Comparing Online and Physical Social Entrepreneurship Training: Lessons Learned moving Online

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Abstract

With soft skills such as networking, groupwork and team building being key aspects of entrepreneurship education, the Covid-19 pandemic arguably has had a larger impact than on many other subject areas by the need to switch online. Having run a four day, fully immersive Enterprise School for social enterprise off campus for many years, the Covid-19 pandemic saw a need to move online with a danger of these key aspects being lost. By using the more familiar local area, spreading out the time between sessions and increasing the interactions with guest mentors we were able to mitigate for some of these issues. This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of moving online with qualitative feedback from students and staff including some unexpected benefits such as improved accessibility for some students.

Keywords: Enterprise, entrepreneurship, extracurricular education, online learning.

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is acknowledged as a key component of a university education backed by employers, governments and students themselves (QAA, 2018). Whilst some students will indeed start a business on graduation, many others will use their skills within an existing organisation as intrapreneurship or start a business later in life, which makes measuring the true value of interventions difficult. There have been some longitudinal studies (Matley and Carey, 2007) and also retrospectively asking alumni entrepreneurs what was successful (Phillips, 2018), but measuring outcomes is notoriously difficult (Henry et al., 2017; Duval-Couetil, 2013). It is suggested that those that are put off entrepreneurship by understanding how difficult it could be is a useful outcome to prevent unsuitable entrepreneurs wasting money and failing when they could find a better match being entrepreneurial within an existing organisation (von Graeventiz et al., 2010). There are a range of activities both on and off curricular for those with an interest in entrepreneurship (Nabi et al., 2017, Phillips, 2010). Many studies suggest extracurricular activities are best for those interested whilst at university (Papadopoulou and Phillips, 2019). This especially applies to social enterprise where students have suggested it is better taught in a multidisciplinary environment separated from "general" entrepreneurship (Jones and Phillips, 2021). Entrepreneurship education generally works best as learning by doing, as an active experience. It was found previously that an immersive experience away from the University using a four day residential enterprise school for social enterprise has worked well in encouraging knowledge and skill building (Phillips, 2017), and that students have taken that back to their home environment, with the ability to reflect on what they have done in order to improve, such as in the Kolb learning Cycle (Kolb, 2014). The Rugby Team Framework (Rugby Team, 2008) was previously used to assess the benefits from an increase in self efficacy and an increased entrepreneurial skills set to actually creating a venture (Phillips, 2017). As with other subjects, entrepreneurship education has been affected by the urgency to switch to online, with not only the elimination of face to face teaching but also less ability to plan in advance for upcoming courses due to changing regulations. Online learning was previously a small part of university teaching prior to Covid with approximately 5% of degrees completed online in the US, and the hurried migration online in 2020 has been problematic for many academics and students, with students often perceiving it as lower value (Watermeyer et al., 2021). Since entrepreneurship education has been reinforced in the literature as a subject that needs face to face immersion, Liguori and Winkler (2020) suggest that it is even further behind other subjects in terms of understanding how successful pedagogic models can be adopted online. Online learning has many positives, for example it is cost effective, flexible and can facilitate elements of both synchronous and asynchronous activity and allow intereaction with others in many different locations. Liguori and Winkler (2020) suggest that whilst the basics of business and entrepreneurship can be taught in a straightforward manner by online teaching, aspects of the

entrepreneurial mindset and entrepreneurial competencies which are more applied in nature are more difficult and require more thought and planning. A range of options have been suggested for making the most of EdTech and Dhawan (2020) has summarized the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges of online teaching, and that accessibility, flexibility and lower costs are important positives.

