Preparing Freelancers of the Future: a teaching case study

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Abstract

This teaching case study focuses on a method developed by the Centre for Entrepreneurship at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) for preparing students to enter the workforce as a Freelancer or Independent Consultant. This method has been carefully crafted, based on student feedback and calls for this type of training, bringing in to sharp focus the balance of policy, pedagogy and practice. The starting point is a reflection on constructivist philosophies of education, tested models that inform entrepreneurship education, and an evaluation of students' demand for a specific skill-set to face the freelancing economy. The questions that were posed and answered throughout the case study provide trigger points for reflection, where both educators and researchers can ask the same questions to evoke results at their own institutions. The model that emerged from this case study can also be applied, and adapted in its current form, providing educators with a robust pro forma for their own curriculum development. This model has implications for entrepreneurship education and pedagogy and for students hoping to freelance.

Key words: Entrepreneurship education, Freelancer, consultant, pedagogy

Introduction

The rapidly growing number of platform firms such as Uber which connect workers who are regarded as independent contractors to clients for in-person service tasks has led to novel changes in employer-worker relations and the rise in freelancing (Agrawal et al, 2013). While the legality of these classifications are subjects of debate, the rise of these business models require a need to rethink how students are trained for the work place of the future. Yet, preparing students to freelance is a complex task; it comprises the design of learning outcomes that enable students to thrive in a rapidly changing economic and employment landscape, where job security and self-reliance are key features of thriving professionally.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the constructivist philosophy of education is utilized in the development of a model for the training of freelancers in entrepreneurship education. The model enables students to explore 'what entrepreneurship means to them' and ultimately enable them to develop an entrepreneurial mind-set. The model has been developed around three key concepts, that map a student's learning from simple to complex. Firstly, Bloom's Taxonomy is used to affirm the progression through the stages of learning. Secondly, Hytti's 2002 study on entrepreneurial learning is used to track progress as students become more entrepreneurial. Finally, the QAA (2018) Guidelines for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship were consulted, specifically the student learning journey towards entrepreneurial effectiveness. The model is explored through a coaching style, and the sessions are designed to help students think about entrepreneurship, with themselves at the centre.

The paper contributes to entrepreneurship education by presenting a flexible model that can be applied or adapted in its current form to provide entrepreneurship educators with a framework to enhance curriculum development, training and entrepreneurial mind-set to learners.

Literature Review

Preparing students to freelance is a complex task. It comprises the design and delivery of curricula with learning outcomes that enable students to thrive in a rapidly changing economic and employment landscape where job security and self-reliance are key features of thriving professionally. Jackson (2008, p.5) explains '*preparing for jobs that don't exist yet, using technologies that have not yet been invented, in order to solve problems that we don't know are problems yet*'. When preparing the freelancers of the future, a crucial consideration is the concept of resilience and learning from failure. Graduates that have developed the ability to learn from failure are those that display the resilience needed to bounce back in the uncertain future of employment (Shepherd 2004). The paper

combines resilience and learning from failure based on the work of Carole Dweck. Dweck articulates that to promote the Growth Mindset failures serve as useful milestones in a personal journey. Dweck (1999, pp.5-15) captures this thinking in her chapter '*When Failure Undermines and When Failure Motivates*', where strategies are shared to help students move forward rather than look back and dwell on the past. The Lean Start Up (Ries, 2011) philosophy correlates with this concept, encouraging people engaged in start up to fail fast, so that they can learn quickly and move on with the customer. The cases discussed have been based on the Lean Start Up (Ries, 2011) approach, weaving in wherever possible Growth Mindset techniques.

Bloom's taxonomy is omnipresent in the world of teacher education. The original Taxonomy, developed by Benjamin Bloom in 1956, set out to classify six elements of learning within the cognitive domain; Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation (Krathwohl 2002). Bloom's model suggests that the learner progresses through the six categories in a linear format, and since it's inception, teachers have used this model to develop learning outcomes that invariably fall into one of Bloom's six categories. In 2001, the Taxonomy was revised by Anderson and Krathwohl. The notable changes were the re-ordering the complexity of the categories, re-naming the categories from nouns to verbs, and allowing more flexibility within the hierarchy, helping teachers to overlap some learning objectives. The revised taxonomy is used in this case study; Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyse, Evaluate, Create.

