

Conference Theme:

New Approaches to Raising Entrepreneurial Opportunity: Reshaping inclusive Enterprise, Policy, and Practice Post-Pandemic

WORKING RESEARCH PAPER

Title: Experiential learning: using live projects as a conduit for civic engagement and 'clinical' business practice

Topic – scaling entrepreneurship education pedagogy and assessment for the development of skills and knowledge, creating social and public value through impact.

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Introduction

Experiential learning has been demonstrated as supporting student engagement and giving the learner the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment (Shore *et al.*, 2010; Pittaway *et al.*, 2015). Reflection within this contextualised environment allows the learner to develop almost instantly and reapply developed skills or theories until honed within the environment to which said skills are most applicable (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). Whilst this context may be live (organisational or work-based learning) or simulated, it is clear that experiential learning is most focused when a contextual element is included. In addition, active learning approaches such as 'live projects' have been previously described by scholars to foster enterprise and employability skills (Rae, 2010). This skill/ competency-based approach has become one of the most significant changes seen in education, in which competencies becomes the core element of the learning experience (Ferrerias-Garcia, Hernandez -lara & Serradell-Lopez 2019).

"As educators, we face the biggest challenge and opportunity of our generation in providing the inspiration, optimism, confidence, enterprising skills and tools which will enable students to start or resume their lives and careers beyond university, and to contribute to economic and social regeneration. Every student needs to be flexible, adaptable, confident of their abilities, resourceful – in short, enterprising. Enterprising learning is a vital capability which can help students become more self/employable in this new era. More enterprising people are more likely to thrive in times of economic change and uncertainty" (Rae, 2009).

Through introducing experience-based modules within the syllabus, we create a challenging and inspirational environment. Contextual practice of skill provides clear opportunity for learning and development, and for student to understand the level at which the skills is required, as quite often students will over judge themselves resulting in a mismatch of student and employer expectations (Dinning, 2017). Furthermore, in the context of management education these experience-based modules provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation. Given the current economic and post pandemic environment, it is imperative that graduates are provided with the opportunity to develop the skills and

competences to enable them to secure a brighter economic future for themselves and also that they are able to demonstrate they are able to contribute to the business recovery through innovation and creativity (Bacigalupo, 2020)

The aim of the paper is to assess the impact and effectiveness of a pedagogical approach, and engagement framework that has demonstrable impact on regional growth through the development of a highly skilled workforce, who are simultaneously creating social and public value through the reach of the projects engaged. We develop a pedagogical model of delivery following best practice and theoretical developments from the literature. The paper will draw on experiences of the authors who have each worked in this field of education for over 15 years and experienced both success and failures of student working on real time, live business projects undertaking primary research to address a business problem, generating an improvement plan driven by data and academic analysis

1.0 Literature review

1.1 Experiential learning

Experiential learning is a term used by many authors and presenters to loosely describe pedagogy that is different from the usual didactic information deliverance commonplace in higher education (Rae, 2009). Some use the term to describe a form of learning that happens outside of the classroom – learning “through” experience, or “learning by doing” (Corbett, 2005; Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Reynolds, 2009; Bergsteiner *et al.*, 2010;).

Although it is unclear as to when the term experiential learning was first used – indeed many refer back to Confucius circa 500BC – the modern field of experiential learning has focused around two key authors; namely Kolb and Schön. From the late 70s these two have developed theories, based on the experiments and writings of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. While Schön developed his theory of double loop learning and focused on reflection, Kolb has dedicated his work to a spiral of learning developing a Theory of Learning Styles that fits alongside that of the Myres-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers & Briggs, 1980), which in turn built on the work of Carl Jung (Jung, 1971).

This history builds a picture of the wide variety of work that is associated with the term experiential learning. It goes some way to explaining why there is such a depth of definitions and interpretations within the field. Contrary to much of the work that sites Kolb, Dewey (1938, p. 19) labels all learning as experiential learning, and this can be justified within Kolb’s learning cycle: A learner receives an experience, reflects on this experience, forms a concept/theory, applies this theory in experiment and thus receives a new experience from which the cycle may begin again.

