# From the zoo to the jungle – narrative pedagogies and enterprise education

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**Abstract:** *There is scope for a better understanding of the development of entrepreneurial competences in students through experiential learning pedagogies by engaging them with the entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurs' habitats. This study analyses a novel pedagogical interaction which embraces the narrative aspects of entrepreneurial learning by encouraging students to review and relate their experiences of enterprise education critically and to reflect on how those experiences prepare them for an entrepreneurial career. The study highlights the value of experimenting with more embedded ways of teaching entrepreneurship that resonate with the lived experience of entrepreneurs. In light of their analysis, the authors offer recommendations on how to incorporate entrepreneurial learning mechanisms as part of the education of future entrepreneurs.*

**Keywords:** *entrepreneurship; education; pedagogy; experiential learning; entrepreneurial habitat; narrative*

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The field of entrepreneurship education is highly heterogeneous in terms of its definition, purpose, content and pedagogy and as such research into it is constantly evolving. This is particularly the case with entrepreneurship education pedagogy, which contains many diverse views on the 'what' and the 'how' of entrepreneurship education (Kirby, 2004; Gibb, 2009). It is in this area, entrepreneurship education pedagogy (notably experientially based learning), that this study is positioned. We argue that entrepreneurship education must extend beyond the classroom and provide an opportunity for the student to experience and learn 'with' and 'from' the entrepreneur, thus instilling real world entrepreneurial 'know how'. In this paper we seek to contribute to the practices of entrepreneurship pedagogy through examining embedded, experiential entrepreneurship education. To that end we draw upon evidence from teams of students who have completed the University of Limerick's Business Consultancy module, a practice-based programme that strives to develop core entrepreneurial competences and exposes students to entrepreneurs in the latter's normal working environments. The study interrogates students' perspectives on their gains in key entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and competences and attempts to establish where and how optimal learning occurred.

Engaging with entrepreneurs in their own socio-economic world is in the spirit of the call put forward by McLean (1973) that we recognize '. . .the proper place to study elephants is the jungle, not the zoo' and more recently to the invitation put forward by Vanevenhoven (2013) '. . .that we need to send our students out into the

actual environments that they are studying' (Vanevenhoven, 2013, p 468). However, as educators we fail all too often to consider what is the most appropriate 'zoo' – in this case, the entrepreneurial context.

The study examines the students' reflexive narratives of their experiences of the Business Consultancy module, in order to assess the characteristics, benefits and drawbacks of such experiential programmes embedded in the entrepreneurial habitat. A critical evaluation from the wider perspective of enterprise education is also performed, so as to provide a conceptual – as well as empirical analysis – of such pedagogies.

## Moving enterprise education from the zoo to the jungle

Despite the many views on the 'how' of entrepreneurship education, there is convergence of opinion that the traditional didactic pedagogies are not sufficient, with a preference being expressed for those that are action-based and experiential in nature (Gibb, 2002; Cooper *et al*, 2004; Kirby, 2004; Heinonen and Poikkijoki, 2006; Pittaway and Cope 2007; Blenker *et al,* 2008; Vanevenhoven, 2013). Indeed, Haase and Lautenschläger (2011) indicated the need to desist from simply teaching knowledge on business creation and that learning by doing and experiential learning are appropriate modes for instilling entrepreneurial 'know how'. The favoured options for experiential learning focus on getting closer to the entrepreneur or becoming embedded in a 'real-life situation' (Akola and Heinonen, 2006). Similarly, Taatila (2010) found that relevant entrepreneurial skills and competencies are best learned through 'pragmatic real-life development projects' that are highly experiential in nature. Neck and Greene (2011) recommend that teaching entrepreneurship as a method which extends beyond understanding, knowing, and talking and requires using, applying and acting in an entrepreneurial manner is most effective.

Consensually, at the core of the experiential learning is the ability for students to practise entrepreneurship through action-based pedagogies which, through exposure, allow students to engage actively in tasks that stimulate the types of behaviour the entrepreneur enacts on a daily basis (Lightner *et al*, 2007; Page and Mukherjee, 2007; Haase and Lautenschläger, 2011). Action-based and experiential learning extends beyond 'fieldwork' or 'praxis' (the connecting of learning to real-life situations) in a structured classroom situation and provides a deeper cognitive learning: experiential, reflective and reflexive (Tenenbaum *et al*, 2001; Hytti and O' Gorman, 2004; Brennan, 2005). It locates

reflection and learning within the social, historical and structural contexts in which knowledge is shaped, manufactured and used and integrates reflection and action, albeit as a process in which individuals in a group support each other in their own and their peers' reflections and learning (Ramsey, 2005; Higgins, 2008; Corradi *et al*, 2010). Action-based learning typically causes various conflicts and critical incidents, generating high levels of emotions, which in turn can have important effects on learning and identity building processes (Jarvis, 2006). Cope (2011) and Butterfield *et al* (2005) highlighted the role of negative emotions in learning, often described in terms of conflicts and critical incidents, as important aspects of action learning. According to Zuber-Skerrit (2002) action learning involves, in essence, learning about learning and using this to learn from both positive and negative learning episodes and contexts. However, less emphasis is placed on the negative learning, despite the rich learning ('knowing what not to do in the future') obtained from dealing with, for example, uncertainty, conflict and business rejection.