In 2002, Hytti et al compiled a comprehensive study, of 60 enterprise education programmes in five European countries, to determine the common aims and objectives of those enterprise education programmes. The research from both programmatic and literary resources resulted in their classification of three aims of enterprise education; learn to understand entrepreneurship, learn to become entrepreneurial, and learn to become an entrepreneur. In a subsequent study by Hytti and Kuopusjärvi (2004), the latter learning to become an entrepreneur, was the most frequently evaluated type of training programme, specifically with a focus on teaching/coaching students to become entrepreneurs and/or run small businesses.

In 2012, the Wilson Review on Business and University Collaboration called out universities for not preparing graduates with the skills they need to meet business demands. In the same year, the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) released its inaugural guidelines for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education, which hoped to close this skill gap. In the rapidly changing socio-economic and socio-political climate, the QAA opted to publish a revised version of the guidelines in 2018. These guidelines highlight the student learning journey towards entrepreneurial effectiveness, a progressive model through various learning interventions. This journey routes the student from an initial starting point of entrepreneurial awareness, posing questions such as 'what is

entrepreneurship?'. The journey then moves forward, in tandem, towards the development of entrepreneurial competencies and an entrepreneurial mind-set. Once a student has then developed these three pillars (either inside or outside of the classroom) they can then move towards entrepreneurial effectiveness.

Design and methods of delivery

The concepts of preparing students for uncertainty, preparing students for failure, and helping students learn from failure informed how the learning was then designed. However, the groups of learners varied from in-curriculum classes (levels 4-7) to mixed groups of opt in learners. Therefore, an examination of methods used to prepare students for entrepreneurial learning, in addition to preparing mixed groups of students was needed.

The three models discussed in the literature were used (Hytti et al, Bloom and the QAA) have informed the case studies in this paper, with the aim of scaffolding learning, moving students towards entrepreneurial effectiveness. James and Pollard (2006) in Coffield (2008 p.12) explain this technique as '*providing structures to help learners move forward in their learning so that, when these supports are removed, the learning is secure'*.

Hytti et al's 2002 study on entrepreneurial learning informed the levels of information included in the delivery of the programme. These included:

1. To learn to understand entrepreneurship (What do entrepreneurs do? What is entrepreneurship? Why are entrepreneurs needed?).
2. To learn to become entrepreneurial (I need to take responsibility for my learning, career and life. How to do it).
3. To learn to become an entrepreneur (Can I become an entrepreneur? How to become an entrepreneur? Managing the business).

These objectives were then cross-referenced and aligned with Bloom's taxonomy. We took the six categories of learning, and split them across three sections:

1. Remembering and Understanding - these were paired as we could design activities based on developing an awareness and understanding of entrepreneurship initially.
2. Applying – this category was left stand-alone, as we wanted to design activities that would allow students to have plenty of time to apply concepts, to involve them in the prior learning.

3. Creating, Evaluating, Analysing – these three aspects were paired, as some of the students will extend their learning beyond the classroom, in particular the evaluate and create aspects, into their activities in the real world.

The aim here, was to leverage the constructivist philosophy of education, where learning is built up based on previous experiences, and contextualised with a purpose (Fawbert 1998), linking directly to Gagne's principles of *'stimulating students to recall previously learned capabilities'* (Gagne 1985 in Fawbert 1998 p.7). Gagne's learning theory on Conditions for Learning, again, gives us a progressive model that classifies levels of learning. Gagne's 9 steps (gaining attention, identify objective, recall prior learning, present stimulus, guide learning, elicit per performance, provide feedback, assess performance, enhance retention) give a chronological method for educators to design an effective programme. However, the learning interventions in this case study vary in terms of length, assessment, and intended outcomes (one case study is opt-in extra curricular). Therefore, the focus of this case study is gaining the students' attention, helping them to identify objectives and relate them to their previous experience, give them stimulus and guide learning then elicit performance. The overall aim of this type of entrepreneurship education is to build a transferrable set of behaviours and skills, a technique highlighted by James in Gardner (2006 pp.55-56) as *'providing opportunities to apply concepts and strategies in novel situations'*. Moreover, as our students move on to freelancing opportunities, it will be the students' clients that will provide Gagne's final steps of providing feedback, assessing performance and enhancing retention.

