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"Five Plus Two" Skills Set and Success of Young Art Entrepreneurs: A Case Study Of Seven Visual Artists

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ABSTRACT:

This article aims at showcasing the design, development and implementation of a Young Art Entrepreneurs (YAE) career development scheme for visual artists, based on a model of "five plus two" entrepreneurial skills sets, advanced by Marco Thom (2016). It documents the philosophy, approach and methodology to develop entrepreneurship skills amongst seven young graduate artists over a period of six months. Findings based on an analysis of seven case studies of individual artists involved in the First Cohort of YAE in 2017, indicate that those who are able to better internalize the "five plus two" skill sets, seem to show a greater chance of success in launching and managing their own art enterprises.

OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this paper is to document changes in the lives of seven visual artists enrolled in an Young Art Entrepreneurs career development scheme launched by National Art Gallery of Malaysia in 2017.

The primary focus is to show how their exposure to the “Five Plus Two” skills set advanced by Marco Thom (2016), as crucial components to successfully develop art entrepreneurs, have impacted their lives.

The secondary objective is to document the process of designing, developing and implementing an impactful entrepreneurial development programme that will help artists sustain themselves and profit from their creative enterprises.

Finally, we hope to draw lessons from this case study that may be employed in helping shape appropriate policies for career development of artists in the country.

Background of YAE

YAE, an abbreviation for Young Art Entrepreneurs Career Development Scheme, was launched by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, in the first quarter of 2017, It is a twenty-five week preparatory course on entrepreneurship that focuses on required skills needed to succeed as art entrepreneurs. The training is divided into two segments: one week (40 hours) of Bootcamp and twenty-four weeks of intensive business coaching and mentoring.

The Bootcamp acquaints participants with basic understanding of the fundamentals of sustainability and profitability in the arts, including exposure to strategic planning, finance and marketing. It offers our trainees an opportunity to learn how to utilize creativity in business innovation and career development by changing their mindset from that of an artist towards becoming more of an entrepreneur.

Throughout the Bootcamp and six months of residency that follows, they are guided by dedicated mentors and experienced coaches to develop the required mindset, knowledge, understanding and specific skills to smoothen their transition from being an artist to becoming more of an entrepreneur.

At the end of six months of training, participants may choose to be art professionals or owners of art businesses or a combination of both. Their coach assists them in conceptualizing a business idea, understanding how to start a business, crafting a business plan, sourcing finance for their new ventures, hiring and training support staff, managing and growing their own enterprises.

YAE Development Scheme has chosen to approach entrepreneurship as a creative venture. It draws parallels between participants' background in artistic creation with that of the entrepreneurial creative process. To make them feel more at ease and to help soften the impact of their transition into business, coaches employ many components found in design to illustrate how similar art is to entrepreneurial development.

YAE graduates are expected to launch their own business ventures once they have undergone the career development training. YAE assists them in identifying sources of funds, pitching to funders, networking with influencers and even starting up their own enterprises.

YAE career development scheme prides itself as a premier entrepreneurial development training that ensures that artists, who have been through the course, are able to sustain and profit from their artistic ventures. It is a life long dream of Dato' Dr. Mohamad Najib, Director General of the National Art Gallery of Malaysia, who is a self-made entrepreneur himself, before venturing into academia and eventually helming the organization.

As a young artist who once struggled to make a living from peddling *batik* paintings on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, he confessed that he and his colleagues, would be better prepared for their careers had they been adequately exposed to some knowledge in entrepreneurship. Disillusioned with dwindling sales, during the recession of the 1990s, he made his way to *Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)*, to study fine art and later, pursued his doctorate overseas and subsequently appointed Dean of the School of Fine Art at *USM*.

"Regrettably", he said, "fine art schools, locally and abroad only focus on teaching techniques without adequately preparing their students to enter the business world". As a result, "many fine art graduates are not as successful as they should be!". Many are forced to moonlight between tedious day jobs, in order to pursue their passion for art. Yet they are many more talented artists who have unfortunately sacrificed their profession to work in unrelated fields, just to survive.

