

## X. Authentic Grit: The Elusive (But Essential) Entrepreneurial Trait

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Authentic grit ... the passionate pursuit of hard goals that awes and inspires others to become better people, flourish emotionally, take positive risks, and live their best lives. (Miller, 2017: 4)

After more than a decade in Executive Directorships for multi-nationals as a corporate entrepreneur, I entered the full-time academic ranks, having held previous roles as Chief Operating Officer at Sony PlayStation, Managing Director at Blockbuster Entertainment and as National Sales Manager at GlaxoSmithKline and Boots Pharmaceuticals. My passion for continued education, based upon resilient and innovative imperatives, arose from my previous leadership experiences in disruptive and dynamic organisations/industries. Deep down, across my career I had always been drawn to the idea of becoming an educator, as it turned, *entrepreneurship education* (hereinafter EE) has become my home. My active involvement in (and often shaping) the entertainment, pharmaceutical (FMCG and OTC) and franchising industries pathed a lovely pathway towards my EE journey. I have been teaching entrepreneurship for nearly 20 years, originally starting (albeit for a short time) in the marketing discipline. I was introduced to EE by a renowned global entrepreneurship educator, Professor Howard Frederick and subsequently mentored by one of the world's most respected entrepreneurship educators, Professor Murray Gillin.

### *My teaching philosophy*

My teaching philosophy is based on a *theory for practice sake* perspective through which I aim to develop *authentic grit*<sup>1</sup>. I achieve this through various combinations of practice-based **tools** that draw upon my **students'** imagination and action, empathy, experience and reflection, to develop positive change through *experiential learning*.

By *authentic entrepreneurship grit* I mean, the passion and perseverance associated with the pursuit of challenging goals that awe and inspire (nascent) entrepreneurs to succeed emotionally, take positive risks and be true to their cause. This is for me, central to the entrepreneurial mind-set, something I have

witnessed not only in entrepreneurs, but also in business leaders throughout the world.

Operating in the research dominated **culture** of higher education, I find myself able to develop my **role** through also having a research focus, or one's scholarship of learning and teaching. This provides an ongoing opportunity for me to contemplate what is effective practice in EE, and to learn from and with my peers<sup>2</sup>.

## MY CONTEXT

I have experience as the Program Director of a Masters of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, focussed on teaching entrepreneurship *for* entrepreneurs via many teaching pedagogical **tools** aligned to the development of authentic grit and entrepreneurial efficacy within current entrepreneurs. This context, whilst similar to bootcamps and/or training at accelerators/incubators, is uniquely **student**-oriented and supportive of informed entrepreneurial action. Currently, as Professor of Entrepreneurship at La Trobe Business School, I am responsible for cross-disciplinary entrepreneurship education as well as a Masters of Management (Entrepreneurship) for nascent or budding entrepreneurs; therefore, a totally different context, as explained elsewhere<sup>3</sup>. Here, the teaching **outcome** relates to supporting *entrepreneurial intentionality*, more so than self-efficacy<sup>4</sup>.

### *My teaching aim*

Hopefully by now, you have a sense of what motivates me, that is, educating both nascent and experienced entrepreneurs. In other words, teaching nascent entrepreneurs the tricks of the trade, and helping experienced folk understand their past actions and hopefully, to improve their future effectiveness. Nevertheless, a constant challenge is ensuring sufficient intentionality exists within each individual **student**. This is critically important as the development of authentic entrepreneurship grit requires authentic intentionality; i.e. an appreciation of; innovation, calculated risk taking, proactivity, creativity and of course, passion. Therefore, I am mindful to first cultivate an enterprising spirit in my **students**, so a mindset much broader than just start-ups. Then, with sufficient interest, the development of an entrepreneurial mindset is possible.

### *Getting in to EE*

I found myself teaching EE by default, stepping into to overcome a perception held by others that an incumbent lecturer was unable to authentically connect with **students**. Asked to stand in as impromptu guest lecturer, I had to deliver off-the-cuff, and so spoke about my experiences launching Sony PlayStation, all of the creativity, innovation, risk-taking and disruption; and the **students** loved in. Later, I spoke about the rise and fall of the largest global video outlet: Blockbuster Video. As I again discussed issues related to disruption, innovation and technology, I experienced a passion and willingness to learn from these **students**, and these two experiences motivated me to get into entrepreneurship education; it was all about connecting with the **students**!

