Teaching Business Creativity on Demand: A Case Study

Popular and scholarly literature support the notion that creativity and innovation is becoming the new core competency of corporations (Business Week, August 1, 2005, Wall Street Journal, Sept 17, 2003) and that a company's greatest asset may be its creative capital. (Harvard Business Review, July-August 2005) Headhunters and recruiters suggest that the most critical attributes he or she is looking for when recruiting new MBA's or other mid- level management candidates are: To be good communicators, to have the ability to solve problems and to be good team players. (WSJ September,2003) Creativity plays an enormous role in each of those attributes. Innovation in organizations starts with tapping into the creative potential of all employees and their knowledge about customers, competitors and processes. (Leavy, 2005) Organizations should be creating a Creativity on Demand Environment (C.O.D.E.)

Individuals need to grow in order to meet the needs of corporate America. They also need to grow to satisfy their own needs. Their greatest potential for growth is in the use of their creative capacity to think up new ideas and to take new approaches to life. (Steinmetz, 2003)

Today's graduate and undergraduate programs may not be teaching enough of this Creativity on Demand or Creative Problem Solving. A recent survey by the authors of this article found that only about half of all traditional MBA and Executive MBA programs addressed creativity and innovation at all, and only one-third had stand alone courses that addressed these subjects. (Selden, G.L. and Vardis, H., Benchmarking Survey on Creativity and Innovation in MBA Programs, 2005) Perhaps B-schools have not kept up with the needs of today's hyper-competitive marketplace.

To address these needed attributes a course was created in 1999 by the Creative Focus Institute in conjunction with Emory University's Business school.
The success of this course has led to the development of similar courses at 5 other Universities. One of the most successful is at the Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta where the course is offered twice a year. It is a 5-day seminar on Business Creativity and Innovation and focuses on models and tools to teach creative problem solving, Creativity on Demand. Demand for the course is extremely high with the classes filling up on the first day of registration.

The authors have made many mistakes and have learned many lessons from the development of this course. The case study that follows will focus on the process issues and lessons learned in an attempt to capture the attributes of a successful course in Creativity on Demand.

The content of the course is modularized and the modules are created around a manager's daily activities:

- *Creative problem solving* techniques
- *Business strategy* (processes to collect information and analyze it most efficiently)
- *Team activities* around real business projects are used to teach collaboration
- E*ffective presentations* (Presentation and NLP techniques are taught)
- *Dealing with difficult people* (Improvisational theater techniques are taught)
- *Architectural principles* on how to induce creativity and innovation or how to reduce it
- Additionally, the course examines the emotions that drive creative thinking. For instance: *Risk taking, support,* fear, *collaboration, and other emotions.*

These are the content objectives of the course. Other courses could look much different from a content perspective. However, we have found some process issues that make this course successful. These issues are discussed in the following list of 47 process issues for a successful course in Creativity on Demand.

The physical environment

The relationship of room size to the number of students is important. The ratios and the set up are critical to the dynamics of the course.

1. Limit the class size

The number of students accepted in the class is usually 30 so that 6 teams of 5 can be formed. If necessary, we can increase the number up to 35 at most, so that each team may have an additional student but the number of teams remains at 6.

2. Set up the room so that almost everyone can see everyone else

The room is set up the day before or early in the morning when the course starts. The tables for each team are set up in such a way so that there is visual contact among the students and between the students and the faculty.

It is important that the students have at least 210 degrees of visual access to the room at any given moment. A flat room is a must for the main class room. Auditoriums and tiered seating are not conducive to conducting these classes. 30 Square feet per student is ideal with 6 breakout rooms that are needed to be available so that the teams can work on their own time on their assignments.

3. Meet and greet them when they first come in

As the students arrive the morning of the first class, all are greeted and welcomed to the room by the faculty that is present on that day. The conversations center on personal interests of the students, the type of work they do, special needs they may have, logistics and other topics of interest to the students.

Make every student feel important

The students are made to feel that they are the center of attention, not the faculty. This is an attitude which the faculty develops through extensive sharing and warming up among themselves prior to starting the course. Each and every student is treated with respect and professional courtesy which they deserve because they are all professionals.