The DG as well as the National Art Gallery, is determined to convert as many ordinary visual artists into entrepreneurial-savvy individuals, enabling them to sustain themselves and profit from their chosen vocation. YAE is one of the strategies adopted to spearhead the career advancement of young artists in the country.

In Search of a Model for Young Art Entrepreneurs

We started planning for YAE without a specific model in mind. Guided mostly by our experience in training graduates and undergraduates in entrepreneurship at tertiary levels and consultancy, mostly guiding practicing small business owners, in a variety of industries.

Our initial design of YAE was influenced by the thoughts of Peter Cobb *et.all* of Artspire (2011) “*The Profitable Artist*”: *A Handbook for All Artists in the Performing, Literary, and Visual Arts*. Cobb and associates contended that to be successful artists would require five major elements: Strategic Planning, Finance, Law, Selling and Fundraising.

However, Cobb *et.all* was writing a handbook for practicing artists who wanted to further their careers. While we, at YAE on the other hand, were trying to groom recent graduates who had very little idea of what kind art business they wanted to venture into. We included an element of “idea creation” or “conceptualization” where our young artists were asked to explore possible businesses that they would like to enter after their residency at YAE. We decided to allocate one day of Bootcamp to idea creation and allowed them to deepen their exploration during the first month of their residency before they started their business planning.

In addition, we built in an element of strategic thinking into the Bootcamp that would be pursued during the six months of coaching to help them visualize their business missions and visions. We opened up their minds to business opportunities and networking channels available for artists in the country. We spent about ten percent of Bootcamp on the subjects but were reinforced during the six months of residency.

Another element we believed would be essential to succeed in business was leadership. Every participant was required to lead a team in organizing at least one weekend event to sharpen their leadership skills. We also wanted our artists to have adequate knowledge in finance and marketing. We invited guest speakers to train them in finance, accounting and taxation. In addition, we brought in experts on digital marketing to help them reach out to a wider audience online. These elements were equally reinforced throughout the six months to help them develop implementable business plans.

During the first week following the Bootcamp we assisted them in getting their own company registered and their accounts opened at a nearby bank. For most it was the first time they ever had a registered company and a current account in their own names. Later, we guided them to register a brand or trademark at the the Intellectual Property Office or MyIPO.

Marco Thom's Five plus Two Skills Set

Later, we came across the research by Marco Thom who undertook a survey of 200 lecturers in Fine Art at Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the UK and Germany. Thom set out to “determine the crucial skills for fine artists”. His respondents were lecturers who “are simultaneously working artists” who could probably offer more valid viewpoints “based on their professional experience”, compared to those who were mere academics.

In a working paper presented at Institut für Mittelstandsforschung (IfM) Bonn in 2016, Thom concluded that his findings confirmed his literature review and theoretical assumptions, that the following “Five plus Two” crucial skills are required to develop entrepreneurship among artists. The elements of his model are reproduced below.

1. Idea/Creativity. “Ability to think creatively or innovatively that leads to new insights, novel approaches and (business) concepts, fresh perspectives, whole new ways of understanding and conceiving things.”

2. Strategic Thinking (Planning) “Recognition and realization. Ability to set goals and develop (long-range) plans in a variety of areas, to anticipate the unexpected, to analyze the business environment, and to cooperate with people.”

3. Opportunity “Ability to recognize, assess and realize business opportunities.”

4. Networking. “Ability to develop and use contacts for (business) purposes beyond the reason for the initial contact. Networking skills comprise in particular the abilities to 1) target activities strategically, 2) systematically plan networking, 3) engage others effectively, 4) showcase their own expertise, 5) assess opportunities, and 6) deliver value to others.”

5. Leadership. “Ability to develop a "Art/Business Vision" of where one wants to be and to inspire people (external experts) to help achieving this vision. Leadership skills are particularly important for one-man and small businesses as they often need external help.”

+1. Finance. “Ability to plan, fund, direct, monitor, organize, and control the monetary resources of the arts entrepreneur (business).”

