

How Women Bridge Cultures through Practical Entrepreneurship
A comparison of entrepreneurship
empowerment in several countries, including Australia, Malaysia and New Zealand

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Overview

Global organizations increasingly seek entrepreneurial talents for their junior management positions. We report on outcomes of an initiative between global firms and universities worldwide, to instill a sense of ethical and sustainable entrepreneurship in university students, through practical community projects.

As widely supported as management education is, evidenced by a plethora of business schools attached to many universities worldwide, management education has increasingly been criticized for lacking reality (Thorpe, 1990; Jones-Evans, Williams & Deacon, 2000). Traditional approaches have separated education institutions and business organisations as two isolated learning arenas (Leitch & Harrison, 1999), and we speculate that continued focus on accreditation, refereed publishing and other academics-based objectives of business schools will widen the perceived gap between businesses and teaching. Chan (1994) argues that what management institutions teach is not what business organizations actually need, potentially causing a disconnect between business and universities. It appears intuitive that teaching limited exclusively to in-classrooms activities must be a significant disconnect to the real world, where we expect senior students to take on responsible and effective junior management roles immediately upon leaving university.

We have investigated a non-profit program which empowers students to apply entrepreneurship principles they learned at university in communities through development of their own governance models to effectively reach out to community members, solicitation of their own funding for these projects, and presentation of their work to corporate executives in a competitive format.

There is evidence that some of these student participants demonstrate sufficient entrepreneurial learning, to be recruited directly into sponsoring firms. We find that such an action-learning program in sustainable entrepreneurship can effectively connect business leaders to their future managers.

Background

Entrepreneurship education has long been identified as a critical factor in preventing future high levels of long term unemployment, and there is evidence of a strong correlation between educational level achieved and high income over a lifetime (De Faoite/Henry/Johnston/Van der Sijde, 2003). Nearly all the academic literature outlining the genesis of business and entrepreneurial studies is preoccupied

with this gap.

Action learning has been underpinning an increasing amount of training practice throughout the world for nearly seven decades since its genesis in the work of Reg Revans (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). These environments have ranged from private companies (Marquardt, 2004) to public sector organisations (Blackler and Kennedy, 2004) and even to development programs in Third World nations (Mayoux, 2005). Furthermore, in recent decades, it has been introduced either as a complementary and/or alternative means of educational instruction in some schools (Wilson, 1992) and tertiary institutions throughout the world (Brunetti, Petrell and Sawada, 2003).

Greater collaboration between the academic and business communities has been advocated for many years (Cochrane, 1988; Forcht, 1991; Gabor, 1991; Orr, 1993; Portwood, 1993; Reed, 1993; Warwick, 1989; White, 1993). For this closer working relationship, action learning seems to an effective connector. The number of multinational corporations who use action learning for managerial, professional, team and workforce development is diverse, ranging across such well known names as Samsung, Dow, GE, Deutsche Bank, Boeing, Sodexo, Novartis and Nokia (Marquardt, 2004). This would create a level of acceptance by business leaders for young managers who have received part of their education via action learning.

After the Carnegie Commission Studies "signalled a crisis situation" (Rowley, Lujan, Dolence 1998; Wheeler, 1998) specific shortcomings were highlighted as a lack of relevance to business of the topics under research, overly quantitative course content, and a lack of preparation for entrepreneurial careers. While this led to the emergence of entrepreneurial tracks in business schools, Leith and Harrison note overall programs remained structurally the same as before. They place the change to this, and the genesis of the current entrepreneurial business education, at the door of the ratings system for business schools that was developed in the late 1980s by various media. While originally changes were superficial and focused "primarily on product tinkering, packaging, and marketing", a 1988 report on the status of business education noted a lack of coordination between the sector and businesses, and an ignorance of the value of lifelong learning in the business world (Porter and McKibbin, 1988).

Cheit (1985) explored business educator's dilemma further in his discussion of the two models of business education. The academic model, primarily concerned with scholarship and maintaining business education's hard won respectability within the academy, lies in contrast to the professional model, where business education both responds and supports the needs of the business community.