4. Listen and show interest to all the students

A professor of mine used to say that the first time you teach a course is pure terror, the second is interesting and the third is boring! I am not sure how many times you need to teach the class before it becomes boring but the fact is that for the students it is ALWAYS the first time. And because it is the first time it is inevitable that they will have questions, comments, suggestions and most of these comments will have to do with their learning styles. We do believe that no matter how hard the material is, you can make it interesting and easy to learn if you match the materials to everyone's style.

Style has to do with the way people process information: There are auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners and when we teach our courses we make sure that we cover all styles so that all students are taken care of.

5. Give and expect respect from all of them

As the students are greeted at the door it is done on a first name basis. Also, be very careful to respect confidentialities. Sometimes you may have to be a teacher, others to be a father or a mother and yet others to be a good friend. Above all, be a great coach and you will have their respect. Dignity is what everyone wants and they may ask for it in their own individual ways. Just listen, observe and feel!

6. Celebrate all the emotions they experience

During the course we teach, the students go through many emotional spaces, by design. Creativity is an outcome that is based not only on process, people and environment but also on emotions. Some times these emotions are emotional roller coasters and we are prepared for it. It is very important to acknowledge and openly admit these emotions so that everyone knows that they are common in the room and they are not exclusive to any one individual at any given time. Celebrate them, talk about them and move on including them in the room.

Create an emotionally safe environment

An emotionally safe environment is one where everyone feels comfortable with anyone else. By demonstrating leadership in emotions and being willing to model correct emotional behaviors the team of faculty help students to feel safe.

7. Model all behavior

During the course, there are many exercises designed to demonstrate various behaviors. Always, always we demonstrate them for the students. Not only these exercises but also all behavior we expect from them. If we have to act silly, we do it. If we have to act serious, we do it also. In addition, we model behavior that we are expecting to take place in the class. We cannot teach them divergent thinking and close our minds to suggestions they may have. We do have in place mechanisms to capture their daily wishes, improvements, points they did not understand and at the end we demonstrate that what we teach is what we practice.

8. Explain what you are going to do…

Before we start a new topic we want the students to understand what it is that we are going to cover so we create exercises which raise the curiosity on that particular subject. For example, before we teach the blocks to creativity we ask the students to do something creative and discuss what kept them from going even further "out of the box". That usually creates a lively discussion which leads to the subject we want to teach.

Another example may be a warning that some students will feel uncomfortable with a given exercise. For instance if the exercise involves messiness, those who are perfectionists may feel a certain discomfort and that is the nature of the beast! You have to get your hands dirty if you want to plant a garden.

9. Do it…

This step is self explanatory: We teach what we aroused the curiosity about and if possible, we demonstrate it so that they truly "get it"

10. Tell them what you did

And again, we tell them what the benefits are of what we covered and how it is to be used in their lives or in the business they are in. The most important part of this step is a thorough debriefing.

The debriefings we do are based on the 3-step or 3-question debrief. The 3 questions are:

- What….?
- So what….?
- Now what….?

In other words, what happened or what did you learn?
And how did that affect what you do?
And finally, how are you going to use it or what are you going to do as a result of learning it?

Powerful insights come out of these discussions. By the way, these discussions are best done in pairs and then shared with the room. More about this later.

11. Reduce stress

Stress reduction is done by thoroughly explaining everything and making sure there are no questions. No student is left in the dark asking questions that go unanswered or being confused when out of the class. To accomplish this we make an up front commitment that we will stay as long as it takes on any given day and the students can have access to us for coaching on any of the topics we teach. This is a huge commitment and there are nights that we are available until midnight but this is the only way the students can be sure that they will have total comfort with the materials.

Another stress reduction mechanism we use is lots of ice breakers and warm up exercises so that the students enter a situation already warmed up and the stress factor is low. An example of this type of exercise might be a silly drawing they are asked to do representing a portrait of another student and they do it in the blind so that they do not see the drawing until it is finished. It results in lots of laughter which then prepares them for a divergence exercise and they feel it is OK to bring out "silly" ideas because they just had fun with everyone else and because everyone else can have "silly" ideas and that's OK! But it is those silly ideas that may produce breakthrough thinking which otherwise would not have been produced.

Create a fun environment

We live in a world that the work environment is no longer formal. People go by first names, may men do not wear ties, business casual is the code of dress and in general people are becoming accustomed to the idea that if you are going to work more than 8 hours a day you might as well be comfortable and casual… and have fun!

