

Knowledge Acquisition and Business Modeling Using Experiential Learning Approach to Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Boosting entrepreneurial thinking and emphasizing its usefulness at all levels of education is a response to support the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan (European Commission, 2013), use the international potential, and revolutionize the culture of entrepreneurship in the EU. In order to increase both the attractiveness and effectiveness of entrepreneurship education, mainly at HEI, a variety of methods, tools and materials will be developed. Entrepreneurship, creativity and interpersonal communication are the key transversal skills necessary for working today in a multicultural environment. However, for shaping an entrepreneurial mindset, students need clear objectives and understanding embedded with multidisciplinary knowledge as well as competences to implement useful solutions in business practice. In this sense, an approach based on experiential learning and teaching has become a requirement in the education process. The purpose of the conducted research is to explore and carry out a synthesis of practice-oriented methods and experiential learning activities in entrepreneurship education to support students in solving real business problems by interacting in multicultural teams. The cognitive aim of this paper is to present the iterative and participatory co-creation process of business models generation by international students based on their experience, observation, and reflection within the framework of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project titled Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams (ECMT+). During the three entrepreneurship training workshops (Intensive Programmes 2017-2019) in total nearly 150 students from seven European high education institutions represented 16 nationalities. The study reveals positive effects of applied methods of experiential entrepreneurship education, significant involvement of participants in achieving the goal and gaining professional knowledge regarding to business model generation.

Keywords: ECMT+, business modeling, entrepreneurship education, experiential learning and teaching, intercultural collaboration

1. Introduction

Experiential learning approach to entrepreneurship has become increasingly important over recent years. In order to increase both the attractiveness and effectiveness of the practice-oriented education process, a variety of methods and materials can be used to help students utilize their own potential in the future professional work. In this sense the EU Member States have recognized the need of entrepreneurship education to be integrated in the official educational curricula (Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan). However, the methods and curricula do not always seem to be the most efficient and communicable for students. There is a need for evaluation of the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programmes. A lack of evidence on how learning strategies, methods, and tools influence the development of entrepreneurial competences and how these competences will be transferred into a new venture makes it difficult to design more effective educational programmes (Badzińska, 2017b, p. 324). In order to shape an entrepreneurial mindset, students need clear objectives and understanding embedded with multidisciplinary knowledge as well as transversal competences to implement it in business practice and turn challenges into useful solutions.

One of the most important challenges in the field of higher education is to educate students effectively to develop their professional competences and boost their employability in a demanding competitive market. The Erasmus+ Strategic

Partnership Project titled Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams (ECMT+) 2016-2019¹ is a European cooperation project promoting practice-oriented entrepreneurship education and intercultural inclusion. ECMT+ strengthens HEIs working life relevance developing education that responds to the needs of the local businesses and expands the understanding of the potential of the international co-operation and networks. In ECMT+ seven high education institutions from seven different European countries work together for developing students' entrepreneurial mindset, teaching practice, entrepreneurship research, and multicultural communication skills. The partners of the consortium are: Karelia University of Applied Sciences (Finland), University of the West of Scotland (United Kingdom), Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau (Germany), Silesian University in Opava School of Business Administration in Karvina (Czech Republic), VIVES University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), Poznan University of Technology (Poland), Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne (France).

In order to develop effective educational programmes and curricula the ECMT+ Project Partners organized three entrepreneurship training workshops (Intensive Programmes 2017-2019) which were aimed directly at stimulating entrepreneurship mindset, creativity, teamwork, innovation, and intercultural collaboration. With more experiences in multicultural teams and encouragement, students should be able to realize their entrepreneurial aspirations to face future challenges.

The purpose of the conducted research is to explore and carry out a synthesis of practice-oriented methods and experiential learning activities in entrepreneurship education to support students in solving real business problems by interacting in multicultural teams. The cognitive aim of this paper is to present the iterative and participatory co-creation process of business models generation by international students based on their experience, observation, and reflection within the framework of the ECMT+ Intensive Programmes.

The originality of the applied exploratory study lies in presenting teaching approaches, methods, and contents elaborated by the ECMT+ Project Partners which were applied and evaluated within the international project. Both descriptive and explanatory techniques were used in the presented study.

2. Materials & Methods

The multidimensionality of entrepreneurship education requires the acceptance of the limitations of the study area. The objective of the exploratory research covers teachers' and students' experiential learning, participatory co-creation process of business model generation, as well as reflections on and evaluation of entrepreneurship education outcomes during the three Intensive Programmes (IP) 2017-2019. The intensive workshops took place once a year in March by the ECMT+ Project Partners, namely at Karelia University in Joensuu (2017), at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau (2018), and at Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne in Roanne (2019).

