**Title:**

Staff perspectives of threshold concepts in the context of an undergraduate entrepreneurial business degree programme.

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**Title and Summary:**

Staff perspectives of threshold concepts in the context of an undergraduate entrepreneurial business degree programme.

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This developmental paper explores staff perspectives of threshold concepts in the context of a newly developed, innovative undergraduate entrepreneurial business degree programme. It is intended that this work will form part of a future larger project exploring how students come to understand entrepreneurial business management using various frameworks and concepts, including the critical lens of threshold concepts, as tools for interpretation.

Focusing on the individual student and the development of their competencies and behaviours, entrepreneurial business management is explored as a multi-disciplinary subject area applied in a work-based learning programme. There is a significant challenge inherent in the definition of threshold concepts in this context however the research could potentially unlock the language of entrepreneurialism and map its relationship to the concepts of graduateness and employability. This in turn has the potential to create a common discourse across the subject disciplines, creating dialogue and future learning value.

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Introduction

This paper explores staff perspectives of threshold concepts in the context of a newly developed, innovative undergraduate entrepreneurial business degree programme. It is intended that this work will form part of a future larger project exploring how students come to understand entrepreneurial business management using various frameworks and concepts, including the critical lens of threshold concepts, as tools for interpretation.

The Entrepreneurial Business Management (EBM) programme was launched in September 2013. It is inspired by an approach developed at Finland’s Jyväskylä University of Applied Science’s ‘Team Academy’. Participants work in teams to set up and manage real businesses, and learn together through identifying commercial opportunities, developing plans to exploit these, and managing the resulting activities.

This research is potentially significant as it provides insights into a journey towards an innovative, experiential learning model and may offer insights into pedagogical developments in entrepreneurial education.

Theoretical Context

This section is set out as follows; after discussing various dispositions associated with entrepreneurial behaviour, the case for entrepreneurial education is presented. The legitimacy of business and entrepreneurial business as subject disciplines is briefly considered, before moving on to explore how the idea of threshold concepts may differ in ‘pure’ subject disciplines and multidisciplinary subject areas. The rationale for the identification of threshold concepts or their equivalent in the study of a multidisciplinary area such as entrepreneurial business management is proposed. The context of the pedagogical methods used to deliver the programme and their role in propelling students along their journey towards ‘thinking like entrepreneurs’ is considered.

The case for enterprise and entrepreneurial education is strong (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2012) and there is global growth in entrepreneurial education programmes (Benyon, et al., 2014). This is apparent not least in the UK, where entrepreneurship is identified as enabler of positive social, economic and political change (Matlay & Carey, 2007).

Defining what entrepreneurial business management is, in terms of a subject discipline is challenging but important both in terms of programme credibility and curriculum design. The Higher Education Data & Information Improvement Programme have recently proposed grouping enterprise and entrepreneurship together, and defining them together as:

“The application of creative ideas and innovations to practical situations, including, but not exclusively, creating and growing organisations in order to identify and build on opportunities." (HEDIIP, 2015)

According to the current programme listing, studying for a degree in Entrepreneurial Business Management includes the study of management, marketing, human resource management, finance and accounting, creativity, innovation, leadership, communication, team working, strategic planning and decision-making. Other skills taught include:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * Negotiation skills
* Problem solving
* Building resilience
* Change management
* Implementing ideas
* Networking
* Critical thinking
* Working productively
* Learning to learn
 | * Building a Company
* Developing business processes and systems
* Business Strategy
* Sales
* Customer Service
* Building Stakeholder Relationships
* Business law
* Raising finance
* Managing business performance
* Risk management
 |

<https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/study-at-northumbria/courses/entrepreneurial-business-management-ft-uufebm1/> [accessed 22/06/2015]

The production of knowledge is commonly and historically organized in disciplines and the communication of knowledge within a disciplinary field is normally expected to differ from the communication of knowledge within a non-disciplinary field (Van den Besselaar & Heimeriks, 2001). Business studies is typical of a subject in a non-disciplinary, or multidisciplinary field. Business Schools and business studies courses have long struggled with academic legitimacy perhaps because of this. The Gordon and Howell report and funding from the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Council (Pierson, 1959) started business schools on their continuing trajectory to achieve academic respectability and legitimacy by becoming (applied) social science departments.