Simulation is often used in a classroom environment in order to address the challenge of teaching a complex and changing subject area (Payne *et al.*, 2011), but at the same time is often cited as a safe way to practice real-world processes (Pittaway & Cope 2007). This is common with those studies that focus on entrepreneurial learning, notably in a higher education environment. Here, it is “*the important interaction between theory and practice and the need to create a learning environment where students are able to experiment with*

theoretical knowledge gained during their academic studies" (Pittaway & Cope 2007, p.214). Yet at the same time, artificially creating an environment where the individual can apply knowledge and skills within a relatively low risk environment that contextualises the learning objectives, and allows for development of new knowledge and skills through a process of experience and reflection (Pittaway, Ferrier, Aissaoui, & Mass 2017)

With standing the test of time this concept of using live-case studies, or computer programmes to simulate a real world scenario is motivated partly by a quest to engage the individual with an aim to improve the effective learning environment for the sake of the learner (Daly, 2001), Experiential learning is not only recognised as an important contributor to higher education (Kruger, Kruger & Suzuki, 2015) but also has been demonstrated as supporting student engagement and giving the learner the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment (Shore *et al.*, 2011).

1.2 Learning in context

One of the main implications of Pittaway and Cope's (2007b) paper is in its reference to *"the important interaction between theory and practice and the need to create a learning environment where students are able to experiment with theoretical knowledge gained during their academic studies"* (p. 218).

The concept of context is one that has been repeated throughout the literature and it is clear from this evidence that it is a key aspect in the experiential learning paradigm. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2020) highlights the role of business curricula and educators in helping businesses respond to the profound changes taking place today

The positioning of such context varies within the papers reviewed, depending on the focus of practice, namely: entrepreneurial learning; organisational learning; work-based learning; and service learning, with the last three in this list seemingly merging in their definitions. So much so, whilst providing a work-based learning case study, Kevin and Ann (2012) focus on organisational learning: *"the coming together of individuals to enable them to support and promote each other's learning, which will eventually benefit the organisation"* (p. 26). Skills development appropriate to the contextual environment is a key driver on the increased employability of the learners involved through the development of *"concrete experience"* (Daly 2001), or employer-relevant skills acquisition (Green & Farazmand 2012), developing an understanding of enterprise architecture, and easing the transition of students into the workplace (Regev *et al.*, 2009). More recently, Rohm, Stefl and Ward (2021) positioned student skill development at the heart of their research suggesting that the development of meta skills are critical for graduates to ensure their work readiness. Clearly the contextual focus of the programmes being delivered is seen to influence the future employment of the participants.

Community service learning is defined as the carrying out of *"needed tasks in the community with intentional learning goals and with conscious reflection and critical analysis"* (Kendall, 1990, in Seider, *et al.*, 2011, p. 290). Pittaway & Cope (2007) refer to *"communities of practice"* which *"emphasizes that learning is linked to the conditions in which it is learned"* (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p.219). This *"authentic work practice"* helps students *"pick up*

invaluable “know-how” from being on the periphery of competent practitioners” (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Pittaway & Cope, 2007, p. 219). Wiese and Sherman (2011, p.48) suggest that service learning *“is a form of experiential learning in which students are asked to participate in learning activities connected to community service”* In this case, it is clear that there is a contextual element to the students’ learning outcomes with reference to *“clear learning goals”* and *“adequate course integration”* (Howard, 2001). Tracey (2012) uses Garnett’s (2008) definition of work-based learning as *“a learning process which focuses University level critical thinking upon work, in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the university”* (Tracey, 2012, p.8). Notable in each of the definitions above, is the common occurrence of participation in an activity that is directly linked with the focus of study (be it within a University course or a specific work-related skill) that is applied and reflected upon to promote development or learning. Sometimes, context is not clear within an activity or an event though, and Meyer (2003) attempts to address the lack of context within outdoor-adventure training (when used as an experiential learning activity). They refer to Baldwin & Ford (1988) and Cheng & Ho (2001) when discussing the need to transfer training back to the organisational setting. Standard methods involve post-activity stages of reflective observations or debriefings for example. The article talks of learning taking place either “near” – where the experiential learning (or application of a skill) is of a situation directly related to the desired future application, or “far” where the experiential learning is of a situation unrelated and focuses on general skills improvement for future application. Specifically, the outdoor-adventure activities are identified as meeting the “far” criteria and more general skills such as personal development, interpersonal communication and creative problem solving are developed. This second concept of ‘far’ learning developing only general skills, and where active learning did not necessitate an application to context and therefore could risk any potential learning being unfocused.