Finally, the QAA Guidelines for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Education (2018) were consulted. The QAA guidelines provide an in-depth account of enterprise and entrepreneurship education in the UK, specifically useful for defining the terminology and strategies that can prove most effective for the inclusion of enterprise and entrepreneurship education. Of particular interest in this case study is the student learning journey from Entrepreneurial Awareness to Entrepreneurial Effectiveness. The breakdown of the student learning journey proved helpful when unpacking the curriculum planning.
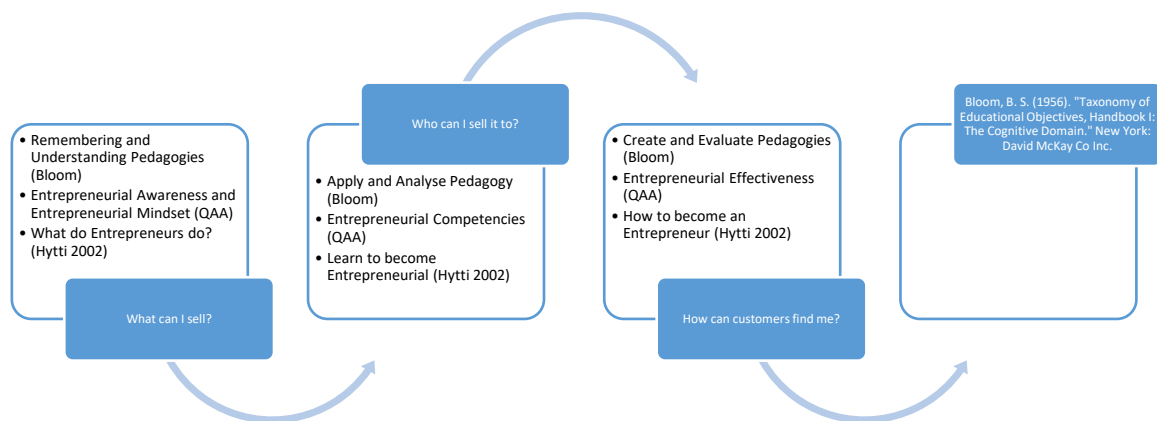
The three models identified highlight a starting point for the learning design for Freelancers. Each model shared the idea that developing an understanding of freelancing and an awareness of the concept was a valid starting point.

The Model

The model that is developed is based on three simple questions, which layer the Bloom, QAA and Hytti models in tandem. By posing these three questions to students, a number of outcomes are hoped to be achieved. Firstly, 'What can I sell?' aims to help students think critically about what value they can

bring to customers. In the unpacking of this question, information is uncovered about the student, such as 'what entrepreneurship means to them' and aims to encourage an entrepreneurial mind-set. The questions are kept in a coaching style, and the sessions are designed to help students think about entrepreneurship, with themselves at the centre.

Figure 1. Preparing Freelancers for the future with three simple questions

- Remembering and Understanding Pedagogies (Bloom)
- Entrepreneurial Awareness and Entrepreneurial Mindset (QAA)
- What do Entrepreneurs do? (Hytti 2002)

What can I sell?

Who can I sell it to?

- Apply and Analyse Pedagogy (Bloom)
- Entrepreneurial Competencies (QAA)
- Learn to become Entrepreneurial (Hytti 2002)

- Create and Evaluate Pedagogies (Bloom)
- Entrepreneurial Effectiveness (QAA)
- How to become an Entrepreneur (Hytti 2002)

How can customers find me?

Bloom, B. S. (1956). "Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain." New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Findings; Preparing Students for Freelancing in Case studies

Case Study 1 – Sport Psychology

The department for Applied Sport Psychology have identified and acknowledged the shift in the graduate landscape, from traditional careers to a portfolio of experiences including Freelance working. The British Psychological Society (BPS) Standards for Stage 2 Training states that 150 days of consultancy work is required, which presents educators with the challenge to prepare students to face a new economy of freelancing and self-employed opportunities from the earliest career entry points. There was an increasing need to communicate this industry trend to students, and provide them with the necessary skills to operate successfully in this environment.

This led the programme team to include a 'start-up' day for all level 7 MSc Sport Psychology students. This group was mixed in terms of baseline knowledge of entrepreneurship, and mixed in desire to

pursue a freelance/portfolio career. This initial session was successful and it channelled students into the University's Start-Up Funding streams. One of the crucial pieces of feedback from this session, was that the students wished they had access to this session earlier in their learning journey.

To address this feedback and increase the readiness of students to face the freelance economy, the course team decided to collaborate with the Centre for Entrepreneurship to develop curriculum changes that would increase entrepreneurial awareness and skills to meet these new industry demands, starting from Level 4. The course team identified a Curriculum Enhancement Internship as the ideal vehicle to make these curriculum changes. It was vital that the intern selected had vested interests in both curriculum development and entrepreneurship to enable the project to be successful. The intern selected was a PhD Student who had interests in starting up his own consultancy, and was therefore considered an exemplar to lead the project.

