

Improving Students' Entrepreneurial Skills – A Cross-Border Experience

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Abstract

As more and more graduates are entering the workplace, creating sufficient employment opportunities for them has become a pressing problem in most countries. Consequently, most governments wish that more of these fresh graduates will set up their own business instead of depending on the government to provide them with a career. For example, in Malaysia, entrepreneurship is made a required course for all academic disciplines so as to equip graduates with basic entrepreneurial skills. However, many of these programmes do not provide enough hands-on opportunity for the students to use the business knowledge acquired. A cross-border collaborative project by a Malaysian university in northern Malaysia and a Thai university in Southern Thailand was implemented to complement the efforts that have been taken to prepare the students to venture into business. The collaborative project required the participants to prepare a business plan that is almost good enough for use in the application for business loan on an innovative product. The preparation of the business plan requires the students to apply the business knowledge gained. Besides, the project also helps the participants to enhance their soft skills, English language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding. This paper will briefly describe the design and the implementation of the project and present the findings obtained using questionnaire survey and interview conducted on the project impact on the development of participants' entrepreneurial skills

Bio data

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Introduction

The number of new graduates entering the workplace is increasing yearly. To create sufficient employment opportunities for them has become a pressing social problem in most countries. Consequently, most governments have tried to 'persuade' more of these fresh graduates to set up their own business instead of depending on the public and private sectors to provide them with a career. To encourage the university graduates to do so, many specific initiatives have been implemented. For example, in Malaysia, entrepreneurship is made a required course for all academic disciplines so as to equip graduates with basic entrepreneurial skills. However, many of these programmes do not provide enough hands-on opportunity for the students to apply the business knowledge acquired.

A cross-border collaborative project by a Malaysian university in northern Malaysia and a Thai university in Southern Thailand was implemented to complement the efforts that have been taken by the two universities to prepare the students to venture into business.

The main objectives of the cross-border collaborative project are to provide opportunities for the participants to (1) use English in real life context, (2) develop 'soft skills', (3) enhance cross-cultural understanding and (4) acquire entrepreneurial skills. The collaborative project requires the participants come out with an innovative product and to prepare a business plan that is almost good enough for use in the application for business loan for manufacturing and marketing it (please refer to appendix for a sample of the table of contents of a business plan submitted). The preparation of the business plan requires the students to apply the business knowledge acquired. Besides, the project also helps the participants to enhance their soft skills, English language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding.

Project-based learning

In an engaged learning environment, students take charge of their own learning and are self-regulated, find excitement and pleasure in learning, and understand that learning is social (NCREL, 1994). To engage students in their own learning, the learning tasks need to be challenging, authentic. An integrative project-based learning (PBL) is a model for classroom activity that shifts away from the classroom practices of short, isolated, teacher-centered lessons and instead emphasizes learning activities that are long-term, interdisciplinary, student-centered, and integrated with real world issues and practices.

Project-based learning typically begins with an end product as the outcome, the production of which requires specific content knowledge or skills and typically raises one or more problems which students must solve. Though the end product is the driving force in project-based learning, it is the content knowledge and skills acquired during the production process that are important to the success of the approach.

The project-based learning approach uses a production model: First, students define the purpose for creating the end product and identify their audience. They research their topic, design their product, and create a plan for project management. Students then begin the project, resolve problems and issues that arise in production, and finish their product. Students may use or present the product they have created, and ideally are given time to reflect on and evaluate their work (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991). The entire process is meant to be authentic, mirroring real world production activities and utilizing students' own ideas and approaches to accomplish the tasks at hand.

PBL (and related instructional approaches) has generally been shown to be effective in increasing student motivation and in improving student problem-solving and higher order thinking skills (Stites, 1998). There are also positive findings from research on the project approach in early childhood and elementary education (Katz, 1994; Chard, 1992).

This paper will briefly describe the project's design and implementation and will present the findings on the impact of the cross-border collaborative project on the participants' entrepreneurial skills obtained using questionnaire survey and interview with some selected students.

Project design and implementation

A collaborative project involving 20 students from each of the two institutions and spanning over three months was implemented. The students from the Malaysian university were all majoring in engineering, whereas the students from the Thai university were from other disciplines such as business, business English, IT and accounting. The arrangement was chosen to provide the opportunities for the utilisation of acquired knowledge and to facilitate the generation of technology based innovative products for marketing.

The 40 students were divided into four teams with five students from each institution. Each team was required to work a business plan for seeking funding for an innovative product proposed by the team. Each team was supervised by two facilitators.

The participants met six times (six weekends) over a period of three months, three times in Malaysia and three times in Thailand.

At the first meeting they students were introduced to the basic principles of business plan writing. They were then required to brainstorm to come out with an innovative product that they would like to market.

The students developed their business plan during the second, third, fourth and fifth meetings. During these meetings, they were given more knowledge on the preparation of business plans. Besides face-to-face meetings, the students also communicate with each other via emails and other form of electronic communications.

