



Developing the next generation of entrepreneurs: Giving students the opportunity to gain experience and thrive



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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have increasingly utilized experiential approaches in business education; however, some researchers have suggested that further research is required to investigate the effectiveness and student reaction to such approaches. The aim of this study is to determine the impact of an experiential learning approach on the perceived development of entrepreneurial traits and to measure the level of both student engagement and satisfaction. The approach was designed and tested during a Higher National Diploma (HND) entrepreneurship module in a British HEI. Traditional taught sessions were blended with applied activities that required students to utilize the skills they learned to complete steps of the activities, which increased in length and complexity. Results found both a high level of student satisfaction and engagement and the belief that the module's experiential approach had, in many instances, helped to develop entrepreneurial traits. Successful practice and modifications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Within the last two decades, higher education has seen considerable growth in both the development of entrepreneurship as a subject and in the number of entrepreneurship courses offered. Entrepreneurship courses are mainly found in business schools within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Collins, Smith, & Hannon, 2006), and are often taught alongside traditional business disciplines, including management, marketing and finance. Entrepreneurship education can be defined as the development of attitudes, behaviours, and capabilities that can be applied during an individual's career as an entrepreneur (Wilson, 2008). However, entrepreneurship is a complex phenomenon that requires decision making across all aspects of business activity in situations where there are high levels of uncertainty in a global and dynamic socio-technical context (Timmons, Gillin, Burshtein, & Spinelli, 2011). This has led to considerable debate in the literature regarding the most appropriate teaching methods to develop entrepreneurial knowledge and stimulate learning (Balan & Metcalfe, 2012). Past research has suggested that the success of entrepreneurship education has been mixed, with some research reporting positive outcomes (e.g. Athayde, 2009; Fayolle, Gailly, & Lassas-Clerc, 2006; Karlsson & Moberg, 2013), and other research reporting less favourable outcomes (e.g. Von Graevenitz, Harhoff, & Weber, 2010; Oosterbeek, van Praag, & Ijsselstein, 2010). The lack of consistency in the findings may be due, in part, to methodological weaknesses. It may also be attributed to a general lack of agreement on a conceptual model for the analysis of entrepreneurial education (Von Graevenitz et al., 2010).

Academic support has been increasing for the use of non-traditional higher education learning environments in the study of entrepreneurship (Gibb, 2002; Jones & English, 2004). As a result, many entrepreneurship educators have adopted

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approaches based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), which draws on earlier works that emphasize the central role experience plays in learning and development (Dewey, 1963; Piaget, 1950) to develop a dynamic, holistic model of an experience-based learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). This approach departs from traditional lecturer-led passive learning, increasing the emphasis on action-orientated or active experiential learning, problem solving, project-based learning and peer evaluation. This has led to a wide range of new active and creative problem solving and learning by doing experiential approaches being adopted. New approaches have included business simulations, meeting and interviewing entrepreneurs, developing business plans, and attending entrepreneurship forums. Piercy (2013) argues however, that while experiential approaches have become an increasingly favoured form of pedagogy for business educators, student reactions to experiential approaches require further investigation.

The qualitative research herein builds on previous research by exploring how experiential learning in an applied setting supports the development of four key entrepreneurial behaviours or characteristics. The teaching approach required participants to be actively involved in planning, developing, and implementing two student-led events. The students then reported via reflective essays on how, and whether, the four key behaviours had been utilized, and how they could have been used and developed further. Additional qualitative feedback was collected through a series of interviews. Finally, students' module evaluations were analyzed to discern student satisfaction with these experiential approaches.

2. Literature review

2.1. Active and experiential learning

The development of students' critical thinking skills is one of the main goals of higher education. This encourages the movement beyond knowledge comprehension and towards the higher order skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). The core elements of active learning are student activity and student engagement in the learning process, in contrast to traditional lecture formats where content is passively transmitted from the lecturer to the students (Prince, 2004). In this process, active learning should involve the use of the higher order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In the past, it has been argued that higher education institutions have done little to foster active learning aimed at developing the critical thinking and creativity of business students. As a result, corporations have reported that entry-level graduates have been lacking in these skills (Snyder, 2003).

Business schools have increased their focus on developing the skills required for business, marketing and entrepreneurship, and instructors are exploring new and inventive ways to introduce active and experiential approaches that can help to prepare students for their future careers. Experiential learning can be described as a participatory form of learning that involves participants in using a range of mental processes to synthesize information in an active and immersive environment (Feinstein, Mann, & Corsun, 2002).

Kolb (1984, p. 6) described the importance of participants being "able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences; they must be able to observe and reflect on these experiences from many perspectives; they must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories; and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems".

Experiential Learning Theory has had a major impact on both the design and delivery of educational programmes in management training and development, and formal management education (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Many business school educators have accordingly adopted approaches based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle to develop a dynamic, holistic model of an experience-based learning process. It is a process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 41), and as such involves an active interpretation of experience. Reflection is an important element in this approach and structured approaches to the reflective stage can enhance this process (Platzer, Snelling, & Blake, 1997).

As academic literature has increasingly recognized the value of non-traditional higher education learning environments (emphasizing action-orientated experiential learning), new approaches have been introduced within the HEI system to reap the benefits of experiential learning. It has been argued that such active learning approaches address many of traditional teaching approaches' limitations (Caldwell, 2007; Knight & Wood, 2005; Lean, Moizer, Towler, & Abbey, 2006; Mahajan, 2012; Makienko & Bernard, 2012; Ruben, 1999), and generally result in improved knowledge retention, increased problem solving skills and increased motivation for future learning (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Rhem, 1998; Snyder, 2003). Importantly, it has been argued that whilst lectures are a useful vehicle for imparting knowledge, they do not lead to thought or attitude adjustment and the development of behavioural skills or inspire interest in the subject (Grimley, Green, Nilsen, Thompson, & Tones, 2011). However, active engagement in an activity together with enjoyment of the experience can significantly increase both motivation and learning (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Karns, 2005). It is, perhaps, not surprising that active experiential learning approaches are increasingly being introduced into syllabi to supplement traditional teaching formats (Daly, 2001; Karns, 2005; Piercy, 2013). While studies on student satisfaction with experiential learning are varied, Piercy and Caldwell (2011) found, in a multicultural study, that students reported high levels of satisfaction with experiential learning.

2.2. Working within groups

Working within groups on a project provides a forum for experiential learning, enabling a student-centred focus in the classroom that creates an active learning experience (Patel, 2003). A cooperative learning experience can enhance student

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