



THE KAOSPILOTS: SCHOOL OF SOCIETAL CHANGE, BUSINESS CREATIVITY, AND PERSONAL MASTERY

BY NOVEMBER SKY FREYSS-COLE

Imagine you attend an educational institution where your ideas are supported and anything seems possible. Imagine that, as a student, you are valued as an equal part of the organization. You are there because you want to *take* an education, not *get* one. You are there because you want to start a business, lead projects, develop new ideas. You are there because you want to change the world. At your school, you learn by doing. Your lecturers are entrepreneurs, authors, consultants, and fellow students. You are encouraged to explore your strengths and weaknesses, to learn from your teammates, to be curious, and to do the incredible.

Meet the KaosPilots: a team-based international business education with the aim of being the best school for the world. Each year, this Danish-based program welcomes in a team of students from around the globe. Together these students embark upon a three-year journey that takes them through the disciplines of project design, process design, and business design. The teams consist of individuals between the ages of 21 and 31 with diverse nationalities, professional backgrounds, and ambitions for the future.

Why KaosPilots? Why Now?

In this time of rapid change, we need individuals, organizations, and commu-

TEAM TIP

Following the KaosPilots' example, seek possibilities in challenging situations. Instead of pointing fingers, ask, "How am I going to do it?" and "How can others support me?"

KAOSPILOT VALUES	
The program is designed and operates according to the following values:	
Streetwise	The wisdom and know-how for maneuvering in society, in both the cultural and business worlds
Risk-taking	The courage to step forward, experiment, and challenge one's own fears
Balance	The cohesion, coherence and dynamic interplay between content and form, the individual and community, the local and the global, praxis and theory
Compassion	The striving to alleviate others' suffering
Real World	The staff and students must work with real people and real problems, carrying out projects for external stakeholders
Playful	Work and study life should be light-hearted, good-natured, and fun
In 2007, the KaosPilots was nominated for an Index award and named by <i>BusinessWeek</i> as one of the Top Design Schools in the world.	

nities that are able to embrace complexity, dance in the moment, and navigate in times of chaos. We need leaders who are not only able to make tough decisions but who are also visionary, supportive, collaborative, and creative.

Now the question is: Are our schools, colleges, and universities being designed with this goal in mind? Unfortunately, not often enough. Many aspects of the traditional educational system end up resembling mechanisms for control rather than tools for change.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge highlights the importance for organizations of having a focus on personal mastery, or learning and personal growth. He writes, "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn." This understanding lies at the heart of the KaosPilots. Their aim is "...that each individual student acquires the skills, knowledge, and understanding of themselves and the world around them, enabling them to realize their values, visions, and goals in an organizationally, socially, and economically viable way."

The KaosPilots was founded in 1991 in Denmark's second-largest city, Aarhus. The school rose out of a local youth group called the Front Runners, which took a positive approach to creating cultural projects that responded to relevant social issues. With their creative and innovative solutions, the Front Runners proved to be pioneers of social entrepreneurship in the local area.

After years of creating these cultural projects, some of the Front Runners, including project leader and director Uffe Elbaek, began developing an idea. They would create a school that would provide students with knowledge, experiences, and skills in the field of social entrepreneurship (see "KaosPilot Values"). The rest, as they say, is history. The KaosPilots was born.

Over the years, the KaosPilots has received support from companies such as Apple, Lego, and Carlsberg. Currently, the program is financed by the Danish government, the in-house consulting company, KaosWorks, and student tuition fees. Most applicants

discover the school through word of mouth. KaosPilots are out in the world working on projects, engaging with others, and often talking about their education. They don't hesitate to share why they are enrolled in the school, what they love about it, what they'd like to change, and how they are part of changing it. In addition, articles in the international media, including magazines such as *Fast Company*, *Ode Magazine*, and *BusinessWeek*, tell the KaosPilots story to those who are farther away, leading potential students to the website, where they are able to find more information, contact current students, or download an application (www.kaospilot.dk).