Fun does not mean that we don't get serious about what we teach, it means that we cover all our bases so that all people learn and enjoy doing it. We provide stimuli for the auditories, the visuals and the kinesthetics. We incorporate all sorts of audiovisual materials and very participatory exercises so that the students' attitudes are kept on the lighter side and that makes a huge difference.

12. Use music that is appropriate for each occasion

We have an extensive library of music which ranges from very introspective to very high energy music and with huge doses of classical and various styles from many different countries. This allows for creating the right mood, the right inspiration and of course the right speed. This does not mean that everything we do incorporates music but you must have music available if you want to set the right tone for the room.

13. Decorate the classroom so that it inspires the mood you want to create

Colors and activity items are everywhere in the room. The signs on the walls are reminders of key learnings, all are made in color and all the paper used in the room is color paper. These are creative thinking sessions and we want the students to be in that mood.

During the course, the students work in teams on a project that takes 4 days to complete. The students are encouraged to use everything they have available in order to make the most impressive presentations.

14. Consider everyone's needs and have the right toys for them

Her we are talking about the learning styles and as said earlier it is up to you to provide visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli to keep the students engaged. Balloons, plastic balls, play dough, wooden sticks, pipe cleaners and many other creative objects are used.

15. Involve them by asking them to invent the answers

Spoon feeding is teaching but not learning. We like to teach through demonstrations. If you don't engage them they will forget. So we ask questions and after we get their answers then we reveal our answers. Most of the time the questions we ask help them produce the answers and that creates ownership. This is an important element in our teaching because the students, by discovering the answers, have created neural pathways to the correct associations in their brains.

Practical learning techniques

There are some practical learning techniques which you can use. We have listed below some of them. Those that we feel are most critical to the success of this course.

16. Allow for different learning styles

By utilizing many different techniques and stimuli we can engage the students' brains at any given point in time when it is ready to exit the room.

Engaging the students in physical activities in the room, challenging them with new ideas, constructing models for learning, sharing or using video engages all the senses. Most importantly, notice the level of participation in the class. It tells you a lot about the level of interest and the level of engagement at any given moment.

17. Provide a variety of assessments to demonstrate learning

The students are assessed in a number of ways:

First, they are given a case study which each team of 5 students has to work on and present the last day of the course. At that time we invite judges who hold significant positions in Corporate America to come in and judge the presentations and the solutions the students have devised. They come in as potential investors. The students through their presentations must convince them to invest in their product. The judges have evaluation forms and they rate the students on more than 10 variables.

Second, the students are asked to complete two written assignments. One assignment is to take the tools and models taught and apply them to a real world situation they are facing. The second paper asks them to compare and contrast two or more models from those discussed in class or found on their own.

Third, the presentations are videotaped and the faculty members can review and evaluate them.

Finally, the faculty of the course is evaluated on more than 20 variables by the students and that feedback, over the years, has led to numerous changes in course content and process.

18. Introduce projects to practice what is learned

Besides the 5-day project the students are asked to complete, they are asked to complete other projects in the class and bring the solutions the following day. This keeps the motivation high and there is a constant excitement during the course.

Make the content important and relevant

All of the content has immediate applications in the students' life or their work.

19. Explain why it is relevant

People tend to pay attention to information that affects them directly rather than information which seems directed to someone else. An example of this is trying to teach someone how to sky dive when it is of no consequence to them because they will never do it. Take someone who can't wait to sky dive and not only he will be listening intensely but will also ask questions to fill in the gaps.

In our classes we spend time to explain the daily challenges managers are faced with and how the tools of this course address these challenges through thinking that is "in and out of the box". After all, we as individuals, create the boxes in our minds so why not take the chance to make them smaller or larger as the situation calls for and find new and unique solutions!

20. Make it interesting and enjoyable through the delivery

It is hard to satisfy everyone's needs when it comes to "delivery" but you can satisfy most of the students if your delivery is engaging. Demonstrations, team projects in class, participation, frequent breaks, debriefings and other exercises can add to the richness of the delivery.

21. Use experiential learning

Experiential learning is one of the most engaging techniques in training or teaching. It is very important to have it modules that are easy to follow and have a beginning and an end time and comprehension intervals that work for the participants.

