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entrepreneurship**

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## **Learning-by-doing as an approach to teaching social entrepreneurship**

### **Abstract**

Many studies have explored the use of learning-by-doing in higher education, but few have applied this to social entrepreneurship contexts and application: this paper addresses this gap in the literature. Our programme involved students working with different stakeholders in an interactive learning environment to generate real revenue for social enterprises. Our results show that learning-by-doing enables students to develop their entrepreneurial skills and enhance their knowledge of social businesses. The findings also show that students became more effective at working in teams and in formulating and applying appropriate business strategies for the social enterprises. Overall, the learning-by-doing approach discussed in this paper is capable of developing the entrepreneurial skills of students, but there are challenges that need to be addressed if such an approach is to be effective.

**Keywords:** Interactive Learning Environment; Learning-by-doing; Pedagogy; Revenue Generation; Social Entrepreneurship

## **Introduction**

In recent years, social entrepreneurship (SE) has been encouraged by the perception that private businesses can solve social issues effectively (Dees, 2001), and probably better than the government departments that have often been responsible for such affairs in the past. In recent years SE education has also been on the rise as a subject of study in British and north American higher education institutions (Gunn, Durkin, Singh and Brown, 2008; Schlee, Curren and Harich, 2009). At present the approach to SE education varies widely, encompassing teaching techniques such as classroom based lectures and workshops to consulting in live projects (Frank, 2005; Gunn et al., 2008). However, the engagement of students in generating real revenues for social enterprises as a learning approach to social entrepreneurial learning has not been fully explored.

This article describes an innovative teaching approach that uses a fund-raising activity as a method of acquiring SE skills and knowledge. This approach adds new learning attributes into the knowledge-acquisition cycle (Kolb, 1984); it helps to create a more rounded interaction between students and the real social enterprise world, and thereby develop the appropriate SE skills. Another contribution is the adoption of a synergistic learning platform (Collins, Smith and Hannon, 2006) using different types of stakeholders to support students' learning. In this case these were the social entrepreneurs, learning facilitators (comprising both academic and non-academic staff from the university), and local businesses who were prepared to sponsor students' fund-raising efforts.

This article starts by explaining how SE skills and knowledge can be acquired. A rationale is offered for the selection of the learning-by-doing approach and the adoption of a synergistic learning platform. The research method and design is then described. We then discuss our findings, and assess how, and what, students learnt from this approach, and what needs to be in place for it to be effective. Finally we discuss how this approach may be used to improve SE education, and make recommendations for further research.

## **Learning-by-doing and social entrepreneurship education**

Our adoption of a new approach to teaching SE grew out of a frustration with the way social entrepreneurship is taught in higher education. We believed that a different approach could result in increased social entrepreneurial capabilities and a better understanding of the context in which social enterprises operate (Gibb, 1987 and 2002). Most SE programmes engage

students at classroom level, with negligible opportunities for students to learn how to create wealth or take risks (Schlee et al., 2009). Being able to cope with emotions such as fear of failure and the ability to deal with uncertainty are also important entrepreneurial attributes that classroom teaching barely addresses (Rae and Carswell, 2000).

A synergistic learning platform (Collins, Smith and Hannon, 2006) involves various stakeholders – in this case students, social entrepreneurs, facilitators and business sponsors - bringing their own respective knowledge, skills and experiences to the learning path (Boud and Costley, 2007). This type of learning environment allows for the exploration of opportunities as well as the implementation of value creation (Rae, 2003, 2009), but in which unsuccessful value creation is not penalized as it would be in the real world. Although the social enterprises benefited from any funds the students were able to generate, they lost nothing if no funds were generated. The students similarly were not penalised if their fund raising efforts were unsuccessful; instead the academic assessment was based on a reflective log of their learning journey.

Most of the research on SE pedagogy (for example Frank, 2005; Schlee et al., 2009) has studied the use of case studies, live projects and the development of business plans. Since social entrepreneurs have similarities with mainstream entrepreneurs (Harding, 2006), it can be assumed that some of the skills needed and appropriate learning methods are similar (Rae and Carswell, 2000). Thus opportunity-centred learning (Rae, 2003) may be an appropriate pedagogic approach for SE as it has been shown to be for ‘normal’ entrepreneurs (Deakins, and Freel, 1998; Young and Sexton, 1997). The key elements of this learning approach include a) trial and error; b) doing; c) discovery; and d) problem solving.