Action learning is not without its critics, and we speculate that the divide between business expectations of practically relevant education outcomes will clash more intensely in the future, as government-driven funding mechanisms place greater pressure on business schools to engage in traditional academic publishing efforts. Consistent with Pedler (1983) and Mumford (1995), several authors find that the existing definitions either over emphasize one element or miss the other of action learning due to its flexibility and the widespread usage. This raises the issue of how action learning can be introduced to business school teachings as an effective complement to traditional teaching methods. As an entrepreneurship education technique, action learning is different from and more comprehensive than any kinds of management education approaches. It advocates to focus on the learners rather than on the teachers (Mumford, 1984) and challenges the passive approach to learning characterized in the traditional teaching/learning techniques (Leith & Harrison, 1999). The action learning approach, on the other hand, has its critics. Some challenges include those to the

psychological and political processes intrinsic to action learning, and that it also promotes practice at the expense of theory, thereby, promoting concerns about its philosophical base (Raelin, 1998). Smith (1988) identified and analysed a weakness of action learning for lacking a balance between knowledge and practice – which has been an ongoing debate in the field of management development (Silver, 1991). Another criticism of action learning from Revans, which have been extended by Mumford (1996) and Pedler (1991), is the role of mentors and tutors. As part of the student teaching/learning program we observed, academic mentors and executives take an active role in guiding the students.

Given this focus on action learning and its obvious interest to entrepreneurship educators who often focus on practice teaching, we speculate that this Students In Free Enterprise effort can effectively connect business leaders and managers, after earlier reports with a much smaller sample size indicate the favourable reaction of business leaders to the SIFE project outcomes (Mueller, Anderson, Thornton, Patkar, 2005) and the positive reports from business leaders (Mueller, Thornton, Wyatt, Gore, 2005). This is an action-learning program where a student learns by reflecting on the group actions being taken in solving a real organizational problem with participants of similar position also experiencing challenging situations (McLaughlin and Thorpe, 1993; Eden and Huxman, 1996), specifically through the teaching of entrepreneurship principles to members of their respective communities.

Many entrepreneurial characteristics, such as self-confidence, persistence and high energy levels, cannot easily be acquired in the classroom (Miller, 1987), and this program engages students in their communities, to perform in a real environment, overcoming market resistance, structuring effective programs, measuring their outcome and demonstrating the results to executives. These projects can resemble real-life managerial challenges, similar to those students would be expected to perform once they have left university and have begun to work as junior-level managers. As part of this action learning challenge, participants need to create an effective internal governance system, develop fundraising techniques to remain fiscally solvent, create a sales approach for their projects and think about succession planning within the transient world of student life. We speculate that this comprehensive set of real-life managerial challenges is one of the reasons why CEO-level senior executives of some of the largest firms worldwide (HBSC, Unilever, PepsiCo, Wal-Mart, etc.) support this effort. It is a short step from performing under real-life conditions while at university, to performing in the work place where similar skills are needed.

Our interest was not merely in assessing such a uniformly administered program in different country for effectiveness, but we are keenly aware of the cultural difference among these countries. While Germany, the United States, Australia and New Zealand have been 'free market' countries for all of their existence, China and Singapore business leaders operate with a strong recognition of political dogma overshadowing economic activity. Although values in China are changing, and resilience and resourcefulness will continue to elevate them towards success (Liao and Sohmen, 2001), not all commonly measured entrepreneurship values easily transfer from West to East. Some entrepreneurial attributes, a positive response to change, initiative and profit orientation, appear to be in conflict with Chinese values (Kirby and Ying, 1995) and more recent work found that a sharp contrast existed between Chinese entrepreneurs and Chinese managers regarding individualism, risk and openness to change. In some areas, particularly risk tolerance, Chinese entrepreneurs scored higher than their American counterparts (Holt, 2000). Equally important, entrepreneurship is on the rise in South Korea, with one out of 11 people working for relatively young companies in 2000, firms that were established less than 3 1/2 years ago (Park et al, 2001). The SIFE approach actively focuses on gender inclusion through specific sponsoring of Women Entrepreneurship (through HSBC), and thus we connect this

work to the growing trend of women in business in Asia, i.e. in South Korea, where more women are participating in business, with about 33.9% of all business establishments in South Korea were owned or headed by women in 2000 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2001). We therefore conclude that an entrepreneurship education system is of great importance in these countries, where private ownership of assets and personal profiting from business opportunities has not always been the norm.