The outcome of this 6-month project was a curriculum that had been fully designed, using data from student focus groups, in line with Bloom's taxonomy; at level 4 the students engaged in 'remembering and understanding' activities, at level 5 they engaged in 'applied' activities and 'analysis' based activities, and at level 6, the students engaged in 'creation and evaluation' activities.

At level 4, students are asked to examine the question 'what is entrepreneurship' and 'what does it mean to me'. After this, they are asked to be creative by coming up with solutions to significant industry problems. This opportunity in the first session is allowing students to think about the first fundamental question 'what can I sell'; by investigating industry problems and coming up with solutions, they are starting to consider the possibilities of products and services that can solve problems for customers.

At level 5, students are encouraged to consider self-awareness and branding. They're starting to explore their professional values and how these map back to the products and services that they can offer. A key task in this session is for them to identify a successful consultant Sport Psychologist, and consider how they brand themselves and who they are aiming this branding at. This helps the students to address the second fundamental question 'who can I sell to'.

At level 6, the students encounter a guest speaker who is a practicing entrepreneur in the field of Sport Psychology. The guest speaker is asked to specifically focus on their early experiences of finding work as a Consultant Sport Psychologist, where the opportunities can be, their personal qualities and attributes, the challenges of finding opportunities, and giving advice to the next generation of Sport Psychologists. This helps the students to consider the practicalities of the third question 'how can customers find me' from an experienced person currently working in the field.

The curriculum design was communicated to the programme team in the form of staff training and development activities. The programme is now embedded in Applied Sport Psychology Undergraduate pathways. This scheme has led to a curriculum that is cutting edge in terms of providing students with up to date industry knowledge from the outset, improving the student experience and value for money aspects of university education.

The MSc and Doctoral students still have access to the 'start-up' day style training activities, based on the lean start up model and Growth Mind-set. The team receives external applications to the Graduate Level courses, so the message still need to be communicated to students that have not been through the Undergraduate Entrepreneurship Training scheme.

Case Study 2 – Extra Curricular Session (Opt-In Multidisciplinary).

The Centre for Entrepreneurship runs a suite of opt-in extracurricular training for students who wish to start a business or become self-employed. There are approximately 6 programmes per semester, two of which are targeted at creative freelancers, who hope to monetise the skills they've acquired and enhance on their degrees. In the past two academic years, the creative freelancer sessions have attracted over 80 participants, from all of the arts based courses at LJMU, including Graphic Design, Film, Fashion and Art and Design. The Creative Freelancer sessions have also attracted students from outside of the Art School, including Journalism, Creative Writing, Social Policy, Computing and PhD students hoping to commercialise their research.

Students that opt to attend these courses, often have a good understanding of how their industry is using freelancers to meet skill shortages in the workforce, and those who desire to work flexibly, leveraging technology to secure a varied workflow of global opportunities for multiple clients. However, this course provided a different set of challenges. The students embark on this training from all levels, from a cross section of disciplines and from varying degrees of experience, including those who were already freelancing, and those who are still considering options. Opt-in cohorts also present challenges, such as no prior rapport with the trainer or fellow classmates, and limited ability to provide materials in advance of the sessions.

The session design has been modified and now starts with a 'portrait of a freelancer', where we invite external speakers to talk candidly to students about life as a freelancer, and the journey travelled since university. This account is delivered in a round table style, informally, to replicate the sensation that students are listening to an interactive, live podcast. It is important for the guest speakers to reinforce the messages around resilience and ability to learn and recover from failures whilst freelancing.

After the guest speaker, the session then moves on to answer three fundamental questions:

- What can I sell?
- Who can I sell it to?
- How can they find me?

These three questions address a number of concepts in plain language, and cover the essentials of designing your value around customers (using customer discovery and value proposition) pricing, personal branding, money, marketing and sales. This keeps in line with the Centre for Entrepreneurship's lean start up approach, which is embedded into our operation's core.

The material is accompanied with a booklet, so that students can make notes, answer questions with the option of keeping them private or sharing with the group, and have a record of this point in time, with the intention of being able to reflect on their practice.

Discussions and Conclusion

In this paper, we examine a model that was developed and applied to case studies for an entrepreneurship education programme. The model that was developed is a hybrid, informed by three key models. Bloom's Taxonomy, The QAA Journey towards Entrepreneurial Effectiveness, and Hytti et al (2002) three sets of aims.

This was straight forward in Case Study 1, where the learning was being designed for students at the same entry points. However, in Case Study 2 the learning was being designed for mixed groups of students, with varying degrees of knowledge and experience. In both Case Studies, initial assessment and attitude towards freelancing was an important factor to consider.

