

The Enterprise Project

I walked into a sea of activity. In one room students were either sitting in front of sewing machines or cutting up pre-owned sweaters. The student in charge of quality control passed a hat back over the table “this one is coming apart, you need to re-do it.” In the other room, flyers were being printed amidst heated discussions about changing the promotional text, one student waving a flyer in the air “you know, this is actually going out to the public.”

The classrooms were chaotic and I’m sure most heads, teachers or parents, used to an orderly classroom, would be horrified at the scene. But this was just our latest project. However, it reached another level of intensity due to it being an actual business, a Companies House registered business. All of the students who were sixteen or above were the official directors and were automatically enrolled in the “Young Enterprise Scotland” (YES) programme.

Most students at age sixteen are swamped with exams and have no time for anything else. But we only offered exams in maths, English and physics. (We would go on the following year to increase the exam offering to English, maths, physics, history, music and German). This left time to pursue projects. Because of the experience the students had encountered through the other projects, they were all, without exception, ready to take on the responsibility of being a business owner. Each student was assigned a role within the business including: product design and development, quality control, finance, marketing and promotion.

In creating the company it was important to the students that the product be ‘green’ and that the business contained an ethical element. After much discussion, they chose to purchase woolen sweaters from charity shops and to use the fabric for ‘beanies’. The hats were made by the students who worked long hours on borrowed sewing machines to produce an initial collection. The hats were then sold at various events put together by YES. The company was chosen for “Best Product” by the YES judges, which was a huge accolade for the students.

The refugee crisis was at its height and the students wanted to do something to help. They decided that the ethical side of the business would be to offer customers a free hat for every one purchased. The free hat would be posted to a refugee centre in Greece. The YES judges were also really impressed by the ethical element of the company.

The experience provided valuable lessons for the students. The main one being how to get a business off the ground. This included communicating with customers, securing good prices for the original materials and working together to make things happen. Ethical manufacturing was explored including an awareness of how clothes are made, mostly by people, including young children, working long hours in clothing factories. This brought up discussions about job creation versus exploitation. Sending the hats to refugees also brought up discussions about immigration and a nation’s humanitarian responsibilities versus the need to protect borders. Alongside discussions, newspaper articles were brought in and pinned to the info board, various TED talks were watched and students brought in opinions from people outside of school.

The business owners also mentored their younger peers who played a big part as volunteers, they helped at every step of the way, all motivated by making the business successful. This was a really good grounding for them as they would be the next group of business owners who would go on to create an arts business the following year. This business saw customers able to create a painted design on a silk scarf using the ancient Ebru method of water surface printing. They had the busiest stall at the Christmas Fair and also won an award from the YES judges.

The YES programme culminates in the students sitting an exam through the Business School at the University of Strathclyde. To pass the exam, the students had to answer questions pertaining to their business, such as what challenges they had faced, how they had performed in their specific roles and how they had worked within a team. Because the students had lived and breathed the experience, they were easily able to answer the questions and they all passed with flying colours, some with distinction. The great thing about the exam is that the student is not judged on the quality of writing, the questions can be answered with bullet points. It is the information which is important. This certification can then be used to show future employers that they have been responsible for running a viable business venture. They are also able to talk about this experience - working in teams, overcoming challenges etc.- during job interviews or when applying for college or university courses.

During the setting up and the running of the business there were two main areas of educational and emotional development:

Firstly, students looked out into the world and saw some of the challenges the world faces, and also what needs to be done. This was the beginnings of global citizenship. Secondly, the students had to rely on each other when times were tough, when they didn't feel like sitting at the sewing machine anymore, or delivering any more flyers, or going over the finances, or standing for another few hours at a stall. They saw each other exhausted, stressed and anxious but also excited happy and proud. Because of this dependency on each other, including the younger volunteer students, there were no signs of loneliness or isolation they were a fully functioning community.

This community had gelled long before they embarked on the business. In fact, I think we would have been skeptical about the success of the students working together had they not been through many TPP. The skills, peer-connection and confidence the students had developed throughout the projects then rolled right into the demands of running their own business.

As a class, we also watched episodes of the television show "The Apprentice" and the students would call out when they saw glaring errors the contestants were making. There would then be energised discussions about how they would do things differently. The Enterprise projects, along with TPP and traditional classes, provided the theoretical and the practical experience which resulted in the students feeling equipped for the next stage of their lives.