In an attestation to the close interest executives have in the outcomes of such an effort, HSBC's Chief Executive Officer Paul Lawrence in Singapore hopes to "help university students in Singapore to expand their skills and outlook, and to prepare themselves for the opportunities presented by businesses in the global economy" (Lawrence, 2005) and Wal-Mart's President in Korea Santiago Roces expects the students "make positive progress to build a better world of business" (Roces, 2005). At the end of each year of student performance, SIFE teams compete in front of senior executives for the right to represent their country during a global competition, undoubtedly adding an incentive to students with these global events being held in places like Toronto, Barcelona, Paris, etc. KPMG's Director of Global Markets in China says "I am amazed by the enthusiasm and quality of the young people that participate in SIFE. Their projects are typically innovative and bring value to the communities and environments in which they operate. The business exposure they gain through SIFE certainly positions the students well for their future careers" (Thomson, 2006).

The interaction between the executives and the student participants creates an innovative forum for leaders to evaluate prospective new staff members, and for students to better understand the needs of the firms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that several of these participating students are hired into supporting firms, bypassing the traditional recruitment pathways.

Methodology

We have asked participants of the Students in Free Enterprise program in seven countries to complete a web-based survey (www.sifeaction.com/survey), and we have assured ourselves that web access was available to all of those students in their respective countries. In China, where web access to this specific site was not universally allowed by university servers and networks, we have made hardcopy survey forms available. The survey was in English, since the SIFE presentations are also operated in English. The response rate varied country-by-country. While it was significant in Korea, Singapore and China (with more than 60% of all SIFE students completing the survey), the participation rate dropped for Australia (18%) and New Zealand (30%) and was low in the US, where we sampled the responses mainly from one large university only, and in Germany, where the effort had just started. The total survey population numbers 477.

We have also interviewed more than 30 senior executives of multi-national organizations in New Zealand, Australia, South Korea, Singapore, United States, Germany and China to investigate how effective a program is, through which those firms create practical entrepreneurship experiences for students, and then recruit those program participants as young managers into their organizations.

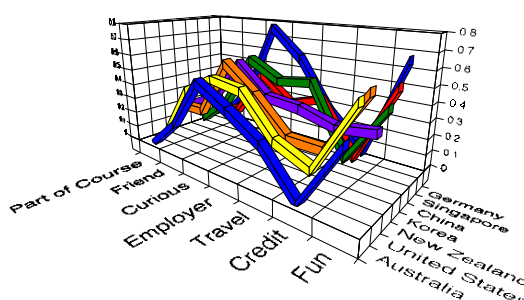
We have confirmed these student reports by collecting data from faculty advisors in several countries, with a similar on-line survey instrument and then applied the PETE (Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005) to validate the approach of this program and to reconcile it with the requirements of the market place. The PETE model describes ingredients of an effective interactive managerial learning program and seeks to explain that the presence of several factors can improve the effectiveness of practically relevant entrepreneurship education.

Study Results

Students join this program for different reasons, with some similarities throughout these diverse cultures. While students in China, Singapore, Germany and South Korea were interested in the travel opportunities offered through this activity, 'curiosity', 'having fun', 'making friends' and 'meeting employers' were ranked highly throughout the sample (Graph 1). Of greater significance is that the traditional academic connections of a university-based activity, 'getting academic credit' and 'being part of a course' were very uniformly ranked as poor motivators for students. We speculate that students attach value to the fact that this program is not part of the school offering, and that they actively look for an engagement which reaches beyond the boundaries of conventional academic teaching. Conversely, this threatens our traditional beliefs that learning opportunities offered within the confines of a university setting are appreciated because they are offered there and not outside.

Graph 1: Why did you join the program?