Team-based activities can form a strong component of action learning and add value to the student in three main ways: personally, socially and educationally. Stein (2006) cited the personal benefits of teamwork as building confidence, making assignments more enjoyable and increasing the relevance of work interaction for learning and for the work place. Social benefits include making friends, exposure to business people and networking and, from an educational perspective, skills such as problem-solving, reasoning, communication, listening and leadership were developed. When synergy exists between the three sets of benefits then a more holistically knowledgeable, informed, confident and creative graduate is developed (Hytti *et al*, 2010).

Thus it is argued that the traditional lecture-based didactic methods of teaching and learning are insufficient alone as entrepreneurship education pedagogies. In agreement with Cooper *et al* (2004), to achieve 'real, active learning' there is a need to provide opportunities for students to 'see, touch and feel' entrepreneurship at first hand by working alongside practising entrepreneurs. This further reinforces the belief that we need to send our students out into the actual environments that they are studying: from the zoo to the jungle.[1]

## Research methodology

As stated earlier, the purpose of the research was to assess the characteristics, benefits and drawbacks of experiential entrepreneurial education programmes from

the students' points of view. Consistent with the principles of existential phenomenology (Thompson *et al*, 1989; Cope, 2005a), our approach elevated the lived experience of the entrepreneurial student as the focus of our research, seeking to make sense of learning in the way that it is experienced by the students. This was further informed by an ontological understanding of reality as 'narratively' constructed (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001), narrative being long recognized as a primary mode of acquiring human knowledge and of communication (Czarniawska, 1998) and the main means by which people make sense of and structure their life experiences (Bruner, 2004). The methodology was therefore designed to gather and interpret students' reflexive accounts of their learning experience, having completed an enterprising education module.

Specifically, we focused on student experiences of two cohorts of a Business Consulting module delivered to interdisciplinary students. This module offers individuals, small businesses and community groups a consultancy service to identify and solve their business problems: student teams adopt the role collectively of a business consultant, to provide the small firm client with a range of practical, realistic and implementable recommendations based on an implementation plan having fixed provisions for a financial budget and an operational timetable. Although the student teams were not physically located in the firms concerned, they could visit the clients throughout the process to observe the business practices in operation and each client met with the students on a number of occasions throughout the completion of the module at the university. The module culminates with the students presenting their clients with a written consultancy report as well as making a formal verbal presentation of their findings to the client, faculty members and invited guests (such as representatives of development or funding agencies). In addition, this module provided a sample of significant diversity in terms of the student demographic characteristics and educational fields. Thirty-two students voluntarily consented to participate in this study and Table 1 presents an overview of their profiles.

We followed Czarniawska's (1998) advice and 'concocted' an appropriate device in order to facilitate the endeavours of making sense of the students' experience. Use of the term 'device' is based on its potential for interpretation as 'artfulness and instrumentality, but not necessarily high tech and standardisation' (Czarniawska, 1998, p 1) and, in addition, that '. . .a device [rather than a method] can be idiosyncratic' (Czarniawska, 1998, p 1). For the purposes of this research we purposefully deviated from the 'pure' phenomenological interview, which consists of a free-flowing conversation directed by the

**Table 1. Student profile.**

| Interview number | Gender | Discipline/areas of study | Nationality |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male | Equine science | Irish |
| 2 | Male | Business studies | Irish |
| 3 | Female | Business studies / Accounting | Irish |
| 4 | Male | Food Science | Irish |
| 5 | Female | Business studies/Marketing | Irish |
| 6 | Male | Business studies/Marketing | Irish |
| 7 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | German |
| 8 | Female | Equine science | Irish |
| 9 | Female | Production management | Irish |
| 10 | Male | Business studies/Economics | Irish |
| 11 | Male | Food science | Irish |
| 12 | Male | Production management | Irish |
| 13 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Irish |
| 14 | Male | Food science | Irish |
| 15 | Male | Mechanical engineering | |
| 16 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Indian |
| 17 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Chinese |
| 18 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Irish |
| 19 | Female | Architecture | Irish |
| 20 | Male | Software design | Irish |
| 21 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Russian |
| 22 | Female | Mechanical engineering | Irish |
| 23 | Male | Business/Marketing | |
| 24 | Male | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Irish |
| 25 | Female | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Irish |
| 26 | Male | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Irish |
| 27 | Male | Production management | Irish |
| 28 | Female | Business/Marketing | Irish |
| 29 | Female | Business/Accounting | Irish |
| 30 | Male | Business/Economics | Irish |
| 31 | Male | Business studies/Entrepreneurship | Saudi Arabian |
| 32 | Female | Equine science | Irish |