#### *My connection to EE*

In my previous professional career I had learned the **rules** of how to climb the corporate ladder. Then the ladder was undermined by biotechnology disrupting the sameness of my pharmaceutical context. Then, at Sony and Blockbuster it was less about climbing a ladder and more about staying alive on my toes, navigating the daily challenges associated with entertainment, technology and innovation, and then disruption. As fate would have it, a neat segue from business to academia, and marketing to entrepreneurship unfolded almost as if planned. Personally, while marketing provided an entry point into academia, it was the disconformity that characterises the process entrepreneurship that most excited me. In entrepreneurship I also found a space where **students** had a greater sense of purpose and urgency, and this suited me perfectly.

## MY APPROACH TO EE

Good EE is about *active engagement*. EE is not a spectator sport! Personally, I feel there are too many educators that are not actively engaged when teaching entrepreneurship, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes<sup>2</sup>. Worse still, too many **students** take entrepreneurship subjects to put a certificate on the wall. This also gets in the way of optimal learning **outcomes** in the context of EE. To further complicate matters, the **culture** surrounding many higher education institutions and EE seems engineered more for symbolic purposes<sup>5</sup> than **student outcomes**. In spite of the **cultural** factors educators that surround EE, there are positive ways to approach the design and delivery of EE.

Good EE is about using interactive experiential **tools**, innovative teaching and learning, educator diversity, theory for practice-sake perspectives, and most of all, developing authentic entrepreneurship grit in **students**. It's about dynamic enterprise skills, filling the fuel tanks of hungry **students**, in short, its about

**students** and educators wishing to challenge **rules!** Good EE is also about activating entrepreneurship ecosystems.

### *EE tools*

To repeat, EE is not all about start-ups, it's also about a mind-set, or true entrepreneurship grit. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship is very much about creating new ventures and employment, and the mind-set or grit also go a long way to producing start-ups, so let's consider this further. We are fortunate to have many gurus globally that have provided validated **tools** for use in EE; including the lean start-up, business model canvas and to a lesser degree, design thinking. These **tools** have become more and more instrumental in experiential learning, *aka* learning by doing. There are many new ways to use technology to support experiential learning<sup>6</sup>. When complemented with team-based **tools** and holistic entrepreneurship ecosystem approaches, we stand a decent chance to sidestep misguided attempts to use generic management and/or leadership theories in EE, and we all know start-ups are not small versions of big business.

### *Assessing outcomes*

So how do we measure and assess adult engagement with experiential pedagogical **tools** and/or, the development of entrepreneurial grit? Personally, I measure actual *authentic grit*, in the following areas:

- **Student focus**: Proactivity and innovative approach to create new pathways to success.
- **Student passion**: Combining energy with calculated risk-taking, creative behaviour and learned skills to enhance sustainable activity.
- **Student humility**: A willingness to learn from failure, the ability to pivot based upon build-measure-learn principles, the expansion of knowledge and action oriented engagement; and self-confidence and self-regulation.

And yes, often I see **students** with 'bad' entrepreneurial grit, such as:

- *Selfie grit*: Whereby **students** brag about accomplishing things, without humility.
- *Stupid grit*: Pursuing goals at all costs in spite of detrimental effects; rather than developing relationships with other professionals and peers who will give honest and critical feedback; so, a failure to pivot.

- *Faux* grit: **Students** with faux/false grit often aren't satisfied with who they are and what they have done, or they might over-evaluate their self-worth, or take credit for doing things that they actually haven't done.

I accept my notion of entrepreneurship (or authentic) grit can be somewhat elusive, and for my **students**, it's a balancing act to get it right.

### *My role*

Through my engagement with several professional education bodies<sup>7</sup>, my **role** as educator has evolved. In addition, a combination of networking in start-up oriented places<sup>8</sup> and use of related **tools**<sup>9</sup> has significantly enhanced my ability to design and use experiential learning **tools**. In combination with my own curiosity, my own scholarship of teaching and learning is on upward trajectory<sup>10</sup>, as EE supports the **role** of disruptors, promoters of dreams, agents of change, facilitators of opportunities and generators of empowerment.