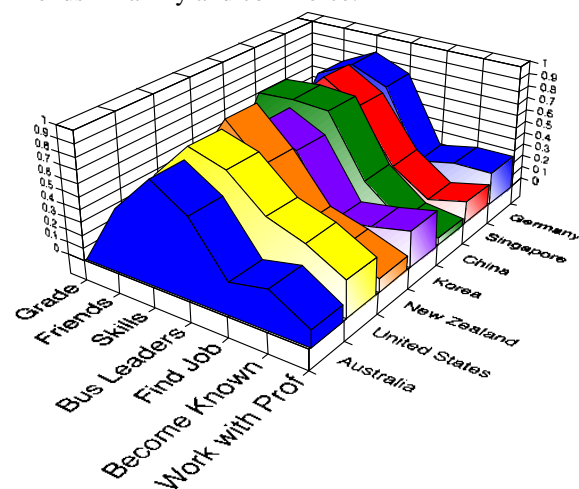
In reviewing the students, we find that the students, are looking to to 'meet executives' degree they indicate an new friends' and 'getting a intent is likely also



expectations of majority of all learn 'new skills' and (Graph 2). To a lesser interest in 'making job', although that reported in the

response of wishing to 'meet executives'. Respondees in the US, where this program has been operational for more than 25 years, focus on job opportunities which are offered during large job fairs attached to SIFE competition events. We have not yet reviewed enough long-term data to form an opinion on whether program participation results in tangible job search advantages, and we suggest those areas as valuable additional investigations in the future.

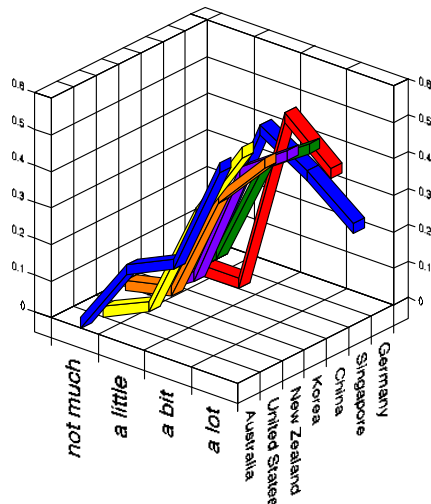
Chinese and Korean students, culturally more focused on creating large networks of friends and family, value the opportunity to enlarge their circle of friends, consistent with the 'guanxi' concept of contributing to and then become a beneficiary of, strong and long-lasting relationships among local friends in family and commerce.



Graph 2: What were your expectations as to outcome?

Students report a significant level of time involvement for these activities (Graph 3), with the majority of students investing between 6 and 10 hours per week. A large group of German participants spent more than 20 hours per week on this initiative, likely rivalling the amount of work they invested in

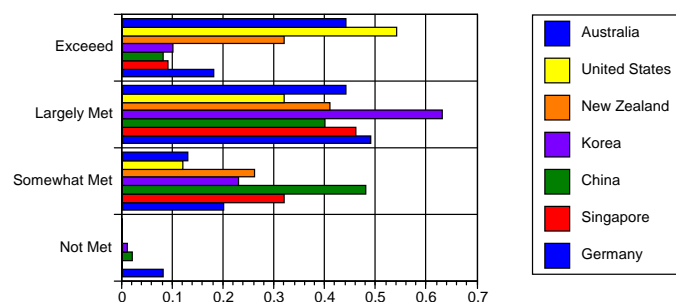
any other course at their university. We must admire the dedication of these students, especially in countries like Korea and China where the privilege of attending university by itself requires a more-than-fulltime effort.

Graph 3: To what extent did you learn new skills?

The participants report significant levels of learning that were achieved (Graph 3). Aside from a slightly less enthusiastic affirmation of learning in Singapore and Germany, 45%-55% of the students report 'a lot' of learning, and another 35%-50% report 'a bit' of learning. This appears to be quite an achievement, given that this is an unstructured, mainly self-driven series of events which is purposefully unclear of the specific steps required to achieve a successful outcome. In fact, the students do not know until the day of their national competition how their projects are rated by the judges and thus are largely left to their own devices in the development of their deliveries.

It appears that the skills learned are not just the traditional tools-based skills of financial analysis, planning, etc. The students report they have learned team work skills, are more proficient in speaking in front of a challenging audience and are more self-assured. These specific accomplishments are much harder to achieve in a traditional classroom setting, and it seems that the students appreciate these outcomes greatly.

