

ENTREPRENEURIAL PEDAGOGY: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING DESIGN APPROACH

ABSTRACT

The case study explores the pedagogical design approach of combining students' seminar learning with the hands-on experience they gain from working at an entrepreneur center. Using a hybrid entrepreneur center, the case study illuminates a new design of combining regular teaching (through seminars) and working at a center where interns obtain direct guidance from the entrepreneurs and the faculty facilitator.

Key words: Entrepreneurial pedagogy, Experiential Learning, Bump and Connect, Intern Seminar

INTRODUCTION

The idea of entrepreneurship in the United States has been thought as the rise in class and upward mobility of different individuals who had ventured into new ideas and had created successful businesses (Lamoreaux, 2010). A call for increased research in entrepreneurship dates to the Schumpeter's era where he urged collaborative effort between historians and economic theorists in providing empirical research on how entrepreneurship has shaped the different economic sectors like firms, industries and the notion of modern capitalism (Jones & Wadhvani, 2006; Schumpeter, 1954). This push in research has led to increased interest in the development of educational programs that foster entrepreneurial ideas (Solomon, Duffy & Tarabishy, 2002). In the United States, the introduction of entrepreneurial learning can be traced as early as 1987 when Dwight Baumann introduced a course in entrepreneurship (McMullen and Long, 1987). Since then there has been a positive trend in entrepreneurship learning. In particular, in the areas of social entrepreneurship, experiential learning and incorporating business model canvas activities into the curriculum (The George Washington University Center for Entrepreneurial

Excellence, 2014). Today, over 40% of schools in the United States offer courses in social entrepreneurship and 61% teaching courses related to entrepreneurship (The George Washington University Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, 2014). Given the increase in teaching entrepreneurship, there is an obvious need to understand the pedagogy that goes into teaching these courses. This information will be beneficial to other educators and colleges and universities that wish to design and teach courses on entrepreneurship.

To explore more on entrepreneurial learning, this study will examine the pedagogical approach of combining students' classwork with the hands-on experience they gain from working in an entrepreneur center with a startup business. Using Billet's (2002) workplace pedagogical practices framework, this study will look at an experiential pedagogy design that involves participation of startup companies, working in an entrepreneurial center and direct guidance from the entrepreneurs and faculty (Billett, 2002). This study consists of 36 students who participated in a hybrid learning environment including seminar sessions and employment in the entrepreneurial center working one-on-one with entrepreneurs over a two- year period.

Study concepts

Entrepreneurship center- The entrepreneurship center is a hybrid between a co-working space and an incubator space. The center provides shared working environment where members can connect with each other, as well as receive guidance on various business they are launching.

Entrepreneurs - Entrepreneur center members who are actively starting an enterprise or have started it in the past 12 months.

Student interns- Students accepted in an entrepreneurship internship course. The students are required to apply and go through an interview before acceptance. Students selected have some

knowledge on entrepreneurship or they are in the existing entrepreneurship concentration program.

Intern seminar session- A weekly meeting with the internship facilitator that allows the students to discuss entrepreneur center issues as well as the entrepreneur projects assigned. The sessions also act as a reflection period on what the interns are learning.

Co-working environment- shared workplace where entrepreneurs develop their ideas and informally interacting with the other entrepreneurs.

STUDY FRAMEWORK

Despite the increase in teaching entrepreneurship, there are clear pedagogical challenges.

Venkataraman's (1997) questioned whether we are teaching entrepreneurship with an aim of developing opportunities or do the courses assume that that the opportunity has already been identified? Given the need to have an experiential component included in teaching that can develop opportunities, many entrepreneurial programs are moving towards experiential learning and incorporating business model canvas activities into the curriculum (The George Washington University Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, 2014). Research indicates that students are looking for programs that provide opportunities for internships as well as start-up strategies that analyze new venture's potential environments (The George Washington University Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, 2014). To formulate this experiential learning, the study adopts Billet's pedagogical work place model. Billet's (2002) model uses research that focuses on the importance of experiential learning. To expand on workplace pedagogy, this research focuses on how this type of learning affects students cognitively in terms of critical thinking, how the surrounding situations may affect learning and adaptability and how learners can utilize workplace opportunities and transfer of learning (Ericsson & Lehman, 1996; Suchman, 1997;

Engestrom & Middleton, 1996 and Darrah, 1996). Guided by these principles, Billet (2002) developed three planes of workplace guided learning. The first plane was guided engagement in work activity. This involved experiential work activities, direct guidance by experts, interpersonal interactions between experts as well as interaction within the workplace environmental settings (Billet, 2002). This level aims to provide learning through undertaking everyday work activities, sequencing of tasks, providing opportunities to participate, observe and listen as well as accessing goals required for performance (Billet, 2002). The second plane involves guided learning at work. This involves, close guidance by experienced workers, use of modeling, coaching and scaffolding, use of techniques to engage workers in self-learning and use of techniques to develop understanding (Billet, 2002). The final level involves guided learning from transfer. This involves the use of questioning, problem-solving and scenario building to extend learners' knowledge to novel situations (Billet, 2002).