+2. Marketing (Sales). “Ability to reach the market (its potential customers, including decision-makers) and to achieve a high degree of visibility and awareness.”

Thom categorized the first five skills, in accordance with de Wolf's & Schoorlemmer's (2007:19), as "real entrepreneurial skills". According to Thom (2016), these five skills, "have explicitly and primarily to do with the creating of a successful business or self-employment career, while the last two skills in finance and sales enable the successful running of the business or entrepreneurial career". The findings presented below, in the form of seven case studies of the First Cohort of Young Art Entrepreneurs support Thom's contentions.

Seven Case Studies of First Cohort of Young Art Entrepreneurs (YAE)

Case #1:

YY (22), is the youngest in the group. She has a diploma in Fine Art. When asked to pitch for the first time, she responded "Wow, I was so nervous! I have never spoken on camera before! I became more relaxed only when I was advised to take three deep breaths and to read the script that the coach, at our Bootcamp, wrote for me. Now, I know, next time, when I have to speak in public, I will write the speech first and breathe deeply before talking to stop from shaking!" Her nervousness did not just arise from her youthfulness and inexperience but was more due to her inability to think of a viable business idea.

She was excited about having her own small business with her own logo that she could put on her paintings and use the opportunity given by *Balai Seni* to show to the world her creative skills. "I cannot wait to participate in exhibitions planned for us!" However, YY had difficulty conceptualizing a business idea. We observed that even by the end of the six months, she was unable to propose a sensible business idea that could be translated into a viable venture. Coaches and mentors offered assistance by giving her various ideas to try. But by the end of six months she was only able to propose a simple business venture consisting of an art workshop. On the other hand, to her credit she did have relatively good networking skills that helped get participants to attend weekend art events organized by the group.

It was apparent that her "young age, immaturity in thoughts, weak writing skills, contributed towards her inability to conceive a business idea, design strategies to utilize opportunities offered or develop leadership skills." Neither did she show competence in finance and marketing to help her in her business venture as evidenced by her business plan submitted at the end of the training.

However, to her credit she did show her leadership skills by organizing a weekend workshop for children that attracted almost five hundred participants. Using networking made available by the National Art Gallery she did find a place, on her own initiative, for overseas art residency, with funding secured by YAE training scheme.

Case #2:

JK (23) who also graduated with a diploma in Fine Art, echoed the wishes of the Director General when she said, "I came into this course with zero knowledge but after only five days I have learnt so much on how to do business, as an artist!"

She had never taken any course in management previously and had no knowledge of business planning and marketing strategy. Prior to the Bootcamp, JK had obtained a research grant to study cross-cultural art in Indonesia. At the end of six months she became more confident of getting other awards simply because she discovered a better way of writing for funds and an effective method of pitching before a panel of judges. Both skills acquired during her training at YAE.

From our observations, JK gained most of her knowledge on how to obtain more research grants and project funding for her art work. She was able to follow guidelines on how to apply for grants. Using techniques of applying for grants, that we showed her, she succeeded in getting more funding and received offers to follow art residency in Europe. She finally settled on an art residency at Edinburgh with funds secured through a YAE.

However, her level of maturity, almost on par with her younger colleague, may partly explain why she too was unable to conceive a business idea beyond opening a small class to offer art training to children. Neither was she able to design strategies to utilize opportunities offered nor was she able to develop leadership skills during her tenure at YAE. As a result, the business plan proposal she submitted did not show any promise of getting funding.

On the other hand, being alumnus of an urban art institute, JK, like her colleague, YY, she was able to draw upon support from her city campus, family and her own ethnic community, capitalizing on social networking that drew large crowds to all art workshops, held at YAE Art Depot, at weekends. If only she could conceive an idea that can attract investors, her networking skills would certainly help in marketing her business venture. Sadly, like YY, she too, wanted to start only an art class for children that was ill conceived and unable to gain any interest from an investor.