Based on their written applications, approximately 70 individuals are invited to attend a unique application workshop that takes place in Aarhus over the course of two days at the end of April. During this workshop, the potential KaosPilots-to-be complete various assignments while working in small groups with other applicants. Using the information gathered from this experience as well as from the applications, members of the staff and student body then select a diverse team of about 35 aspiring KaosPilots to begin the program in the fall.

Each year, a single team is welcomed to the KaosPilots. The program lasts three years, which means that at any one time, around 100 students are enrolled at the school. Since 1991, 15 teams have matriculated. Fifteen staff members fill the roles of school leadership, administration, technical support, team leaders, and consultants for KaosWorks. Others who influence the KaosPilots are the board of directors and the school's vast network of lecturers, graduated KaosPilots, clients, partners, members of sister schools and programs, and friends.

The Education: A Closer Look

The layout for the three years, in short:

1st Year – The ToolBox

First year is focused on methods, theory, and practical project work related to three core areas—Project Design (project development and management), Business Design (business development

and management), and Process Design (process management and leadership).

2nd Year – Process Management and International Project Management

Second year is focused on Process Design and Process Management (including the design and facilitation of processes for external customers). In the spring, the team goes on a three-month “Outpost,” implementing projects for external clients in another country.

3rd Year – Project and Business Design

Third year is focused on Business Design (entrepreneurship and building the business plan), an individual world practicum, in which the student further explores his/her area of focus in an organizational setting, and an individual project leading to the final exam.

“You can always count on the KaosPilots to take you exactly where you need to go . . .”

—Alan Webber

Students generally work five days a week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The curriculum is a mix of lectures, projects, and individual, group, and team assignments. All members of the team go through a similar course of study, as they are a single learning unit throughout their three years at the KaosPilots. Students also engage in cross-team and organizational projects and events throughout the year.

In the fall of 2008, the school experimented with a new initiative called “White Week.” During this four-day program of inspirational learning, the whole organization participated in lectures, workshops, and dialogue around the theme of community. Guest speakers included Robert Fortunato from ForStrategy Consulting (US), Nick Nissely from The Banff Centre (Canada), and Anna Kirah from CPH Design (Denmark).

In the last few years, sister schools and programs have opened up in Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. A

couple of years ago, the school in Aarhus switched from conducting lectures in Scandinavian languages to English; this shift has allowed the student body to become more diverse. Currently, the KaosPilots hail from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Brazil, the Netherlands, Cuba, the United States, South Africa, Iraq, Costa Rica, and Morocco.

“Best School for the World”

The KaosPilots has always had a global focus. Since the school's founding, teams have worked and studied around the world during their projects, Outposts, and internships. The experience is exciting and is seen as crucial as the borders of organizations and nations are becoming more and more permeable in this globalized world.

Over the years, the KaosPilots has developed and shifted in response to the changes taking place around the world. This adaptation includes a focus on three key areas: sustainability, social innovation, and cultural diversity. Together students and staff are exploring these subjects to discover their deeper meaning and the possibilities they hold for the future.

Last February, a team of KaosPilots spent a semester in Shanghai exploring the theme of social innovation. Their work included a joint project with Chinese graphic design and multimedia students and British photography students. The group created and displayed an exhibition of more than 30 art pieces aimed at highlighting social needs in China and the initiatives that are bringing people together to fill those needs.

Upon their return to Denmark, the KaosPilots students created a book about their discoveries in this field entitled, *Social Innovation, A Travel Guide*. With regards to this publication, Alan Webber, founding editor of *Fast Company*, wrote, “You can always count on the KaosPilots to take you exactly where you need to go—in this case on a journey to the future.”