participant (Cope, 2005a). A semi-structured questionnaire, although not typical, has been used as an alternative in phenomenological consumer research (see, for example, Mick and Demoss, 1990). We provided students with a semi-structured interview guide consisting of unstructured, descriptive questions which identified a number of themes and encouraged students to write freely and describe their experiences in these areas. This device was flexible enough to afford the

students the space and time to reflect on their experiences and freely construct their stories. It also provided anonymity by freeing the students from face-to-face interviews with faculty; and, equally, gave them the opportunity to think about and reflect on their experiences.

The analysis was carried out by four researchers. Each interview text was read several times by two scholars, with rotating responsibilities to ensure maximum independence. Detailed analysis and discussion by the whole team refined and consolidated the theme protocol. The analysis process resembled the 'hermeneutic circle', where understanding and interpretation are different moments of making sense of the world (Thompson *et al,* 1994). Hence, 'the meaning of a whole text is determined from the individual elements of a text, while, at the same time, an individual element is understood by referring to the whole of which it is a part' (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p 63); that is, the part-to-whole iterations involve intratext and intertext cycles (Thompson, 1997). Initially, each interview was analysed using what has been termed as *holistic-content* analysis (Lieblich *et al*, 1998, p 13). Each interview text was read carefully until patterns started emerging. Initial and global impressions were put into writing and notes were taken of the exceptions to the general impression, as well as unusual features of the narratives such as contradictions or unfinished descriptions. The emergent themes were then used to provide categories for the analysis across the interviews, thus employing the *categorical-content* approach (Lieblich *et al*, 1998). This is essentially similar to what is widely known as 'content analysis': it separates extracts and classifies parts of the story into defined categories or groups. This was appropriate because the experience of the module was shared among the participants and the categorical approaches to data analysis allow for the identification of themes across the interviews. Four main themes emerged from our analysis of the interviews and these are discussed in the remainder of the paper.

## Findings

The study's findings were found to fall within four main themes: entrepreneurial self-development; the learning journey; pedagogical bridges and balances; and relationships and networks. With regard to their entrepreneurial self-development, students told us they had learned about and acquired a range of core entrepreneurial competences, as well as developing and refining their business acumen. Above and beyond these *sine qua non* aspects of entrepreneurship education, however, they also identified substantively enhanced

self-knowledge, as well as a deeper and broader appreciation of the entrepreneur within the entrepreneur's 'natural' habitat. The students' learning journeys were characterized by a very strong intrinsic sense of joy and achievement, despite their experiences of being strongly challenged in a variety of ways – personally and professionally. Much emphasis was placed on the authenticity of the learning journey, as well as on the autonomy which it demanded of students. In terms of pedagogical bridges and balances, we found that the module acted to span theory and practice as well as bridging the students' journeys from university life to working careers. Balancing structure and flexibility was also a crucial, third element in connecting, pedagogically, the academic realm with the 'real world' of lived entrepreneurial experiences. With regard to our fourth and final theme, relationships and networks, it was clear that challenges, chaos and problems were both articulated and negotiated within the relational nexus. Learning was co-produced through team interactions and a clear recognition of the added value of shared complementary skill-sets was also highlighted. In addition, students also explicitly reported the significant value of the strong networks and relationships with multiple actors which they had built as an integral part of their learning experience.

### Entrepreneurial self-development

*Business skills and competences.* As noted above, students documented a wide range of specific business skills and competences which they had developed as a result of their participation in the Business Consulting Module. Examples of these tangible skills and competences included:

- report writing;
- research;
- presentation;
- professional communication;
- qualitative interviewing;
- project management;
- client management;
- listening and understanding;
- networking;
- database building;
- team working;
- time management; and
- cost analysis.

These may appear rather mundane learning outcomes, but nevertheless they are foundational business practices which it is anticipated all business school graduates should have developed and refined. Thus it was gratifying to note that, with its other benefits, this form of embedded experiential learning

also contributes to the learning of fundamental business competences which are very transferable into any business size contexts.