The IPs involved intensive two weeks of working together both of students (each time from 46 to 48 participants) and teachers / coaches (about 25 each time) from seven different European high education institutions in order to develop entrepreneurial skills through experiential learning activities and practice-oriented methods and tools. Furthermore, practitioners and entrepreneurs from local business environment shared their experiences about success factors and failure management to workshops participants. During the IPs, students are given a balance of practical experience and theoretical issues to encourage them to adopt a wide range of substantive knowledge about entrepreneurship. The participants received input from coaches and practitioners from various backgrounds while collaborating in multicultural teams at designing innovative business solutions and generating business models (Canvas). Students participated in workshops were exposed to authentic customer needs, expectations, and market demand.

Experiential learning activities were applied during the IPs and supported by coaches / practitioners through which students learned while doing. Kolb's (1984) Theory of Experiential Learning as a widely-accepted theory, was used to contribute to meaningful teaching practice and to support learner experience. The model of experiential learning cycle is known for its holistic approach to student learning, which incorporates action / reflection and experience / abstraction (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). Through the experiential learning approach, the course participants had the opportunity to combine their prior practical experience with the knowledge acquired during the intensive entrepreneurship workshops to explore the ways to

¹ ECMT+ Entrepreneurship and Communication in Multicultural Teams is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Project 2016-2019 (Agreement 2016-1-FI01-KA203-022743), www.ecmt-plus.eu

the real business modeling. Undoubtedly, the experiential learning process supports performance improvement, learning and development which can result in new relationships, knowledge and attitudes, as well as consolidate relations to learning outcomes and essential employability skills.

Moreover, the applied qualitative research methods include a participatory observation, reflection, analysis as well as evaluation of the whole experiential learning process. Reflection is an important human activity in which the participant consciously thinks about an experience, assesses what happened and offers an evaluation. A critical aspect of reflection is that it is conscious and deliberate (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1996; Brookfield, 1998; Schon, 1998). Reflection involves considerations of thoughts, feelings and actions. The purpose of the reflective descriptions of IP's participants was to explore in more depth their experiences related to intensive programme. The modes of the students' reflective essays were primarily descriptive and evaluative. The reflection concerned three areas: i) the form of workshops itself, seminars and didactic methods used, ii) cooperation in multicultural teams, iii) the entrepreneurial attitudes of students and possible future plans for establishing their own companies (see Badzińska, 2017a, 2017b; Heinz & Chylková, 2017; Heinz, Chylková & Nenička, 2018). Similar to students, teachers were encouraged to reflect on the upcoming experiential learning activity, its connections to course content and expectations for student learning. Specifically, conscious reflection of the self enables educators to develop an awareness of their teaching pedagogy and its potential implications for classroom facilitation.

3. Challenges of Entrepreneurship Education

According to the European Commission Communication 'Fostering entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning' (2006, C 309, pp. 110-113), entrepreneurship refers to an individual's ability to turn ideas into action. It fosters creativity and innovation as well as self-confidence as it develops a spirit of initiative and helps individuals to learn to cope with failure. There is a need of strong intellectual and conceptual foundations, drawing from the fields of entrepreneurship and education, to strengthen entrepreneurship courses, as well as of deep reflection on practice as educators and researchers (Fayolle, 2013).

The key to a successful entrepreneurship education is to find the most effective way to manage the teachable skills and identify the best match between student needs and teaching techniques. The choice of techniques and methods depends mainly on the objectives, contents and constraints imposed by the institutional context (Arasti, Falavarjani & Imanipour, 2012). "Reciprocal learning and sharing between the teachers and professionals from working life offer one channel, even if a small one, to the local businesses to join the international co-operation and all parties possibilities to build connections in a diverse network" (Badzińska & Timonen, 2019, p. 12). Apart from business knowledge and skills, entrepreneurship education develops certain beliefs, values and attitudes to encourage students to really consider entrepreneurship and self-employment as an attractive and valid alternative for the future work.

The most important primary and short-term results of entrepreneurship education are to raise awareness, knowledge and understanding about entrepreneurship concept and practice, to develop individual entrepreneurial and networking skills, behaviors, and attitudes as well as personal self-confidence and capability to start a new business (Hannon et al., 2006). The relevant literature "suggests important links between education, venture creation and entrepreneurial performance as well as between entrepreneurial education and entrepreneurial activity" (Raposo & do Paço, 2011, p. 453).