Context then, is a concept that allows learning to focus on desired learning outcomes, giving the learner the opportunity to experience first-hand how the application of a particular skill or theory effects the environment. Reflection within this contextualised environment allows the learner to develop [learn] almost instantly and reapply developed skills or theories until honed within the environment to which said skills are most applicable (McKeever *et al.*, 2014). This reduces the effect of any mismatch and self-overrating that a student can typically make when applying skills in the workplace (Dinning, 2017). Sometimes, this context may be live (organisational or work-based learning) or simulated, but it is clear from the studies reviewed that experiential learning is most focused when a contextual element is included.

1.3 Skill development of student

As universities navigate through the need to upskill their graduates to be successful in the jobs market amidst the 4.0 Industrial Revolution. In 2020, the World Economic Forum predicted that there would be an increase in the need for skills associated with active learning, learning capability and creativity. Equally, the need to develop a student’s digital capital should not come as a surprise. Over 10 years again scholars were predicting a changing landscape of graduate roles (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010), so whilst the current changes

should not be a surprise, the speed at which the landscape is changing probably is. Preparing students for jobs that currently do not exist is nothing new, it has been captured in academic writing over the past 10 years (Neck & Greene 2011; QAA, 2018). In 2012 the Wilson Report suggested that graduates do not have the necessary skills to meet the need of today business, making it imperative for universities to ensure that student profiles include an employability and enterprise aspect and accept it as their responsibility (Neck and Green, 2011)

Employability has long since been described in terms of a set of skills, knowledge and attributes (Yorke and Knight, 2006), including skills such as planning, prioritising, problem solving, self-management, teamwork, communication and attributes such as the willingness to learn, taking risks and self-confidence. Whilst the research of Yorke and Knight is rarely contested, some ten years on, Bacigalupo et al. (2016) led a European project to develop a competency framework for entrepreneurship drawing on a systematic literature review of over 200 papers the research group concluded with 15 competencies that all learners across Europe would be given the opportunity to develop. With a focus on experiential learning Ferreras-Garcia, Hernandez -lara and Serradell-Lopez (2019) report competency based approach has become one of the most significant changes seen in education, in which competencies becomes the core element of the learning experience

1.4 Teamwork

Experiential learning is often described as a tool for developing skills and competencies , and teamwork is cited as one of those skills/ competencies . Heim *et al.*, (2005), Joshi *et al.*, (2005), Cronin & Connolly (2007), and Payne *et al.*, (2011) use a team-based component to enable the development of teamwork and communication skills, amongst other cited skills, through a contextualised, action-based (as well as competitive) process. The objectives set out by Regev *et al.*, (2009) were: “(1) to ease the transition of students into the workplace, (2) to give students an understanding of enterprise architecture issues” (Regev *et al.*, 2009, p.273). Kayes, Kayes *et al.*, (2005) focus on the application of an experiential learning approach to team learning in order to overcome negative factors associated with teamwork. They discuss the importance of “*the self-analytic group*” (Lewin, 1946) where members reflect on and talk about their experience together through a ‘conversational space’ to develop a ‘*shared self-image*’. It is recognised that the description of group work is very much in-line with that of experiential learning, whereby “*learning is the social process of transforming experience into knowledge*” (Corbett, 2005; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1946, p.77).

Six functional aspect[s] of team learning are presented by Kayes, Kayes *et al.*, (2005). Namely: learning about purpose; learning about membership; learning about roles and role leadership.; learning about context; learning about process; learning about action. Joshi et al. (2005) and Rae (2009) also look to incorporate what they call “*a social dimension*” to their studies. The social learning that occurs within teams could be considered as a system of processes of reflection, both externally amongst participants, but also internally as an individual experiment with their own ways of interacting and behaving with the rest of the group and then reflecting on the results. Finally we draw on Saenz ant Cano’s (2009) review of learning , which suggests learning comes from three principal sources: learning from content, learning from experience and learning from feedback.

