Critical Thinking and Career Choices in the Creative Industries

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AS WE APPROACH THE THIRD DECADE OF THE NEW CENTURY, the subject of careers represents a minefield of uncertainty, particularly for parents and their school-leavers who find themselves balancing the pros and cons of tertiary education. At times this feels like being trapped between the proverbial 'rock and a hard place' as few professions still offer a lifelong guarantee of employment and many are often oversubscribed and high in cost. Technology has also dramatically changed the career landscape, and while the internet provides unlimited access to new markets, it also encourages competition from every corner of the globe. A common challenge for many school-leavers is an inability to identify a preferred career, exacerbated by a failure to recognise his or her natural strengths and attributes.

As the coordinator for the Entertainment and Cultural Enterprise Management (ECEM) degree offered by the Institute of Caribbean Studies at The University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, I interact with many young people who enter the UWI grappling with the above uncertainties and concerned with aligning their developing career interests with the need to earn a good and reliable salary. For many students, their perspective can be summed up by a common desire to avoid the dreaded 'nine-to-five job' or, as they see it, spending their lives trapped by four walls and a desk. While some might interpret this as a sign of immaturity, many of these students display a strong work ethic, an entrepreneurial instinct, and are often creative and self-motivated.

The ECEM degree is unique in the Caribbean: in addition to offering courses that focus on the creative industries, it also culminates in an internship which

places the student with a Kingston-based company for six weeks to obtain a sense of the work place and have an opportunity to observe how theory is applied to local practice. Some students enter this programme attracted by the term 'entertainment' but quickly learn that this refers to a group of global industries which are diverse, and like any complex subject, can be broken down into component parts and formalised into a programme of study.

The ECEM degree is therefore not a vocational programme based on practical, hands-on courses, but rather focuses on a specific range of creative industries and through academic engagement, provides understanding of the complex ways in which they operate and function. Although some courses require theory to be translated into practice, the focus of the course content is consistently academic and theoretical, and requires a significant amount of reading, writing and study. Although the degree covers a range of subjects including event planning, artist management, sports management, accounting for small businesses, the film, publishing and music industries, these fields are interrogated through theoretical concepts that are intended to position the student with a foundational understanding of these fields at the international level. In addition, comprehension of these themes is anchored within a cultural and societal frame, explaining how human experience in the context of regional history has shaped the world in which we live.

The wider academic umbrella of cultural studies therefore represents the foundation on which the ECEM degree is based, and for many students the resulting discussions not only explain the power structures that direct and shape society, its institutions, and industries, but also examine how the individual fits into this complex array of value systems and structures. The creative arts often represent the vehicles through which many of these value systems and structures are expressed, reinforced or challenged, and so music, dance, and the visual arts are analysed as aesthetic but also commercial systems that can represent diverse ideas related to concepts of identity, power, freedom, sexuality, religion, and politics.

Most of my working life has been spent in the entertainment industry as a music practitioner, but I am also an academic with a PhD in Ethnomusicology, so I have a healthy respect for the spaces where practice and theory meet. Many students who desire a career in the field of entertainment, are often anxious to

engage with the practices associated with the industry, not initially understanding that it is the theory and critical thinking skills that represent the true value and potential that the ECEM degree, and every other degree in the humanities, offers. The content of the courses is certainly important, but it is the development of critical thinking skills that elevates the potential of the student and which will ultimately allow them to decipher, assess, analyse, and comprehend a complex array of information and a wide variety of topics, as well as traverse and negotiate diverse career paths. Understanding the importance of developing these skills is important, especially for students who have excelled during their school life using a system of rote learning, but find that this is not an adequate method for studying at tertiary level. The ability to think critically will not only serve the student well in the selection of a career but also in developing their career in response to changes in the work market. The true value of undergraduate study is therefore located in understanding the process of study as much as in mastering the content of the courses that make up a particular degree programme.

As we look back at recent developments in the creative industries, it is not just the speed of change but the seismic movements that have had a massive impact on those working in the industries. For example, the music, animation, and video gaming industries have been revolutionised by new technologies, while social media and mobile communications have transformed the way in which many forms of entertainment are delivered to the consumer. In this dynamic environment, the only thing that is definite is the uncertainty of the future. For young people selecting these areas of employment, it is their ability to adopt and adapt to this constantly changing environment that will dictate their ultimate success. However, we should not be daunted by the dynamics now found in many industries because change also provides new commercial opportunities. Those best positioned to take advantage will likely be equipped with the tools to understand not only the function of the related products, but also how they fit into a complex range of social and cultural practices. Anyone looking at career choices should give some thought to the idea of not only acquiring information but ensuring that its transmission includes the development of critical thinking skills. This provides the real key to career success.