However, employers increasingly demand application-oriented knowledge, and the usability of knowledge generally requires the combination and integration of knowledge from various disciplines. So whilst business studies may continue to battle for academic legitimacy in some quarters, it has a clear advantage when it comes to graduate employability.

The description of EBM content is not unusual. A typical syllabus for a business programme would be likely to include elements of finance, marketing, human resource management, operations and strategy. Entrepreneurial business therefore, would appear to be a distinctive *way* of doing business, so that it does not differ in content but in approach. Entrepreneurial business is a way of doing business that draws out dispositions, attitudes and behaviours associated with being entrepreneurial.

Often entrepreneurial characteristics are associated with dispositions and sometime are implied to be innate personality attributes. Dispositions associated with entrepreneurial behaviour and the capacity to engage in entrepreneurial activity include

* Willingness to seek out opportunities and to act quickly when they arise
* Using resources effectively
* Prioritising the building of networks over hierarchies

(Stephenson, 1990, quoted by Gartner & Baker, 2010, pp.2-3):

Entrepreneurship is also associated with

* the development of new approaches and solutions (Soriano & Huarng, 2013).
* a tolerance for calculated risk (Bruyat & Julien, 2000)
* a proactive willingness to change how things are done (Avlonitis & Savalou, 2007)

A high level of self-efficacy is also frequently cited as a defining characteristic of entrepreneurs (Hechevarria, et al., 2012). Indeed many of the characteristics associated with successful entrepreneurship are also associated with successful learning approaches of higher education (Pugalis, et al., forthcoming), and are demonstrated in activities or processes.

 “Probably in all disciplines, there are conceptual gateways or ‘portals’ that must be passed through….to arrive at important new understandings.” (Land, et al., 2008, pp. ix-x). After passing through such a conceptual gateway, a person will think differently about a particular phenomenon within that discipline. These gateways or portals may be described as ‘threshold concepts’. A threshold concept is likely to be transformative, and may even lead to a transformation of personal identity and a reconstruction of subjectivity, a shift in values, feeling, and attitude; “mastery simultaneously changes what we know and who we are.” (Cousin, 2008). Such changes are likely to be irreversible. The new understandings may also expose the previously hidden interrelatedness of something and can often be troublesome, causing “stuck-ness” in students. In addition, Land, Meyer & Smith (2008) suggest they may define the boundaries of academic territories.

The idea of threshold concepts would appear to be more readily applied to disciplinary contexts where there is a relatively greater degree of consensus on what constitutes a body of knowledge; for example in Mathematics; perhaps because these subject disciplines have been commonly accepted as legitimate for a considerable period of time. It might be expected that the articulation of threshold concepts would differ in disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and non-disciplinary settings.

Within Business Studies – even more so with programmes such as entrepreneurial business management – aspects such as “ways of thinking and practising” (Wenger, 1998) within a discipline may also constitute thresholds which lead to a transformed understanding. This could be summarised as a student on the entrepreneurial business management programme being able to ‘think like an entrepreneur’. Baillie & Johnson (Land, et al., 2008, pp. 129-141) describe the development of a “professional attitude” as such a threshold in a Professional Skills course for students entering an Applied Science programme in Canada.

Similar to Baillie and Johnson’s (1998) Professional Skills course, the entire entrepreneurial business management degree programme could be described as a preparation for students to work in an emerging context. The teaching model similarly resists directing tasks in a prescriptive manner, instead using the summative assignments as the only fixed points in the curriculum. The fear of being responsible for their own learning as described by Baillie & Johnson (1998) was also often evident in the students of the entrepreneurial business management programme (Pugalis, et al., forthcoming). Students were found to have a narrow view of what constituted teaching, and had a desire to be told explicitly what to learn, despite claiming a dislike of a transmission based model of education.

