

Entrepreneurial Learning and teaching in higher education- Challenges in developing engaging pedagogies.

An exploratory case study of an undergraduate programme.

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Abstract

What role if any do educators have to play in developing entrepreneurship? The recent report from the EU (2006) on entrepreneurship in Higher Education highlights the importance of education in the promotion of more entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours and refers to the challenge of stimulating entrepreneurial mindsets in young people. In particular it notes that at third level the primary purpose of entrepreneurship education should be to develop entrepreneurial capacities and mindsets and advocates an action learning approach. The report (2006) emphasises the need to use experience based teaching methods in order to develop entrepreneurial thinking and states explicitly that “traditional educational methods (like lectures) do not correlate well with the development of entrepreneurial thinking”. It follows then that traditional modes of assessment (like exams) do not facilitate the development of entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviours.

Similarly Gibb (2002) expounds a view that questions traditional educational methods in the context of developing entrepreneurship. He argues that “entrepreneurship can play a significant role in a range of very different environments in societies across the world, within and between countries and cultures”. However, he suggests that the traditional ‘paradigm’ of entrepreneurship education would need to change in order to facilitate that. He implies that entrepreneurship that exists solely in the dimension of business schools is too narrow, and hinders its ability to address major issues in society.

This paper seeks to explore the fundamental challenges involved in entrepreneurial learning and teaching. The main question this paper seeks to explore is whether the use of a portfolio led assessment model for teaching key transferable skills associated with entrepreneurship education is appropriate for the achievement of the stated learning objectives and the development of key transferable skills. This paper presents some preliminary results of a pilot study involving first year level 7 and level 8 Business enterprise students at IADT, Dunlaoghaire. The findings reveal some insights into the value of portfolio assessment for first year students.

Introduction

Introduction and Rationale

The EU stated economic objective is to encourage **entrepreneurial activity** in Europe by helping to create favourable framework conditions for businesses. At the Lisbon European Council on 23 and 24 March 2000, the European Union set itself as its goal for the next decade to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, which will be capable of developing sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. In this context, the ability of higher education to produce dynamic and highly educated individuals to work in this environment remains to be seen.

According to a recent publication from the World Bank (2002:1), tertiary education is central to the creation of the intellectual capacity in which knowledge production and utilization depend and the promotion of life long learning practices necessary for updating knowledge and skills. In addition, the report (2002:26) argues that human capital formation is a critical requirement for any knowledge based economy. Equally, the World Bank (2002:27) notes the short shelf life of knowledge, skills and occupations as a consequence, the growing importance of continuing education. The report argues that the traditional approach of studying for a discrete and finite period of time to acquire a first degree after secondary school is being progressively replaced by a **life long learning** model. This goes beyond the narrow notion of second chance education. Thus, the report suggests that a progressive **blurring between initial and continuing** studies as well as training will need to become the norm. The report cites Finland as an example of good practice in this respect.

The NQAI report (2003:11) notes that recent demographic changes will witness a reduction of the youth cohort in the population which will impact upon future learner groups. The report equally notes the rigidity of curricular design delivery modes and assessment methodologies which by implication is likely to affect the ability of mature learners to access and participate meaningfully in higher education.

In the UK the recent report by the Learning and Skills council (March 2005) proclaims that “Skills matter”: for individuals, organizations and society generally. Without the requisite skills including entrepreneurship, innovation, managerial effectiveness and technical capability, the goal of achieving a high value added high productivity economy will remain elusive.

The arguments in support of key skills are two fold: Firstly the economic argument which proposes that in order to compete in the global marketplace the continuing development of intellectual capital is pivotal.

Secondly, skills development it is argued is part of the social policy mix required for a more prosperous and socially inclusive society. (Learning and Skills Council 2005)

The Learning and skills council in its draft strategy are making a clear business case for sustainable development to education and training. Equally, the learning and skills development agency (2005:3) in its response to the strategy for sustainable development stress that for a fully effective contribution from the learning skills sector, requires organisations and curriculum boundaries to be surmounted. It equally stresses that the identification and understanding of knowledge, skills and attitudes needs to support sustainability will be vital if the sector is to be enabled to take in a leading role in the future provision of learning opportunities and thus contribute to the wider economy, society and the environment.

Entrepreneurship education

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Similarly Gibb (2002) expounds a view that questions traditional educational methods in the context of developing entrepreneurship. He argues that “entrepreneurship can play a significant role in a range of very different environments in societies across the world, within and between countries and cultures”. However, he suggests that the traditional ‘paradigm’ of entrepreneurship education would need to change in order to facilitate that. He implies that entrepreneurship that exists solely in the dimension of business schools is too narrow, and hinders its ability to address major issues in society, particularly in developing countries. Gibb (2002) refers to this as the ‘institutional’ dominance of the USA business schools. It is influenced considerably by the dominance of the historic economic literature combined with the largely corporate business school approach and is almost exclusively business management focused. The question lies as to whether this model can meet the challenges of modern society.