With a peculiar exception in China, students across the three continents report of 'largely met' or 'exceeded' expectations, which appears to be a good result given the many hours the students have invested in their work (Graph 4). The lone outlier is China, where more than 40% of the students indicated their expectations were only 'somewhat met'. Follow-up interviews with those students clarified their response. These achievement-focused students were frustrated that their team did not win the China SIFE national competition and thus they missed out on the (all expenses paid) travel to the world cup competition event in Toronto. We know from contact with the students in all of these countries that nearly all of this year's participants have re-enrolled to participate next year again, and we take this as a confirmation of the reported high level of satisfaction.

**Graph 4: To what extent did this activity meet your expectations?**

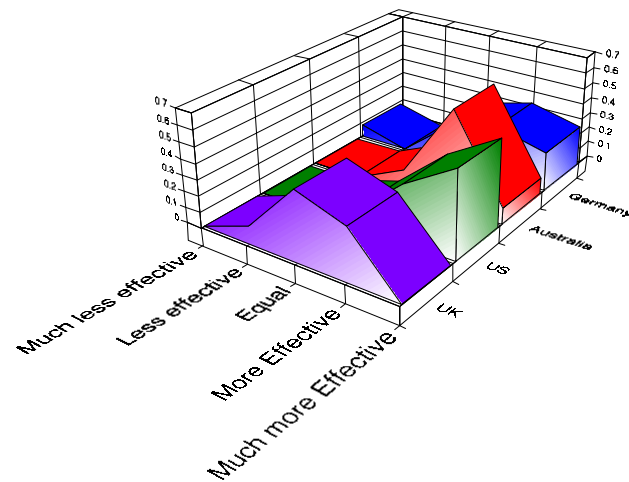
Action Learning is only one strand of the various models that have been adopted by Business Schools in response to criticisms of too

traditional and limited teaching methods. In undergraduate courses, the business plan, the use of case studies, and the business simulation are common teaching methods.

Honig outlines the business plan as probably having its historical genesis in the long-term planning used to turn around large firms (Honig, 2004). He quotes Drucker who, in 1959, attempted to define long-range planning as 'the organized process of making entrepreneurial decisions' (Drucker, 1959; Honig, 2004). The business plan in the classroom context is defined as "a written document that

describes the current state and the presupposed future of an organization" (Honig, 2004). Most consist of 20 – 40 plus page documents that "outline a proposed new product or service; the organizational and financial strategies to be employed; marketing, production, and management activities; and an examination of the competitive and environmental constraints and resources" (Honig, 2004). The business plans involve group work, and the integration of material across a broad range of business school disciplines is expected in the presentation of material. In this spirit, we have asked faculty members who observed and mentored these SIFE students, to comment on the SIFE outcomes in comparison to business plan competitions, as these competitions seem to come closest to the competition format used for this action learning program.

We had hypothesized that this somewhat unstructured action learning program might not fare as well in the lecturers' opinion as business plan competitions, where schools and faculty help design the course of events and thus likely take more ownership of the learning outcomes – and we were wrong. The feedback from faculty advisors was unanimous that such an entrepreneurship learning program yields either 'more' or 'much more' learning outcome when compared to other school-driven competitions, such as business plan competitions (55%+ of the respondents).



Graph 5: How do these action learning outcomes compare to Business plan competitions, etc.

In contrast to case competitions, action learning must involve real work - that is, it will have real outcomes, and is not a simulation exercise. It must involve questioning and critical thinking, in order to be able to question the validity of existing assumptions, and to use the

answers to move the process forward. People must take responsibility for their own learning; they must not wait for their responses or struggles to be recognized and assisted from outside. The action learning needs to be a value-adding exercise for the organization. Bowerman and Peters regard self-evaluation and presentations as being means of embedding knowledge within an organization. For them, the action learning must be successful in building group dynamics, as members of a 'set' come together to work with and learn from each other. (Bowerman and Peters, 1999).

To that extent, this action learning program meets common definitions, and we see it consistent with the Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement (PETE) model (Mueller/Thornton, 2005), developed to guide school faculty to the creation of effective action learning environments.