The idea that experiential learning is used as a tool for developing teamwork is used somewhat as a palindrome, where authors also use teamwork as a tool for developing experiential learning (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). This action-oriented process of co-participation can be best reflected through students working in teams on real problems that do not have clear solutions (Marsick & O’Niel, 1999). So, working in a team promotes action, reflection as well as contextualisation within a social environment.

2.0 Methodology

Drawing on best practice and a detailed literature review, a conceptual model for the pedagogic approach to delivery and assessment of an experiential model of learning for management education is developed and presented.

An analysis of module evaluation and student feedback is undertaken, over a four-year period of successive student cohorts. In addition, an impact framework is applied to measure the received social and public value as perceived by the (over 100) organisations engaged over the four-year period.

3.0 A conceptual model of clinical business practice

Whilst the literature review provides an indication of what experiential learning does, it does not tell us what experiential learning is, or how it is obtained. Much attempt has been made to fit new models with that of the ELC. Bergsteiner *et al.* (2010) display an adaptation of Sviniki and Dixon’s (1989) model, who assign various teaching methods across the bimodal axes of concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation and reflective observation. Similarly, Daly (2001) provides a table of ‘experiential exercises’ that highlight how each one meets four key elements. Of note here, is the reference to ‘real relationships’ (social) and ‘real consequences’. The latter element of ‘real consequences’ could be interpreted as being part of the contextual framing previously discussed. Further attention is given to the idea of risk at the end of this section. Corbett (2005) maps Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) (see Figure 1) to his creativity-based model of opportunity recognition (CBMOR), using the idea that the ELC can be broken down into stages, or states, and defining where each state is being utilised in the CBMOR.

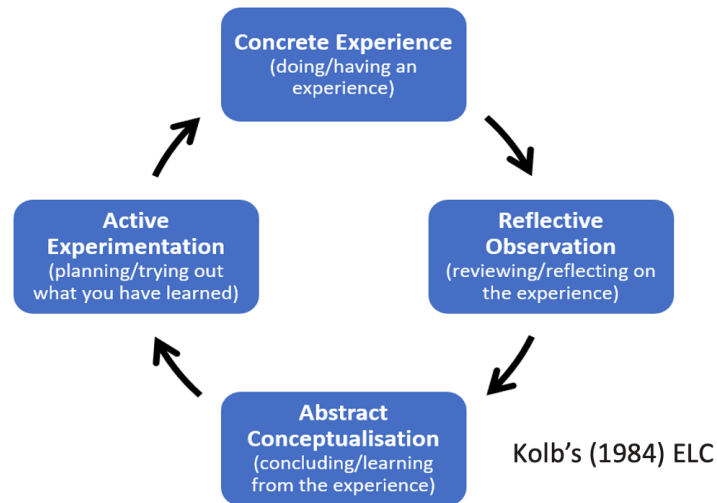


Figure 1: Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle

Node	Teaching methods
Concrete experimentation	Direct experience, recall of experience, in-class experience (lab), simulations, film/tapes, lecture examples.
Reflective observation	Rhetorical questions in lecture, thought questions for reading, discussion, brainstorming, logs, journals.
Abstract conceptualisation	Lecture analogies, descriptions, text reading, model critiques, paper/ project proposals, model building exercises.
Active experimentation	Filed work, labs, projects, homework, case studies, simulations, lecture, examples.

Table 1: Nature of student involvement in various teaching methods.

The characteristics discussed in the literature review are further analysed to capture the core factors that are being utilised, these factors are concentrated to social, contextual, reflection and action. In all literature reviewed there is a social interaction within teams, or through the live case studies or action workgroups. Context is either simulated, through artificial creation of a 'real' environment, or through the lived experience. Learners are taking action, solving problems and are either encouraged to reflect, or do so through the social interactions that they participate in. These four factors, or elements provide the basis for the formation of a new conceptual theory of experiential learning.

Contextual	Action
Social	Reflection

Figure 2: The elements of experiential learning

Much of the discussion highlights the practice of skills development in the medical profession “whereby students are supported to engage and learn in the clinical learning environment” (Bourgeois *et al.*, 2011). Such contextual practice of skill provides clear opportunity for learning and development, and in the context of management education provides further opportunity to provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation.