Guided by the model, this study uses the pedagogical experiential learning of student interns in an entrepreneurial class. To provide guided engagement in work activities learners were required to be involved in actual startup entrepreneurial projects with entrepreneurs who had just started their business in the prior 3 months to one year period. Interns worked on projects that lasted either a couple weeks or months while they observed and learned from the center's entrepreneurs. In addition, entrepreneurs' assessed their performance through time-based project milestones the interns were expected to complete. Interns were required to work with the entrepreneur to attain certain goals within a given time. At the end of the internship period the entrepreneur would assess the ability to tackle projects, the intern's research/problem-solving capability as well as the areas of improvement. Involvement in the entrepreneurship "coworking" center provided the students with the opportunity to learn in an interactive environment where

entrepreneurs share space and engage with each other and the students. To analyze the second level of guided learning, students worked on projects supervised by the entrepreneurs as well as the faculty guiding the experiential class. For the guided learning for transfer level students were required to use analytical and cognitive skills to solve the issues that the entrepreneurs were facing. To illustrate how this was applied the study develops an instrumental case study providing insight on how students learned in an experiential entrepreneur environment.

DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The study explores the teaching through a traditional case study. Thirty six students (in groups of 4 to 8 for a period of four months each group) participated in the internship course (Entrepreneurship Intern Practicum Seminar) during a twenty-four month period from spring 2014 to December 2015. The internship was advertised on campus and students that were interested applied. The course included students from several disciplines including business, computer science and graphic design. The course was part of the entrepreneurship internship program. Applying the experiential learning concept, interns gained experience in harnessing their skills to discover and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities and to see how other entrepreneurs overcome their obstacles especially in the early start up phases (Politis, 2005). Using the instrumental case study approach, the study offers a description of the different levels which the student learns (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). Analyzing the internship, the study formulated the following research question;

RQ. What design characteristics of the internship facilitated student learning?

The research uses the characteristics of the instrumental case study with an aim of providing insight into a particular learning experience (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). The research

focuses on the phenomenon comprising of student recruitment and center training as well as seminar facilitation (Stake, 1995).

Recruitment and Training

Recruitment was for potential interns from all majors of study at a public university. The candidates were chosen through a competitive application process, where GPA, diversity of majors were key factors. The main information obtained from the application was their experience in working in entrepreneurial environment, if they have started businesses and their desire to start businesses in the future. Students with some background in entrepreneurship were given heavy consideration. The internship was a paid opportunity and interns were required to work 10 hours a week. Once accepted students participated in an introductory day-and-a-half-intern training at the center where they were introduced to how the center worked and interns expected roles and responsibilities at the center. That is, taking a customer service role several shifts weekly in keeping the Center open and functioning for the entrepreneur members. In addition they were given an interactive tour of one of the major co-working spaces in the area to give them a better idea of their roles at the beginning of the semester long internship.

Entrepreneur to student learning

Once students were hired and trained they were matched, based on their background, with entrepreneur members who were paying to use the center to launch their businesses. The entrepreneurs provided projects that were comparable to the student's skills. The major projects were in marketing, social media, web design, graphic design, IT coding, sales and event management. Students were given weekly or monthly milestones by the entrepreneurs on various

projects and had weekly meetings to assess their progress. Additionally, the center's faculty facilitator supervised their progress to ensure that students met their goals. Any issues and disagreements between the intern and entrepreneur were most often settled through the faculty facilitator's efforts. In such situations, the faculty facilitator, met individually with both intern and entrepreneur as a first step then strongly encouraged the student and entrepreneur to meet. The faculty facilitator also worked with the student to develop a rough outline of their work which facilitated communication with the entrepreneurs. Using project management software, entrepreneurs would assign their projects with a given time frame. The student would then work with the entrepreneur to achieve the deadlines while at the same time updating their project milestone on the software. The project management software allowed the faculty facilitator to find ways of assisting the students in completing their tasks. The software also acted as a repository where the entrepreneur could download the semester long work and work with any other students when necessary. The interns' grade for this section considered feedback from the entrepreneurs as well as faculty facilitator observations.

