

A Hybrid Approach for Entrepreneurship Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

While there have been a wide range of programs created and launched to encourage the development of entrepreneurial ventures, many gaps remain, especially when these programs are carried out in a distance or virtually. Providing purely on-line educational resources reduces the associated cost of delivery and may be revisited by the users as required, but it often lacks the contextual information needed by the user.

An additional consideration is that these ventures must also develop support networks. This is not easily achieved in purely online approaches or in short-term intervention scenarios. Achieving this requires the development and involvement of local expertise in the development of the new ventures.

Supporting the creation of entrepreneurial new ventures is critical for the growth of developing economies. An approach recently piloted between the University of Waterloo, Canada (UW) and Strathmore University, Kenya has been to provide a framework that offers access to Canadian and local incubation expertise, with the overall goal of creating local technology-based ventures.

In this presentation we discuss this recent initiative to address these development issues through a program consisting of E-learning originating from UW's Conrad Centre and classroom-based learning in Kenya at Strathmore's @iBizAfrica facilities.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Distance Education, Hybrid Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

What is entrepreneurship? Can it be taught? How can it be supported in a distance or virtual context? These questions are constantly at the forefront of entrepreneurship education e.g. [1], [2], [3]. Before we can discuss if it can be taught, we first need to define what it is, and whether we are focused on teaching about "entrepreneurship" or about developing "entrepreneurs".

Entrepreneurship can be defined as applying creativity and innovation to solve problems and exploit opportunities [4]. An entrepreneur on the other hand can be thought of as the agent who engages in the act of entrepreneurship, identifying problems and gathering the resources to exploit the opportunity that the solution to the problem represents. This distinction is important in the discussion of entrepreneurship education, since it is not simply the generation of new ideas, but the capacity to exploit an identified potential opportunity that is an important aspect of entrepreneurship.

From this perspective, if one is engaged in a conversation about entrepreneurship, then examining its characteristics and potential socio-economic impact become the learner's focus. If, however, the intent is to develop individuals who have the capacity to identify opportunities and implement potential solutions, then a different approach is necessary. What then are the objectives of entrepreneurship education? In this paper, we take the latter approach of developing the learner's capacity to actively engage in the venture creation process.

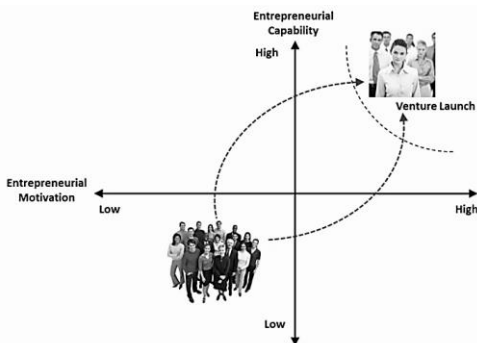
2. A MODEL OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

When discussing entrepreneurship education, it is important to begin the conversation with an understanding of its objectives. Here, we are not simply providing the learner with a theoretical understanding of the concept. Rather, the goal is to develop the ability to successfully pursue an entrepreneurial initiative, whether it is within an existing enterprise or involving the creation of a new venture. Entrepreneurship education is a transformational process. As discussed by Poutiatine [5] this can be defined as a process through which an individual is moved from one state to another over time. In this case, we are attempting to take an individual and assist him/her to think and behave like an entrepreneur. As such, we are not simply changing their knowledge; we are attempting to impact their fundamental motivation and beliefs. In other words, while we cannot guarantee success, the objective is to create a 'transformational experience' for the participants, developing

the entrepreneurial mindset and self-efficacy that will form the basis of future entrepreneurial behavior.

To be successful, entrepreneurship education must address behavioral aspects as well as knowledge transfer. Further, this knowledge transfer must be provided within a context. As illustrated in the simple model shown in Figure 1, the challenge is to develop programs which can move individuals who may have an initial level of interest and motivation in creating a new initiative, to a point where they can launch a sustainable venture.

Figure 1 Entrepreneurship Education



3. VIRTUAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

A difficulty with many entrepreneurship education programs is their reliance on simply providing content, or class projects that do not have any significant impact on the motivational aspect of entrepreneurship. In other words, what is missing is a learning context in which the learner can experience entrepreneurship in addition to acquiring information. From this perspective, entrepreneurship education is essentially “project-based” or “experiential” learning e.g.: [6], [7]. As discussed by Bender [7], this approach integrates context into the instructional model such that the learner finds it meaningful and can apply the knowledge that is being provided in solving the target problem. In the case of entrepreneurship education, this target problem is not simply the identification of opportunities and the development of a viable venture plan. It requires learners to experience the integration of knowledge into a context that they are motivated to implement.