> 'I learnt a huge amount from getting the first three versions wrong and feel much more confident in questionnaire design now. I would actually count it as one the bigger learning outcomes for me on the programme.' (Interview 13)

> 'I had in the past been good at presentations but always suffered from nerves, however after the presentation to St Gabriel's I feel empowered to present to anyone without any worries. I am very pleased with this outcome because it means a lot to me and to my future career!' (Interview 17)

> 'Writing up the report was at times tough as we had no experience of how to do it best.' (Interview 8)

> 'This however was a good learning experience.' (Interview 7)

*Business acumen.* The interviews also revealed the theme of business acumen development. This relates to building the students' overall confidence to operate in a business context and imagining themselves as potential entrepreneurs, consultants and management professionals. There was evidence of students developing an awareness and appreciation of their own 'street smarts' and learning about their own heuristics for judging situations and people and acting accordingly. We would argue that while foundational business competences can be and are taught through more formal didactic approaches, the only place where such acumen can be learnt is in a hands-on business environment. As such, embedded experiential learning can be seen to offer enhanced business acumen skills that are not normally encountered by students in the classroom.

> 'I learned my value to a group really. I realized how entrepreneurship and business is for me as I do have a head for it.' (Interview 8)

> 'Great ideas do does not mean guaranteed success. Our clients failed to establish a business for their product at an early stage and as a result lost a lot of momentum in getting their product to a further stage.' (Interview 13)

> 'You have to be very conscious of not only what the client wants but what their customer wants. It's always a challenge to know whether to play it safe or take a risk.' (Interview 13)

*Personal reflection and self knowledge.* Students discussed a sense of self-awareness as a result of their engagement with the module. These relate to perceived personality characteristics and traits, to strengths and weaknesses and the team roles they deemed relevant to themselves. Personal reflections were inspired by their extended involvement in complex tasks and, especially, stimulated by their interactions with other actors. The development of enhanced personal identities and critical self-knowledge represents a substantial benefit for students involved in this kind of team-based task-centred learning, which appears to act as a substantial stimulus for self-enquiry and self-identity, central aspects in the development of the entrepreneur.

> 'I learned to know when to lead and know when to be lead.' (Interview 10)

> 'I learned that I could be a strong leader but do feel comfortable having someone to ask for a second opinion. I learned that I am an enthusiastic person and this can be contagious in a team environment.' (Interview 3)

> 'I learned that I'm far more tenacious than I thought. I used good lateral thinking to bring ideas outside the brief and was articulate when trying to explain to the team why I was suggesting these.' (Interview 13)

*Entrepreneurs in their habitat.* Extensive exposure to the entrepreneurial context – the habitat of the entrepreneur – also provided a focus for student learning. Students shared their insights into the nature of the socio-economic context within which their client entrepreneurs operated and what they had learnt from this experience. Many of their vignettes involved a demystification of the stereotypical, heroic rhetoric of the entrepreneurs, recognizing instead the entrepreneurs' vulnerability to resource constraints and market turbulence. The previous theme referred to student self-entrepreneurial identity: through engaging directly in the entrepreneurial habitat, the self-identity of the entrepreneur undoubtedly became apparent, presenting a fruitful opportunity for the students in some ways to 'mirror-image' themselves on the entrepreneurs with whom they worked. Also clear were the students' experiences of the inherent messiness, ambiguity and underdeveloped nature of entrepreneurial planning and recognition that the entrepreneurial context can be chaotic, unfocused and frustrating. The extremely hard work demanded of entrepreneurs, too, was identified and discussed extensively. The aptness of the jungle metaphor for the entrepreneurial context thus seems particularly clear.

> 'Love is blind. As entrepreneurs we hold our businesses to be far too precious, we need to treat them as what they are, a business, and whilst we may

pour our hearts and souls into them, it can be that very emotional attachment that may doom them to failure. So, love your business but be fair to it, validate, validate, validate.' (Interview 13)

'Small businesses can be just as successful as large multinationals. Small businesses just have to work harder due to lack of resources available to them.' (Interview 11)

'While small businesses may have good business ideas, but lack of business intuitions and knowledge may become the biggest barrier on the path to success. A lack of business know-how had hindered them in acquiring funding in the past. This ultimately led to a loss of potential growth and momentum for the clients.' (Interview 13)

'Big thing I learned from entrepreneur – he is too caught up with paperwork and micro aspects of the business – he works for the business rather than working on the business.' (Interview 13)

*The learning journey*

An important theme with regards to the learning journey was the description of the module as a positive experience. This relates mainly to a sense of enjoyment and achievement arising from the students' experiences with the module. It is also important to note that a key factor involved in this is the perceived authenticity of the project (that is, whether it is perceived as a 'real world' situation). The accountability and autonomy which authenticity entailed likewise added significantly to students' learning journeys. The focus of the feedback in the narratives relates not only to content or knowledge acquisition but also to skills and personal development, also evident in the previous section. Knowledge acquisition is undercover learning, taking place where the outputs and results are the focus of the learning rather than theory or didactic content. In the field, practice often preceded theory. Challenges provided a special opportunity for learning and, perhaps surprisingly, were celebrated for this very reason.