The importance of entrepreneurship education and entrepreneurial activity for the economic growth of countries is now well established. A high level of entrepreneurial activity contributes to foster competition, innovation, economic growth, and job creation. As the economy needs more entrepreneurs creating jobs, it's necessary to unleash students' entrepreneurial potential, remove existing obstacles and revolutionize the culture of entrepreneurship at high education institutions. It aims to facilitate the creation of new ventures and to shape a much more supportive business environment for existing entrepreneurs to thrive and grow.

Entrepreneurship, creativity and interpersonal communication are the key transversal skills that graduates need on the labor market. This requires future-oriented curricula, appropriate learning environments, competent teachers, possibilities to interact with professional life as well as expert support to solve real problems by interacting in diverse multicultural teams (Timonen, 2018, p. 3). Undoubtedly, the cross-cultural value differences, the diverse educational background and work experiences as well as the lack of trust may generate different patterns of behavior in intercultural collaboration. Intercultural teams are influenced by many challenges related to teamwork organization and relationships between members. If they can be good managed it can lead to satisfactory results that justify cross-cultural experiential learning and teaching

(Badzińska, 2017b, p. 326). However, it should be noted that the area and quality of the learning process depend not only on the pedagogical approach and the experience represented by supporters of the course participants at all stages of the project but, above all, on the involvement and internal motivation of the participants themselves.

Experiential learning approach to entrepreneurship is based on a set of conditions for successful collaboration, associated learner attributes as well as teaching methods and tools leading to acquisition of entrepreneurial knowledge. Kolb and Kolb's (2011) extensive work in the field of experiential learning have resulted in some considerations that educators should review. They recommend that teachers recognize that learning is cyclical and while students learn about specific content and subject matter, conscious reflection and learning about the individual learning processes is just as important. Experiential learning activities should be purposeful and beneficial to student learning. It is important to adapt the tasks to the appropriate and most meaningful level of involvement for students (Kolb & Kolb, 2011, p. 58). The goal of the experience-based learning is to improve students' employability and interpersonal skills however, the student self-assessment and the evaluation of the student's performance and learning outcomes is obligatory.

The multidimensionality of national cultures raises a number of difficulties in teaching entrepreneurship in international teams. Cultural values are embedded in practices, the local environment, the institutional context, and people's values and behaviors. As indicated by the research conducted by Hinds, Liu, and Lyon (2011) international project teams frequently suffer coordination problems, crises of trust, and unhealthy subgroup dynamics. These teams often are difficult to manage and fall short of performance expectations. The challenges and tensions in intercultural collaboration often stem from incompatible practices. The previously acquired knowledge and experience may halt the formation of relationships, the discovery of entrepreneurial opportunities and effective teamwork (Shane, 2000). On the other hand, cross-cultural competences and cultural diversity are a great potential for entrepreneurship education in international project teams. The different cultural backgrounds result namely in a variety of world perception capabilities and networks that make the teams more innovative (Chua, Morris & Mor, 2012). Therefore, to maximize participation of students in the educational process, "teachers need to experiment with teaching opportunities to connect with the multiple ways of knowing these students have and multiple intelligences" (Battiste, 2002, p. 15).

4. Results and Discussion

The issue of the experiential learning approach to entrepreneurship discussed in the paper relates to the implementation of the international ECMT+ project, where practice and experience-oriented way of intercultural collaboration and developing entrepreneurial mindset play a significant role. One of the most important tasks in this respect was the organization and carrying out of three two-weeks workshops (Intensive Programmes) for in total 147 students from seven European high education institutions. The IP's participants represented 16 nationalities from countries of Europe, Euro-Asia, East and South Asia, North Africa.

The Intensive Programmes at Karelia University in Joensuu (2017), at Technical University of Applied Sciences Wildau (2018), and at Université Jean Monnet Saint-Étienne in Roanne (2019) involved in each case intensive two weeks of working together both of students and teachers as well as local entrepreneurs. The workshops were dedicated to entrepreneurship education and preparing participants to face future challenges by enhancing their knowledge of the business world and developing essential skills and attitudes including creativity, initiative, tenacity, teamwork, an understanding of risk, and a sense of responsibility.