In formulating the interaction of each of these elements into a conceptual model of practice, we draw upon Kolb’s (1984) ELT and Schon’s (1983) reflective practitioner model to demonstrate where learning takes place within a clinical business practice environment. Figure 3 depicts the conceptual model.

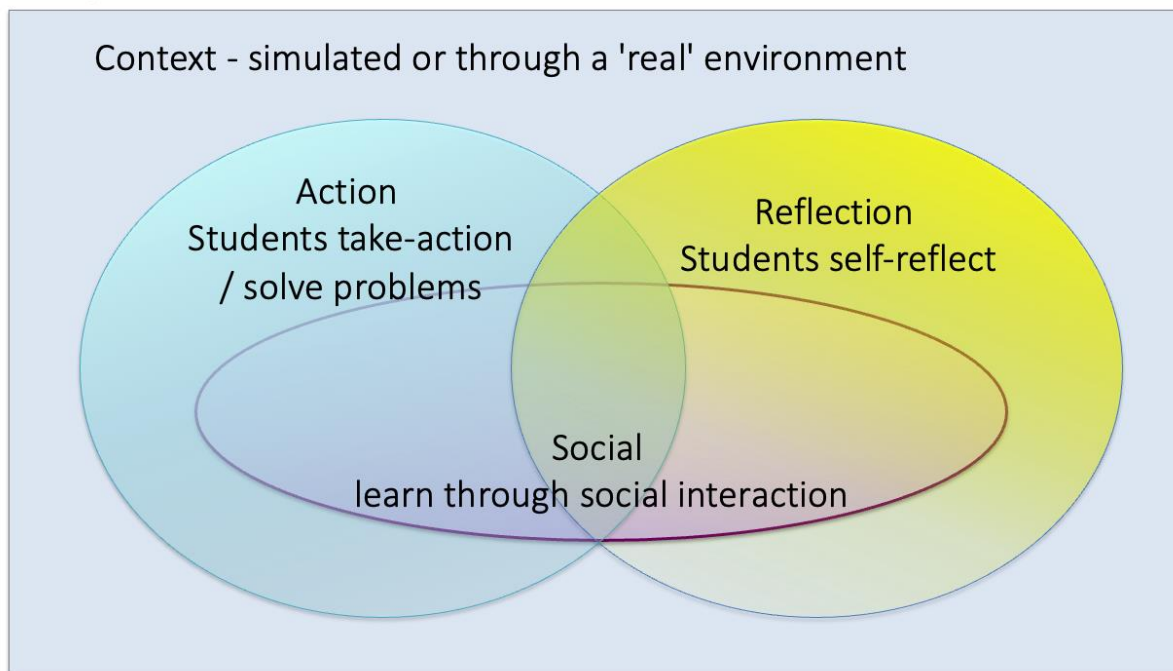


Figure 3: A conceptual model of learning through clinical business practice.

3.0 Application of pedagogy

In applying the conceptual model proposed in Figure 1., a business consultancy module was developed for introduction at level 6 at Liverpool Business School, in 2018. Contextual practice of skill provides clear opportunity for learning and development, and in the context of management education provides further opportunity to provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation. In addition to this we know that it is even more important given the current economic situation, that graduates are provided with the opportunity to develop the skills and competences to enable them to secure a brighter economic future for themselves.

For the said module, students undertake an independent research/ consultancy project in a self-selecting group of 4- 6 students. Each group of students is provided with a project that has been procured by the Business Clinic Team. The project will be focused on a practical

business problem, that will be an issue by a real company. In 2021/2022 there was 180 students on the module supporting 54 business projects

An outline brief is produced, and students are required to undertake primary research to address the business problem generating an improvement plan driven by data and academic analysis. The module requires teams to work independently supported by a series of lectures/seminars to maintain progress. During the module students are encouraged to use peer review and reflection to help them to develop as an evidence informed practitioner.

Reflection within this contextualised environment allows the learner to develop almost instantly and reapply developed skills or theories until honed within the environment to which said skills are most applicable (McKeever et al., 2014). When used as part of the assessment it is imperative that the assessment is ongoing and not just something that the student is asked to think about at the end of a module (Dinning, 2018). To encourage a deeper level of learning (Bloxham and Boyd 2017), it could not have been any more important for this module to develop an authentic assessment, therefore taking the approach to assess 'for' entrepreneurship that adopts more practical methods (Pittaway & Edwards, 2012). Each group is asked to prepare an industry standard report that is returned to the company and in some cases the groups are asked to present their report back to the company. The report along with a reflective piece is the current practice.