*Joy and achievement.* Paramount in students' tales of their experiences were the intrinsic rewards they garnered. These included a real sense of joy in the learning process and of achievement regarding the outcomes of the course. Students described their experiences with the module as enjoyable and interesting in comparison with the conventional module format – which they perceived as less experiential and practical in nature. In some cases the positive nature of the experience was presented as developing through their individual engagement with the module. Furthermore, the interviews reveal a sense of

achievement experienced through their engagement with the consultancy project. This involved feeling that they had accomplished something useful in the business context and that their outputs would be used in the real world. The practical purposeful benefits achieved for the client companies engendered a fierce sense of pride. Students learned about the joy of learning and pride in meaningful achievement in a manner all but impossible to achieve in the classroom setting.

'The relationship I formed with the clients is one that I have thoroughly enjoyed and would find it a pleasure to work again with them sometime down the line if any possibilities arose.' (Interview 11)

'Personally researching the trends meant I had to understand and tie together the significance of a lot of very fluid concepts (Big Data, Cloud, software as a service etc) and though it wasn't easy but I was really proud of this! I felt as if I had really conquered something.' (Interview 13)

'I feel that our suggestions will help our client and it is important, especially in recessionary times, to support the little guy and help them grow.' (Interview 6)

*Confronting challenges.* Challenges were experienced as an integral part of students' learning journeys. Whilst these varied from project to project, problems of time management, resolving team disagreements and managing the client relationship featured repeatedly. Unanticipated, however, was the *post hoc* celebration of these challenges as events which had been met, tackled and surpassed. Again, the opportunities that embedded experiential entrepreneurship education offer for learning positively, from negative experiences, were manifested.

'At certain times it would be challenging when a decision had to be made on various alternative presented by team members to resolve a particular issue.' (Interview 14)

'Time management was probably one of my biggest challenges; it was hard to align the information gathered and subsequent actions.' (Interview 16)

'I suppose the critical point was writing up the final report, making sure that all relevant information was included in the report. With the loss of on team member the team was under pressure to get the report finished in time for the arranged presentation to the client. We overcame this pressure by pulling together as a team.' (Interview 13)

*Authenticity, autonomy and accountability.* The perceived authenticity of the experience appears to be a

crucial factor regarding the students' satisfaction with the module and the project in particular. We noted that the word 'real' was used very frequently in students' descriptions of their allocated clients (for example, 'real business') and the context ('real world') of the project. In addition, scenarios with perceived lack of authenticity (that is, 'non-real') seem, to a certain degree, to compromise the satisfaction gained from the experience. Of course, not all aspects of the real business world are positive and authenticity also includes developing a mature assessment of the 'dark side' of business life. Students reflected pragmatically on these negative aspects of authenticity: this is encouraging, given calls for greater emphasis to be placed on learning from entrepreneurial failures. An additional feature of authenticity was that it developed accountability within student teams for the module, so that responsibility for learning was transferred from teacher to student and between students. There was evidence for this in the strong sense of autonomy expressed by students. The requirement to make decisions, act on them and meet deadlines also enhanced this autonomy.

> 'From doing primary and secondary research to working under real-time clients. It gave the module a sense of authenticity that was lacking from other modules. This authenticity gave an extra incentive in achieving our desired targets.' (Interview 13)

> 'We were representing someone's business, their livelihood and the culmination of all their hard work to date. Therefore, it was important to treat that stage with respect and quadruple check everything that was going out to their prospective clients.' (Interview 18)

> 'It was truer to a real-life scenario where teams must work together and everyone plays their part.' (Interview 16)

### Pedagogical bridges and balances

An important theme that emerged from the student interviews relates to the perception of the module as bridging, or balancing, dyads of contrasting phenomena. By being co-located within both the academic and business realms and connecting the two, the module also embraces – bridges, balances – both theory and practice, student life and a working career, and structure and flexibility. This theme runs across the interviews and highlights that a change of learning context, moving from the zoo to the jungle, also generates other important changes. By embedding students pedagogically in the entrepreneurial context and exposing them to the benefits of experiential learning, the module also inculcates important aspects of lifelong learning which should stand them in good stead long after the completion of their degrees.

*Bridging theory and practice: 'connecting the knowing to doing'.* Most of the students expressed their satisfaction with the pedagogical approach of the module as their preferred mode of learning, often described as a 'learning by doing', 'hands on', 'practical' approach. The experiential characteristic of the module was recognized and valued by students as adding substantially to their learning by connecting the knowing – developed in the remainder of their degree studies – to the doing.