Depending on the complexity of the material more or less time needs to be allocated to each module. We have discovered that approximately 20 to 45 minutes maximum works for the materials we teach. You may have to experiment and find the right time for your materials.

22. Use audiovisual materials but do not depend on them

It seems that ever since PowerPoint and other such computer programs have come to life, most people have built a dependence on them. The same thing has happened with computer projectors or piping of music through invisible wireless servers. There seems to be a greater and greater dependency on these electronic wonders. Yet, the truth is that the person that stands in front of the room, with an easel and a marker should be able to deliver the message just as effectively as he would through all these marvels of technology.

23. Debrief what they learned first in small teams (2-3) then as a class

People in general are hesitant about sharing their personal feelings and ideas in public. Let alone when it comes to new information which is followed by uncertainty. There is a way to encourage them to do it.

When debriefing after a module has been presented, ask the participants to pair up with someone else and share using the "what… so what… now what…" formula.

After approximately 3 to 4 minutes, ask them to get together with another pair and the four of them share their thoughts and feelings. After another 3 to 4 minutes, ask them to finish and then have the entire room share. The initial "private" sharing allows all the common concerns to be shared and the hesitation goes away. Once people know that they have done it with 1 and then 3 others, there is support and a feeling of comfort in the room.

24. Demonstrate or practice what they learned

Case studies from our past experiences are very powerful instruments. Very few things are more convincing to the participants than telling them and showing them real world examples of what we are teaching.

Another thing we do is to allow the students to practice, through small group activities, how to use what they have learned and how to apply them to situations in their lives.

25. Let them teach each other what they learned

A good technique is for the students to break out in small groups of 5 or 6 and teach each other what they have just learned. In order to do this in a most effective way, we ask the students to bring to the class some challenges they have and they would like to work on them. In the class, they are asked to select one and apply the tools and techniques they learned while they work in small groups. They do it by taking 5 to 10 minute turns and while they work on it a faculty member moves from group to group to assist with questions or points of clarification. This is best done with 2 to 3 faculty in the room so that no group is left unattended.

26. Create competition through team projects

When the participants are given their case study assignments the class is divided in 6 groups of 5 to 6 participants (the class is limited to no more than 36 students. 30 is the usual limit).

There are 3 scenarios given out so that there are 2 teams per scenario. This creates for a little friendly competition among teams and it is fascinating to watch how far teams will go so that the other competitive team will not see what they are doing. We have witnessed on more than one occasion that a team will go shopping for materials they may use in their presentation and bring the materials into their break out room all wrapped up so that the others will not see what they are doing. In other situations we have seen teams cover the windows of their room so that no one from the outside will see the room inside.

Manage time

Time management is of paramount importance to a successful course. Below we have listed some of the most important time driven activities to which you should pay attention.

27. Give breaks every 45-60 minutes

Over the years we have discovered that the students feel a lot more comfortable having a 5 to 8 minute break every hour than a 15 minute break every 2 hours. This works great for the students and gives a good chance for the faculties to regroup.

28. Need brain breaks every 7 to 10 minutes

The brain will stay engaged on a subject for about 7 to 10 minutes. After that it will start to venture into other places and other spaces. If you want to have control of the room, you need to continuously monitor the

level of "presence" you have in the room. By presence, we are referring not to the physical presence but the mental presence.

A good way to do that is to give "brain breaks" every 7 to 10 minutes. These can be small activities which could range from asking a question and expecting answers or asking for show of hands or even asking them to stand up for a good reason and move around. It is like the 7th inning break in baseball but in this case it is the 7th minute break.

29. Vary the modes of learning and rotate them every 15 minutes

Another good way to keep the participants in the room is to change, to the degree that is possible, the mode of teaching and learning. If what you are doing is telling, you are serving the needs of the auditory-dominant participants but are leaving the visual learners behind. Try switching to another style after no more than 15 minutes. Then, go to a kinesthetic or participatory style.

The best way would be to mix the different styles so that all are with you at all times. And don't forget the pauses! By pausing for about 6 to 8 seconds you give the brain a chance to catch up with what is learned. Pauses are best when asking questions. Many presenters ask a question and expect instant answers. If they don't get them they give the answer to the audience. A better technique is to ask the question, wait several seconds and if nothing comes up after 8 seconds, you may want to probe with another question and if that does not yield any answers then provide the answer.

