

Student-initiated and student-led ventures: the challenges of enterprise within the taught curriculum

(Research paper)

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Introduction

This research paper draws on an evaluative pedagogic research study of a work-related learning initiative called the Venture Matrix (VM). The Venture Matrix comprises a series of taught modules delivered at all three levels of an undergraduate Business and Technology course. The VM's primary purpose is to enhance enterprise and commercial awareness skills and attributes in students. It does this by giving students the opportunity to initiate and run their own business ventures. Activities involve coming up with a viable idea for a venture, preparing a business plan, advertising the venture, finding clients, securing and fulfilling contracts successfully, handling payments, hiring and firing staff, amongst others. The nature of the VM requires students to actively seek collaborations with groups outside of their immediate venture. This means finding ways to approach and engage with students they do not know personally and establishing positive, interdependent working relationships with these students. As the research study makes evident, the success of each venture is dependent on students developing the ability to establish such positive working relationships.

This research paper discusses some of the key findings of the research study, particularly those related to the value of the interdependent working relationships which students develop within the VM; findings related to how the experiences of students within the VM allow students to develop some of the key components of the USEM employability model (Knight and Yorke, 2003) are further discussed, in particular in adopting a reflective attitude to their work (metacognition).

Context

The VM pedagogical approach is essentially targeted at integrating enterprise within the taught curriculum which makes it necessary to consider the conceptualisation of enterprise skills and attributes within an educational context,

as well as the broader conception of employability in the research literature. In addition, the research study was informed by the concerns within educational research with establishing effective approaches to embedding employability within the higher education (HE) curriculum. Both of these points provide a context for the research study.

Moreland identifies the entrepreneurial skills and the attributes of an entrepreneur, and further discusses the context of how these become a learning goal in an educational context (2006). The CIHE report (Archer and Davidson, 2008) identifies similar skills and attributes, emphasising team work, the ability to work internationally and honesty as those which employers value most highly in recruiting graduates. The concept and learning design of the VM environment provides opportunities for developing these skills and attributes. The question for the evaluative study was to explore the conditions which facilitated or hindered the development of such skills and attributes.

Such diverse lists of skills and attributes can be classified into a theoretical construct, such as the USEM model (Knight and Yorke, 2003). Each of the skills and attributes listed by Moreland can be classified under one of the elements of the USEM model: understanding, skills, efficacy and metacognition. It was therefore both of these approaches to conceptualising employability which the study draws on as parameters for evaluating the student experience of enterprise and employability within the VM. In order to understand the value of this experience, this paper explores the extent to which students made use of the opportunities for employability which the VM provides, as well as the factors which hindered and those which aided such provision.

Methodology

An explanatory case study approach was adopted for this research. The case study approach was considered appropriate as it allows for a close focus on a 'bounded system' (Cresswell, 2007: 73) and the learning interactions taking place within this system. The Venture Matrix can be seen as a bounded system as it has its own rules of interaction. While it emulates the real world of business it does not

pretend to be the real world, but rather to give students a realistic and low-risk experience of the world of business.

An explanatory case study was also considered appropriate because it is concerned with the causal relationships within a bounded system:

'An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships – explaining which causes produce which effects.'

(Yin, 1993: 5)

This is pertinent to the research questions which explore the factors influencing student engagement, as well as the reasons why discrete elements and approaches within the VM work more successfully than others in delivering the employability experience to students.

As is necessary for the case study approach, data was collected from multiple sources and using multiple methods in order to give a comprehensive picture of the student experience. The following sources and methods were used:

- **A survey questionnaire** distributed to the Business and Technology students taking VM modules at levels 4, 5 and 6. A total of 49 students responded to the questionnaire.
- **Focus group interviews** - four focus group interviews were carried out with VM students. Three of these were with students on the Business and Technology course, with each representing one level of study. The fourth interview comprised a cohort of Sports Science students at level 5. Their views were taken to represent those of students coming into a business module from a course unrelated to business. A total of 17 students took part in the interviews.
- **Students' written reports** - six student reports (two from each level) were explored for content which would triangulate or supplement the data gathered through the focus group interviews and the survey questionnaire.

- **Assessment tools used within the module** - these included assessment briefs given to students, module descriptions and assessment sheets showing the percentage weighting of the final assignment as well as the assessment descriptors.
- **Discussions with the module leader** - The purpose of these discussions was to prepare the researcher by giving her an idea of the way the pedagogic interactions were designed and the way they were expected to work by the tutor.

The data gathered was analysed using interpretative thematic analysis techniques (Bassegy, 1999), including the following steps:

- Generating and testing analytical statements;
- Interpreting or explaining the analytical statements;
- Deciding on the outcome and writing the case report.

The students' experiences as described by them and the implications which these made for teaching and learning were elicited. It is believed that the conclusions drawn from the evaluation would make valuable suggestions regarding how to address student engagement with an employability initiative such as the VM.