In each IP eight five-six international student teams were taught entrepreneurial attitudes as well as tasked to work out and present their innovative business solutions to the experts and practitioners from the Finnish, German, and French business environment. During the IPs, students are given a balance of practical experience and theoretical background to encourage them to gain professional knowledge and entrepreneurial competences as well as to increase the learner self-awareness. The participants received input from teachers / coaches and practitioners from various backgrounds while working in multicultural teams at creating innovative business solutions and generating business models. The business ideas should solve real world challenges and have immediate practical implications. The students were tasked to think about their personal problem or about ideas that foster sustainability, inclusion of people (e.g. immigrants, refugees) with difficulties of access to the labour market or social entrepreneurship (entrepreneurship that focuses on creating a positive social impact rather than on creating as much financial profit as possible). In order to give students hands-on experience, they had to explore academic content in a purposeful way outside the classroom through one day field trip looking for inspirations for business solutions. In turn, in the on-campus controlled lab environment (e.g. ViNN:Lab at TH Wildau) students had the

opportunity to observe, test, measure, apply business concepts, collaborate, and experience hands-on learning with tools, innovative equipment, and resources utilized in a specific field.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and the new Kolb Learning Styles Inventory 4.0 (Kolb & Kolb, 2011) were adapted in the teaching-learning process as a powerful foundational approach to all forms of learning, development, and change. The variety of teaching methods / tools used and learning styles provided a framework for the experiential learning process. The whole cycle consisted of the following phases: Initiating & Inspiring, Imagination, Experiencing, Reflecting, Analyzing & Evaluating, Conceptualization, Thinking & Designing, Action & Cooperation, and Balancing, which are discussed below in a synthetic way (Table 1).

Tabl. 1. The Phases of the Experiential Learning Cycles applied within the ECMT+ Intensive Programmes 2017-2019

Initiating & Inspiring	The Pre-IP framework Initiating of a new intensive workshop. Acquiring a basic knowledge of entrepreneurship and business modeling. Creating entrepreneurial ideas for a business. Preparing a collective video of national students' teams with local background. Focusing on new learning opportunities and intercultural collaboration.
Imagination	Start of the IP Presenting business ideas in a "market" format (posters, talk) for other teams. Discovering the competing ideas. Converging/selecting the most interesting ideas. Focusing on international teamwork, challenges and new experiences.
Experiencing	Considering a range of possible options and business solutions based on own experiences, acquired knowledge and cultural background. Join a team with "the best business idea". Agreement regarding team contract & decision making. Sharing information based on subjective experience. Collecting feedback and building relationships to other course participants. Focusing on concrete experience by others.
Reflecting	Connecting experiences and ideas through sustained reflection. Taking time to intentionally consider multiple perspectives and the factors involved (e.g. learning content, aims, outcomes, environment). Assessing the new experience gained. Focusing on participatory observation and milestones.
Analyzing & Evaluating	Exploring and collecting data. Verifying market demand for own business idea. Assessing new knowledge and information gained. Focusing on data, customer needs, and unique business solution.
Conceptualization	Integrating experience and new acquired knowledge into existing schemas and theoretical foundations. Customer profiling and creating value proposition. Creating a rough concept of business model. Focusing on the whole concept developing.
Thinking & Designing	Using rational thought, research findings, disciplined logic or mathematics to generalize. Exploring, testing, experimenting, prototyping and designing. Focusing on business model iteration.
Action & Cooperation	Asking for feedback & support on the prototype. Taking directed action to accomplish the common goal. Commitment to solve problems and achieve practical results. Practicing Business Ideas - Fair & Pitch Focusing on expected outcomes. Highlighting and awarding the best solutions. Celebrating.

Balancing	Seeking a balance of practical experience and theoretical background. Asking for feedback on the IP and evaluating the learning outcomes. Significance of the experience both for students and teachers. Critical analysis and consequences of actions. Developing and improving curricula by implementing experiential learning activities (connections to academic content). Focusing on flexibility and utility.

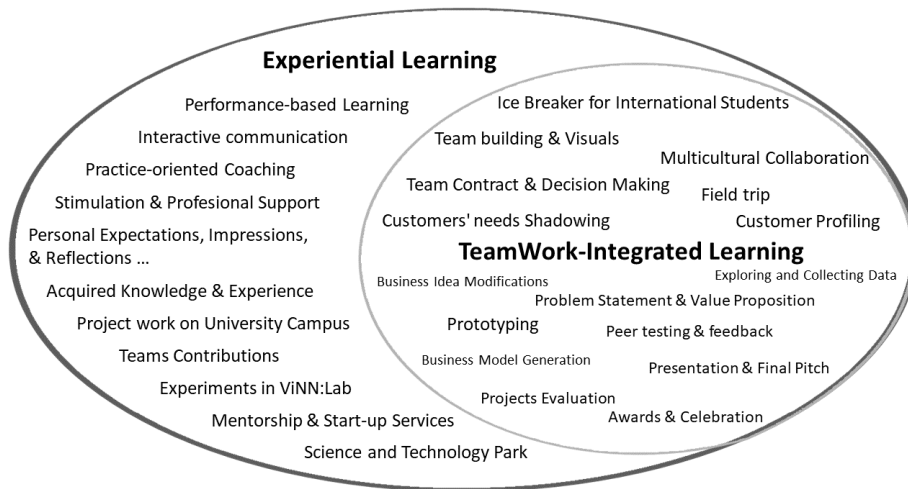
Source: own elaboration based on the ECMT+ Intensive Programmes (participatory observation and co-authorship) and Kolb Learning Styles Inventory 4.0 (Kolb & Kolb, 2011).