Through social interactions people can learn and further their knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1998). Learning is also influenced by individuals’ emotional intelligence and culture (Gibb, 2002). The behaviours that should be observed by students to reinforce their learning include exploring new opportunities, taking risks, commitment to work, applying intelligence and determination (Caird, 1990). Another important epistemological aspect of learning is people feelings (Gibb, 2002). In Gibb’s view cognitive, connative and affective developments are highly driven by personal motivations and emotional intelligence.

A learning-by-doing programme enriches the student experience and thereby enhances the development of their entrepreneurial skills and knowledge (Rae and Carswell, 2000). Kanji

and Greenwood (2001) argue that experiential and opportunity-centred learning is best achieved by setting out actions that have to be conducted by nascent entrepreneurs.

In many SE curricula, inside and outside of the classroom, the pedagogy rotates around academic development (Kickul, Griffiths and Bacq 2010; Gunn et al., 2008). The creation of a business plan, as described by Gunn et al. (2008), and Heriot, Cook, Simpson and Parker (2008), is very much in a shadowing role and does not give students direct experience of the business development role. Such methods do not provide the opportunity for students to make real business decisions or to discover the problems that social enterprises encounter, or how they actually generate funds.

There is strong evidence from the literature that experiential projects are a powerful tool in making learning environments meaningful (Higgins and Simpson, 1997), as they allow for interaction and effective learning to take place, which fosters the development of reflective skills (Graham, 2004) by introducing ambiguity (Heinonen and Poikkijoki, 2006).

The experiential projects used in this study provided an interactive environment that enables students to foster the development of their critical thinking and problem solving skills. Students are indirectly forced to resolve the various issues arising in their fund raising events. They are required to analyse the environment of the sponsoring entities, and in the process locate, identify and assess relevant information in order to create a solid business plan. This process was deliberately uncertain and complex (Collins et al., 2006) as entrepreneurship entails the solving of complicated and unstructured problems.

A number of researchers have suggested that moving individuals outside their comfort zone to an engaging and active environment allows for a more expressive self-discovery and learning process to take place (McMullan and Boberg, 1991; Munro, 2008). The range of knowledge and skills involved in developing the financial, technical, legal and market aspects of the business plan also heightened emotions by asking students to address problems with which they lacked familiarity with. Besides, the need to develop skills in time management, planning, negotiation and persuasion (Collins et al., 2006) help students to overcome the uncertainties and complexities of new business venture.

### **The learning programme and methodology**

Having been briefed about the task, students were required to decide on the entrepreneurial activities needed to generate funds for the social enterprise. The course team acted as

facilitators of the process, and encouraged students to be creative and innovative, but they were expected to come up with their own ideas. Being an independent learner and thinker (Collins et al., 2006) were important pedagogic objectives set by the educators.

Five types of stakeholders facilitated the learning process: (1) students themselves (other team members); (2) university lecturers; (3) university corporate services staff; (4) social entrepreneurs; and (5) sponsors. The module leader ensured that there was cohesion and communication between the various stakeholders and the students. The five social entrepreneurs included two charities that provided international aid, a hospice and a local medical charity. Sponsors included local businesses such as business consultants, printing companies and shopkeepers, the university’s Student Union and the university itself.

In addition to carrying out the tasks necessary to raise funds the 99 students that participated in this module were required to reflect on their own progress and complete online wiki logs on a weekly basis. These form the principal source of data for this study. The other stakeholders’ comments on their interactions with students, which were recorded by two of the present authors as contemporaneous notes, also formed part of our data set and were used to triangulate the students’ learning process as well as to identify the role that the different stakeholders played in this. Table 1 lists the different sources of data.

**Table 1:** Data Sources

Source of Data
Students’ reflective logs. Weekly wikis submitted to the university’s online learning environment (Blackboard)
Business plan development notes, including students’ entries (using wikis) on their preparation for the fund raising events.
Video recordings of presentations
Field Notes of e.g. meetings between educators and social entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs and students,
Evidence of students activities, including pictures taken by the students
Stakeholders Communication: Examination and review of relationships between the academic staff and social entrepreneurs and sponsors

We were looking for evidence of learning discussed in the review of literature above. This included how students enhanced their learning, what type of knowledge was acquired, and the link between a-priori (known without prior experience) and posteriori knowledge (gained by experience). Data analysis and presentation in the following section was guided by the six stages of the *Linking Personal Learning to New Business Process Development* discussed by

Gibb (2002, p. 267): Induction; developing valid ideas; developing operational plans and resource identification; negotiation of opportunity; implementation; and survival. The study uses Gibb's approach because it captures the different stages of the study programme and the student learning experience by tracking their progress of meeting the outcomes expected in each stage of the module. Table 2 shows the weekly timetable for the module, expected learning, and the equivalent stages of Gibb's (2002) model.