Research findings

Reflection and the need for realism

As the learning of enterprise skills and attributes is at the heart of the VM initiative, this research placed an emphasis on exploring the extent to which students took advantage of opportunities for developing their abilities in this respect. Negotiation skills emerged as one of the most practiced skills within the VM according to students. The survey questionnaire indicated that the key skills which most students across the three levels felt they had acquired through collaborative working were communication skills and negotiation skills; an average of 70 percent of students reported increased ability in both of these skills. These findings were

supported by the focus group interviews with students. The following comment illustrates this point:

Level 5

Student 6: *As far as charging people, what I did was, I thought of the top amount possible that the job would be worth and then if they agreed to that then yeah fair enough and if they wanted to negotiate... I remember in one scenario, they said 'we need three logos how much is it going to be?' and I said 'three logos is going cost you three thousand pounds', and then he said alright well can we do it for a bit less I was thinking like half that amount, and I said well we can do it for that amount but if you need the logos amending or changing I'm afraid that you'll have to pay me the full amount before I'll even think about looking at them again. So like it's a bit hard-nosed but I think that's the way business is.*

Researcher: *And did it work?*

Student 5: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *Do you feel rewarded once you've been successful in that process?*

Student 6: *I feel like the tactics that I used worked, I think, I'm not sure that it was the best way to go about it but.*

Researcher: *Why not?*

Student 6: *Because it might have been, it might have been too like, not customer focused enough like they might have felt like they didn't get as much of a good deal so in the future they might not come back to us. So it's like maybe we got the short term payout but the long term payout isn't in our favour because of the tactics that we adopted.*

There is evidence in this comment of the student learning negotiation skills in practice, or learning by doing, as is characteristic of the constructivist approach. However, what is interesting to observe is how the student has subsequently reflected on the experience. We can see that while he has been successful in his negotiation in the short term, he realises this approach may have cost him a longer term relationship with the client and greater returns. This is an instance which illustrates how the commercial awareness skills which they gain in practice lead these students to adopting a reflective attitude to their work, what Knight and

Yorke describe within their USEM model as 'metacognition' (2003), one of the key elements of learner employability.

Two distinct factors for such reflection taking place can be identified in this instance. Firstly, the constructivist pedagogical set up of the VM environment which places an emphasis on the active and self-directed learner constructing an understanding of their working environment while relying on their previous and current experiences, as well as learning through making mistakes. The VM provides a relatively risk-free environment for the learners to make such mistakes and rewards them for reflecting on these. In addition, little formal guidance is given to students as to what they should do in any particular circumstances.

The second crucial factor for facilitating reflection in the learner was the 'realism' of the experience. Evidence in the interview and survey data pointed equally to the fact that students' deep reflection evolved specifically in situations where they perceived the experience as true or close to the way business is conducted in the real world of work. Conversely, where this experience of 'realism' was lacking, this could have a significant negative effect on students' motivation to engage with the task. The following comments illustrate this point:

(Level 4 students)

Student 2: *Yes we didn't use any of our original... we got 1000 pounds - squids. We didn't use any of that at all.*

Student 1: *So that's the legal side as well, when you have an expense, but I think it needs to grow significantly for the money to work better. For it to become more relevant. Because at the moment it's pretty much just - 'complete a task'.*

Student 2: *There needs to be more cost incurred then there would be ...*

Student 1: *There are essentially no costs in it at the moment.*

Student 2: *...renting places...*

Student 1: *Sounds like more of a transactional basis that you are doing at the moment - you do this job, you just pay it and you are finished sort of thing.*

Student 2: *Whereas it doesn't really cost anything to do the job.*

Student 1: *Which it would.*

Student 2: *Which in real life it obviously would. Because you would need equipment, premises etc.*

(Level 6 students)

Student 17: *So when we were setting or prices in the real world you'd probably charge £200 for a website, but if we made £200 it wouldn't make any difference because we had 40 000 to start with anyway - so what's the point in doing it.*

(all laugh) *Might as well put our feet up.*

In both of these comments students express the need for a more realistic experience: more costs need to be incurred; the starting capital for their businesses needs to be reduced. It is also evident that not having these constraints was detrimental to these students' engagement with the work. An experience which closely mirrors the world of work and is in this way 'realistic' is therefore essential both for students' engagement with the work and for their propensity to reflect on the experience and learn from it.

Learning honesty and trust through interdependence

Another element of the VM experience which stood out as enhancing learner reflection was this of the collaborative working set up of the learning environment. We call this element 'interdependence' as it is a form of collaboration which makes each student's work and success dependent on the performance of other student groups and individuals, most of which the students would not have met or known previously. This 'interdependence' proved to have a crucial effect on students' learning.