Case #3

Another 23 year old is **MF**, who graduated with a degree in fine art. He said the Bootcamp "certainly opened not only my mind but showed me how to make plans more systematically". In fact, after the Bootcamp, he said he was

more confident about participating in art business in the country. "I have made up my mind that after my YAE training, I would like to venture overseas to do shows in Abu Dhabi, Maldives and elsewhere!"

It took MF one month from the start of coaching session to propose the idea of an art truck. Everyone thought it was a viable idea. But it took MF four more months to develop the idea into a viable venture. The attractiveness of his business plan lies in the idea of bringing art to the people. He planned to gather paintings and other works of art from fellow artists and exhibit them on the truck. At the same time, the truck will organize art activities on site for residents at every location. To supplement his revenue MF's truck provides refreshments and snacks for visitors.

At the end of six months, his proposal turned out to be the best business plan for the First Cohort of YAE. He was so determined to succeed in business planning that he consulted his college mates from the Business School to help him refine his ideas and enhance his financial projections. That enabled him in getting support from a funding agency.

Where leadership is concerned, MF took the lead in organizing the first event by combining art talk involving well known artists with refreshments provided by food trucks. This was a novel idea that attracted a relatively large crowd. It also helped spur him on with his art truck plans that was designed to sell refreshments alongside art works.

MF too succeeded in obtaining a place for his art residency overseas after his training at YAE. He confessed that had he not attended the training he would not have the networking to acquire funds or get a place for an overseas residency. Neither would he know how to prepare a business plan or take the leadership to organize an event involving well known personalities in the local art scene. He was also appreciative of the coaching he received that showed him how to form a company, start a bank account, pitch to funders, market his art work, keep track of his income and expenditure.

Case #4:

To "**Bob**" (29) another graduate in fine art, the training was an eye opener where business planning is concerned. He felt that he is now able to prepare a business plan to upgrade his studio in his home town. After six months, Bob submitted his business plan and was successful at pitching to many potential investors.

The Bootcamp and the six months of training, he said, was his life line. "Now I can submit my proposal to potential investors with greater confidence" says Bob with a sigh of relief. "I kept postponing months after months, because I just didn't know how to write one, before this training".

Bob is now running his own business of making a variety of art props for theme parks in Malaysia and Singapore. He now owns an expanded art studio in his home town, trains other artists, accepts commissioned work from government agencies and corporate bodies locally and abroad. He is grateful for the networking contacts he obtained through YAE that helped fund his projects, expanded his studio and won a place to attend an art residency in Jakarta. But most of all he appreciates the coaching he received that helped him become a better entrepreneur than he ever imagined.

In his own words, “Without YAE I would have remained just an artist, without knowing how to pitch to corporations, or seize the opportunity before me, or think of an idea to write in a plan, or for that matter lead a group of other artists, to complete a project! YAE really opened my eyes”.

Case #5.

On the other hand, **TN (27)** who holds a Master in Fine Art, the Bootcamp and the design of the YAE training was far superior when compared to courses she followed on campus. She said she did enroll in management courses that had some elements of entrepreneurship at the university but the Bootcamp and the six months of coaching that followed, was more practical for her.

"This training is true to life. I can apply everything I learned immediately. And it is specifically focused on visual art. The entrepreneurship courses on campus were very general, without any connection to visual artists, at all! I certainly appreciate the caring attitude of our instructors. They are so helpful....!"

One unique characteristic of TN is her ability to speak Mandarin, English and Bahasa fluently. As a result, she became a natural leader for the team bridging two major groups; those fluent in Mandarin and those that were fluent in Bahasa. Often times she did help both groups when they have difficulty with English. TN is quite perceptive at adapting art to her business concept. Her ideas have attracted investors who are delighted to offer her seed money. She plans to have an artistic bed and breakfast accommodation with a difference. All bedrooms to be marketed on AirBnB will be designed like those painted by great artists. For example, one of the rooms offered will be furnished exactly like a painting by Vincent Van Gogh.