The alternative model of entrepreneurship education, promoted by Gibbs and supported by the EU report, moves towards a broader societal model of entrepreneurship, which places emphasis on the values of entrepreneurship and developing entrepreneurial behaviours, attributes and skills encompassing concepts such as emotional intelligence, vision, holistic management and the ability to build trusting relationships. This scenario translates into a need to equip individuals with personal entrepreneurial capacities and to design organisations of all kinds, public, private and NGO (non-governmental organisations) to support effective entrepreneurial behaviour. Therefore the new challenge for entrepreneurship education is that it needs to address a number of personal, organisational and societal capacities. This in turn challenges educators to develop modes of teaching and learning that support the development of these capacities.

Existing models of entrepreneurship education fall somewhat short in developing these capacities. The Harvard view of teaching entrepreneurship is highly case focused (Harvard Business School 2005). Yet entrepreneurial behaviours, skills and attributes, nurtured by well designed pedagogies and exposure to experience are essential components of being able to 'feel' what it is like to be entrepreneurial and are arguably key to the creation of entrepreneurial values through learning (Gibb 2002)

At the heart of a more innovative approach to entrepreneurship education is creating an opportunity for students to feel entrepreneurial and this requires a teaching methodology which creates opportunities for students to "learn by doing". It recognises that knowledge is not learning until it is in some way internalised either by application or thinking. Very often, this internalising is achieved by "doing". This approach creates very real challenges for higher educational institutes as entrepreneurial learning can be seen as a process of trial and error and incremental improvements, something that can be hard to accommodate within traditional academic curriculum.

Conventional models do not easily meet the broad needs that are required for the entrepreneurial society. 'There has to be a wider context than business, an holistic approach to knowledge, a strong emphasis upon pedagogical variety and experiential learning, understanding of how to design entrepreneurial organisations of all kinds and, in terms of outcomes, a stronger focus upon creating empathy with the entrepreneurial mindset'. (Gibb 2002).

Key Challenges to the Implementation of Key Skills and Portfolio Assessment with a Bachelor of Business Level 7 and Level 8.

Whilst it is generally acknowledged that a variety of approaches exist in relation to the development and provision of key skills within a programme. These are briefly outlined below:

- embedding skills development into the curriculum
- encouraging the development of transferable skills through extracurricular activities.
- giving students access to "add-on" courses/units/sessions which develop and assess specific skills (eg: IT, languages, and numeracy skills in some cases)

Equally, there is considerable agreement, within educational literature, from a HE perspective, that students pay much greater attention to key skills, and hence invest more effort in developing them, where the skills are clearly embedded in their cognate area. Thus this programme has aimed to embed key skills across the curriculum. This has been approached using a variety of mechanisms. Initially, the development of a Learning and Research Portfolio which is aimed at enhancing self awareness, independence and personal development amongst first year students has been introduced. Further details are outlined in the table below:

Assessment for this module is through the preparation of a portfolio which presents evidence of student learning and personal development. The focus of the learning and assessment is through the development of transferable skills specifically, reading and analysis, writing research and referencing, group dynamics and logical thinking.

Portfolio One

Learning contract, reflective learning logs, presentation plan, mind maps, individual and group learning activities to enhance self awareness and critical learning and self assessment.

Portfolio Two

Containing coursework including information seeking exercises, project planning, literature summaries, reviews and critical reflection of different writing styles. Information gathering using the internet library databases. Reflective essays using appropriate formal conventions for referencing and critical identification of learning from the module.

Formative Assessment throughout the year with the submission of exercises completed in class submitted to lecturer for feedback and comment. Regular scheduled meetings with students to discuss progress and ensure completion of all tasks in the portfolio.

Brockbank (1995:113) argues that the development of a profiling portfolio project should *enable students to articulate and communicate what they can do* and that such projects would seek to help students to recognise and assess the skills they possess or have gained and enhanced. It is interesting to note that she concludes that this type of portfolio may be more appropriate at the intermediate or final level. In contrast, this module is attempting the assessment methodology amongst first year level 7 and level 8 groups.

