

## DEAD POET'S SOCIETY: EIGHT LESSONS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the debate over the ability to teach entrepreneurship, university students are migrating in large numbers to the classroom. The authors strongly believe that entrepreneurship can be taught through the process of creating an entrepreneurial mindset within the individual student allowing him/her to recognize and seize the opportunities necessary for new venture creation. Furthermore, the authors suggest the use of video, specifically Dead Poet's Society, as a vehicle to enhance the students' learning of various entrepreneurship concepts as well as introduce them to the entrepreneurial mindset. This paper describes eight lessons from Dead Poet's Society that have implications for aspiring and practicing entrepreneurs.

## INTRODUCTION

Multi-talented Robin Williams delivers a brilliant performance in one of Hollywood's most compelling and thought-provoking motion pictures. Williams portrays passionate English professor John Keating, who, in an age of crewcuts, sport coats and cheerless conformity, inspires his students to live life to the fullest, exclaiming..."Carpe Diem, lads! Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!" The charismatic teacher's emotionally charged challenge is met by his students with irrepressible enthusiasm--changing their lives forever.

(Dead Poet's Society Promotion, Touchstone Pictures)

The integration of management education and video has increased significantly over the last decade. Examples of such a marriage of management teaching and video technology include Management Live: The Video Book (6), the recent video cases offered by the Hartwick Humanities in Management Institute and the discussions in various journals on the benefits of using specific films to illustrate key management principles [e.g., (1) (4)]. The purpose of this paper is to continue this trend by describing the use of one particular movie in the classroom, Dead Poet's Society, to illustrate important concepts within the emerging field of entrepreneurship.

A common question must be addressed before proceeding. Can entrepreneurship be taught? From the inception of the field in the 1960s, much research has been conducted on the traits of entrepreneurs [e.g., (8) (2) (7)]. The trait approach, however, produced a set of characteristics that did not distinguish entrepreneurs from other populations. Later, Gartner (3) argued that behavioral approaches provided a stronger foundation to the study of entrepreneurship. The behavioral approach to entrepreneurship views the organization as the primary level of

analysis and the individual entrepreneur is viewed in terms of the activities undertaken to create a new venture. Following the behavioral approach to the study and teaching of entrepreneurship, the authors and others [e.g., (3) (10)] posit that teaching entrepreneurship should focus on what the entrepreneur does, rather than who the entrepreneur is.

Despite the debate over the ability to teach entrepreneurship, university students are migrating in large numbers to the classroom. Student motives for studying entrepreneurship vary. Desire to start one's own business, protection against future corporate restructuring, willingness to work in a small to medium sized company, and intellectual curiosity are only a few of the reasons students are enrolling in entrepreneurship courses (11). Regardless of the reason, demand for entrepreneurship curricula is high and universities are answering the call to supply. According to Katz (5), approximately 200 institutions of higher education have a major, minor or concentration available in entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship courses are being offered at over 1100 schools.

The authors strongly believe that entrepreneurship can be taught through the process of creating an entrepreneurial mindset within the individual student allowing him/her to recognize and seize the opportunities necessary for new venture creation. Dead Poet's Society is one tool that can be used to foster an energetic and creative environment necessary to the entrepreneurial classroom.

#### DEAD POET'S SOCIETY: AN OVERVIEW

The setting for Dead Poet's Society is a traditional, all male preparatory school in New England (Wellton) during the 1950s. An unconventional English teacher, Mr. Keating, uses the medium of an English class to not only facilitate the boys' knowledge of poetry but also the self-directional skills necessary to succeed in life (9). Keating challenged the school structure built on tradition and academic rigor. The faculty did not readily accept Keating and his methods, but to most of the students Mr. Keating was a visionary-, a man whose ideology touched those he taught.

A group of boys impacted the most by the teachings of Keating, but who felt stifled by the rigid teachings and ideals of the school, recreated the Dead Poet's Society, a society once led by Keating when he was a student at Walden. Poetry became the vehicle to growth, confidence, and the coming of age. These boys ultimately found their souls and passions when they immersed themselves in the words *carpe diem*, seize the day. These words became action, and for these boys, miracles happened as well as tragedy.

#### LESSONS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Many entrepreneurial lessons can be learned from Dead Poet's Society. The remainder of this paper describes the following eight lessons for entrepreneurs.

1. Conformity stifles creativity.
2. Don't follow the leader.
3. Find your passion and bring it to life.

4. Make your life extraordinary.
5. Creativity can be unleashed - we all have it.
6. There is a time for daring and a time for caution. The wise entrepreneur knows the difference.
7. Looking at life from different perspectives will allow you to see what others cannot.
8. Carpe Diem - Seize the Day.

Lesson 1: Conformity stifles creativity.

Life at Wellton revolved around the four pillars of tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence. Though philosophically admirable, these pillars, when bounded by conformity in thought, teaching, and action, can only limit individual growth and stifle creativity. For example, the Greek language was taught by repetition rather than by application. Before Mr. Keating arrived, poetry was taught by understanding the beat or pentameter rather than understanding what is felt by the poet when such words are written. Students living in Wellton's structured environment knew only one way, and learning only became a stepping stone to Yale or Harvard. Tradition in school and family dictated student's fate without any regard to that individual's talent, skill, or passion.

The Wellton environment is characteristic of many large corporations where policy and process dictate behavior and action. The environment is safe and protected where conformity is encouraged for political purposes, risk is discouraged for unknown purposes, and creativity is often inhibited by a traditional culture. The entrepreneur challenges this type of environment and creates a venture grounded in new thinking, creativity, and a drive to achieve beyond normal expectations.

Lesson 2: Don't follow the leader.