A business plan competition was held at the sixth meeting. The four groups presented their business plans to a panel of four judges who were asked to evaluate the viability of their business plan.

Participation in the collaborative project required the students to use the knowledge that they have acquired from their studies, their soft skills, and the English language in real life context over an extended period of time.

Findings and discussion

A questionnaire survey and interview with some selected students were conducted to gauge the achievement of project objectives.

Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire comprises 28 questions about the various aspects of the project was given to the participants on the last day of the project. Only 30 participants attended the last meeting. The responses to the three questions related to the business plan activity are given in the table below.

Table 1
Responses to the questions related to the business plan activity

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I have improved my business plan writing skills	53.3%(16)	43.3%(13)	3.3%(1)	
I have more knowledge of business plan now	53.3%(16)	43.3%(13)	3.3%(1)	
The business plan activity is very suitable for this project	26.7%(8)	73.3%(22)		

Almost all the respondents agreed that the business plan activity was a suitable activity and had improved their business plan writing skills and knowledge.

Interview

An interview with four project participants, two from each institution, was conducted on the last day of the meeting to obtain information on their perceptions of the project. Their responses (unedited) to the questions related to the business plan activity are given below.

Question: What have you gained/learned from the project?

Respondent A (Engineering major)

I have gained a lot of thing especially in communication and writing a good business plan. Before this, I don't even know what is business plan is. But with this good collaboration with

our lecturers and HU staffs (lecturers and students), I am now capable to write a good and complete business plan.

Respondent B (Engineering major)

- a. Teamwork and cooperation.*
- b. Hardworking and politeness.*
- c. Improve our soft skills.*
- d. Improve our presentation skills.*
- e. How to communicate well with other students.*
- f. Learn new knowledge to upgrade ourselves and thinking.*
- g. Be responsible and committed with task or work given.*

Respondent C (Business English major)

- 1. Learn and understand more about business plan writing which is some students never know what is business plan and what is it for. But after join this project, I know that the business plan writing is very important and utilize for starting up new business)*
- 2. this is good chance and good opportunity to practice on business skill for all students who want to be a business people or want to be an entrepreneurs*

Respondent D (Accounting major)

Can practice more on business plan writing skill. learn more writing process (as quite not clear about it before) and know how to utilize the plan

Question: What of the project (e.g. writing business plan, visit, interaction activity, ...) do you like best?

Respondent A

For my learning side, I prefer to have writing business plan and other knowledge about business. This is good for my future living. But, for my entertainment side, I would prefer to have a group activities and visiting more educational and entertainment places such as night market and historical monument and places.

Respondent B

I'm the person who like to do business. Writing a business plan is very challenging and enjoyable too for me and I like it very much. But the time given to us was too short, hence, we faced the problem of time constraint.

Respondent C

My favorite activity is interaction activity because group members have to work together and harmony then we can win the game, moreover we can relax after work with business plan writing. And the worth activity for us is business plan writing.

Respondent D

Visiting tour

Question: What have you learned from the business plan project?

Respondent A

For business plan project, our teams have done a very good (I prefer say it GREAT) work and we have a good communication and collaboration. I've learned how to write a good business plan, how to tackle the market strategies, which way to do a good presentation and the importance to work in team.

Respondent B

Unimap is an engineering university; we are trained to produce and do some testing and research. We have to present our end product to the customers or bosses. This presentation skill is not available from the books that we have been studying but through this project, it will enable and help us on how to prepare a good proposal and present our goods in a professional way.

Respondent C

I now know how to write business plan much better.

Respondent D

Before I not clear about business plan writing. After joining project I am clearer now.

The respondents' interview responses show that they have, in general, enjoyed and learned from the business plan activity. Their feedbacks indicate that the business plan writing task had helped them to broaden their knowledge as well as skills on business plan writing. The ability of the project to enhance business plan writing skills in particular could be attributed to the design of the project which entailed active involvement of participants in the plan writing process. The writing process required the participants to think, plan and generate the content of the plan as they had to decide on their own what they wanted to do. Carrying out the hands-on project activity enabled them to better understand the factors involved in the preparation of business plan and to acquire the basic business plan writing skills.

Conclusion

The collaborative project was designed to help the participants to enhance their soft skills and entrepreneurial skills. The business plan writing activity was used as the vehicle for achieving the objectives. From the data obtained through questionnaire survey and interview, we can clearly see that the business plan activity has been able to help the students to improve their knowledge of business plan writing directly and their entrepreneurial skills indirectly. The observation has lead the authors to believe that such collaborative project can be used to supplement classroom teaching to equip students with the basic business skills needed for them to embark on the journey of being self-employed. Working on an authentic business plan allows the participants to see the whole process of starting a business better.

It is also necessary to point out that conducting international collaborative project is not an easy endeavour. The university management's support and the faculty members' commitment are needed to successfully implement such project.

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Appendix 1
Sample Business plan Table of contents

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