

**AUTOETHNOGRAPHY APPROACH TOWARDS
COLLABORATION IN THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP
EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the journey on collaborating with external partner in entrepreneurship context at a private higher education institution in Malaysia in the first year. By reviewing theory, (mis)fit of the business opportunities were found and presented. The initial collaboration was suggested as a mean of gaining access to the global entrepreneurial platforms and visibility of the institution on the entrepreneurship education. This study also suggested that entrepreneurial learning gained by 354 first-year respondents was very strong. Network and training opportunities provided by the external partner could emerge and become the preferred choice of the respondents with business sustainability necessary for a successful evaluation and exploitation process.

Keywords: collaboration, entrepreneurship, higher education, business sustainability

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1. Introduction

Economist Joseph Schumpeter (1934) put forward the argument that innovation is the primary driver of economic development. The author posited the entrepreneur as an agent of change via creative destruction and it was this creative behavior that differentiated the entrepreneur from the aspects of innovation. With increased competition, internationalization and changing environment, the shift to activity-based market settings caused universities to act as a medium for the creation of new companies and innovations and providers of intellectual capital (Nilsson, 2012). Miles, Miles and Snow (2005) presented a futuristic scenario in which innovation and economic development would be linked with “the power of collaboration”. Collaboration is defined as “a process where two or more parties work closely with each other to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes” (Miles et al., 2006).

McKeown, Millman, Sursani, Smith and Martin (2006) conducted a survey on three areas across graduate entrepreneurship education: type, content, and delivery methods. This paper sought to strengthen the connection between entrepreneurship and leadership by looking at the challenges of a structural fit between two collaborators, university-private entity. The aim was to contribute a set of practical appreciation for the entrepreneurial leadership in the first-year collaboration. The research question was ‘Where are we now and where we will be within 5 years?’ We were not seeking to test the validity of the answers to these questions, but rather to gather data about entrepreneurial practices and to make well-informed suggestions for decision-makers at the institution of higher learning. An ethnography approach was used to conduct this study. The purpose of this analytical autoethnography is to share my experiential and theoretical reflections on the process of collaboration. This study will include experiences of students undertaking the entrepreneurial studies in better understand the effectiveness of the collaboration. There was always a possibility for things to go in one or another way, but we can always look at the extent in which we could influence the result or for ways to create from where we are, and from there to make a decision following either an “effectuation” or “causation” approach (Sarasvathy, 2001)

2. Why Autoethnography Research?

Autoethnography is ‘a self-narrative that critiques self with others in social, political, economic and cultural context’ (Spry, 2001, p. 710). “The teacher is seen as an integral part of the curricular

process and in which teacher, learners, subject matter, and milieu are in dynamic interaction” (Ellis &Bochner, 2002; Clandinin and Connelly, 1992, p. 392). Chase (2011) suggested that personal experiences reflected who we are and what we think. The narrative resulted in self-reflection on the part of the researcher, participant, and reader. The goal of an ethnographical study was to elicit self-discovery which happened as a result of self-reflection, self-analysis (Chase, 2011; Chang, 2008) and transformation (Chang, 2008). The reader was able to compare and contrast his or her life for validation or discovery when reading the narratives of others.

Narrative inquirers can build a knowledge base without relinquishing respect for the individual voice (Trahar, 2009), which was the researcher’s voice in this context. This was the approach I was taking in writing my autoethnography and when considering it as a form of knowledge. The personal narrative served as an empowering experience marked by self-realization.

3. Entrepreneurship Education

A trend toward distinct entrepreneurship program identity seems to be emerging, which may indicate an increase in the perception of importance and the sustainability of entrepreneurship in higher education (Zahra, Newey, & Shaver, 2011).

Understanding the role of networks, clients, and other stakeholders has been identified as important entrepreneurial concepts (Taylor & Thorpe, 2004; Gibb, 1993). Many entrepreneurship courses and curriculum are designed to encourage and stimulate new business start-ups (Peterman & Kennedy, 2003; Leitch & Harrison, 1999; Vesper & Gartner, 1997). The role of the course was to provide a useful insight into the challenges involved in being entrepreneurs and encouraging skill development and self-reliance (Henderson and Robertson 1999). The content of entrepreneurship programs should focus on practice rather than theory, in order for students to experience rather than simply learn about entrepreneurship (Phan, Wong and Wang, 2002). The common teaching methods for teaching entrepreneurship courses in recent years include the creation of business plans, class discussions, case studies, feasibility studies, and guest lecturers (Solomon, 2007). Traditional teaching methods such as lectures were found to be less effective in teaching entrepreneurial principles (Sogunro, 2004; Gibb, 2002). Learning by doing seemed to

be the new theme in entrepreneurship education (Fiet, 2000a; Fiet, 2000b; Gorman, Hanlon and King 1997).