> 'To quote Confucius, ''I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.'' Learn-by-doing is the only way to learn.' (Interview 12)

> 'The hands-on approach to the module was right up my street. It brought us from the class-room to the ''real world'' and prepared us for what's ahead. I believe that the module took in everything we have learned over our four years from economic modules to marketing module to accounting and incorporated them into this module. It was the perfect way to put what we learned in class to society.' (Interview 14)

> 'I love learning by doing so found it a much more beneficial way of learning. I think it would be very easy for some people to learn from a textbook and regurgitate it in an exam but how of that do they remember a month later? A hands-on approach teaches you skills for life without you even realising it.' (Interview 3)

*Stepping from university onto a real world career path.* Students, in a variety of ways, experienced the module as a step before entering the 'real world'. There was a sense of the module as preparation for the real world, bridging not only theory and practice but also student life and future career paths. The expression 'the real world' has different meanings for students and offers a multiplicity of different career paths. We found that students' learning in the module paved the way for a variety of alternative careers. In several instances, this step was made very firmly indeed, with the entrepreneurs employing students after completion of the project to carry out specific, skilled tasks, drawing on their professional training (for instance, as a designer or a market researcher). For others, enacting the entrepreneurial context opened up the career possibility of becoming entrepreneurs or consultants working with entrepreneurs. As students contemplated moving on from university into their future careers, their learning on this module opened up new possibilities to them.

'Gathering the funding options will benefit me in the future as it opened my eyes to the varying sources and methods of acquiring funding.' (Interview 13)

'It gives good real-life experience that then be transferred into practical examples that can be used in future job interviews. This is the closest we can get to a real-life work scenario.' (Interview 7)

'I have formed a relationship with the clients. This is beneficial as I will continue to work with them over the summer months in developing the business side of the company even further.' (Interview 13)

'Personally I have learned than consultancy is something I would like to do as a career. It is challenging and rewarding. Every client is looking for something different so the working environment is always exciting.' (Interview 14)

*Balancing structure and flexibility.* Pedagogically, the bridging discussed above is achieved through the workshop format that involved individual meetings between each group and their allocated supervisor. The interviews revealed a need for balance between structure and flexibility. This is evident through the student statements relating to their satisfaction with the absence of conventional lectures but simultaneously highlighting the importance of the weekly individualized workshops as sources of structure, clarity, time and task management and continuous feedback and improvement. Such dynamic project-specific support for learners makes unique demands of faculty, whose facilitation of the process requires surrendering accountability and decision-making to student learners. Whilst students largely exhibited considerable enthusiasm for this structured flexibility, there were also some signs of anxiety in the face of a change in didactic format, which extended students beyond their comfort zones.

'I loved the weekly meetings. It made sure that we met every week and we always had individual tasks assigned, so everyone knew what had to be done [...] I think if the two hour lectures were on as well it would have taken from our time on the project and there probably would be a poor attendance.' (Interview 1)

'Our lecturer provided excellent support and advice for the remainder of the group meetings which I felt was a much better situation as it was truer to a real-life scenario where teams must work together and everyone plays their part, but also provided for learning from the lecturer working in a mentoring role.' (Interview 17)

'It [workshop format] benefited us because we knew exactly where we had gone wrong by getting the feedback. This helped us to learn more and do the rest of the project better. Feedback was very important!!' (Interview 15)

*Relations and networks*

The fourth and final main theme we found in students' reflective narratives highlighted the significance to their experiences of relationships, interactions with others and networks. Thus far, it has perhaps been the experiential element of the course delivery which has been the focus of attention. Here, instead, the embedded characteristic of the module is emphasized, most especially the socially-negotiated and co-created nature of the entrepreneurial habitat. The 'jungle' is engaged with and, through interactions with a range of other stakeholders, challenges are articulated and negotiated relationally and new knowledge is co-produced and co-learnt. The team is the pivot around which the project revolves and its processes, management, joys and tribulations are much reflected upon by students, who celebrate the shared, complementary skill-sets which the team 'owns'. Finally, a core outcome of the module for students is the development of their own social capital, as their individual and collective networks widen and deepen.

*The relational negotiation of challenges.* The interviews revealed insightful areas of challenge, often experienced at the intersections of the two realms of education and business, but also within teams. Most challenges were articulated within student narratives as being relational in nature and were also negotiated and tackled through interactions between people. That is, relationships acted as the nexus for critical challenges to the smooth progress of tasks, both in terms of problem identification or emergence, but also – often – as the venue and process through which these were resolved.