Class seminar learning

Utilizing the concept of "bump and connect" (Proximity, particularly informal, often brings about crucial encounters among people in a common environment which may lead to collaboration and innovation; (Krim et al., 2006; Reuf, 2010; Krim & Cosby, 2010)) the faculty facilitator conducted a weekly seminar for all the interns where they discussed their experiences with their entrepreneur match as well as what they were learning from working at the center. To allow interns to reflect on their experiences they were required to keep a weekly journal on their learning from three areas: the work of the intern for an entrepreneur member of the Center; the assigned reading (generally only a chapter from an Entrepreneurship popular book, and/or an

article), and third reflection on this experience along with the experience of working as an intern for the Center. In effect, the interns were asked to reflect on their own learning with the entrepreneur, as well as the cases of the other interns with their entrepreneur match. The interns were learning not only from their own case, but also the sum of all the interns who were serving during the internship period. Additionally, each seminar meeting also discussed the ‘metrics’ of the center. That is, how often were the entrepreneurs using the center, and for how many hours? In the first seminar, students and the faculty facilitator discussed what would be the best measure of the center’s progress, until the center was old enough that the startup companies might hire interns at the time of their graduation. Also discussed was what the level of interaction among entrepreneurs was? Using designed method of accounting for hours, interns recorded the number of hours entrepreneurs were at the center. This formed the bases of discussion on ways to improve “the bump and connect” formal as well as informal sessions. This allowed the students to connect their work to real life experiential learning that was taking place. In the process students became more committed to their projects as well as to the center as a business.

DISCUSSION

The three parts experiential learning described offer critical information. The first part considers the seminar and the journal writing that interns submitted every week detailing their experiences and what they have learned (this consisted of 30% of the grade). The second part was the projects that students worked on assigned by the entrepreneurs (consisted of 60% of their grade). The final part included the work the interns did in running the center. This included customer service work, helping keep the center organized, assisting in planning and coordinating of events (consisted of 10% of their grade). The study focuses using the first and second part of the experiential learning. The experiential design of the course is in line with studies that have

suggested that learning that takes place within an entrepreneurial context are experiential in nature (Collins & Moore, 1970; Deakins & Freel, 1998; Minniti & Bygrave, 2001).

Because the internship was a day based program which meant that students could only work during the day it encouraged a participation of students that were full-time. The class seminar was also tied to the entrepreneurship program. Just over half of the 36 participants were majors in the business field. About one fourth of all interns concentrated in Entrepreneurship. The intern participants were also diverse; about one third female; about one fourth African-American or Latino, and about one fifth born outside the US. During the internship the faculty facilitator supervised the interns work at the center, their work with entrepreneurs and the intern journal reflection process in terms of what entrepreneurial skills and attributes they were learning (Gibb, 2005). The objective of the current research was to determine the crucial design factors that facilitated the student learning. The focus during the internship was to allow/encourage informal “bump and connect” entrepreneurial experiences that facilitated an experience of learning (Collins & Moore, 1970; Reuf, 2010; Deakins & Freel, 1998). The internship experience directly provided interns the crucial contact factor that enabled them to learn by undertaking everyday entrepreneurial work activities, Sequencing of tasks, providing opportunities to participate, observe and listen as well as accessing tasks required for performance (Billet, 2002). The interns also had close guidance from the actual entrepreneurs, who coached them and pushed them to research and self-learn (Billet, 2002). The weekly two-hour seminar session conducted by the faculty facilitator helped the interns reflect and question situations which led to problem solving scenarios and in turn extended learners’ knowledge (Billet, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The research focuses on studying the experiential design factors that facilitated learning by student interns. As students look for programs that provide opportunities for internships as well as start-up strategies that analyze new venture's potential environments (The George Washington University Center for Entrepreneurial Excellence, 2014), the study provides a new program framework that can incorporate entrepreneur centers in the learning process. The study also provides a hybrid approach which combines both classroom approach (seminar) and actual experiential entrepreneurial work. The internship design discussed in this paper emphasizes contact with actual entrepreneurs and entrepreneur environments which in response provides learning opportunities and in extension knowledge to start businesses. The case in the research deals with the engagement in work activity which involved experiential work activities, direct guidance by experts, interpersonal interactions between experts as well as interaction with the workplace environmental settings (Billet, 2002). The study builds on the entrepreneurial pedagogical literature by developing an internship educational programs that fosters entrepreneurial ideas (Solomon et al., 2002).

The study limitations consisted of a small number of interns that participated in the program. However the selective nature of the internship allowed for a controlled process in which to observe the learning and identify the factors that contribute to the learning. Students that applied were also self-selecting in that they were interested in entrepreneurship. In addition attracting students to be part of the internship proved to be challenging since the credits applied were associated with the business area where the entrepreneurship program is housed. Despite the limitations the case study can be considered an addition to the research addressing the importance of having experiential learning entrepreneurial programs. It also shows a new way

in which entrepreneurial programs can be redesigned to provide both a space for entrepreneurs to start a business as well as a learning environment for students who are interested in the field.

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