When considering entrepreneurship education at distance, the question that arises is how to best support experiential learning in a virtual environment? Given the importance of context and that the learner will be experiencing entrepreneurship in a physical space, a hybrid approach seems most appropriate. Hybrid learning provides the opportunity to combine traditional ‘physical space’ or ‘face-to-face’ learning with the content, mentoring and process available from a virtual space. This requires more than simply providing a MOOC. It requires the creation of a collaborative learning environment that is aware of the learner’s context and is synchronized with the activities occurring in the physical environment.

4. A PILOT PROJECT

A recent collaboration between the University of Waterloo’s Conrad Business Entrepreneurship and Technology Centre (Conrad) and Kenya’s Strathmore University provided an opportunity to implement and evaluate a hybrid distance education model for entrepreneurship education and

development. The overall objective of this collaboration is to encourage and develop local technology-based entrepreneurs through a combination of external virtual support while developing the local infrastructure necessary to support these types of ventures.

Figure 2: Hybrid Distance Model

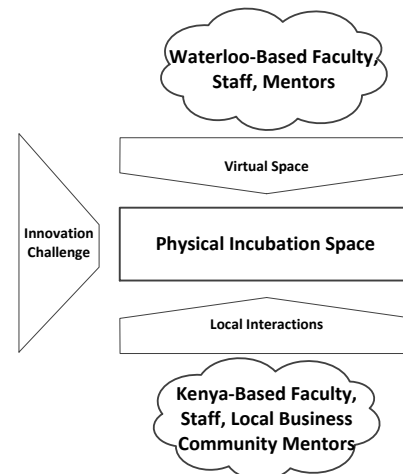
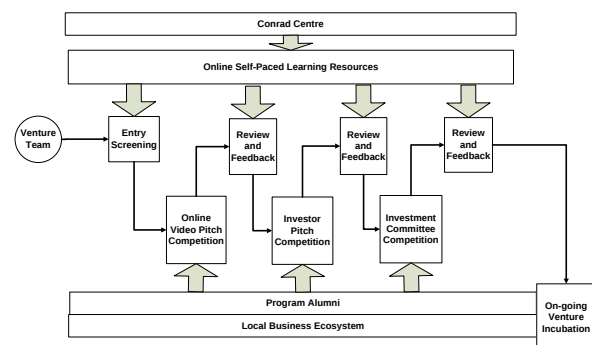


Figure 2 illustrates the approach used in the collaboration. In the first phase of the pilot, teams were invited to provide their solution to a challenge question. The challenge question was developed using the recent World Economic Forum report [8] which identified agricultural issues as a major regional socio-economic risk. As a result, the challenge posed was to address local agricultural issues through the application of mobile and social network technologies. 45 teams, representing approximately 150 students, from Kenya and East African responded. Teams submitted a 90 second video of their concept, which was assessed by faculty members in Waterloo and Strathmore. Of the initial submissions, 10 teams were invited to move into the second phase.

Figure 3: Event-Gate Structure



Here, the remaining teams were provided the physical infrastructure to further develop their ideas, while also being provided with seminars, workshops and networking opportunities from Strathmore faculty and the local business community. In addition to this, the overall process, additional mentoring, and access to learning materials were provided through Conrad’s virtual incubation platform, referred to as Jamii, which is Swahili for community.

An important aspect of the virtual component is the structure which it provided to the teams. As shown in Figure 3, the virtual incubation process consists of three 'events' which are used as the focal milestones for the teams. In the case of this pilot, the entry screening was undertaken through the initial challenge screening. Following entry into the second phase of the competition, teams progressed through the various gates, ultimately leading to a final set of ventures. A further difference compared to more traditional "static" online content was the provision of real-time, online interactions with the team members as well as with the local faculty. This interaction permitted the virtual mentors to address issues and identify appropriate learning content as they emerged with the teams as well as identify areas for customization of learning content.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

What is entrepreneurship, can it be taught, and how can this be supported in a distance environment are the underlying questions that this research seeks to explore. The collaboration and pilot program have provided an opportunity to learn more about delivering entrepreneurship education at distance. While the hybrid approach to development of entrepreneurs resulted in the launch of several ventures, some of the most interesting insights will be obtained in the longer term as we observe the future paths of the program participants.

While assessment of the operational lessons learned in the first pilot is ongoing, perhaps the most significant has been around encouraging and maintaining learner engagement in this type of environment. As would be expected, communication and coordination is an ongoing issue in this type of delivery and further enhancements are being developed to improve the interaction between the virtual mentors and learners, specifically through greater use of video.

Finally, as we move forward with implementation of the next challenge, further content development based on user feedback and coordination of activities is underway. Some of these changes are related to cultural and content delivery styles in the virtual and physical spaces. As many of the questions of interest are longitudinal in nature, efforts are underway to collect and evaluate data related to the survival of the ventures and the long term behavior of the individuals who have been involved in this entrepreneurship education program.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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