

Entrepreneurs in the Classroom

Sandra Hlebs 24 October 2012

The British Council in Europe is running a project called [CENTRES](#) (Creative Entrepreneurship in Schools), which takes the entrepreneurial spirit to young people in secondary schools. It takes place in eight EU countries: UK, Estonia, Poland, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland and Latvia. As the EU is one of the biggest exporters of creative goods, and creative industries are acknowledged as the most potentially innovative of all EU sectors, the project focuses on fostering students' entrepreneurship in this area.

Entering schools with new ideas, or indeed, changing the curriculum, is traditionally a difficult task in most of the participating countries. Schools tend to be closed systems that do not readily communicate with the local, let alone the international, environment; they are worlds unto themselves. Children remain in these institutions for a considerable number of years, through a period of their life which defines how they will think and act, and what they will aspire to become as adults. At the same time, we are battling with recession, sluggish economies and general lethargy in our countries. Entrepreneurship, education and employability are important parts of the recovery and the future development of economies.

All the project partners shaped their own approaches in their respective countries. This article focuses on Slovenia. Together with the project partner CEED, the Centre for Entrepreneurial and Executive Development, we selected three schools for a pilot project, building on their successful entrepreneurship and mentoring programmes in South East Europe, Morocco and Bangladesh.

When discussing how to approach this, we agreed that it is not only the students but also the teachers that need training. We became aware that the training we were discussing was actually more about fostering the entrepreneurial spirit than hard business skills. We established the following baseline:

- Young people often lack the entrepreneurial attitude, entrepreneurial skills and personal initiative. They need to understand their own aspirations and ambitions, and be able to develop ideas and recognise opportunities. Slovenians are capable of more than we often dare. We do not recognise this failing, and understand that making mistakes is an integral part of a success story. We are known to have ideas but are unable to realise them, either because we do not know how, or purely because we do not persevere.
- The above situation stems greatly from our school programmes' essential of lack of understanding of their role in raising more confident individuals who

have dreams, goals and aspirations. (A very good comparison was made with young birds that are not taught how to fly, but have their wings clipped instead.) We need to change the foundation of education. The key challenge we face is to integrate schools with businesses and the wider social environment.

- In addition, entrepreneurship is still stigmatised and perceived as something negative and selfish, based on negative anecdotes about tycoons pursuing their own egotistic goals.

We developed a programme centred on developing the entrepreneurial attitude as a personal trait; equipping students with creative thinking, presentational and networking skills and other skills including active listening and inquisitive inquiry, with the goal of testing their ideas in the market,. We also demonstrated how to present and generate excitement for their ideas to others. CEED utilised people from their own network of entrepreneurs; they went into classrooms to mentor young students and their teachers, and applied their know-how through presentations, workshops, consultations project work and networking.

After the pilot year, this proved to be a life-changing experience for everyone involved. The kids loved it, and the training gave them an opportunity to excel as never before. They gained the understanding that obstacles are a necessary part of the process and only make you

stronger. They gained confidence, developed a sense of how to shape their ideas, and were more than able to present them to the audience at a public pitch. The students understood their relationship with the external world and the meaning of all the support systems and networks in their environment. Perhaps most importantly, they gained the courage and energy to move forward and realise their potential. The teachers – one of them described them as “the least entrepreneurial group of people” – were positively surprised at how the programme affected them. One of them stated that she realises only now how talented her students are. It caused her to pay attention to them as individuals and not just pupils in her classroom. And the entrepreneurs involved as mentors were keen to continue the programme – they enjoyed working with kids and praised their talent, but at the same time were very critical of the education system. One of the most prominent Slovene entrepreneurs said, “Our schools still promote qualities like obedience and diligence above all – which means they are raising generation after generation of excellent . . . servants, but certainly no leaders or entrepreneurs.” Practically all of them donated hundreds of hours to working on the talent and aspirations of students that would easily go unrecognised by the traditional system. At the same time, they felt rewarded when they saw their success.

The closing event of the pilot project was at the beginning of May. It celebrated the success of the pilot, with more

than 300 hundred participants from schools, government and the 30 businesses that were involved. The Prime Minister of Slovenia, Alenka Bratusek, and a series of the country's most successful entrepreneurs endorsed CENTRES. Prime Minister Bratusek stated, "I endorse the CENTRES project. Acquiring knowledge and diligence are no longer enough for the next generation if we want to be a successful country. Schools must open up to the local and international environment and help their students acquire . . . skills." The entrepreneurs included Sandi Cesko, chief executive of Studio Moderna (which employs 6,000 people in Central and South East Europe), and a member of the Clinton Global Initiative.

And what now?

The project is only a year old, but here in Slovenia, thanks to the advances made by our partnership, entrepreneurs and business, the schools, teachers and, of course, the students, CENTRES has come a long way in a short time. There are plans with the Ministry of Education to extend the project to include many more schools here.

One challenge is to attract and hold the attention of politicians and policy makers throughout Europe. You can see the impact and potential of this programme outlasting the life of the project, expanding and developing into something that we can take to students and systems across the world.

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