Many universities offered students of entrepreneurship opportunities to learn and network outside of the classroom (Solomon et al., 2002). Examples of some of these opportunities included guest speakers, onsite visits to entrepreneurial companies, business plan competitions, elevator pitch competitions, internships, small business consulting opportunities, case studies, and student organizations devoted to entrepreneurship. New generation of students who grew up with access to the internet, unstructured learning (rather than more traditional structured academic programs) and an understanding of the power of collaboration and social networking were central to the way students engage with the world (Allen & Lieberman, 2010). These opportunities are part of the basic lexicon of many entrepreneurship programs.

It was possible to teach and educate people in entrepreneurship (Fayolle, 2008). Educating students on entrepreneurship and how to become more entrepreneurial are also significant components of entrepreneurial education (Rae, 2000). The best people to deliver education to students that will enable them to become entrepreneurs are practitioners whom themselves have the expertise and experience of entrepreneurship (Vyakarman, 2012).

4. The Collaboration

A not-for-profit organization, NPO, collaborated with a respected institution of higher learning, IHL, on the Entrepreneurship Module for two continuous academic cycles of a total of eight months: March/June 2013 and August/November 2013. NPO provided support during the campus event on Business Prototype Showcase (March/June 2013) and Business Pitch Competition (August/November 2013); exposure and experience for the university and students at global. The events were held as part of the coursework for students who registered for the elective module, Entrepreneurship. The group pitching was evaluated by the external judges. The new relationship had caused a structural change to content and delivery of the Entrepreneurship module to meet the expectations of the entrepreneurial practitioners and/or the levels of national/international competitions.

4.1 The(Mis)match Project

I was appointed as the lead facilitator for Entrepreneurship module in 2013. It was also the same year NPO came on board. During the inaugural meeting of an hour with NPO, business strengths and weaknesses (gaps) of both entities were explored to identify possible complementary products. Several lessons were obtained from the visit:

- Incubation facilitation approach was not adopted by NPO
- NPO was keen to provide global exposure and experience for the university and students

The appreciation for the business objectives of both entities was instrumental to a successful partnership. A comparison of the objectives for both business entities was provided in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 here>

A few authors explained the effectiveness of collaboration. In this study two renowned authors were used in the discussion of the above. Hytti and O’Gorman (2004) took the view that entrepreneurship education was offered in many ways, depending the objectives of the education.

- If the objective of the education was to increase the understanding of what entrepreneurship was about, the most effective way to operationalize the objective was to provide information through public channels such as media, seminars or lectures in a relatively short time period. As a recognized tertiary education provider, entrepreneurship education played a significant role in cultivating the entrepreneurship spirit among the graduates. Students who had taken a course in entrepreneurship had shown greater interest in becoming entrepreneurs and/or these students acted more entrepreneurially than other students in taking up the challenge to start a business (Kolvereid and Moen, 1997); these students were more likely to start their own business than other students (Webb, Quince and Wathers, 1982). This objective was visibly evident from the perspective of IHL in Table 1.
- If the objective was to equip individuals with entrepreneurial skills which were applicable directly to work, the best way to deliver the education and training was via industrial

training. Laukkanen (2000) suggested a business model that students should be operationally involved in real business contexts. In this parallel strategy, the individual was trained in business establishments. This objective was not strongly prescribed by NPO and IHL.

- If the objective of the education was to prepare individuals to act as entrepreneurs, the most effective technique was to facilitate experiments by trying entrepreneurship out in a controlled environment through business simulation or role playing. NPO prescribed very strongly to this objective. This shift is based on general consensus in the entrepreneurial education research that entrepreneurship is best taught by acts of entrepreneurship and experimental pedagogical tools (Hills 1988; McMullan & Long, 1987).

On the other hand, Kyrö (1997) advocated that entrepreneurship education consisted of three main components: self-oriented entrepreneurship, internal entrepreneurship, and external entrepreneurship. Self-oriented entrepreneurship refers to an individual's self-oriented behaviour; it is the basis for developing internal and external entrepreneurship (Remes 2004). Internal entrepreneurship deals with entrepreneurial and enterprising behaviour. The inception of the entrepreneurship education showed that formal education at IHL was inclined towards internal entrepreneurship.

