UPDATING A CULTURAL COMMUNITY: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT.

Susan Badger Booth, Eastern Michigan University
Department of Communications and Theatre Arts
103 Quirk, Ypsilanti, MI 48197
734-487-0033; sbooth1@emich.edu
Charles Jabour, Eastern Michigan University
Ann Olugbile, Eastern Michigan University

ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

Framed by Eastern Michigan University’s Past, Present and Future this Symposium describes a process for mixing experiential learning into a classroom of Arts Management and Administration students. If you make a Latte will they come? How do a group of college students infuse life back into a space that is feeling old, cold and unwelcoming? Will they learn what every college student is wanting for lunch or will they focus on how college students want to express themselves? Only time will tell. Join us for a de-brief and learn some lessons from the students at EMU.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PAST: Eastern Michigan University had never conducted a capital campaign, but in 1984 the school would raise $1.3 million to renovate the existing Quirk Theatre and to build the Sponberg Theatre.

From the very inception the shared theatre lobby would be positioned as a central meeting place. Originally a small kitchen was located adjacent to the lobby. The ability to not only produce performing arts events, but also offer a meal in one singular space created a unique cultural climate.

PRESENT: Twenty-three years later not much has changed in the old Quirk Building, but the active lobby is no more. Although it is still the main entrance to both theatres the space no longer sings with activity.

Last winter the university food service finally decided to close the Café in the Quirk Lobby. Could we turn a failed business into a catalyst for a new cultural community?

FUTURE: Six months later we have turned the Quirk Lobby into a business incubator as part of Professor Booth’s fall Arts Management class. The challenge was to frame an experience where the students take ownership.

Twenty-five students in the class were split up into 5 groups - each partnering with a student campus arts organization. Groups discovered missions, assessed strengths and picked programs. Entrepreneurial values were explored.
By January we will be able to share both the successes and failures of this business incubator, renamed AMP, in a Symposia Panel including both professor and students sharing the results of this lesson.

SO WHAT: How can you teach risk, without experiencing risk? How can you learn to articulate your businesses ideology, without discovering it? How can you learn what will inspire others, if you don’t feel inspired?

How can we teach Entrepreneurship without creating it?

UPDATING A CULTURAL COMMUNITY:
AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROJECT.

PAST: One of the smallest in the food chain of Michigan state schools, Eastern Michigan University (EMU) had never conducted a capital campaign. Instead of raising private dollars EMU had been depending predominantly on state allocated higher education funding.

In 1984 EMU would raise, $1.3 million to renovate the existing Quirk Theatre and to build the Sponberg Theatre, finally implementing their first capital campaign. Ken Stevens, Director of the Arts Management Program would be asked to put his classroom teaching to the test and would be temporarily assigned to work with the Provost’s office in raising the $1.3 million. Major donors would be developed from the Theatre Departments modest annual fund-raising efforts. Unusual for a major university capital campaign - possible? Successful? Definitely!

The two performance spaces, Quirk and Sponberg, were designed to share a centrally located lobby. The Quirk Building was already home to the Department of Communications and Theatre Arts, including faculty offices, classroom space, two small performance spaces and a scene shop tucked in back of the Quirk Stage.

From the very inception the lobby would be positioned as the central meeting place for audiences, students, staff and faculty. The space included the theatre’s box office, a cluster of small café tables and chairs separated by a wall of stylish glass block from both theatre entrances. Originally a small kitchen was located adjacent to the lobby.

Access to a kitchen would be key to the development of this space for events. The ability to not only produce performing arts events, but to also offer a meal in one singular space created a unique cultural climate. Breaking bread with colleagues, fellow students and other audience members brought together a highly diverse group of people and maybe event paved the way for a unique set of expectations for the performance to follow.

Maybe because of the cache of a brand new space, or the flexibility of being able to fully serve the audience everything from dinner to entertainment the Quirk Lobby was always filled with people. Even now when I talk to alumni, they fondly describe the Quirk Lobby as the place they would meet up with friends.
PRESENT: Twenty-three years later, on a superficial level, not much has changed in the old Quirk Building, but the active lobby is no more. Although it is still the main entrance to both theatres during performances and numerous students pass through the lobby on their way to classes every day, the space no longer sings with activity.