Following this pilot module, further implementations of practice were developed using a process of review and stakeholder feedback.

4.0 Analysis

Through introducing experienced-based modules within the syllabus, we create a challenging and inspirational environment. Contextual practice of skill provides clear opportunity for learning and development, and in the context of management education provides further opportunity to provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation. In addition to this we know that it is even more important given the current economic situation, that graduates are provided with the opportunity to develop the skills and competences to enable them to secure a brighter economic future for themselves. *"As educators, we face the biggest challenge and opportunity of our generation in providing the inspiration, optimism, confidence, enterprising skills and tools which will enable students to start or resume their lives and careers beyond university, and to contribute to economic and social regeneration. Every student needs to be flexible, adaptable, confident of their abilities, resourceful – in short, enterprising. Enterprising learning is a vital capability which can help students become more self/employable in this new era. More enterprising people are more likely to thrive in times of economic change and uncertainty"* (Rae, 2009).

Module evaluation of said modules over the past four years have shown a range of both strengths and weaknesses. The average response rate to complete the module survey is 25% Using a thematic approach to the analysis, the free text comments from the module surveys

were analysed. The top five identified strengths and weakness are shown in Figure 2 and 3 below. Note; The size of the text bubble gives some indication as to the more popular answers but they are not an exact measure.