To achieve my **role**, I am increasingly mindful of a many interrelated issues that impact my local environment. This includes; understanding the evolution of EE in higher education, new **tools** for experiential leaning, the translation of policy initiatives around EE into on the ground practice for my **students**, and adopting new pedagogical **tools**, like competency-based education. Having such awareness enables me to blend the old and the new vis-à-vis curriculum **tools** through which to support the development of entrepreneurial grit. Doing so also means that I embrace multiple broader aspects of my **culture**<sup>11</sup> and take on leadership roles to not only advance my own career, but also to safeguard my **students**' rights to access authentic experiential learning.

### *My challenges*

The traditional **culture** of the university<sup>12</sup>, per se, is biggest challenge to supporting the development of authentic grit. Universities by nature are risk-averse and cumbersome. Innovative pedagogical **tools**, as required by EE, are often frowned upon. I remind my peers that academia is about managing and minimising *resources*, whereas entrepreneurship is about managing *opportunities*; totally different skill sets and behaviours. Worse still, where I see other faculties disrespecting the profession of business, I also frequently see business schools disrespecting EE; despite the institutional aspirations my universities hold vis-à-vis being entrepreneurial. Nevertheless, Entrepreneurship (more broadly) is one of the fastest growing disciplines globally, evidenced by significant *cross-disciplinary* initiatives (both

institutional and business), together with significant growth in entrepreneurship ecosystems. This enhances the need and legitimacy of EE. Conversely, having to assume *poor cousin* status for my scholarship of teaching and learning research is frustrating, as entrepreneurship research in more fancied research journals often takes centre stage. It does however provide a platform for entrepreneurship academics to be guided by quality research, thereby enhancing their research-teaching nexus, so long as it is a theory for practice-sake perspective.

### *My satisfaction*

Seeing my **students** develop grit remains the catalyst to my ongoing satisfaction. Sensing they are moving towards a better version of themselves excites me just as much as seeing those actively pursuing start-up activities related **outcomes**. It can be a bitter pill to swallow that some **students** simply do not wish to engage nor adopt entrepreneurship skills, but a mitigating factor (or reality) is that entrepreneurship is not for everyone. But if we can change the lives of most for the good, it's mission accomplished. Currently, a new area of interest for me is EE for senior entrepreneurs, or those aged 55+. Whilst sometimes difficult to achieve learning **outcomes** in this cohort, when I do, success is a sweet. A little like when I share my practice with other educators globally and they feedback back to me their successful **outcomes** using my **tools**.

## SHARED WISDOM

Entrepreneurs *create* employment as opposed to seeking employment, making entrepreneurs masters of their own destiny. The proliferation of STEM has significantly enhanced the demand for EE, being a catalyst to take **students** to frontiers they previously could not have imagined. EE has also evolved to incorporate deeper consideration of gender, social contexts, minorities and the disabled; providing further evidence on the **outcomes** of entrepreneurial behaviour on real-world problems. In doing so, EE is becoming an inclusive platform from a behavioural perspective, with **students** learning how to adapt them selves to an ever-changing world.

In contrast to more traditional forms of education, EE supports **students** to become more proactive, innovative, risk-oriented, creative, active, and yes, capable of authentic grit. EE plays the role of challenging assumptions, transforming thinking and supporting innovative thinking, increasingly using

dynamic **tools** as such as artificial intelligence and big data<sup>13</sup> to guide or even disrupt the industries of the future.

### *My development*

For me, EE is simply a matter of lifelong learning, especially with regards my scholarship of teaching and learning. However, this personal development is always occurring against a **cultural** backdrop of transformative, disruptive, innovative and dynamic institutional challenges, ironically, often aimed developing the *entrepreneurial university*. Within this chaotic context, if I am to succeed, I know I will have to be a step ahead of the game. Here my development aligns to the challenge my **students** also face, not quite having all the required knowledge today in order to take action tomorrow. Further, I'm mindful that I have repeated my entrepreneurship/authentic grit theme throughout this chapter, but I keep asking myself if *my own* grit provides an appropriate springboard to **students** to take on new paradigms. In other words, as educators, we have to regularly update our own entrepreneurship skills, knowledge, **tools** and behaviours to share with our budding **students**. Doing so means engaging with theory, preferably for practice sake research, to up-skill educator knowledge and skills. An appropriate entrepreneurship *research-teaching nexus* is what separates true grit from faux grit.