Students are made aware that they are part of the research project during the first week of the module delivery. Each student had to sign a consent form in accordance with the university code of ethics and research practice. In addition, students were informed about the role played by each stakeholder and their responsibilities.

## **Valuation of the Learning Journey**

### **Stage 1 - Induction**

Week one was a central focus point of the module as it provided an opportunity to orientate the students to their tasks and establish clear methods of collecting data for evaluation and analysis. The induction period also enabled the educators to establish compliance from all participating stakeholders (Kanji and Greenwood, 2001). The students learned that they need to collaborate with other stakeholders in the process of idea generation and evaluation. No funds were available for the project and this forced students to use their own personal initiative to generate funds, including seeking out sponsors for their ideas.

The reflective logs from this stage showed that students were excited about the challenge. The planning wikis revealed students sharing their ideas, considering the commerciality of their ideas such as the need to generate sponsorship, thinking of potential venues for their events and activities, calculating the time required, and assessing the likely income from the various options.

### **Stage 2 – Developing Valid Ideas**

An important aspect of the programme was for the student teams to conduct field research outside of the university environment in order to obtain a greater understanding of the social enterprises they would be working with and how their fundraising events would contribute to the objectives of these enterprises. This also provided an opportunity for the teams to identify

the key priorities of their own work. This stage helped to reinforce the notion of the project being a real one with real outcomes, and the importance of cooperation (Kanji and Greenwood, 2001) where students work with social entrepreneurs and educators to jointly determine priorities.

During this stage, students had to present their ideas for revenue generating events to the social enterprises. This interaction provided direct feedback as to whether their ideas were seen to work or not. The students also learned about organising an event within a specific timescale. For instance, the students generated many ideas but had to prioritise these based on viability and time. One team who presented plans for a sponsored sky dive discovered that although the idea had the potential to generate revenue it was not acceptable because of timescales, the potential financial risk and the logistics of the event. Based on feedback from the social enterprise they developed an alternative plan for a comedy night that had the potential to generate a similar level of revenue but with far less risk. In addition, learning to accept feedback from the social enterprise encouraged the students to explore new avenues.

### **Stage 3 – Developing Operational Plans and Resource Identification**

Students realised the importance of working collectively in evaluating their plans and in managing their relationship with each stakeholder. The plans cover the marketing research, financial feasibility, human resources, risk assessment, and possible alternatives in case that that the initial plan has failed. Each plan was evaluated in terms of students' capacity, and receiving the approval from the social entrepreneur.

The real life experience of attempting to raise funds made students realise that the purpose of a business development plan is to reduce risk, and that any risks taken are informed by evidence. Students are also involved in searching for the resources that can be used in organising the fund raising events. This includes university facilities (i.e. student union), services offered by sponsors in the community, and resources collected from friends and families. The students used the weekly wiki action plan to oversee their progress in terms of collecting the necessary resources and how to proceed to the next step without lagging behind in planning for the fund raising events.

### **Stage 4 – Negotiation of Opportunity**

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A key feature of the module was to encourage the students to be creative in their approach to overcoming what could be significant challenges, such as the generation of revenue without a budget. The teams had to think proactively in order to obtain the resources required. This included negotiating the free use of the facilities of the university for their events, obtaining support for their campaigns from the Students Union, utilising the existing merchandise of the social enterprises, and securing sponsorship from businesses and individuals. Negotiation with sponsors involved students highlighting the positive benefits of participating in the fundraising projects, such as improving their reputation for corporate social responsibility and values.

One team raised funds by encouraging their family and friends to make donations and by going into the community with official collection tins. This provided them with an operational budget that allowed them to organise a sports day for young people in North London. During this event the children were sponsored by their family and friends, tickets were sold for people to watch the event and refreshments and merchandise were sold to the customers.

Our data showed that the majority of the students had difficulty in knowing how to pitch for sponsorship. As a result, the university staff decided to invite students who had prior experience of pitching for sponsors to network with the student teams and share their experiences and expertise. This was organised through a special session run jointly with the National Consortium of University Entrepreneurs. Our data showed that students were more likely to be motivated by their peers rather than the academic staff; the number and quality of ideas increased following this intervention.

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## Stage 5 - Implementation

Eighteen out of nineteen groups successfully generated revenue. The team that failed to raise funds was unsuccessful as they did not have a realistic timescale to implement their plans. They also encountered numerous communication and operational difficulties that resulted in their failure to run their fundraising event. Despite this failure, the learning logs indicated considerable learning about what could and should have been done differently, indicating the benefits of learning in a relatively risk-free environment.