'At [the] start the client was reluctant to take on advice/changes – ''client shield'' in his own words. However, the team challenged the client and ''stood up'' to him and in the end he was open to our advice/changes.' (Interview 11)

'The initial meeting with the client was a little awkward in that they were not yet aware of what we would be feasibly able to deliver in the set timeframe and we weren't sure what would be expected of us. For that reason there was a little bit of tension in that first meeting, but once the brief was settled at the second meeting it was relatively all plain sailing from there.' (Interview 13)

'Non-completion of a task promised to the client I felt this betrayed our original commitment and it's not like me to go back on a ''promise'' and I wasn't part of client interface so felt somewhat out of control.' (Interview 16)

*Co-production of learning: teamwork and shared skill sets.* The benefits and complications of teamwork were addressed at some length by students. They highlighted the value gained by embracing team diversity and by sharing effectively within the team setting, as they engaged with a variety of assignments – from generation of ideas, through problem solving and completing specialized tasks. Team members pushed each other to complete tasks to a high standard and to deadlines, raising individual performances and thus enhancing learning still further. Especially celebrated was the diversity of skill-sets within the teams and the fact that it was people's differences that added value, promoted co-production of learning and enhanced overall team performance.

'I like working in a team as I believe ideas flow between people much more than working alone. I enjoy being the ''resource investigator'' as I have the ability and maturity to ask direct questions and get answers.' (Interview 16)

'Each team member had a different way of doing things, but diversity is an unavoidable element of team-work and we all got along with each other's different ways of doing things without grievance and made it work.' (Interview 13)

'As team leader it was a new role, I found that a person can gain a lot from this role as you can learn some experience of being the ''manager'' to effectively get everyone working on the same level with focus to achieve the overall goals in terms of grades and balancing that with the client's needs/wants.'(Interview 19)

*Network development: embeddedness in action.* An additional outcome from the module identified by students was the development of their own social networks and the social capital which they built up during the process with the client entrepreneurs, with their fellow team members and with their faculty supervisor. This new resource was valued as a real benefit in its own right, as well as offering potential support in the future.

'I have formed a relationship with the clients. This is beneficial as I will continue to work with them over the summer months in developing the business side of the company even further.'(Interview 15)

'This [relationship with the lecturer and supervisor] doesn't really happen with other modules and is very reassuring to realize that lecturers are actually normal human beings! Not just robots at the top of the class on a rant about the state of the economy.' (Interview 2)

'I have learned that business and entrepreneurship is still about 'people' and 'relationships', no matter what size the company or type of industry they operate in.' (Interview 7)

In summary, the findings demonstrate the mastery students acquired in key entrepreneurial skills and competences 'from' and 'with' entrepreneurs and by means of peer leaning enabled by the faculty supervisor. The voices of the students bring to the fore the role of the entrepreneur as a source and conduit/intermediary for rich tacit learning. Teamwork is a powerful learning support mechanism and generates peer and relational learning. Given this, we suggest that the entrepreneurs should be examined more closely, to understand how they learn, as the basis for devising pedagogies that are more appropriate. Informed by the narratives from the students we have extended the literature on action learning to include entrepreneurial learning, in order to determine how to create synergies between both.

## Discussion

This paper is placed at the intersection of the growing literature on entrepreneurship education and the emerging literature on entrepreneurial learning. It augments the entrepreneurship pedagogy literature by addressing how a practice-based programme can enhance and draw out relevant entrepreneurial skills and competences. In establishing this link between experiential and action based learning and entrepreneurial learning we now discuss how it relates to the four themes of the findings.

### Entrepreneurial development

Reference was made by the students to self-entrepreneurial identity and self-development; and this aligns with Cardon *et al* (2009) who argued that strong entrepreneurial identity will influence the persistence of the entrepreneur in coping with new venture establishment and growth issues. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) have suggested that entrepreneurs will engage in activities focused on 'crafting, protecting and modifying their views of themselves as well as gaining social validation for their views'. Given that an entrepreneur's theories of action are developed from specific learning episodes or experiences, because they

are embodied in the entrepreneur and embedded in the context of the enterprise (Gray, 2002; Rae, 2004), these competences and capabilities can be enhanced by drawing on the experience of others formally or informally and from different sources (Martin and Smith, 2010) or from the interaction of a range of actors including close collaborators within the company and external partners and contacts (Ravasi and Turati, 2005). An entrepreneur's theories of action can therefore offer valuable insights into programme content regarding social validation of ideas and establishing entrepreneurial identity.

### The learning journey

The learning journey of the student contained mixed emotions, moving between structure and uncertainty, conflict resolution and reflectivity – which mirror those of entrepreneurs. Further, the importance of embracing negative learning becomes more apparent in the entrepreneurial learning literature. Petkova (2009) developed a theory of entrepreneurial learning from performance errors and business failures, an important source of learning for entrepreneurs because of their proliferation under the conditions of high uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the start-up process and early life of firms. Given that problems and business mistakes are unavoidable, we would argue that they should be examined more closely by both scholars and practitioners in order to capture the learning opportunities they offer to students.