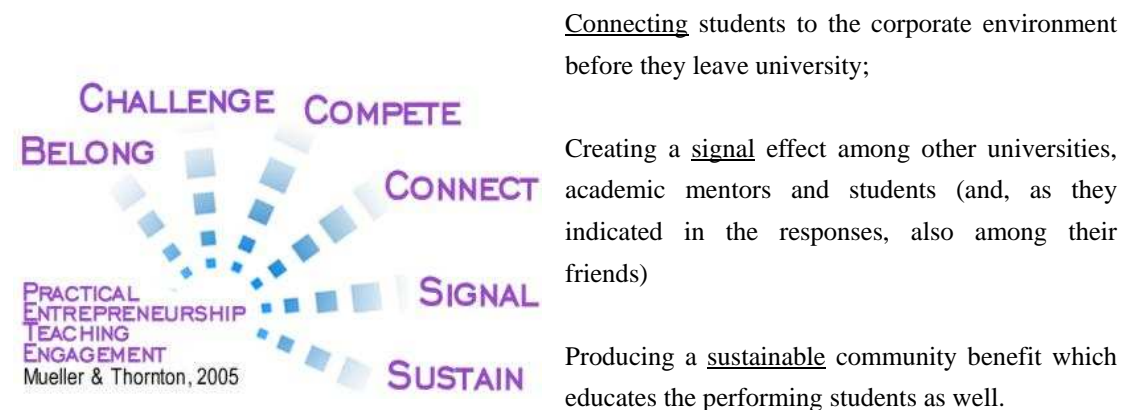
This entrepreneurship teaching model attempts to isolate factors which can contribute to high student engagement and outcome levels by creating a sense of:

Belonging by creating a committed and motivated sub-group of students with a special group membership in an organization;

Challenging the students to practical work outside the classrooms and requiring significant personal

commitment to achieve acceptable outcomes;

Including a real-life competition in front of senior corporate executives of world-class corporations;



Graph 6: The PETE Model

The involvement of faculty in this action learning programme is one of innovation from both an organizational and educational perspective. At the heart of the programme is a team of multinational CEOs and Presidents who can expose participants to the “real world” and offer practical assistance (including financial support) and advice to the ongoing assignment issues of SIFE.

The participating executives from companies such as Unilever, HSBC, Philip Morris, Wal-Mart, Metro, KPMG, Bayer, Asahi Shimbun, etc. are universally supportive of this effort. These senior executives comment positively on the quality they have seen when the students present their materials. Two of these comments are shown below, and are suitably representative:

“KPMG is proud to have been a founding supporter of SIFE in China. With the expansion to more than 30 teams this year, we are excited about the many new Chinese students who have participated in SIFE. The ability to develop, deliver, measure and manage projects is essential for successful business leaders and I am delighted to see the growth of SIFE in China introducing more and more future business leaders to the skills required to be successful in both local and global organizations.” (Kennedy, 2004)

“Wal-Mart is a fast-growing company and committed to sustainable global business and people development. Wherever we are, we see SIFE students participating in important community work. They educate our communities about business opportunities, and we congratulate them for their efforts. We also welcome your joining the team with passion interests and grow with us.” (Hatfield, 2005)

The Human Resource Director Asia for Cadbury Schweppes, Lesley Staples (Staples, 2005), reports that the company identified at least two students from the Australia SIFE teams who they would otherwise likely have not been in contact with. Those students were hired, performed above-average, and one was sent recently on fast-track development program in Singapore, where he excelled.

CONCLUSION

We have investigated an action-learning based entrepreneurship program in seven countries on three continents, which attempts to give students the opportunity to apply their academic learning in a

practical environment. These students have grown up with different cultural norms governing their rules of interaction and with different economic systems favouring/disfavouring free market enterprise. It is therefore remarkable for these participants to uniformly and consistently report outcomes which propel their learnings ahead of those who do not engage in action learning events like these.

These students work in teams for which they establish self-governance, must create and 'sell' their own design of projects, and then perform those projects. At the end of each program year, student teams from each country compete before senior executives and the winning team travels to a world event.

These contact and travel incentives seem to create an attraction for students, who report high levels of engagement in this extracurricular work, as well as high rates of outcome satisfaction after completion of their work. Executives appear attracted to this program and support this work through their personal attendance at competition events, as mentors to students and with corporate financial contributions.

We have not investigated whether there is a tangible effect on the course grades of students after they completed the program, and we are curious whether the participation in this program does create job opportunities these students would otherwise not have. There has not yet been a longitudinal investigation into the lasting career benefits of action learning education at university.

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