An average of 53% of students responding to the survey across all three levels indicated they had gained skills in 'working with different types of groups'. For first and final year students, this was one of the highest ranking skills which students indicated they had learnt through group work; it was ranked slightly lower by Level 5 students, but was still identified by just over half (52%) of these students. This is significant as working with interdisciplinary groups and groups at different levels is a unique feature of the VM and is one of the ways of the employability experience becoming integrated into students' programme of study at all levels. The focus

groups built on this data to provide evidence of how and why these students found such interaction useful. In the following example students from the Level 5 Sports cohort pointed out that the group work element of the VM was significantly different from their experience of group work within the rest of their course:

(Level 5, Sports students)

Student 11: *Because I suppose in our group we all obviously worked together we didn't have to operate with other course teams and people from different courses. And meet other people's deadlines.*

Student 10: *The matrix allows you to do that, it's aimed at that really.*

Researcher: *Is that more difficult? Is it more challenging to do that, when other people's work depends on you?*

Student 11: *it makes things more realistic in a way because you have to - say if we mess up and don't meet a deadline we know it is going to affect other people's work as well. Especially when you think that some people's dissertations are being written on what we are doing...*

Similarly the following comment by second year students shows that these students felt responsible for other people's work and success depending on them:

Level 5:

Student 7: *I think any risk I felt was because of the third years - we were doing real work for them for their real projects and there was a risk in us saying we would do this for a certain deadline when we have all this other work as well or we are trying to do our work. I think if we hadn't done it I would have felt quite bad. So that was a risk I guess.*

Both of these examples indicate that the fact that if they missed a deadline they would negatively influence other people made these students feel personally responsible for the work, more so than it would have done if the work had consequences for themselves only. This is how working in an interdependent way within the VM recreated the realistic experience of the world of work where interdisciplinary teams, working in different companies depend on each other in order to be able to meet a shared goal. This form of collaborative and interdependent working therefore allowed students to feel this was a realistic

experience which as discussed previously is related to promoting a reflective attitude to their work.

In addition to raising their sense of responsibility, such interdependence meant that students had a first-hand experience of realising the importance of being honest and the need to trust others within a business world. As discussed in the literature review, the CIHE report (Archer and Davidson, 2008) quoted 'honesty' as one of the most important employability attributes from the point of view of employers. There was a wealth of evidence from the focus group discussions of the challenges which students perceived in having to trust others with their work:

(Level 6 students)

Student 12: *Like for us we had to trust a second year student to make a website for us and that was part of one of their sports groups' coursework. So when they say it has got to be in on the 13th February and we are trusting another person we don't know to do this, like they would come and have a go at us if we didn't get it done for them it would look bad on us and not really the guy who was supposed to be doing it. So I think it is not part of their coursework, if it goes wrong on our end it's like if we mess up and mess up their final year coursework it would be terrible for them really. Whereas the fact that I didn't do it is not really anything off his back - he's just said 'yes I'll make a website for you'.*

Student 17: *Someone would say it's all right if you put contracts in place, but if he breaks the contract then nothing is going to happen to him really it's just fictitious isn't it. So it was quite risky for us to trust someone else to do the work for us.*

The majority of the students interviewed spoke about this interdependence in the work as the most high-risk activity within the VM and the one which taught them to take responsibility for their learning most fully. It is evident therefore that having to trust each other and work interdependently taught these students the most valuable lessons regarding honesty in a business world. It was interesting to note that students progressed in their thinking towards finding ways of being more comfortable trusting others with work:

Level 5

Student 4: *I also thought it would have been a better idea if they (first year students) actually worked with you and once you've employed them to be a part of our group as opposed to just contacting them asking them to do something and they send it via email. So they'd work with us as a group rather than them being on their own. Because when you're employing someone they are working with you, not in a different room at a different time.*

In this and in a number of supporting instances students expressed a preference for closer, more regular contact with those they had delegated work to such as would allow them to develop stable working relationships. The fact that students progressed to looking for strategies for improving communication and collaboration with each other is evidence of deep reflection on the side of students.

Conclusions

The evaluation of the VM learning environment indicated that students made active use of some of the opportunities offered to them for learning within an enterprising environment. In this paper we have discussed those aspects of learning which stood out as most significantly influencing students' employability. We have also related these aspects of learning to learning theory, to employers' needs and most importantly to recognised employability skills and attributes.

The findings of research strongly indicated that the VM learning environment worked on social constructivist principles, such as an active learner who draws directly on their past experiences and their own resources, rather than on external guidance when dealing with challenges in the work/learning environment. Within this the question arose of how students learn from such experiences. There was a wealth of data indicating that reflection, the key form of learning emerging within a work-related learning environment, depended both on the extent to which students perceived the learning interactions as realistic and on the highly interdependent way of working which the VM requires. This has identifiable implications for implementing a work related module within the higher education curriculum. Students would look for opportunities to experience the real world of work as closely as possible; as instances in the research data demonstrated, making the

experience too easy or unrealistic has a negative effect on these students' engagement with the task. In addition, the interdependence which was required of students within the VM proved to be highly successful in inspiring reflection in students. Within this they had to consider the need to trust those they were working with and those they were working for. We can argue that learning how to trust each other has taught these students the value of honesty in the world of business. Finally, while the interdependence which these students experienced can be likened to the collaborative work often utilised within contemporary curricula, there is a pronounced differentiating element in the VM: collaboration spanned all three levels of the course, thus testing students' ability and resourcefulness in managing complex communication and developing relationships of trust with divergent groups and individuals.

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