a lucrative career. *After all, how many people truly make it as a professional artist anyway? 10 percent? 5 percent? Less?*

This line of thinking is small-minded and dangerous.

Sure, the arts is a competitive industry and landing a job in some careers relies on a lot of luck. We’ve all had the image of a poor and struggling artist eating noodles from a cup and waiting tables between auditions imprinted on our brains, but having an arts education actually opens up the mind, allowing room for entrepreneurial innovation. With the types of technologies and positions being created by young entrepreneurs today, having a unique set of tools at their disposal can be very powerful for a new grad.

In fact, creativity is widely believed to be one of the greatest factors to entrepreneurial success. How many times have you heard the expression “thinking outside of the box?” Yet many educational and government institutions have failed to move with the times. Intelligence is valued higher than creativity, simply because it is easier to quantify.

Kids today don’t generally want to grow up to work in a large corporation following orders from dawn till dusk. They want to invent something cool. They want to solve world problems. They want to be entrepreneurs; to do this, they need to be able to solve problems in an innovative and imaginative way. CPS (Creative Problem Solving) helps create better solutions that can speed up the adoption of ideas. This is something that can be learned through arts education.

Cutting funding across the board for this essential area that fosters key skills and abilities in young people is a direct threat on innovation.

I was lucky enough to have more of an arts education than most. My father was a professional theater actor and I basically grew up backstage with him, studying authors like August Wilson and Tennessee Williams before Junior High, then moving onto Greek Tragedies, Comedia del Arte, and understanding the finer storylines of Shakespeare’s more obscure plays before high school. As an actor myself, I did several professional shows and went union before I went to college at sixteen. I skipped two grades not because I was

particularly smart, but because theater had advanced my cognitive reasoning, creative problem solving, and communication skills for my age. It was by no means a frivolous activity.

Acting is no longer my profession, but I still draw on my theater education every day of my life as an entrepreneur. Being an actor taught me how to listen deeply and understand the feelings and motivations of people who are different from me. This not only helped me understand my market, but build strong, meaningful business relationships. Plus, having improv, music, and speaking skills gave me a whole extra set of tools to communicate with!

It is astounding to see now how the arts and entrepreneurship are steadily colliding. You only have to look at infamous tech entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Kevin Systrom and Mark Zuckerberg to see that having a creative mind is worth its weight in gold. And there are more and more examples of creative startups coming to market every day.

The Forbes 30 Under 30 list is bursting with bright entrepreneurs from the arts fields. Jessica Chou produced her first movie, “A Brave Heart: The Lizzie Velasquez Story” to critical acclaim, and now focuses on her YouTube channel to encourage women to learn about mechanics. Discwoman’s female co-founders from Brooklyn invented a successful electronic music platform and booking agency, drawing on their music background and business prowess. The list goes on.

It’s no surprise to me that the arts are turning out some of the most brilliant creative minds. Take Laura Callanan from Upstart Co-Lab, for example. Callanan began her career working in fundraising for some of the top professional theaters in the country. But during the meetings between Hedge Fund Investors and the theater folks, she realized there was a huge disconnect in their vocabulary and communication. So she went back to school for finance and worked on Wall Street for several years in an effort to be the bridge for the gap.

In November, 2015, Callanan launched Upstart Co-Lab as a national collaboration to connect artists, investors and social entrepreneurs. The idea behind it is to create greater opportunities for artists in the entrepreneurial field, believing that “artists are the original social entrepreneurs.”

Contrary to popular belief, artists can actually translate their talents into lucrative business models. A prime example would be Jenni Britton Baeur, founder of Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams, whose arts background was the inspiration for her creativity in the kitchen and drive to start her own company. Then there’s David Gurman, founder of VibrantData, a company that focuses on machine learning. Gurman is a San Francisco-based designer and data artist who uses “real-time memorials” to stream live data and connect viewers with situations of conflict around the world, opening their minds to global problems. Gurman wants to

encourage connections to places that we hear about everyday but can't physically reach. The folks of Upstart Co-Lab are on a mission to create opportunities for more artist/entrepreneurs like these.

Cutting arts education funding isn't just a threat to the creative outlets of new generations. It's a direct hit on innovation and hampers entrepreneurial developments. With so many cases of arts education graduates becoming impactful entrepreneurs, arts education is essential for powering creative-minded problem solvers and creating business leaders of tomorrow.

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