Defining the threshold concepts in any subject discipline may help to inform the development of the curricula in order that it might be optimised. In attempting to define the threshold concepts, educators are making use of an analytical framework that helps them better understand how students learn, what might cause students to become stuck and consequently what pedagogical modifications might need to be made to facilitate their learning journeys.

If threshold concepts can be considered as “ways of thinking and practising” (Wenger, 1998) in entrepreneurial business management, curricula and pedagogical practices could be optimised to enable and support the discovery and development of these attributes in the participants.

Methodology

This paper is the first step on a future iterative journey to collect a multiplicity of perspectives on threshold concepts in entrepreneurial business management; the first perspective being that of members of the coaching team of the Entrepreneurial Business Management programme. The broad intent here is that analysis of the qualitative data from interviews with staff members in the programme delivery team will identify broad emergent themes that may serve as an emergent thematic framework for the exploration of specific threshold concepts with other relevant groups (such as students of the programme).

The data described here is drawn from interviews conducted with the four Coaches (staff members) which constituted the total Coaching team at the time of the data collection, one Teaching and Learning Assistant and previous graduate of a similar degree programme in Finland, and one intern working as an assistant to the Coach team and also a current student of a similar programme, also in Finland. The interviewer (the author) is also a member of the Coaching Team. The data constitutes what (Silverman, 2006) refers to as ‘researcher-provoked’ data. These interviews took place just after the mid point of the academic year, following the intake of the 2nd ever cohort of this new programme.

Of the interviewees, 4 were male and 2 female. Interviews were conducted either in the dedicated programme space or at the Business School, by a female researcher, also a member of the Coaching team, and informally designated as “Head Coach”. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were loosely structured around a script designed to explore threshold concepts within the subject discipline. Interviews were digitally recorded (audio) and then later transcribed.

The presentation of findings here is based on the study of the digital audio recordings. Further analysis will follow the complete transcription of the interview data. In all research outputs identifying details of participants are removed and pseudonyms have been used.

The data will be coded to identify key themes. Analysis reflects categories introduced in the interview script, and also emergent themes and issues. Data was ‘… not analysed as reflecting an objective reality, but as discursive and partial accounts, which are produced in the specific situation of an interview’ (Burke, 2007, p. 413). This is important in examining data which relates to a programme where experiences are strongly located in individual experiences and in the shifting dynamics associated with involvement in a new and rapidly evolving programme.

The following questions were used to structure the interviews:

1. What is your reaction to the idea of Threshold Concepts in education?
2. What subject discipline do you think the programme falls under?
3. If someone tells you they are studying business at university – what do you assume they will be studying?
4. If someone tells you they are studying entrepreneurial business at university – what do you assume they will be studying?
5. Do you think the entrepreneurial business as a subject merits its own disciplinary sub-category?
6. What do you think the threshold concepts in this discipline might be?

The coaching experience of the staff members varied from 2 to 18 months. Most had no formal coaching qualifications with the exception of the interviewer, who has several years of executive coaching experience and a formal qualification in this area. All of the coaching team were experienced in teaching in a Higher Educational context.

Findings and Analysis

Reaction to the term and the characterisation of threshold concepts:

All the interviewees were previously unfamiliar with idea of a “threshold concept” but accepted it as a useful term to label a phenomenon they could relate to. The idea appeared to be stimulating and exciting for most. Describing threshold concepts as “doorways” appeared to be helpful. Alternative terminologies offered by interviewees, included “a turning point”, “a transformative moment”, “a gear change” and “a key that unlocks a door”. There was a parallel drawn with the saying, “Education is what is left after you have forgotten what you have learnt” – perhaps implying that threshold concepts are the substance of education.

