

‘Throwing your students in the lake’ – discursive and communal learning in a disruptive model of business education

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Data for this paper is drawn from a study of student transitions and identities on an innovative BA course in entrepreneurial business management. This programme responds to a priority in UK educational policy – the call for an increase in entrepreneurial education – using a model grounded in the very different social and educational context of Finland, and strongly identified with an international and outward-looking approach to business and to education and learning in general. Students encounter this context through videos, case studies and a visiting member of staff; in addition the distinctive lexis of the original is transposed to the UK setting, so that students refer to some of the novel teaching practices on the course using the same words as their counterparts in other EU countries. From the beginning of the first year students work in teams as business owners and managers, with relatively little ‘traditional’ business school teaching in the form of lectures and seminars. These are replaced by intensive coaching, group projects, and a high level of self-direction and independence. The development of skills such as communication, leadership, creativity, innovation, planning, decision making and working together is emphasised.

The course has a strong and embedded vocational ‘mission’; the development of students not only as *potential* entrepreneurs, but their practical engagement in entrepreneurial activity through setting up an actual company as partners and co-workers. Thus the ‘private good’ of higher education as a route to employment is highly salient. However, the approach requires students to tolerate a relatively high level of uncertainty and risk, and to frame these as positive elements of learning. The contact time with staff involves a minimum of sessions in which they are ‘given stuff’, and a great deal of in-depth discursive small-group teaching in which students must engage with their learning (both practical and theoretical), their tutors, and one another. These sessions depend heavily on their working independently (as individuals and teams) so that they can bring ideas, questions and content on which to work. The aim is to ‘accelerate learning’ and instil a learning orientation. However, this format presents a considerable challenge to a transactional view of higher education for high fee paying students.

Depth interviews were conducted at the end of the first year with two-thirds of the first cohort to enter the programme. These were analysed alongside data from interviews with the staff who acted as coaches, as well as notes taken by the coaches in their sessions with the student teams. In addition some ethnographic observations of coaching sessions and student group meetings were completed.

These students had anticipated a course which is ‘different’, although their actual understanding of this ‘difference’ varies considerably. The ease with which they had made the transition to the high level of independence required for this course and higher education in general varied with the extent to which they had a clear idea of what they would need to do at university. Notions of the ‘independent learner’ varied from the ‘neoconservative’ view of a student ‘cast adrift’ (Leathwood, 2006) to a Newmanesque depiction of a learner who ‘teaches themselves’ and meets with tutors to ask questions and explore ideas.

The *communal* and *immersive* nature of the course had made a considerable impact on these students. Working in teams had led them to reflect more generally on the nature of learning because, unusually, they had encountered not just their own learning orientations and transitions to HE but those of their teammates. This led to a deeper understanding of learning and transformation, but also challenges the notion of an individual student working for their ‘own’ marks. The interviews were remarkable in that the issue of grades was simply not raised by *any* of the interviewees. Students spoke of achievement in terms of a sense of *ownership* and pride in what they could do.

The primary reference of the term ‘learning’, for these students, was to ‘transmission teaching’ and the settings associated with it, usually framed as a direct continuation of compulsory education. All acknowledged, considerable learning gains during the first year but described these in terms of changes in *understanding* and the ability to analyse and critique the world around them, especially in relation to human interactions and motivations, diversity of viewpoint, problem solving and ‘seeing

differently'. They saw these changes as the outcome of their engagement with the course, in particular the discursive and interactive work with their coaches. This was described as a human relationship rather than a teacher-pupil one characterised by asymmetries of power.

Understanding of the role of the tutors/coaches had clearly evolved at different rates during the first year, with some students expecting a more 'regulatory' role than had actually been taken. However, the majority had come to accept the value of the discursive and collegial orientation of the staff. Some had in fact transferred the language of power and control from their 'ideal' tutor to their *self* regulation during the first year.

Students varied in the extent to which they had taken responsibility for the practical aspects of their learning, and for occupying the time and physical environments of the course. These were sites for exploration of new freedoms, some of which were experienced initially as challenging and problematic. Just as students had tried out different ways to populate the notion of 'learning by doing', they had taken different approaches to the 'freedom' of university. These were also complicated by the need to consider how different individuals understand and enact freedom.

The students who took part in these interviews were highly satisfied with their higher education experience, course content and relationships with staff. Many acknowledged that what you 'get' on this course is difficult to quantify in terms of input hours of teaching time, but all felt that what they had done, and been enabled to do, by the novel approach had brought them substantial gains in learning. These nascent entrepreneurs had uniformly rejected a transactional approach to higher education.