### Pedagogical bridges and balances

Perhaps one of the key challenges in developing entrepreneurial experiential learning pedagogies is how to ensure relevant entrepreneurial skills are imparted, and in the most appropriate context, to students. Entrepreneurs learn from experience, action and discovery throughout business formation and growth (Gibb, 2010): learning is thus an ongoing process. Experiential, real time and informal learning processes are therefore important strategies for competence development for entrepreneurs (Rae and Carswell, 2001; Sullivan, 2000; Priyanto and Sandjojo, 2005; Wikholm *et al*, 2005; Gibb, 2009; Hickie, 2011). This experiential learning enables the entrepreneur to reflect on actions and modify future actions as a result; it is about enabling the entrepreneur to dissect, reflect and learn from what can be termed 'critical incidents' in a given relevant context (Gibb, 2009; Hickie, 2011). Our findings show that students, too, understand and appreciate the significance of 'learning by doing' and the benefits it brings. Additionally, we would argue that such approaches also act to develop entrepreneurial learning competences, training students to learn, adapt

and develop in much the same way as (successful) entrepreneurs have been found to do.

### Relations and networks

The fervent narratives emanating on the importance of relational networks relate closely to the importance of such networks in the real world of the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial learning is largely viewed as a social phenomenon because entrepreneurs are so firmly embedded in social communities of practice which incorporate a range of networks and business relationships (Rae, 2002; Hamilton, 2004; Cope, 2005b; Thorpe *et al*, 2006). An integral part of the learning process is the complex network of relationships of the small firm owner–manager. (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). In starting the business entrepreneurs will have contact with a variety of individuals who perform a variety of development functions such as exposure, information, protection and challenging tasks; and psychosocial functions such as counselling, role modelling, acceptance and friendship, all providing feedback critiques, protection and friendliness (Cotton *et al*, 2011; Dobrow *et al*, 2012 ). Understanding and acceptance that 'no man is an island' certainly emerged with our students who identified and established relationships and networks to compensate for deficiencies in their skills.

## Conclusions

In summary, in linking experiential learning with entrepreneurial learning we draw attention to more explicit links between entrepreneurial cognition and learning, building a stronger foundation for embedded practice-based pedagogies for entrepreneurship education. Whilst this programme seeks to diverge from conventional 'classroom' experiences (the 'zoo') by allowing students to engage with 'real-life' entrepreneurial situations (the 'jungle'), the educators' role is still significant in mediating the two 'habitats' and guiding the students through their own journeys into the 'authentic' entrepreneurial context.

The study offers a number of contributions. First and foremost it has highlighted the clear benefits accruing to students from their participation in embedded, experiential enterprise education. Second – and importantly – the study repeatedly indicated that students have in addition developed entrepreneurial learning competences; that they have learned to learn like an entrepreneur. Specifically, students explicitly valued learning-by-doing within the entrepreneurial context – including learning from challenges, ambiguity and mistakes – and within negotiated networks of interrelationships with other actors. We argue that this

enables students to use their learning to inform future actions and decisions in a more effective manner, which resonates with the needs of entrepreneurs. Such an embedded, experiential module provides the students with the means of acquiring and building important social and human capital and developmental networks, whilst also developing an appetite for continuing learning.

Third, the nature and mode of learning draws attention to the role of the student and how they adapt their learning styles. Engagement by the students in teamwork and in experiential learning and reflection requires them to move from a passive mode of learning to one in which they take ownership and responsibility for their own learning and that of team members and assume roles of problem solvers, decision makers, negotiators, conflict managers and communicators, all of which are unfamiliar or, often, uncomfortable characteristics for the students.

Equally, educators are faced with the challenge of moving to transformative teaching and delivery approaches which facilitate the conditions and processes necessary for connecting cognitive and situative learning. This in turn changes the role of the lecturer from a conveyor of knowledge to a networker, facilitator, coach, mentor and challenger. The role of the educationalist moves from the traditional 'sage on the stage' to that of a 'guide on the side' (Hannon, 2005). This research offers opportunities for further research into the development of narrative means by which to assess the success of such programmes. Such narratives should provide for a holistic assessment of the experience, situating the student within the network of relationships, the space and time within which the entrepreneurial/educational experiences occur and the interface between education and real-life learning.

## Notes

[1] In line with this action approach to enterprise education, we follow McMullen and Shepherd in considering entrepreneurship to be 'the willingness to bear the perceived uncertainty associated with an entrepreneurial act. . .representative of a belief–desire configuration, in which belief of what to do is a function of knowledge and desire of why to do it is a function of motivation' (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006, p 148).

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