Making, Not Looking for, Work

Founder Uffe Elbaek was once quoted as saying: “KaosPilots are people who don't look for work, but make their own.” This could be related to the school's culture of seeking possibilities

in challenging situations. If you want something done, instead of pointing fingers, KaosPilots tend to ask “How am I going to do it?” and “How can others support me?” With the space for individual initiatives, this element of responsibility creates a learning and working environment that is flexible, inspiring, and alive.

The students at the KaosPilots conduct their projects almost exclusively for external clients. This process of taking action based on their skills and theoretical understanding deepens the learning process. Success is the aim, but there is always the freedom for failure. This mindset allows students to take greater risks and therefore create stronger results than they might otherwise. Integrated in this learning experience is team and individual reflection, which supports the projects before, during, and after their execution.

One of the central concepts of the KaosPilots is that projects should produce a “Win-Win-Win” result: that there is a gain for the two parties involved as well as for the society of which they are a part. Whether students are developing an entrepreneurial education in Rwanda, working to “green” Dublin with rooftop gardens, or creating a youth dialogue project in Bosnia, the goal is to use the mechanisms of project, process, and business to create a positive impact in response to pressing needs in communities and nations.

Although unique in its approach, the KaosPilots is one of many alternative education programs on the rise around the world focusing on leadership, innovation, social entrepreneurship, and organizational change. So perhaps the question to ask ourselves is not, what does it mean to educate creative, young leaders, but instead, what does it mean for our future if we don't? ■

November Sky Freyss-Cole is from Wellfleet, Massachusetts. She is a final-year student at the KaosPilots and carried out her World Internship at Pegasus Communications, Inc.

My Story

In 2005, I came across an article about the KaosPilots in a magazine that had magically ended up on my doorstep. Immediately upon reading the words on the pages before me, I knew I had to try to make my way in. A year later, I moved to Denmark and became the first aspiring North American KaosPilot.

Over the last two and a half years, I have acquired tools, experiences, confidence, and abilities to help me realize my dreams. I have gained new ways to view situations and insights into the numerous possibilities that exist for solving the challenges we face. I have become more aware that, in the process of creating positive change, I am only able to start with myself. I need to be aware of my passions, abilities, and visions as well as my values, mental models, and weaknesses in order to join with others to create something bigger than ourselves.

I remember after having been at the KaosPilots for one semester, I returned home to the United States over the holidays faced with the challenge of describing to my friends and family exactly what I was learning. My answer: I'm learning how to work with others. It sounds simple, I know, but that's what stood out most in my mind. Through the process of working in a team, I was getting to know more about communication, conflict, and collaboration. I was beginning to better understand

myself and others and how we could get things done together.

I feel this element of group learning is a component that is widely lacking in our traditional school systems, especially in the United States. We are more or less individually insulated all the way through to college. When we head out into the workforce, we are all of a sudden expected to work well with others. Interpersonal skills are some of the qualities most weighted in job interviews, yet the abilities to be with people, communicate ideas, reflect, take criticism, and create visions are not generally a priority in the curricula of our schools.

I was inspired when I heard one of the team leaders welcome the new students this fall. Each year, there is the feeling that things are coming full circle, that we are all part of a learning experience that continues to evolve. In some ways, the new students have similar experiences and epiphanies as those who came before, but underlying everything is the understanding that the new team should and will surpass the previous team's achievements and that all members of the KaosPilots are a part of making that happen.

After these years, I value most my surge in curiosity, my newfound awareness around leadership, and my understanding of how important it is to take risks, be bold and creative, and dare to go beyond what I thought was possible.

—November Sky Freyss-Cole

What You'll Find on the KaosPilots Bookshelf:

Organizational Culture and Leadership by Edgar H. Schein
Building Strong Brands by David A. Aaker
Birth of the Chaordic Age by Dee Hock
Take It Personally by Anita Roddick
Leadership and the New Science: Discovering

Order in a Chaotic World by Margaret J. Wheatley
Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges by C. Otto Scharmer
The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life by Richard Florida