The enterprise school activity tries to fulfill the elements of the EntreComp Framework (Bacigalupo et al., 2016) which lncludes the broad areas of *Into Action* (e.g. learning through experience), *Ideas and Opportunities* (e.g. Spotting opportunities, creativity) and *Resources* (e.g. Mobilising resources, financial literacy and self efficacy). Students are placed in groups from different subject areas to firstly identify a social problem in the local area they agree on to tackle and to then to make a case for a social enterprise to address it. Sessions involved an introduction to an enterprising topic, with pointers to key resources and an emphasis on the students obtaining primary and secondary data to test their assumptions. They were encouraged to speak to potential customers/end users to explore the problem in more detail and to gain feedback on potential solutions. In previous years, the physical enterprise school involved spending 4 days staying in the Lake District area of the UK, which has social issues such as an elderly population, brain drain of young people to cities, seasonal businesses reliant on tourism, transport issues and environment/ecology issues. They were able to physically speak to potential customers, business owners and guest entrepreneurs for feedback and iteratively improve their idea. Groups pitched their social enterprise idea on the last day. The Enterprise School moved online for 2021 and took place via Zoom over 4 weeks with sessions spaced out with similar material provided by lecturers and guest speakers as the previous physical version. A more familiar environment was used as the target - Manchester where the students lived, which allowed some familiarity without the need to physically explore a new area. Issues identified in Manchester included canal waste, high fat diets of South Asian women and employment skills for young people in deprived areas. Groups presented their social enterprise idea on the last day via Zoom. To emphasise more the practical side, more external speakers were used as the reduction of costs allowed this, so each group had access to a social enterprise mentor from the local area. Daily feedback was used to identify any serious issues and to allow staff to recify issues if possible, with a WhatsApp group for urgent technical issues.

Having attempted to provide a high quality online alternative in 2021, the aim of this paper was to identify what worked well and what worked less well using qualitative data from both students and staff in order to inform future activities of this nature.

2. Methodology

Primary data was collected from questionnaires prior to the commencement of the course and also on completion with opportunities for students to provide detailed feedback. There were 20 respondents and data was analysed in a qualitative manner. The pre-event questionnaire focused on reasons for attending and whether they felt online would be suitable for them, to identify any specific issues before the course started to allow time to adapt to any unexpected issues and give the best chance of high satisfaction. The post-event questionnaire focused in depth on how satisfied the students were with the activities, what they felt worked well and less well. It also asked students for an overall satisfaction rating based on a Lickert Scale.

3. Results

Pre-event students were asked their motivations for taking part, the reasons why people wanted to take part were similar and moving online not seen as a problem, if fact one participant cited it as a benefit;

"*I'd like to get the necessary skills to start a business and hear more real life business start-up obstacles and how to overcome these. I admire entrepreneurs and I'd like to start a business but I have a fear of starting / uncertain where to start.*"

"*I have dreamt of entering the world of Social Enterprise Entrepreneurship to try being part of the change….I wouldn't have been able to do this programme this year had it not been virtual due to my exacerbated disabilities. I hope to: feel less intimidated haling from a non-businsss background, feel confident in my understanding of the introductory skills, learn how to quickly work with a new team entirely virtually, have the opportunity to learn from the industry-experienced and a better understanding of the magnitude of problems out there*".

Post-event feedback of student satisfaction was positive and is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Overall Satisfaction with the Online Enterprise School

Answer	% Response
A Great Deal	60.00
A Lot	30.00
A Moderate Amount	10.00
A Little	0.00
None at all	0.00

Qualitative comments were also collected to gain a deeper understanding of what exactly had gone well or less well during the activity. Despite the fact more time was allowed between activities to allow learning to be absorbed and for discussion between students, many felt that even more time could have helped;

"....more time between certain aspects such as pitching-masterclass, pitching surgery and pitch-delivery would have been incredibly useful. It would give us more time to implement and practice the golden nuggets of advice"

"Maybe for online format, a couple of days (instead of one) between Day 1 and Day 2 would give a bit more time for problem research, formulation and statement."