30. Teach new and most important information first

New information has engagement power, it has interest and also it has curiosity. These elements create an environment of attention which keeps the participants' minds "in the room". We have found that by teaching the new and important things first, we don't lose the students. Within any given module each faculty is responsible for doing this and we have worked a schedule to engage the students so that they are excited.

31. Pay attention to time cycles during the day

It is a well known fact that the cycles we go throughout the day are different for each person. This affects not only our bodies but our brains as well. Additionally, within any given hour rotate the activities so that the level of energy is maintained.

32. Teach heavy cognitive materials before lunch

By doing this you can take advantage of the general rule that the brain can absorb more abstract materials in the morning when it is awake. The blood supply to the brain is ample and it absorbs more than in the early afternoon.

33. Teach activate materials after lunch

Imagine this: It is 2 PM and the participants are just returning from lunch. They were not told what to eat or what to avoid so they had lunches of various types and some are lethargic, others are active and others are just feeling heavy. What do you do?

First, advise them to avoid any heavy foods and try to stay off carbohydrates and heavy meat and sauces. It is best to have a light lunch and keep a light stomach so that the demand on blood to accomplish digestion is not so huge!

Second, engage them in learning materials which involve activities that are interactive, participatory, perhaps they can be done outdoors and as the saying goes "don't put them to sleep". Sometimes this may

not be easy and the alternative is to have more frequent breaks in the class, with smaller modules than the morning materials.

Collaboration and practical applications

Collaboration is the interactive opportunities participants will have in using and learning the materials. The opposite of collaboration is individual competitive activities which tend to create a "survival mode".

Think about a situation where a student is asked to solve a challenge by himself. The dynamics are such that competition immediately sets in and the student feels that he has to excel as an individual.

Now think of a situation where a student collaborates with someone else, then the 2 of them collaborate with another 2 students and eventually, as pairs are added, the entire class has ownership of the results. In this environment, the students support and encourage each other through a "mutual intelligence" rather than an individual intelligence. This environment creates a healthier and richer learning.

34. Form teams of 5 to 6

We have found that teams of 5 to 6 students per team create the best team dynamics and ensure everyone's participation.

35. Have the students sit in tables with their team members, not in individual seats

On a number of occasions we had to conduct our courses in classes where the students sat in seats that were screwed to the floor. Each one had a certain distance from the others and the distances between students were fixed. This does not work as well as when the students are sitting in chairs that are movable and they can adjust the position they have with each other.

We have discovered that people change their positions in relation to each other as their perceived mental distances change. For instance, 2 people who have just met keep a certain distance from each other and that is their comfort zone. As they talk and become more comfortable they tend to at first lean closer to each other, then they drag their seats closer and the comfort distance changes. This is very important in the process of team formation because after the initial forming and storming stages as the teams get closer to the performing stage they will get closer and feel more comfortable sitting around the table where they want to be with their teammates.

36. Reinforce group discussions

Group discussions are encouraged throughout the course. They may be part of debriefing sessions or while working on assignments. The advantage we have discovered in group discussions is that when changing partners, and we encourage that, the students have the opportunity to explore new possibilities and many times they realize that a person who may have looked like someone they would not have talked to can be a treasure chest of ideas.

37. Pairing and sharing what is learned or observed, eliminates hesitancy to share in front of a class

This point was mentioned before but merits mentioning again. By pairing with someone else the students drop their defenses and open up to more easily share with the rest of the class. Do it on a regular basis before asking for any sharing from the entire class.

Practical issues

When all is said and done there are some practical issues which make for a successful course.

38. Have lots of light

If the room is blessed with lots of windows keep the light coming in but also be extremely sensitive to the sun light hitting students' eyes, computer screens if you are using them or if it creates so much glare your PowerPoint cannot be seen. Use light in abundance but be sensitive to glare.

39. Open windows if possible

Fresh air is a great source of aliveness in the room as long as the outside temperature allows it. Most participants would love to be outdoors in a beautiful day under a shade with 77 degrees temperature and some comfort level. Since this may be impractical, do the next best thing and invite the outside in. Check for comfort levels with the students and use the fresh air as much as possible.