Participants related to threshold concepts as times when a fundamental penny dropped in a theoretical framework; moments when suddenly lights shone. It was widely acknowledged that once these “doorways” had been passed through, there was no return – things could not be unlearnt, the light could not be turned off again. Reflecting on their own experiences, participants often recalled times when they suddenly came to understand the landscape, and things suddenly made sense. Iain related a conversation with a student who had felt a physical click in his head of the penny dropping. This would appear to suggest that perhaps some thresholds are passed quickly – in a moment, and others take shape as slower realisations. A threshold concept was described variously as something that transforms, changing ways of being and something that has a central place in teaching as “teaching should change people”.

Three participants could instantly see the potential for the research to develop and fine tune the programme and entrepreneurial education in general. The move towards the identification of threshold concepts in entrepreneurial education was acknowledged as potentially very fruitful – if there are better ways to unlock certain doors then a better focus of effort can be made, resulting in better and more reliable outcomes.

Neil highlighted that there might be differences between threshold concepts at various levels. For example; threshold concepts could be defined at the level of the individual, and be dependent on the psychology of the individual learner, and threshold concepts might also be defined at the level of the community; or a society. Perhaps threshold concepts might be different from individual learner to individual learner; what is perhaps a threshold concept for one, may not be for another. Perhaps the most pertinent level of threshold concepts might be defined at the level of a team, which would be particularly relevant in the context of the programme where learning in teams is a key emphasis.

A proposed key strength of the programme was that it allowed learners to customise their individual learning to an extent that was not possible on a traditional business studies programme – where everyone was learning the same thing, although perhaps allowed to specialise to some extent with course options. The programme allows people to concentrate on what they are passionate about, along lines of individual specialism.

Business as a Subject Discipline

When asked what a typical student of a traditional programme of business studies might be covering, five respondents listed finance and marketing. Leadership, human resources management and economics were also mentioned, together with operations, management, strategy, business environment and law.

Iain characterised the study of business as a variable and shifting list of things that need to be done to get a business running, which were very practical and dependent on the needs in the marketplace.

Four participants characterised business as a bundle of subjects, usually learnt as a range of theories, perhaps with a degree of application in the form of case study or limited real life experience. It could be described as a skill set that can be theorised (as opposed to a subject discipline). Business might be regarded as a patchwork quilt of disciplines brought together with a practical purpose, and entrepreneurial business could be regarded as one way of doing business.

Neil found it difficult to configure “business” as subject discipline at all. He related his reaction to a friend who said he was doing business studies as; “tut-tut! That’s not really a degree!” He regarded it as having legitimacy as a post-graduate discipline but not at an undergraduate level as he felt the body of knowledge upon which it was based was insufficiently well defined. He was more comfortable seeing business as a sub-discipline of social science, best approached as a practical skill, but not as a discipline in its own right.

Entrepreneurial business appeared to differ from business for most respondents in the change of emphasis between the application of skills and the learning of theories.

Distinguishing between the study of ‘entrepreneurial business’ and ‘business’

Participants felt that the programme could logically be included as a general business or entrepreneurial management course, but felt it was more about self-development, and a change in attitude rather than the mechanics of business. For example, in the development of self-awareness and interpersonal effectiveness.

Iain clarified the differences between doing something and doing it entrepreneurially in terms of the context. It was felt that entrepreneurial behaviour was appropriate in environments characterised by chaos and uncertainty; “Someone who’s done marketing for a small business has a completely different view from someone who’s done a marketing course.” The argument being that the sort of flexibility, proactivity and creativity that is required in an entrepreneurial business could destroy the assets of a more established business.

Can entrepreneurialism be taught?

Iain expressed a concern that “institutionalising” entrepreneurialism – attempting to teach it - might actually discourage the behaviours that often characterise successful entrepreneurs. By translating it into an acceptable format for traditional higher education, the risk would be that students are trained “not to act but to analyse”, implying that analysis often resulted in paralysis and a reluctance to act, as every available identified option for action appeared to attract an unacceptably high level of risk.