In addition, her bed and breakfast will offer art classes for residents who are keen to learn to paint in the tradition of the great artists. She plans to market her rooms to long term techies who frequent co-working spaces nearby. At the same time, family traveling in groups may find art lessons at her bed and breakfast appealing. Her business model is based on low cost rentals of an apartment in a semi urban area with a return on investment of twelve months or

less. Many investors that she knew through YAE are keen to support her business.

TN found YAE valuable not only because of the opportunities she discovered, the contacts she made, the lessons she learned but more importantly, she was able to apply her ideas and bring to reality her business plans. She left for a four month art residency in Berlin sponsored by a foundation. Upon her return she promised, she will be fully involved in her art bed and breakfast business.

Case #6.

Another participant is **AF** (24) who is dyslexic found the Bootcamp challenging at first because he had to take a longer time to read and understand materials handed out in class.

However, he said the Bootcamp was "enjoyable" because for the first time in his life he was exposed to business management in simple clear language. "Before this course I knew next to nothing about business. I only knew how to draw. But now I understand what the *Balai Seni* is trying to do. I think they want us to know that we can go very far in art business with the help we get from instructors and mentors here! I also enjoyed listening to speakers who are all very knowledgeable".

He added that he would be able to do better in business once he has registered a company, print his own calling cards and create a brand for himself that will be trademarked with Malaysian Intellectual Property Office. "Basic accounting skills I learned in class will also help me prepare accounts...for myself and for taxes, required by *Lembaga Hasil Dalam Negeri* (Internal Revenue Board)".

AF is fortunate. His fiancé is an accountant who has some training in business management. He consults her after class. As a result his business plan turned out to be carefully thought out with impressive spread sheets. He assured us that she helped him with excel, a programme that was alien to him. But the business idea was definitely his own. His business plan consisted of producing consumer goods imprinted with original art works by local artists. At the end of the training AF had an ongoing business located near the main campus of the largest university in the country. He said from his projections, his business would thrive with support from the campus of forty thousand students.

We are indeed amazed by AF's progress. When he joined the training, he was the one who had the most difficulty. But by the end of six months, he was one of the first to establish his own store with investments from individuals whom he networked with through YAE. He had gone on a residency in Jogjakarta to deepen his understanding of the same business that he started. He said upon his return he would be able able to strengthen his business based on experienced gain overseas.

Case #7.

Last but not least is **AMA** (30) who initially wanted to know how to venture into the interior design business, got more than what he bargained for when he enrolled in the Bootcamp and made a commitment to be on site at the Young Art Entrepreneur camp for six months. He was only interested to sell his work directly to hotel owners instead of going through interior design companies that were profiteering excessively from his creative effort. But he found friendship and although the oldest he was able to fit into the team quite easily.

"The Bootcamp offered us an insight into how to better run our art business!" He felt that in just forty hours he was exposed to so many ideas that could make him a better businessman. "I have accepted the offer to participate in the Young Art Entrepreneur because I know I can use it as a launching pad to better promote myself in the art industry. Some may not see this opportunity but for those willing to put in the extra effort, the benefits are tremendous!"

That was exactly what AMA got. He was willing to put in the time and gain contacts to market his work. He was able to network with high net worth individuals who were interested in his business plan and bought many of his unique paintings. Also, through the National Art Gallery he was able to get access to end customers, bypassing those that, in the past, benefitted excessively, from his hard work. He was also able to start his dream projects of offering public art to government agencies using the National Art Gallery and YAE as reference.

More importantly, AFA is now able to open his own art studio that design and develop creative public art, murals and accept commissioned tasks from agencies that were inaccessible previously. He said, "These were made possible only through YAE...!"

AFA's work had been purchased by collectors from Puerto Rico and Singapore. His murals now decorate walls of hotels in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time, has submitted a design of public art to Kuala Lumpur City Hall and will probably be able to install it soon. In the meantime, he is off to Chiangmai for an art residency on a full sponsorship by a supportive foundation.