"It would have also helped with the time difference barriers of our geographic locations, where we lose out on how much time we can work online together across the globe as a unit, which is particularly critical for pitches"

The extra support that was put in place, with Whatsapp group (in case of technical problems) and the direct chat function on Zoom were deemed especially useful. Several students commented that they could ask questions directly via the chat function on Zoom privately rather than in front of everyone – this was useful for some students who may be lacking confidence, with several students saying pre-course that they didn't feel confident in the "business" area, and this was a function that was highly used;

"The additional WhatsApp support was something no other has teacher has offered before and was very useful, and much more effective than using the typical Blackboard Discussion forum. Never come across any programme conducted virtually or otherwise with relentless support and encouragement which also flowed in parallel in the Zoom chatboxes with tonnes of useful links and resources. Every single question was followed through, and we didn't feel like there was a question too big or too small that wouldn't be received well."

Whilst all students enjoyed the experiential learning aspects, one student wanted to take things further by taking their social business idea forward;

"...the practices learned should be put in execution phase with more rigorous targets each week. The structure, framework and mentorship in place is excellent to bring about a real product in the market rather than just executing this as a learning experience."

There were mixed views on the ability to network, whilst one was positive, another participant highlighted the difficulty in networking outside their immediate group;

"I enjoyed that we were put into teams with different people, and got the chance to work/network with different people other than our usual team members."

"I think would be good to spend more time working with others outside our group of 4 on the first day- I feel I only know my group and my mentor, I don't know anybody else."

Table 2. The advantages and disadvantages of the physical enterprise school compared to the online version

Aspect of the Enterprise School	Advantages/Disadvantges of Physical	Advantages/Disadvantages of Online
Networking	Ease of physically networking with both own group, but also with others and informally with guest entrepreneurs and lecturers easier to approach others face to face in an ad-hoc manner.	Meetings within groups straightforward, but sessions with guest entrepreneurs and lecturers more formal with timetabled sessions and pre arranged meetings.
Cost	High cost but more immersive experience and travel element attractive to students. High cost an incentive to fill the programme with many activities.	Lower costs, but less attractive to some students to do another online course. Money saved can be used to bring in more external speakers.
Reflection	Less time to reflect with all activities fitted into four days, not much time to incorporate it into the activities.	More time to reflect, and to react to feedback and initiate change.
Level of induction needed	Spend time learning about a new area, which although time consuming can also help team bonding.	Already familiar with the area so less investigation required.
Ability to ask questions	Generally done in front of whole class, so less confident students may not ask questions.	Option to message privately, so less confident students felt more able to ask questions.
Disability Issues	The need to physically explore the area and move around the venue a potential issue.	Mostly at the PC so physical issues much less a problem, however more allowances needed for Dyslexic students.
Engagement	Away from home so student have less opportunity to disengage.	Working remotely so easier to disengage from the activities.
Staffing	Need staff to travel even if for a short presentation. Logistical issues in bringing all materials required to the venue.	Much more flexible and can do multiple shorter sessions with staff only needed for a short time for each.
Infrastructure	Extensvie infrastructure such as hotel, materials and transport needed.	Technological Infrastructure critical to success, good network connection critical to student engagement.

One participant highlighted the problems of a team member disengaging;

".....one member of our team did not show to the 2 peer mentor sessions we had, and meetings outside of the session it really made the final pitch stressful as I did not feel prepared because we had been practising as a 2 or 3 at times."

And online perhaps more allowances could have been made for Dyslexia;

"We didn't appreciate the extent of typing or scribing that would be needed real-time. Dyslexia aside, other difficulties such as needing adaptations(software and hardware) such as voice recognition to function for the 'live' exercises did not work well, even though I've thoroughly enjoyed it!"

Table 2 brings together feedback from the qualitative comments from students and also feedback from staff to give a fuller assessment of what works well and less well.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Since entrepreneurship education at its best is generally more interactive and practical than many other subjects, it was feared that a switch to online for the annual enterprise school might lose many of the benefits of the physical version. However, this was not necessarily the case and there were several both expected and unexpected benefits to the switch online. Even so students still wanted longer to absorb material and make connections and a small number of students were not proactive in interacting. Online works well for people with physical disabilities and the ability to message in Zoom can allow students to ask what they consider a "stupid" question, however, more should be done to compensate for Dyslexic students.

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