External entrepreneurship was about doing business (Ristimäki 2003). External entrepreneurship education, in the school context, was about developing innovation and business ideas as well as strengthening co-operation between schools and work life, including such activities as work experience and study tours. Through these processes educators develop a society that demonstrates an enterprising mindset. IHL prescribed partially to the external entrepreneurship on innovation and business ideas development, but the coordination on work life was not visibly evident from Table 1.

4.2 The Curriculum Reform

Curriculum reform is about making choices: to consider the different structures of the processes, to decide who is responsible for these processes, to choose aims, and to estimate the different

future outcomes (Macdonald 2003). Curriculum reform dealt with concrete didactical and pedagogical issues: teaching and learning, involving subject contents, didactics, pedagogical development, and evaluation (e.g. Flouris and Pasiadis 2003). The current curriculum reform at IHL was based on Macdonald's (2003) partnership model to a large extent. In this reform, national reforms guided local curriculum development, with curriculum delivery somewhat influenced by the local start-ups.

Prior to 2012, at IHL five books were prescribed on the reading list of the existing entrepreneurship module. A common question posed by students under my tutorship was: 'Which book should I purchase?' The lead facilitators in the past years were unable to identify one source as the main reading support as the weekly lectures were compiled from three reading texts. This was the main challenge faced by the facilitators for more five years. The first task was to conduct a review on the entrepreneurship curriculum and the strategy was to identify a textbook that the conceptual and experiential learning. I took the opportunity of the collaboration with NPO to update the current textbook. The current textbook emphasized on the theoretical aspects of entrepreneurship. A review of the literature showed that entrepreneurial education should include skill-building courses in negotiations, leadership, new product development, creativity and innovation (McMullan & Long, 1987; Vesper & McMullen, 1988). This strongly echoed the ideas of Phan, Wong and Wang (2002) with respect to the underlying struggle of introducing the practicality of entrepreneurship. The content of the syllabus was important as the students had not received formal education on entrepreneurship. I had to ensure the activities advocated by NPO were consistently applied during the delivery of the contents. Every student was as regarded 'real' entrepreneur to ensure skills were transferable.

4.3 Review on the participants experiences

A review on the campus event by the participants was made in 2013. I felt it was necessary to include the feedback from the participants' to gauge their views of the event as a result of the collaboration. A survey was conducted on a total 354 participants in year 2013. The participants were from four schools of IHL (please refer to Table 1). On the first day of the course, participants were introduced the module with collaboration with NPO. Students were asked to write a descriptive answer to a question after participating in the campus events: 'What are your

feelings (positive and negative) towards the Business Pitch Competition?' All the survey forms were returned on the day the survey was held. The purpose of the survey was to provide an overall view of the collaboration from NPO.

<Insert Table 2 here>

Preliminary feedback on the event brought together by IHL-NPO was broadly put in THREE (3) categories:

Participants viewed IHL-NPO event as 'new experience', 'interesting', 'eye-opener' and 'useful'. The respondents' answers indicated that they had yet been exposed to similar engaging business related experience. The experience at IHL encouraged majority of the respondents to make an effort to link their studies to the discipline they are currently engaged and be prepared in the working environment upon graduation two years on. Based on this observation, IHL-NPO collaboration was perceived as an effective platform in providing business related exposure to non-business disciplines and business disciplines undertakers. This observation was supported by the following statements:

'The event was a good experience that gave me an insight on how a business idea is pitched'

'I felt the event was interesting and I gained new experience as I had never done this before'

'The event was quite useful. We are from science school and this will help us to understand the business world'

'I felt it was good for me to join this event because it has given me some experience in what to expect in the real world'

'I learned something I might have to face in the future as I planned to produce a food product'

'The pitching event was a precious experience for me. I learned how to make a creative business idea'

'It was a great experience to discover our creativity'

'I got to learn from the talks given by the speaker. I think we should have more talks given by these experts'