In Case Study 1, the initial assessment and assessment of attitude towards freelancing was determined through detailed pre-planning sessions with the course leaders, and via student focus groups. This allowed the researchers to create a starting point aligned with Bloom, that included pedagogy concerned with remembering and understanding, which aligns with the QAA Model and Hytti's.

In Case Study 2, the initial assessment and attitude towards freelancing was assessed via an application form to join the opt-in training. This allowed the trainers to assess an appropriate starting point, and to judge how much time should be dedicated to the initial stages of entrepreneurship education highlighted in the models used. We found that most students who were opting in to entrepreneurship education had a good understanding and awareness of their industry, and how

freelancers currently operate and the types of work undertaken. However, the students lacked understanding/confidence on technical information, such as finance, sales and marketing.

The next step was to move towards development of Entrepreneurial Competency and learning to become entrepreneurial, posing the second question 'Who can I sell it to?'. At this stage, the customer discovery process was examined, where we move towards supporting students to apply and analyse the market and their potential customers. This is where Entrepreneurial Competencies can start to be encouraged, such as opportunity recognition, taking action, and mobilising resources to start to conduct their customer discovery activities. The application and analytical pedagogies were used in development of this. The students have now gained an understanding of freelancing which could be built upon through the customer discovery process. This process was used, including customer profiling, empathy maps, speaking with potential customer groups and investigating primary/secondary research, which achieved the application and analysing pedagogies. In both cases, this provided opportunities for students to investigate entrepreneurial competency and how to become entrepreneurial. This happened through students completing customer profiles, by researching their customers and engaging in the process. Resources such as 'Talking to Humans' (Constable 2014) and examining the 'build, measure, learn' feedback loop as part of the lean start up paradigm (Ries 2011).

The final step was to move students towards Entrepreneurial Effectiveness using creation and evaluation pedagogies the third question 'How can customers find me?' calls for creation and evaluation pedagogies. We ask the students to start creating material that will attract customers, whether this be a blog, a tweet, a poster or a marketing campaign. This aims to move students closer to entrepreneurial effectiveness by setting goals, using self-direction and communicating with their target market. This was achieved by asking the students to create and evaluate marketing materials that they have created for their customer groups, based on the build-up of information. This was framed around personal branding as a freelancer, and being able to communicate their value and USP to the customers and their problems that have been identified during customer discovery. In this part of the sessions, students were able to create materials in class, or create live materials such as thought leadership pieces on LinkedIn or blog posts.

This paper investigates how the constructivist philosophy of education is utililzed in the development of a model for the training of freelancers in entrepreneurship education. Currently, job security and self-reliance are key features of thriving professionally. The emergence of platform firms such as Uber that connect workers who are regarded as independent contractors to clients for in-person service

tasks has led to a need to re-examine how students are trained for the work place of the future. Drawing on constructivist models of education, (Bloom, 1956; Hytti, 2002; QAA, 2018), the paper shows how a model was developed to train Freelancers in entrepreneurship education. Based on Bloom's Taxonomy, students' progression through the stages of learning is evaluated. Hytti's 2002 study on entrepreneurial learning is used to track progress as students become more entrepreneurial. The QAA Guidelines for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship education is used to gauge students' learning journey towards entrepreneurial effectiveness. The model is designed and explored based on sessions that are delivered through a coaching style. The coaching style of delivery enables students' to regard entrepreneurship as a process with themselves at the centre. The initial starting point of the entrepreneurial process aimed at exploring entrepreneurial awareness by posing questions such as 'what is entrepreneurship?'. The second stage which followed in tandem focused on the development of entrepreneurial competencies and an entrepreneurial mind-set. This stage was then followed by the last stage where students practiced entrepreneurial effectiveness.

The paper contributes to understanding how constructivist philosophies of education and existing models that inform entrepreneurship education may facilitate the development of specific skill-set to enable learners to face the freelancing economy. The paper presents a flexible model that can be applied or adapted in its current form to provide entrepreneurship educators with a robust framework to enhance curriculum development, training and entrepreneurial mind-set to learners.

Limitations and Suggestions for future Research

This model has raised further questions in relation to this type of training and its ability to prepare students to freelance. Opportunities for further research into this model could include student perceptions of freelancing and the gigging economy. Does this type of training prepare students to have an accurate perception of freelancing, and do their perceptions match the realities they went on to face in the workforce? Further investigation and measurement into the students' readiness to freelance after the sessions would further understanding of the success of this type of intervention.

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