Discussion and Conclusions

This preliminary research clearly proves what is often stressed by the Director General of the National Art Gallery that Fine Art schools emphasized too much training on techniques neglecting living skills much to the detriment of their graduates. The seven participants in the YAE First Cohort reaffirmed that they had negligible knowledge of business management, when they first enrolled for the training, because they were not exposed to such courses, while in campus.

Another finding that is evident is that YAE Bootcamp and business coaching provided made them more aware about business management. All participants were positive about management knowledge they received and believed that all visual artists could be more successful when given adequate training in business skills. The seven young art entrepreneurs have been exposed to all elements advanced by Marco Thom along his “Five Plus Two” crucial skills sets that are required to develop entrepreneurship among artists. The case studies above confirmed their applicability and usefulness, as testified by all participants.

This exploratory study clearly reaffirms that ideation or creativity is paramount in business development. This is supported in five out of seven case studies illustrated above. The five were able to conceive more creative business ideas and have a greater likelihood of success in starting a business of their own.

On the other hand, the first two cases showed that they were not successful in developing a viable business because their ideas were not as creative and therefore failed to gain support from investors. However, we are certain that they would be able to create better business models, in the future, now that they know their shortcomings. At the same time, the ability to think strategically helped participants develop convincing business plans. Sharpening their capabilities at opportunity recognition have also helped the five participants in obtaining support for their business ventures.

Similarly, networking methods they utilized increased their chances of success. In fact even in the first two cases, the possession of this particular skill set showed that although, they did not have viable business models, they benefitted greatly from networking provided through YAE. The National Art Gallery and YAE networking arrangements have identified places where they are now able to experience teaching art classes as a first step towards starting their own art schools.

Where leadership is concerned we are in agreement with Thom who believes that this skill set is essential to help all artists survive in their business enterprises. YAE has provided the young artists, with ample opportunities, to gain insights into their own leadership capabilities, by heading their own individual teams to plan, organize, direct and control events, successfully. This skill would be crucial for their survival when they have to manage their own business teams, later.

In addition, the participants are convinced that they have been adequately exposed to basics in bookkeeping, accounting and taxation. At the same time, we showed them where to find sources of funding and how to approach funders with compelling pitching skills and impressive business plans.

Lastly, we showed them how to market their ideas and promote their art, products and services with ease by employing online and off line marketing strategies that most artists often neglect. In addition, we made them establish their own sole proprietorships and develop their own brands to help them market their products with greater confidence.

In conclusion, this paper has fulfilled its objectives and succeeded to showcase changes in the lives of seven visual artists enrolled in the Young Art Entrepreneurs career development scheme launched by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia in 2017. It has also shown how their exposure to the “Five Plus Two” skills set, advanced by Marco Thom (2016), as crucial components to successfully develop art entrepreneurs, have impacted their lives. At the same time, we have shared our experience in designing, developing and implementing an impactful entrepreneurial development scheme that will help artists sustain themselves and profit from their creative enterprises.

Finally, we would like to recommend the following lessons gained from this preliminary study that may be used to help shape appropriate policies for career development of artists in the country.

1. While emphasizing teaching techniques for budding artists, colleges and universities ought to consider providing future undergraduates with some knowledge in business to ensure their sustainability in the real world.
2. The National Art Gallery, having witnessed the success of this first cohort ought to consider expanding YAE by enlarging intakes because there are other artists who could benefit from similar training. To this end, the National Art Gallery has taken steps to train twenty four more young artists in 2018. The Second Cohort of twelve Young Art Entrepreneurs, recently completed their training with astounding success. At the time of writing YAE has already commenced training twelve more in its Third Cohort. However, the National Art Gallery alone may not be able to mount a larger training scheme for thousands who are in need of coaching in business skills. Therefore, we strongly call upon other states in Malaysia to emulate YAE and install similar training for artists within their boundaries.
3. This is a preliminary study and obviously a bigger sample may be necessary to make our assertion here universally acceptable. We therefore, call upon, the powers that be, to fund further research, with a larger representative sample, to make the findings more meaningful and statistically significant.

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