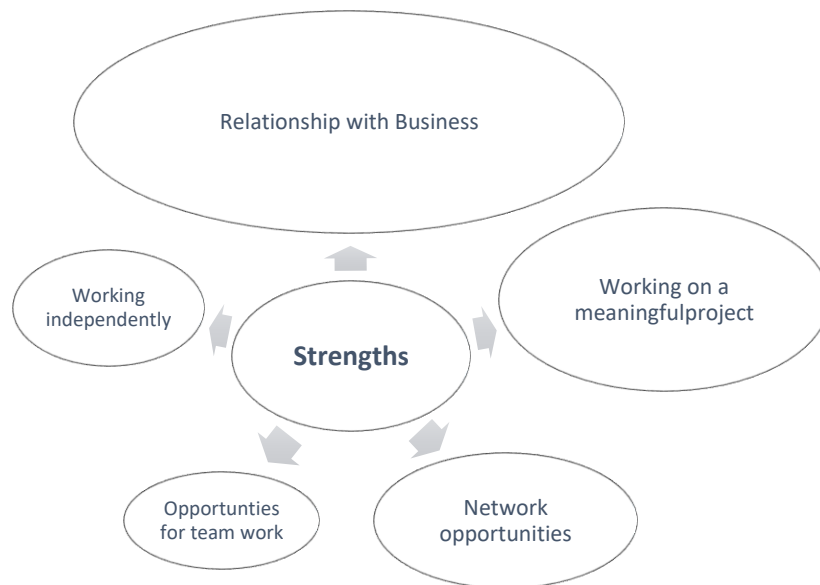


Figure 2: Top five themes identified as strengths of the module

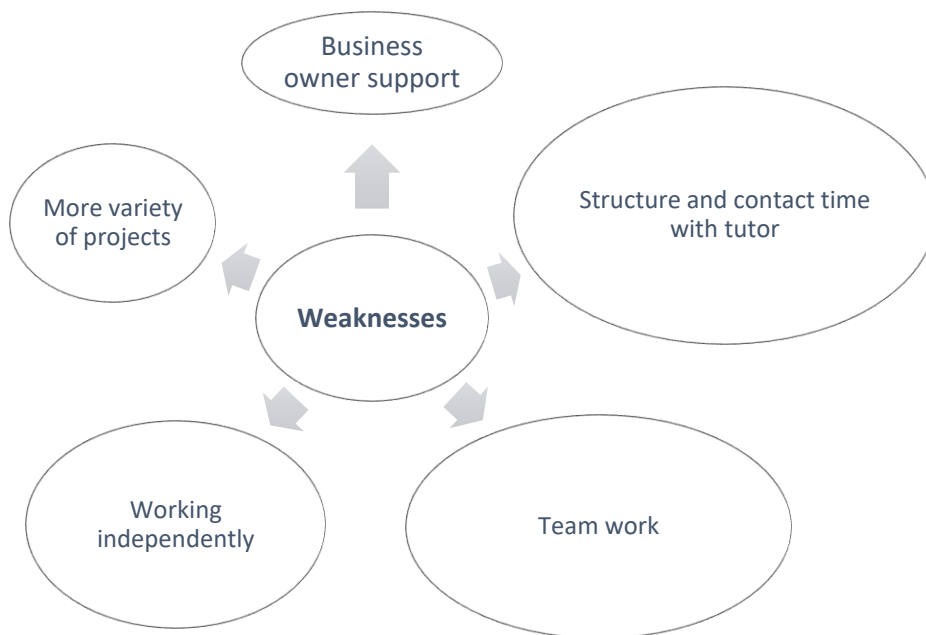


Figure 3: Top five themes identified as weaknesses of the module

A large proportion of students comment in the module survey that they dislike the chaotic nature and independence they are given in the module and request "more arranged contact time with a tutor" more in-depth lectures". Working in teams is reported by many as weakness

of the module, in particular to groups marks being awarded, *“a student can coast along in a group and get the high mark that the other team member have worked hard for”*

On the flip side students continually report on the benefits of the module being associated with the links to local businesses and real projects *“ being able to work with a company, to apply our knowledge to a real working environment”*. Other perceived benefits reported by the student include networking opportunities, and a minority report working either a team or independent as a strength.

5.0 Discussion

“As educators, we face the biggest challenge and opportunity of our generation in providing the inspiration, optimism, confidence, enterprising skills and tools which will enable students to start or resume their lives and careers beyond university, and to contribute to economic and social regeneration. Every student needs to be flexible, adaptable, confident of their abilities, resourceful – in short, enterprising. Enterprising learning is a vital capability which can help students become more self/employable in this new era. More enterprising people are more likely to thrive in times of economic change and uncertainty” (Rae, 2009).

Through introducing experienced-based modules within the syllabus, we create a challenging and inspirational environment. Contextual practice of skill provides clear opportunity for learning and development, and in the context of management education provides further opportunity to provide a level of support to the local business and third sector community in provision of a resource of students that are nearing graduation.

The experience of this module clearly stirs emotion in the students related to teamwork, with many students focussed on their final grade rather than the ongoing learning. There is need for the module team to reinforce that working in a team promotes action, reflection as well as contextualisation within a social environment. There is also an opportunity for the module team to explore different approaches to reflective practice and assessment, that does not mean removing the teamwork from the module. The student felt that the taught element of the module was insufficient which would be attributed to the lack of understand of what a Business Consultancy module entails.

Feedback from students can inform improvements in experiential learning and business clinic process. These include the inclusion of a Business Mentors for each student group. Having a Business Mentor to support the student group to work through any negative effects of teamwork, supporting reflection and solution-based actions. Equally the mentors are also able to reinforce the context in which the project is placed and provide ongoing feedback to the student on the direction of their work.

Further work

Having developed and tested the approach over the past 4 years, the next phase of work is to undertake a longitudinal study is undertaken, assessing key entrepreneurial competencies framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) aligned with the World Economic Forum top 10 skills for future (World Economic Forum (2020)). Multiple cohorts across a varied set of programmes are asked to complete a pre- and post-module questionnaire, demonstrating the level of gain for each of the competencies highlighted. In addition, an impact framework is applied to measure the received social and public value as perceived by the (over 100) organisations engaged over the three-year period.

Conclusion

Management educators and business school leaders may wish to draw upon the lessons from entrepreneurship education in developing curricular and pedagogy that are better able to produce highly skilled graduates for the future workforce and business development. The use of a business consultancy module holds a number of benefits to participating students, including the application of their theoretical course work into practice through engaging with a real business. Developing transferable skills in the contact of business cannot be underestimated when it comes to the student's employability. Equally, neither can the impact that such activity has on the public and social value of participating businesses be ignored. However, that said, more work is required to engage students in the process of reflection during and at the end of their experience. Academic needs to ask the question of what are the activities that brings the learning out into the open, so the student can not only reflect but also understand how these reflections interact with the students personal and career aspiration.

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