Within the business domain this poses several challenges and opportunities. In order to achieve this objective a variety of aspects of course provision ranging from course and curriculum design through to staff development and commitment and the development of assessment strategies which adequately emphasise the importance of key skills. These variables are listed below:

- curriculum design and the development of learning outcomes
- teaching and learning methods including the provision of formative and summative feedback to learners.
- assessment methods
- approaches to evaluating provision

At this early stage of the journey, it is anticipated that creating an awareness within the academic faculty of the Business School of the significance of key skills should be stressed. All of the elements identified above will take considerable time and effort to be fully embraced by all the teaching team collectively.

One significant challenge to be addressed is working with other academic colleagues, employers and students. The University of Salford has addressed this in the following manner.

- be aware of lack of experience or confidence in project management
- understand others' work loads and demands on time
- develop strategies to support staff which include building in mechanisms to share good practice and minimise unnecessary duplication

- encourage an approach where responsibility for key skills development is an integral part of the HE teaching and student support role
- a curriculum mapping exercise is a useful starting point for the process of change as it raises issues of curriculum design and highlights differences in approach not previously considered
- recognise that convincing academics of the value of the task and supporting them through the process takes time

Involving employers

- involve employers in as many ways as possible in a project and ensure that they are aware that their contribution is recognised, valued and perceived as effective
- involving employers in the assessment of student projects both demonstrates the capability of students and promotes to students awareness of employer requirements

Supporting students

- ensure that students are able to see how they can benefit personally from the curriculum development being undertaken, particularly in relation to key skills assessment.
- use key skills as a means of 'adding value' to their degree through opportunities such as externally accredited industrial placement qualifications.
- involving students in innovative practice such as the Independent Learning Module gives them a very different experience with real value. This type of opportunity should be offered as widely as possible within higher education.

Exploring the link between assessment and the development of key skills

Oral presentations and group portfolio tasks will seek to achieve collaboration and teamwork, the ability to organize and present ideas effectively and to articulate in a convincing manner are central to the achievement of the learning outcomes identified in this programme. The presentation and completion of the portfolio of work through out the academic year will promote the acquisition and development of transferable key skills of learning such as how to become more effective learners crucial to enhanced study skills, personal development planning processes and generic skill acquisition in order to enable graduates to function more effectively in the workplace.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of the integration and development of key skills and engaging student learning in an entrepreneurial context with the Department of Business and Enterprise , School of Business and Humanities at IADT Dunlaoghaire. It is argued that an organic approach within the department is most likely to succeed. The paper critically explored and linked appropriate teaching and assessment strategies which specifically embed key skills into the programme through the development of a Student learning Portfolio developed over the course of first year on both a level 7 and level 8 programme. Explicit learning outcomes with key skill acquisition to encourage student meta cognition processes have also been introduced. It has stressed the challenges and opportunities that such an approach is likely to entail. The paper reviewed current literature primarily from the UK which stressed the importance of Key skills within the curriculum.

Whilst skills must reflect what the entrepreneurial culture and environment wants in a graduate, they need to be developed from the ground up. Identification of where the key skills are in the programme is an important starting point, but then (through the use of a matrix) these skills need to be developed at module level. In this way, they will contribute to programme learning outcomes, and ultimately to the employability of the graduate. The success of this approach may be evaluated in two ways. Firstly, through assessment of key skills. As we know, assessment drives the learning, and so we must include these skills as a learning outcome (at both programme and module levels) and assess them accordingly. Learning outcomes and assessments must be consistent, and the support should be integrated across all modules to support the programme learning outcomes. Secondly, success can be measured by tracking the employment and entrepreneurial activity of graduates, where are they? What types of enterprise activity are they engaged in?

Finally, it is crucial to remember that an integrated holistic approach to the development of key skills is essential. *“Implementation by integration and not ‘bolt-on’ is considered most effective. Bolt on skills are often not taken seriously and their relevance is not always evident”*. (Rhodes & Tallantyre in Brown & Glasner:1999, p.110). Integration of skills is challenging for faculty as it requires a cross-modular approach across the programme, which has been discussed in this paper. Curriculum mapping, through the matrix should be carried out. This is an audit of the entire programme, module by module, to identify where key skills can be best incorporated. Support for the development of these skills is evident in the strands and sub-strands which the NQF outlines (under the NQAI). These sub-strands are descriptors of what is expected in the graduate i.e. the graduate-ness of the student when they have finished college. The strands and sub-strands clearly indicate a need for development of key skills in order to realise these in the graduate.

Experience is the most effective mechanism in development of skills and building these skills incrementally throughout the time-span of the programme. This requires a structured and holistic approach and the commitment of the college from the top (academic director and faculty directors) through to the module leaders and students.

Key areas for further attention, in relation to this paper, is the development of key skills – presentation, team building and learning to learn.

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