

Embedding Enterprise Education: the Fashion Project

Fiona Armstrong-Gibbs
Faculty of Business and Law
London Metropolitan University

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Background to study

The growth and development of an economically sustainable society emerging from the financial crisis of 2008 will come, in part from individuals in the form of entrepreneurs. This has already been well documented by Knight & Yorke (2003, 2004, 2006), Winkel et al (2013), the Government's enterprise advisor, Lord Young (2013), the HEA (2011, 2012) and the Chartered Institute for Professional Development (2013) amongst others, that many of these new business start-ups and innovative working practices will be nurtured and graduate through the UK's higher education system. A recent DBIS government report (2013) on enterprise education defines two styles of teaching enterprise, either embedding enterprise skills within the curriculum or through delivery of entrepreneurship knowledge. As such the growth of entrepreneurship education within the wider employability and enterprise agenda is now well recognised and supported within the university sector.

The Fashion Industry

The BFC (2010) Value of Fashion report states fashion adds £21bn a year to the UK economy, (£37 bn wider contribution, including tourism). It is the 15th largest industry in the UK and directly employs 816,000 people making it the UK's second biggest employer.

Given how difficult it is to gain employment in the current economic environment (HEA 2012), many graduates from the creative sector have found themselves on less traditional routes to employment (HEA 2003). In this climate, students can increasingly be seen as 'reluctant entrepreneurs' (Guardian student blog 2013) taking advantage of university and government start-up schemes to earn a living. Current HEA (2012) recommendations suggest universities should actively create a culture of employability through application of experiential learning, teaching strategies and should offer work experience opportunities that contextualise this learning.

The Fashion Project module

Final year Londonmet students were given a choice between producing a traditional research led dissertation or a business start-up project. Toohey (1999) suggests that

giving students a choice helps to “promote ownership and responsibility”. Twenty-two out of ninety-three students chose the business start-up project.

Londonmet has a diverse student population with work and family commitments taking high priority. Many perceive group work as an extra burden on their time or a crutch for weaker students. After student feedback and peer discussions the course was amended to work with LondonMets’ Accelerator start-up unit with a view to supporting the students ‘in house’. This satisfied the resourcing issue, gave credibility to the programme through links with internal stakeholders as well as opening up a stream of new graduates for the Accelerator’s Incubator Hatchery programme.

Curriculum design: the learning outcomes and assessment instruments were the same for the dissertation and the business project. This was intended to give students more autonomy in their project choice to develop employability and enterprise skills.

Teaching and learning: The business project was delivered at the Accelerator through boot camps, academic staff lectures and guest speakers. For the first time students had access to the Accelerator programme as an integral part of their studies and were exposed to knowledge about enterprise as well as being encouraged to foster skills relevant to an entrepreneur.

Assessment: A weighting of 20% pitch, 20% reflective log and 60% business plan mitigated the risk of relying solely on a written plan to articulate their learning. The emphasis of assessment was 40% skills and 60% knowledge, giving students a safe place to take risks and develop their skills and business proposals. A variety of businesses ideas were explored including: jewellery manufacturing, cupcake design and production, vintage clothing and jewellery website, African print designs, footwear sourcing agency, retail pop up shop consultancy and intelligent vending machines.

Results and discussion

Students and Staff: Take up of the option of the new module in 2012 was deemed positive. Willingness and engagement from both staff and students was evidenced in the high pass rate and take up of spaces at the Accelerator. As this was a new untested module it could be argued that these students were risk takers themselves with self-belief, confidence and independence of mind – therefore entrepreneurial by nature. Feedback from staff at LondonMet open days and a meeting with international partners (Modart, Paris) also noted that prospective students were interested in this module because this type of start-up individual project is not normally included in fashion business curricula. The key challenges identified by the teaching team were primarily around insufficient academic staff resourcing, expertise and availability of industry mentors.