As the event was participated from five different disciplines or schools from the university, the participants were able to gain rich insights on how participants from other schools performed. Peer pressure was surprisingly considered important when participants expressed individual performances (dis) ability against the peers despite being aware that this was a mere group presentation where at least one member was expected to participate actively during the 3-minute pitching. Majority of the groups were represented by two participants in a group, while the remaining members of the group remained on state. Our study confirmed Pollack and Rutherford (2012) that establishing cognitive legitimacy with potential investors through different styles of presentations; with common characteristics included skilled storytelling, thorough command of the details, believability, authenticity and strong preparedness viewed as essential. IHL-NPO was able to provoke self-presentation achievements effectively compared to other means. It was particularly interesting to note that respondents were critical of the presenting skills while pitching their prototyping to a panel of industry experts who were also angel investors in the local industry. Excerpts of evidence on this observation were included: *'Hopefully there will be more events like this. I benefit a lot from the pitching event. During the event, I found out that other groups were very good at their presentation skills and mine was worse'* and *'The pitching was a good experience for first year students. The confidence level to present will increase'*

Participants had expressed the challenge in preparing for the event during the 14 week of studies. The collaboration had challenged the participants to prepare prototyping that could solve not only the problem(s) of the society but also be the leader in providing solutions through creativity and innovativeness in the discipline of their choice or businesses. With the culture of Malaysia not highly positioned in creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship was initially viewed as 'difficult' and 'intensive' for the first-year participants. However, the views from the industry experts during the IHL-NPO event changed their (perception) towards entrepreneurship. The event was acknowledged to be 'fun'. A summary of this observation was illustrated by the participants: *'It was fun as we got to know about the ideas of other groups. Overall this is a good course'*

4. Issues Emerging from the Journey

The effectiveness of the first year collaboration was still doubtful with the objective of IHL-NPO yet achieved when the campus winning teams representing IHL was eliminated at the Creative Business Cup (National Finals) and representations from IHL-NPO was absent at the Creative Business Cup (International Finals). The role of strategic aims needed be re-assessed to strengthen the relationship between IHL and NPO. Lack of trust and commitment, and low understanding of how the value might be distributed provide substantial barriers to collaboration (Bonney, Clark and Fearn 2007). Differences in the technical capabilities, role and objectives between the parties in a collaborative innovation process might lead to a potential conflict, and thus these differences, conflicts and interdependence are substantial elements of collaboration (Lam, Chin, Yang and Liang 2007).

The curriculum reform from the perspective of appropriate content was the strategy looked into on the first-year of the collaboration. The main text could be used as a support tool with the other delivery methods in classes. Both types of delivery method could be assessed to measure the preparedness efforts to the participants not only at the campus events but also at the national and internal campus events.

Participants/customers associated 'IHL' and 'NPO' brands positively on the entrepreneurship education collaboration at IHL. NPO extended judging invitations to the industry experts and IHL leveraged on this strength to enable on-campus event a success. The results of the collaboration were evident from the views of the participants/customers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The collaboration in the entrepreneurship was an exploratory project in 2013 where the campus event was perceived as a success by the stakeholders IHL-NPO-Participants. In the next four years, IHL-NPO would need to strive towards excellence in committing at least a representative at national and international competitive events organized by NPO. As a non-profit organization, NPO also provided training and network sessions for its members and participants at Integration of the training and network should be considered and integrated in the curriculum reform in the long term plan. Past literature review showed that training, network sessions, funding were not

the only opportunities available in such nature of collaboration. A research on these areas at IHL-NPO could be explored.

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Appendix

Table 1: Business Objectives of NPO and IHL

NPO	IHL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help early stage entrepreneurs succeed, globally 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To <i>provide a globally connected</i>, but Asian accelerator and startup program 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help these ideas <i>secure sponsorships or funding</i> to send them to immersion camps in Silicon Valley or other startup clusters to secure Money, Markets and Mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IHL serves as an idea bank that provides specialised training modules and receives monetary support from corporate organisations, which are channeled to fund the business plans. IHL allows students to be mentored by business academics <i>with the help of industry experts</i> in developing their business plans to succession
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To <i>strengthen and accelerate finalists</i> by providing them high-quality, personalized mentorship and connecting them to potential team members, advisors, customers and sponsors at a global level 	<p>Campus Event</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To <i>expose</i> students to the hands-on entrepreneurship skill To <i>turn</i> student’s entrepreneur ideas into reality To <i>obtain external feedback</i> from the industry on business ideas of students.

Table 2: Details of the participants

Schools	Courses	Participants
Architecture, Building and Design	Interior Architecture Graphic Communication	24
Biosciences	Food Science with Nutrition Bioscience Biotechnology	64
Engineering	Electrical Engineering Mechanical Engineering	40
Pharmacy	Master of Pharmacy Bachelor of Pharmacy	78
IHL Business School	Foundation in Business Diploma in Business Business Administration International Business Human Resource Management Banking and Finance Finance and Economics	148