

Creating Learning Communities: An Important Tool for Effective Entrepreneurship Education

LEARNING COMMUNITY IMPLICATIONS

A learning community suggests a fundamental philosophical shift relative to the traditional “instructor-pupil” model. This can be hard for some students to understand initially. The role of instructor shifts from that of authoritarian taskmaster, to that of (e.g., life) *coach*. In a learning community centered pedagogy, every student is a “member of the team” and on a field of play to help one another and provide constant feedback.

Let’s consider an example:

Assignment: Develop a Mission Statement	
Traditional Model	Learning Community Model
Response:	Response:
<i>Send Mission Statement to Instructor (Only)</i>	<i>Present Mission Statement to Audience</i>
(Assumes instructor will be able to accurately predict audience reaction and acceptance or rejection.)	(Note: Not just other students but as many as possible, such as prospective customers, consultants, possible suppliers, and peers; collaboration is not “cheating” as it may be under the traditional model.)
Receive Feedback From Instructor	Engage Audience
(Note: Instructor’s views may or may not coincide with the views of a larger audience; thus, the statement is not tested in a marketplace of ideas.)	Multiple points of view can be articulated by a larger audience that in effect becomes a form of test marketing as ideas are fully vetted.
Respond to Positive or Negative Feedback	Respond to Positive or Negative Feedback
(Iterations continue, constrained by time available in the course, communication speed back and forth, student’s and instructor’s willingness and ability to communicate suggestions and revisions respectively in multiple attempts to implement changes and reach a final resting point, probably with bias toward the instructor’s opinions.)	Consider and adapt to feedback from multiple sources; seek a resting point whereby the mission statement enjoys wide acceptance and appeal.
Finish Course	Finish Course
Test in “Real World” before larger audience (hope Instructor’s estimation of acceptance or rejection was right.)	Mission Statement immediately deployable or possibly already deployed by student-entrepreneur.
Result	Result
Slower process, prone to errors and/or exhaustion of resources; work product still in need of further review and development (via presentation in a scenario like the “Learning Community Model” in the right column).	Faster process; tested results with work product ready for deployment.

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Since this construct of a learning community may be new to you in your academic experiences to date, consider the alternative “old” view and its implications. First, in the “instructor-pupil” model an embedded assumption is that the instructor knows everything, and the objective is to “transfer knowledge” (probably in an assembly line fashion, efficiently) to the pupil or pupils. Second, “quality” is therefore implicitly defined as the degree to which such a transfer occurs. Third, transfer effectiveness is often therefore measured through mechanisms such as objective tests (which arguably only succeed at demonstrating what students can regurgitate from memory). Forth, “cramming” and rote memorization fail as a means to build multiple neural connections and therefore the supposedly accurately measured transfer of learning is subject to error (i.e., given the likelihood that memorized material will not be retained).

(As an experienced entrepreneur and consultant to others), the developer of this present course in which you are embarking would advocate that such a model does not work well in entrepreneurship. Rather, entrepreneurs need to build social capital and interpersonal connections with peers (they should also have mentors and “pay it forward” by serving as mentors to others); they need to develop ideas and test those ideas with an audience of peers, subject matter experts, prospective customers, suppliers, etc.; they need to be effective communicators; they need to gain practical skills from experiential exercises; they need to collaborate, rather than operate in isolation.

Elaborating further as to what this means in terms of other implications is that we (instructors) are not so interested in grading, but in encouraging each of you individually and collectively to practice, practice, practice, and give and receive feedback and support to one another on a continual basis!

ADULT LEARNING CONCEPTS FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

When teachers deviate from a strictly expository method of instructional delivery (i.e., using lectures as the sole means of instruction, probably combined with testing based on those lectures), it is easy for students who normally experience this form of teaching exclusively to think that, in effect, teaching means “telling me things” (and if the teacher does not lecture, he or she isn’t teaching, and I am not learning). In many distance classes, the surrogate for expository teaching may be assigned readings followed by tests or similar responses wherein the student submits materials to the instructor for feedback and grading.

However, another form of teaching asserts that teaching may occur when the teacher *leads* or *directs* learners to engage in learning exercises. For example, if an art teacher directs students to “go to an art museum and study the works on the wall, sculptures, and so forth--carefully (and take notes!),” and the students actually follow-through, they will also learn.

A significant body of research suggests that in the latter case, instances involving learning by doing and having hands-on experience “sticks” better, deeper, and longer; if that’s not enough,

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it's also a lot more fun than listening to most lectures. As such, from an instructor's point of view one might "grade" by ensuring that assigned experiential activities were completed (i.e., by knowing that if the specified activity was completed, students' skills and knowledge would be increased).

The following example constructs are excerpts from the book, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* by Stephen D. Brookfield, Jossey-Bass (1st Edition, 5th Printing, 1990); "to help enhance their capability to function as self-directed learners, the educator must":

1. Progressively decrease the learner's dependence on the educators;
2. Help the learner understand how to use the learning resources—especially the experiences of others, including the educator, and how to engage others in reciprocal learning relations;
3. Assist learners to assume increased responsibility for defining their learning objectives, planning their own learning programs and evaluating their progress;
4. Foster learner decision making—select learner-relevant learning experiences which require choosing, expand the learner's range of options, facilitate taking the perspectives of others who have alternate ways of understanding;
5. Encourage the use of criteria for judging which are increasingly inclusive and differentiating in awareness, self-reflexive and integrative of experience;
6. Reinforce the self-concept of the learner as a learner and doer by providing for progressive mastery; supportive climate with feedback to encourage provisional efforts to change and take risks; avoidance of competitive judgment of performance; appropriate use of mutual support groups;
7. Emphasize experiential, participative and projective instructional methods; appropriate use of modeling and learning contracts.

You will note that entrepreneurial leaders are by their very nature people who are self-directed! Thus, the facilitation methods for learning are fitting to the situation at hand, as is the purposeful use of a learning community-centered approach to instructional delivery as a means to improve outcomes.

In the end, you are competing against yourselves, and therefore constantly striving to better your personal best is the goal. We are relatively certain that the instructor-pupil (authoritarian) model is better suited to young children learning from parents, and not for individuals who are striving to be "masters of entrepreneurship."