40. Keep the temperature comfortable but not hot

The best temperature is the one where all students feel comfortable and that changes from winter to summer. In most big rooms the ideal temperature with 30 people in the room is around 68 to 71 degrees Fahrenheit.

41. Provide breakfast items and beverages

In all cases we provide breakfast items like coffee, regular and decaffeinated, water, a variety of bagels, cream cheese and some fruit. You don't want to start the session with completely empty stomachs. If it is someone's choice not to eat, that's fine. But in general, it is a good idea to have some items available even if they choose to have them at 10 AM.

42. Decorate the classroom with appropriate signs, table items, colors etc.

We use signs on the walls which are made in color. We also have balloons, lots of toys, paper, color pens and markers on the tables. The room looks festive and the students engage in these items very quickly knowing that all of the contents of the room will be used eventually.

43. Create unusual games so that they can practice what they learn in physical ways

As was mentioned earlier, we have an arsenal of exercises which are used to demonstrate what is learned. We have a rule: If you cannot demonstrate it how can they learn it? This takes a lot of effort on the part of the faculty but it is well worth it because it engages the students.

44. Rotate the presenters…allow for several faculty members

The course we teach is a 5 day course and we use 5 faculty. Of course one faculty could deliver the course but it would not be as effective. It would be as though a movie could be playacted by one very good actor. Yes, it can be done but in most cases it would be boring! This rotation of faculty may constitute the most important variable in the course. At any given time there are 3 faculty in the room but only one is presenting.

45. Celebrate the beginning and the end of each day and the end of the course

Each day, except for the first one, starts with a debriefing. We call it 3 stars and 2 wishes. The students are asked to list on post it notes what were for them the 3 highlights of the previous day. We call these "stars". It is done privately and then the teams decide collectively on the 3 they want to present to the class. This reduces the time involved and reduces duplications.

They are also asked to write similarly the 2 "wishes" they might have and again these are posted.

Two things happen. We have immediate feedback on what works and what needs to be repeated or paid attention to. Also, it gives us the temperature of the room in terms of learning. Finally, the students appreciate that we listen to their wishes and we respect them. Of course this is followed by a debrief and clarifications. Nothing goes unnoticed!

The end of each day is a celebration in its own right.

Forming a circle we share the highlights of the day, create a group wish and leave on an up note. This is so important we cannot overemphasize it. It is not just warm and fuzzy… it is closure in the best way.

46. Allow for the experiences to be expressed and give time for connections

During the course we attempt to have all students share experiences. As they do it, others jump in and build on these experiences. The sum of all of these "sharings" is a group connection which brings all the points of view into focus and establishes a common ownership.

Closing

Minding the closing could be the most important thing you do for yourself. The conclusion of every course is a ritual directed in accomplishing 2 things: To bring it all together for the students, that is the content and the context of the course and to give them a chance to understand the commitment the faculty have to this course.

47. The last day is the big day

This course is a huge success because the last day is a culmination of what happened the previous 4.

The judges arrive at 8:30 and they are escorted in a room where they are briefed and given the evaluation forms. The adrenaline is high and all are anxious!

Presentations start at 9:00 AM and each one is 20 minutes with another 10 minutes for the judges to fill the forms and ask any questions they might have. All the teams are asked to be present in all the presentations and they have to support the presenting team regardless of competition. The spirit is that all are winners and all support each other because they came through the same course and the same long hours.

After all the presentations are completed, the judges leave and the entire class meets to debrief. This is usually a very emotional time because they have bonded beyond their wildest imaginations and suddenly they realize that the end has come. The debriefing lasts approximately one hour and is accompanied by the reading of a poem, the distribution of the diplomas and the sharing of wishes. Finally, the students evaluate the course and the faculty.

Conclusion

In today's extremely competitive environment, it can be argued that developing a Creativity on Demand Environment, where the tools and processes of Creative Problem Solving are brought out when needed, may be the most important factor in generating top-line growth. However, B-schools may not have caught up with this trend. This paper is an attempt to explore a case study of a course in Creativity on Demand and to look at the process issues that the authors have found leads to success in this course. Many of these process issues can add to the success of any business course, but are a must for a course in the tools and models of creativity.