## Alison Done Here

The real life experience enabled students to realise that the business development plan is to reduce risk and that any risks taken are informed based on evidence (see Table 2 for the skills matrix programme). This experience could not be gained in a classroom environment as they learned to discern the meaning of reducing risk through business plan development. The students discovered that they have to meet all the legal requirements for hosting their events and set up appropriate supporting business systems. Student teams also discovered that marketing and promoting the events through social media such as Facebook, Bebo, Myspace and Twitter to their target customers, pricing, timing and the venue of the events contributed to the desired amount of fund raised.

## **Stage 6 – Survival**

A business plan competition was organised so the students could consolidate their business systems for the four social enterprises. The competition was established to motivate the students and to provide a competitive environment that they would experience in a real life situation. During the mock presentation of their business plans they did allow other student teams to observe. This provided an opportunity for the students to pitch their plans and to determine whether their ideas would survive as long term projects for the social enterprises after the competition.

External judges from the business community were invited to give feedback of the students' plans as to whether they would work or not. It has been identified that the group who did not generate the revenue did not meet the criteria for a consolidated business system or meet the expectation of the judges and would not survive in a business environment. This failure was not penalised in their academic assessment but was used as a learning tool to reflect on their failures and how to improve and apply successful methods based on critical evaluation.

## **5. Implications of the Study**

### **5.1. Students (Nascent Entrepreneurs)**

From the reflection journals it is apparent that students have developed a variety of entrepreneurial capacities as a result of the learning model followed in the delivery of the entrepreneurship elective module. Such attributes include setting targets, identifying factors affecting the progress of the plan, and managing resources available to them within a specified timeframe. The entrepreneurial project has also made students enhance their

reflection and evaluation of their own work during each of the six stages of the revenue generation activity. Self-reflection has enabled students challenge their own ideas and hence find new ways of understanding of what is regarded by them as given facts in the past.

## 5.2. Educators

This research project has clearly indicated that university lecturers in modern education should consider new way of learning to teach in a synergistic interactive environment. Going beyond classroom face-to-face teaching is proved to be challenging to the educators who had to deal with various issues that they were not familiar with, such as resolving conflicts occurred in the preparation for the fund raising events and business plan competitions. The educators had the task of finding the right balance of handling conflict resolution and allowing the teams to resolve the conflict themselves. In few occasions the seminar leader was not prepared to confront and handle the conflicts which arose from the created students' teams and module leader is constantly called on to settle the disputes. At the same time and in a number of occasions, students were confused with the roles of academic and non-academic staff making them not approaching the non-academic staff for their assessment enquiry. Overall, it is found that teaching a module in an interactive setting requires educators to develop new skills, which can be acquired through further educational based training involving business professionals.

## 5.3. Social entrepreneurs

The social entrepreneurs proactively engaged with the students and the educators to successfully deliver the programme, such as providing feedback on the students' organised events. They also offered their own expertise and the knowhow to nascent entrepreneurs. Their views on the education programme reveal that they were highly satisfied with revenue generation activities organised by the students as they made them reach a new audience. However, because social enterprises did not have the access to Blackboard site, which was used solely for the weekly communication between students and academic staff, the educators have relied on telephones and convoluted emails in contacting the social enterprises. It has been learned that these communication tools were not effective as the teaching team expected due to the continuous repeat of sending similar emails to different stakeholders. Therefore, we suggest having a more sophisticated tool of communication across the stakeholders, such as IWOBLE.

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Commented [A4]: UOW does not have specific ethic process but we have explained very clearly to students the role of each stakeholder at the start of the module – non academic provided the support for the event, the academic – teaching and assessment and the social entrepreneurs provided the support to ensure project ideas into opportunity in generating revenue  
However, students themselves confused as who they should approach during times of pressure and crisis...shows the intensity of learning environment faced by students under this kind of situation – working with various stakeholders . It shows that our students are weak in handling real life conflict

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## **6. Conclusions**

The research article reveals that learning-by-doing approach is an effective tool in the delivery of SE education. However, this is not free from challenges and obstacles to the various stakeholders involved either as providers or recipients of the learning experience. The three main areas of contribution made in this study are: (1) provide an insight into how SE education can be delivered innovatively and effectively in the real world situation; (2) enhance our comprehension of the nature and the use of collaborative learning approach within a SE education context; and (3) provide a model on which university lecturers can deliver an entrepreneurial module that enables students develop the required skills and competences of a social entrepreneur.

It is apparent from this study that students' ability to learn from practice is not just relevant, but also fundamentally important in positioning the faculty as a place for scholarship. This is in line with Gibb's argument that universities should play much bigger role in the personal development of students. Through the presented model of delivering an entrepreneurial study programme students enhance their intellectual capabilities and applications of modern social entrepreneurship. This, however and as noted by Gibb, cannot be achieved without great emphasis on course design and outcomes.