### *Lessons learned*

Professionals don't procrastinate, so get on with it. Just as we have moved on from business plans to the lean start-up; transforming ourselves to be dynamic and motivated entrepreneurship educators (who build-measure-learn), a few common-sense steps can further our collective journeys:

- Approach a mentor, someone willing to provide honest and informed feedback. Experienced entrepreneurship educators, in my opinion love to share best practice, but it sometimes costs a few coffees, or better still, a few cold beverages.
- Do research on the entrepreneurship ecosystems surrounding your courses; actively engage with these ecosystems, like accelerators, government institutions, business-angels. Engage cross-campus activities and support the entrepreneurship trajectory of other disciplines, like STEM.
- Closely align to best practice networks and conferences, such as GCEC, USASBE, ISPIM, Babson, IEEC, ISBE and ACERE. These networks regularly host best-practice EE workshops, seminars and webinars; that can contribute to your research-teaching nexus.

- Adopt innovative **tools** to apply experiential learning, and transformational ways to enhance true grit in your **students**. Document, share and/or publish your innovative teaching methods, thereby starting your own scholarship of teaching and learning.

This certainly is no quick fix guide, but if you wish to develop your own passion, perseverance and purpose toward your own unique *entrepreneurship grit*, the world is your oyster!

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Miller (2017), *Getting Grit: The Evidence-Based Approach to Cultivating Passion, Perseverance and Purpose*. Sounds True: Colorado.

<sup>2</sup> A good example of my scholarship and interest in the practices of my peers can be seen here: Maritz, A., Jones, C. and Shwetzter, C. (2015), “The status of entrepreneurship education in Australian universities”, *Education + Training*, **57** (8/9), pp. 1020-1035.

<sup>3</sup> See Maritz, A. (2017). “Illuminating the black box of entrepreneurship education programmes: Part 2”. *Education + Training*, **59**(5), pp. 471-482.

<sup>4</sup> See Penaluna, K., Penaluna, A. and Jones, C. (2012), “The context of enterprise education: insights into current practices”, *Industry and Higher Education*, **26**(3), pp. 163-175.

<sup>5</sup> Mason, C. (2019), “Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: Emergy Research Questions”. Keynote speech at the Australian Centre for Entrepreneurship Research Exchange Conference, Sydney, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Bandera, C., Collins, R. and Passerini, K. (2018), “Risky business: Experiential learning, information and communication technology, and risk-taking attitudes in entrepreneurship education”. *The International Journal of Management Education*, **16**(2), pp. 224-238.

<sup>7</sup> I have been actively involved with the Global Consortium Entrepreneurship Centres (GCEC), USASBE, the Australian Centre for Entrepreneurship Exchange (ACERE) and Babson College.

<sup>8</sup> My role includes supporting various start-up initiatives related to accelerators, incubators, and more broadly, mentoring of others.

<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier, the increased use of pedagogical tools, e.g. lean start-up, business model canvas and various other technological and online platforms has the natural effect of increasing support for experiential learning.

<sup>10</sup> Kuratko, D. and Morris, M. 2018, “Examining the future trajectory of entrepreneurship”. *Journal of Small Business Management*, **56**, 11-23.

<sup>11</sup> Increasing, EE as an entrepreneurial experience requires deep appreciation of the learning styles of my students, experiential opportunities, and linking experiential learning to the curriculum and beyond. Beyond includes course-based experiences, campus-based experiences, community-based experiences and international

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experiences, be that in the business school or in other contexts such as STEAM and/or other multi-disciplinary situations.

<sup>12</sup> Spiegel, B. (2017), “The Relational Organization of Entrepreneurial Ecosystems”. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, **41**(1), pp. 49-72.

<sup>13</sup> Obschonka, M. and Audretsch, D. (2018), “Artificial Intelligence and Big Data in Entrepreneurship: A new era has begun”. *Small Business Economics*, Doi/10.1007/11187-019-00202-4.