The kitchen has long been removed due to a need for further storage and more control gained by the university foodservice. Allowing departments to reign over their own dining activities is now old school. Ten years ago the university added the To Be Café to the lobby, the first satellite food service on campus. Again the Quirk Lobby would be a center of activity, but then other satellite locations in larger adjacent buildings were opened and traffic in the Quirk Building fell off.

Last winter the university food service finally decided to close the To Be Café, because the $100 of daily revenue generated by this small operation was quickly swallowed by staffing and inventory costs. It was at this point that Ken Stevens, yes Ken is still here at EMU, and Susan Badger Booth met with the head of foodservice to ask if we could turn the café into a student business incubator. Could we turn a failed business into a catalyst for a new cultural community?

FUTURE: Six months later Susan is using the development of this business incubator in a fall course: Arts Management. This is a class that all major and minors in Arts Management must take, preferable before other more specialized courses. Arts Management often attracts students earlier in their college careers, which Susan hoped would help sustain this project in that students may want to continue working past the semester.

The challenge is to frame an authentic experience where the students feel major ownership of this business, but also include enough academic content fitting with my course. Professor Booth is using an Academic Service-Learning model, where the teaching methodology will utilize the activity as a means of helping students gain a deeper understanding of course objectives, acquiring new knowledge, and engaging in creating a cultural community. Academic Service-Learning most often connects with community organizations off-campus, but in this case we will be partnering with student run campus organizations instead.

Since this is a course in Arts Management and not Restaurant Management the development and running of the Café will be used as a vehicle for attracting and servicing audiences. Since we are looking for the students to program the lobby space and possible other adjacent spaces, we will partner with five student arts organizations that already embrace student run arts programming in their mission. The groups will include: The Players, a student theatre organization; the Intermedia Gallery Group, a student visual arts organization; The Poetry Society, a student organization focused on spoken word; Dance Forum, a student organization raising funds for the Dance Program and E-TV, a student run cable television station.
The 25 students in the class were split up into five groups partnering with each student organization. Groups started out engaging in parallel activities as the class first explores the basic language of mission, values and core ideology. Once groups are able to articulate their own core ideology the conversation expanded and the five groups met to learn what values they share and what values make each group different. This led us into an assessment of our resources: the lobby space and when it’s available, the café, and our audiences. Special attention was given to our creative capital in this assessment process. It is at this point we explored entrepreneurial values and why they work so well for artists and arts organizations.

Students and their organizations were charged with collaborating on a joint event November 17, 2007. During the semester students would need to help their groups with additional activities, but it was Susan’s hope that this would not limit their creativity and events would spring up organically as endless collaborations develop.

Students would also need to put in 15 hours of work in the lobby during these events, by either running the café or running some portion of the event. As the semester continued funding would be needed and the class would explore sources of earned and contributed support.

By January we will be able to share both the successes and failures of this business incubator, renamed AMP, in a Symposia Panel including both professor and students sharing the results of this lesson.

**SO WHAT:** How can you teach risk, without experiencing risk? How can you learn to articulate your businesses core ideology, without discovering it? How can you learn fiscal responsibility, without making and loosing money? How can you learn what will inspire others, if you don’t feel inspired?

How can we teach Entrepreneurship without creating it?

**CONCLUSION:** During the winter semester of 2007 I had the great pleasure of becoming an Academic Service-Learning Scholar. The program was a full semester where I met weekly with seven of my peers to transform my teaching practices into a process of engaging my students in the field, continuously providing living examples of what my curriculum speaks. This course gave me a framework for what I had already decided was the most effective way for me to teach. Active learning sticks, it’s as simple as that. If you do it – you remember it! My goal is to weave all my classes around projects like this one. Whether it is on campus or off, locally or nationally someone is doing or about to do exactly what I want my students to learn. It is my responsibility to gain access to these partners and share them with my students in and out of my classroom.