For future research we propose the engagement of other departments in the university and large social enterprises in the development of SE curriculum. Other researchers could also consider looking at the development of better SE models of practice focusing primarily on enriching students' learning and skills needed for the new generation of graduates.

**Table 2: Skill Matrix Programme**

Session	Activity	Skills Development	Learning Outcomes	Developmental Stages (Gibbs 2002, p 267 )
1.	Introduction to the programme by the participating social enterprises and the university staff team which includes personnel from different departments	Group Working, Management of Information, Innovation, Planning, Reflection, Interaction, Organisation, Exploration	To understand the need for risk taking, creativity and team building in order to effectively plan the activities  To understand that the module requires self motivation	<b>Stage 1:</b> start with a raw idea.  Having assembled a team and obtained the guidelines of the programme the teams meet the social enterprise they are working with (both at the university and at the offices of the enterprise) and begin to develop appropriate activities
2.	Field work – students visit the social enterprises	Group Working, Communication Autonomy, Problem Solving, Management of Information	To identify the key aims and objectives of the social enterprise they are working with  To undertake field research into possible viable project ideas	
3.	Students liaise with social enterprises and develop plans	Group Working, Communication, Problem Solving, Management of Information	To develop potentially viable plans  To develop appropriate timescale  To identify potential resources and facilities  To co-ordinate team roles and responsibilities	<b>Stage 2:</b> moving from raw idea to valid idea  The teams construct their initial plans based on information from the social enterprise. This includes support and guidance from the staff team on the availability of resources and the appropriateness and viability of the plans  The team identify barriers, test if the idea will work and understand the operating conditions
4.	Student presentation of plans in front of social enterprises	Group Working , Communication, Autonomy, Problem Solving, Management of Information, Self Evaluation	To demonstrate effective presentation skills  To develop negotiation and communication skills  To develop interpersonal and team working skills	<b>Stage 3:</b> Valid ideas to scale operation and resource identification  The team incorporate feedback from their clients into their plans and indicate how they will deliver their plans. This includes: identifying their market, identifying resources, promoting their activities and establishing their financial plans

Session	Activity	Skills Development	Learning Outcome	Developmental Stages (Gibbs 2002, p 267 )
5-6	Students run a fund raising event or activity	Group Working , Communication, Autonomy, Problem Solving	<p>To develop event management and co-ordination skills</p> <p>To develop presentation and communication skills</p> <p>To develop monitoring and evaluation tools</p> <p>To develop general management skills</p>	<p><b>Stage 4:</b> Scale to business plan and negotiation</p> <p>This includes the following considerations:</p> <p>Developing appropriate systems to effectively run the activities;</p> <p>Identifying the appropriate resources;</p> <p>Negotiating with customers, suppliers, premises managers and all stakeholders to ensure successful project outcomes including raising funds for the social enterprises;</p> <p>Evaluating the events and making appropriate adjustments for future project developments;</p> <p>Developing business plans for future development based on learning from the initial project</p>
7	Trial run of presentations evaluating the fund raising event activities	Communication, Autonomy, Presentation Skills, Management of Information, Self Evaluation	<p>To evaluate the effectiveness of the projects and activities and present the findings</p> <p>To reflect on their individual and group learning</p>	
8	Student presentation of actions in front of social enterprises	Communication, Autonomy, Presentation Skills, Management of Information, Self Evaluation	<p>To demonstrate how the team have met client expectations</p> <p>To develop presentation skills based on client feedback</p>	

<b>Session</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Skills Development</b>	<b>Learning Outcome</b>	<b>Developmental Stages (Gibbs 2002, p 267 )</b>
9	Final plans and presentations including feedback from social enterprises	Communication, Autonomy, Presentation Skill, Management of Information, Self Evaluation	To develop critical thinking that allows the team to produce plans for the future  To further develop their presentation skills to investigate alternative fundraising models	<b>Stage 5:</b> From negotiation to birth  This includes demonstrating the viability of the projects for long term fund raising. The completed events provide evidence for future larger scale fund raising projects
10	Final Presentation given to a panel of judges	Group working , Communication , Autonomy, Presentation Skill, Management of Information, Self Evaluation	To develop a viable exiting strategy  To demonstrate adequate and effective monitoring systems  To develop business plans for potential future projects	<b>Stage 6:</b> From birth to survival  This is through pitching long term fund raising plans to independent judges. This enables the team to verify the effectiveness and viability of their projects

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