The Intensive Programmes involved a creative and iterative process using problem-based learning to address the ECMT+ project challenge. Students spend a significant amount of time working intensively both independently and in teams, meeting new people and discovering new ideas. Workshops provided students with a wide range of opportunities for substantial and practical teamwork experience that complements academic study programmes.

After the end of the IPs, the participants were asked to evaluate the workshops by writing a reflective essay. The variety of methods applied for entrepreneurship education and the practice-oriented way were met with a high approval of participants. The free and open teamwork, yet well-coordinated mentoring by teachers, provided a full sense of creating a unique solution, merging individual team members. In the students' opinion, the main advantage was the classes conducted in the working teams under the guidance of coaches with practical experience. Undoubtedly, support and feedback from a mentor can significantly improve the process of knowledge acquisition. The competences of team members (or their lack) in the area of division of tasks, decision making, respect for different values and behaviors as well as shared responsibility for tasks and time management are essential for effective collaboration and the learning process.

Teamwork and intercultural collaboration by developing unique business solutions were crucial for achieving the expected final results of Intensive Programmes using the experiential learning approach. It is a broader term which encompasses diverse entrepreneurial activities, which includes teamwork-integrated learning. Figure 1 presents a wide range of tasks and activities implemented through teamwork, which were part of the overall framework of the experiential learning process within the ECMT+ project. These activities include, for example team building and identity (visuals), team contract and decision-making agreement, division of tasks (team roles), common field trip, exploring and collecting data, problem statement and value proposition, prototyping, business model generation, peer testing and feedback as well as presentation and the final pitch.

Fig. 1. Teamwork-Integrated Learning within the framework of the ECMT+ Experiential Learning



Source: own elaboration based on the ECMT+ Intensive Programmes (participatory observation and co-authorship).

The stimulating and challenging activities provide thought provoking experiences that can generate discussion, brainstorming, and enable participants to understand challenges for personal improvement. In turn, the role of a mentor is to encourage team members to ask questions which should stimulate thought at individual level and enable the group to debate these constructively. In the opinion of Jamie Thompson, the experiential guru (www.experientiallearning.org), the success of the experiential approach to learning depends to a large extent on the learners. They can only make best use of their opportunities if they are ready, willing and able to become personally involved in the learning process. Moreover, people learn by reflecting on their experiences, developing personal insights and understandings, through involvement in intellectual, emotional or physical activity.

5. Conclusions

The Partners of the ECMT+ consortium focus on finding ways to develop the students' and graduates' entrepreneurial mindset and practices in a way that is easily adoptable and scalable. The Intensive Programmes and teacher collaboration in the project aim at finding concrete tools to build and promote entrepreneurial mindset. The theoretical background benefits from the entrepreneurial university scheme (Lackeus, 2015). "In the ECMT+ the entrepreneurial university is explored as a scheme which directly involves students, teachers, businesses and high education institution management, has measurable actions and promotes both the teachers' and students' competences in visible and recognized manner" (Badzińska & Timonen, 2019, p. 12).

Based on the reflections of the IP's participants it can be stated that the experiential approach to teaching and learning entrepreneurship was met with a high level of acceptance by them and brought them tangible benefits, both in terms of knowledge and new experiences as well as in effective collaboration and generation of interesting business solutions. Different backgrounds, fields of study and cultural diversity turned out to be something unique for many students. An important advantage was an opportunity to learn and experience a different perspective on the same issues and exchange views. Especially noteworthy are the responses of students who found that multicultural collaboration provided them with an opportunity to work on their weaknesses and to develop certain competences. Moreover, the importance of acquired knowledge and practical experience for future professional work was emphasized and appreciated.

This exploratory study within the framework of the ECMT+ project can contribute to the dissemination of good practices regarding to entrepreneurship education in multicultural environment. However, changes and improvement still need to be carried out to make this implementation possible. Moreover, it is necessary to promote the inclusion of entrepreneurship as a key competence in all regular teaching activities, especially in the high education level.

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