Conformity not only limits creativity, but it also creates a group of followers. The courtyard scene is a prime example of individuals following a leader only to conform. Mr. Keating encouraged the students to walk, and the end result was a type of "marching pattern" where all the boys were walking in a circle following one another. Perhaps, the boys felt following was the easiest path or that following was the expected norm. Most importantly, following was a defense mechanism resulting from the fear of "stepping out of the box." In always following the leader, an individual can never reach his or her full potential; this potential is unknown and stifled. Eventually Keating encouraged the boys to free themselves of the box and each student's creativity was witnessed in something as simple as a nontraditional walking style.

It is evident that entrepreneurs don't always follow the leader. Entrepreneurs step out of the box and embark on a different path and journey. Some leave out of survival (corporate restructuring, layoff) while others leave to foster their individual potential (the desire to be an entrepreneur). Whatever the reason, entrepreneurs bring the words of Robert Frost to life. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all of the difference."

Lesson 3: Find your passion and bring it to life.

In the face of challenge, what do you do? Individuals that fly rather than fight in times of confrontation are indifferent. Conversely, individuals that push ideas to the limit and fight to hold their ground are passionate about what they do. For example, Neil Perry (a student) asked Mr. Keating why he tolerated Wellton, Mr. Keating's response was, "I love teaching" At the other extreme, an individual may find his passion, but finds it cannot be acted upon. In the case of Neil Perry, acting became his passion that was prohibited by his father. The result was suicide. Passion must be brought to life. If you kill the passion, you may kill the person behind the passion.

Entrepreneurs are passionate about what they do. As a result, new ventures, creation and growth are a lifestyle. Profit is very rarely the motive; rather, an entrepreneur's passion can be found in a product, a service, or the drive and challenge to do something new and different. Passion is at the core of confidence.

Lesson 4: Make your life extraordinary.

Mediocrity is the highest level achieved and defines success only for the status quo. According to Mr. Keating, "Life is a powerful play and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?" All individuals have a part in life's play, furthermore, each person has complete control over his part size. Within every individual lies a talent pool. Once the pool is recognized dive in, swim against the stream, and realize your individual potential. No goal is too high and when that goal is achieved a strange phenomena occurs. A goal thought impossible to achieve will then be achieved by many others. For example, Roger Bannister was the first to break the four minute mile when many said it could not be done.

Today, the four minute mile is standard in competition. Achievement of a goal once thought unattainable greatly impacts society.

Lesson 5: Creativity can be unleashed - we all have it.

In the midst of rigidity and structure, creativity is not dead; it must be unleashed. Mr. Keating pushed and pushed Todd Andersen (a student) to think and use his mind to create a poem. Alone Todd could not accomplish the task because his low self-confidence and fear of embarrassment prevented him from digging deep within himself to find that pool of creativity. The creativity was there waiting only to be unleashed by Mr. Keating

Lesson 6: There is a time for daring and a time for caution. The wise entrepreneur knows the difference.

Dalton (a student) pretended to receive a telephone call from God in the presence of the headmaster. Afterwards, Mr. Keating approached Dalton and stated, "There is a time for daring and a time for caution; the wise man knows the difference.'. This is a strong lesson in entrepreneurship. Just because an individual opens the doors for business does not make him/her a savvy businessperson. Mistakes will be made and taking unnecessary risk is not a requirement for success. On the contrary, taking

unnecessary risk can be detrimental to a new venture.

Lesson 7: Looking at life from different perspectives will allow you to see what others cannot.

Mr. Keating instructed his students to stand on top of the desk and look around the classroom, and this exercise proved a very valuable lesson in perception. Keating's point was that we must constantly look at things in different ways. From an entrepreneurial perspective, an opportunity exists when an individual sees something that others do not. It is at this point that the light goes on and new venture creation begins. Additionally, entrepreneurs are not bounded by corporate rational thinking. Rather, they are encouraged, and many times forced, to look at situations or problems and implement creative solutions.

Lesson 8: Carpe Diem.

Lesson 8 is considered the "capstone" lesson. Carpe Diem is a philosophy of life or of the entrepreneur. Mr. Keating would say, "Don't wait until it's too late to realize your potential." To know you have lived with meaning, to know you have existed with purpose, and to know you brought life to your passions ... then you can say, "Yes, I seized the day."

#### HOW TO USE DEAD POET'S SOCIETY IN THE CLASSROOM?

The authors of this paper have utilized this film in various manners; all yielding productive results. One method is to assign viewing of the film outside of class (towards the end of the semester) and have the students turn in a written report on how the movie illustrated key entrepreneurial concepts discussed in class during the course (some of the lessons they discover from the movie may be similar to those discussed above). An alternative method is for the instructor to use the scenes in the movie related to the lessons discussed above to illustrate entrepreneurial concepts during class when concepts related to these lessons are covered.

In short, we feel that using film in the classroom can be a powerful teaching tool to illustrate a theory or analyze an issue. The use of film may not be the "most traveled" road in terms of teaching routes, but we argue that it can be very effective in the classroom. A film draws the student into the situation and provides students with an engaging opportunity to grapple with concepts and theories (4). We suggest that the movie, Dead Poet's Society, likewise can enhance the students' learning- of various entrepreneurship concepts as well as introduce them to the entrepreneurial mindset. Chiefly, The Dead Poet's Society is about passion, challenge, and seizing opportunities. It's looking at ideas and situations from different perspectives, and living outside of the box. It's challenging the environment to accept new ideas and using these ideas to improve society. Finally, it is persevering through others resistance to change. The bottom line...this is entrepreneurship.

Two Roads Diverged In A Wood, and I----  
I Took The One Less Traveled By,  
And That Has Made All The Difference.

(Robert Frost)

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