Suggested changes to curriculum design: Learning outcomes should be twofold. First, develop and demonstrate a knowledge base. This would include process of

establishing a creative idea, concept, product or service through the stages needed to make it into a viable business proposition (appreciation of finance, marketing, creative and strategic management). Second, be able to demonstrate how competencies and a skill set appropriate for enterprises have been developed. Those that want to start a business should have a structure or a platform to do so through the university if they so choose.

Issues in teaching and learning: Enterprise education is about trial and error, failing and learning from it, opening up to scrutiny and reflecting on the experience for next time. We should create a safe environment where students learn through doing and know it is ok to fail. The university assessment system is not set up for this so it can be at odds with educating entrepreneurs. Hussey and Smith (2003) discuss that just as no two seminars run the same way, no two students will emerge with the same learning experience. Inevitably there are emergent learning outcomes from this style of teaching. This is the 'role of chance' which has many similarities to that of a business start-up – luck and chance.

Assessment: Assessing a business plan is difficult. A sample (pro forma) was provided to the students and marking criteria were developed only once the business plan was submitted. This was not helpful for the students. When assessing weaker students' plans it was questionable how much was derived from their own intuition, gut instinct or from imitation of other plans available to them, in conjunction with credible research. This is a common dilemma in this area, and Powell (2013) recommends offering several versions of pro formas or asking for a first draft plan from students before providing a pro forma. This could also prove useful for formative feedback and feed forward.

Levels of activity that reached by each business venture varied greatly as did the product or service they set up. As there was no pre required idea or finance secured much depended on commitment and financial resources. At the conclusion of the project some students traded, some did not have samples and some were still at the planning stage. Assessing all students using the same criteria proved difficult. The reasons varied, some did not have sufficient funding or ran out of time. A feasibility assessment as part of the business plan might be useful in the future.

Recommendations

- Clearer assessment guidelines, aligned to learning outcomes through specific assessment criteria for the business plan should be made available to students at the start.
- First draft of business plan to be handed in for formative feedback before supplying a pro forma.
- Group work to be embedded in class activities to encourage peer support and open discussion to increase knowledge, confidence and skill set.

- Make use of other students and their experiences in the Incubator most specifically recent graduates as peer mentors and alumni.

Student Experience

The majority identified the lack of specific mentors (resource issue) but highlighted the experience of the guest speakers. The boot camp training and 2 minute pitches were inspirational; if at first intimidating they were ultimately rewarding.

Final reflective logs stated that overall the students fully appreciated the opportunity to set up a business whilst at university and in a safe environment to take risks and learn. Many saw it as a launch pad for the next stage in their career. Although there was no formal group work students benefitted from listening and talking to their peers.

Finally, 5 of the original 22 students have taken space in the Accelerator incubator unit in 2013 with the intention of continuing their businesses and at least one other is trading from home.

Implications for practice

Enterprising students learn by doing, learn from each other and from debate and discovery. They also learn by borrowing from others and making mistakes. Tutors and curriculum designers must also take an entrepreneurial approach to the design and delivery of a course of this kind. By taking part in the business project, students develop a higher order of thinking or metacognition. They can identify and understand how they approached a problem, goal, challenge and so on, thereby increasing levels of self-efficacy.

Enterprise is about innovation, challenging existing ideas and developing something new. If we are to create graduates that are going to be a part of the new economy and wealth creation, they need to be able to question what has gone before, assess it and find a better way.

It is very difficult to measure or evidence success in entrepreneurship project modules. Each student will have chosen the module for varying reasons and success should not be based on how many businesses have been set up. Some students may be latent entrepreneurs (Powell 2013) while others might find themselves in roles as 'intrapreneurs' - employed by companies to take a lead role in innovation or new business development, which as Moreland (2007) notes is just as important and valuable to the growth of business and the economy.

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Biographical Note: Since writing this article, the author has left the University and is now pursuing her interests in enterprise education in Liverpool, John Moores University, where she is Senior Lecturer in Fashion. She is currently writing a book that will be the definitive guide to the theories and strategies used to develop, manage and market fashion footwear.