Neil also emphasised this point “On the main programme you put them through three years where they are taught *not* to ‘think like entrepreneurs’. The programme is set up so differently, it does sort of *force* them to think like entrepreneurs to some extent.”

Three participants expressed scepticism that higher education could make a contribution at all to entrepreneurialism. They echoed the widely held view that successful entrepreneurs rarely have anything to do with the sort of formal programmes that run in higher educational establishments. Often the characteristics of people who are successful in higher education do not overlap with those of successful entrepreneurs. Shoe-horning entrepreneurialism into a standard business degree therefore would appear to be a non-starter.

Two respondents who had had direct personal experience as students of similar programmes to EBM were even clearer in their belief that entrepreneurship could not be taught but could only be learnt through experience. However, they were keen to point out that this experience could be gained on a work-based programme such as EBM, in higher education.

When asked what they would expect someone to be studying on an entrepreneurial business programme in higher education most talked about the *application* of skills traditionally associated with regular business programmes. Iain however, saw entrepreneurial business education as more distinct from business education and identified several necessary unique skill sets, namely:

* Bootstrapping (starting a business without capital - earning a way to fund the development of an idea.) This was regarded as positive as it encouraged businesses to be customer facing, not “investor credibility generating machines”.
* Attracting investment from banks, angels, friends and family.
* Idea generation that involved some level of discomfort resulting from having to commit psychologically to just one idea, and abandoning all others.
* Repeated failing in a way that elicits an attitude of enthusiasm in experimentation with optimising product-market fit.

Potential threshold concepts in entrepreneurial business management

When asked what the threshold concepts in entrepreneurial business management might be, all the participants in this small group could suggest a number of ways of practising and thinking that might characterise what it was to “be entrepreneurial”. There has been no attempt here to test these proposals against any characterisation of threshold concepts, or to categorise them in any way. This is an area of further work and research. What has been compiled here is a preliminary list from an academic staff perspective.

**Independent thinking, acknowledgement of autonomy, and self-efficacy**

The moment when a person realises they do not have to respond to the world outside, but that their decisions can make a difference. It could be characterised by the movement from being passive or reactive to being proactive - someone who actually shapes the world they live in. Being entrepreneurial means believing that if there is a problem, there must also be a solution, and that any challenges can be overcome.

**Enthusiasm for experiment and the acceptance of risk**

The development of an appreciation that any test can have a range of outcomes, all of which can be helpful as long as they are learnt from. Learning to see failure as just a “clock-tick”, marking forward movement.

**Appreciation of the value of the team**

The realisation that there might be a huge value to working with other people, perhaps particularly with people that are completely different and may at first appear to be incompatible. This also includes the skill set of making decisions in groups. There is a potential source of tension here as often entrepreneurs might express a preference for doing things on their own and being self-reliant. Recognising that learning is accelerated in a group as the learning resulting from the mistakes of any one individual can benefit all the individuals in the group, and one person in the group coming to a state of conscious incompetence (from one of unconscious incompetence), helps all to come to that same realisation allowing the group to address the gap in knowledge more quickly.

**Believing in the value of belonging to networks and using them**

A threshold concept was proposed as realising the important of developing and nurturing a network, and realising that if you do not know something, you can probably find someone who does.

**Passionate personal ownership and responsibility**

To be entrepreneurial means considering themselves as founders, owners and creators of the business and being passionately engaged with it. Knowing that passion must be genuine and result from involvement with things in which there is a genuine personal interest. These things are discovered through the process of experimentation.

**Determination and persistence**

Learning that success takes longer than might be expected and not to give up in the meantime, making that one last attempt.

**Action orientation**

“Just *doing* stuff”, rather than merely talking about it was often described as a threshold concept.

**A loftier aspiration, and higher aim**

Moving from believing that making money could be a reason for being, to realising that success will only come if that is put that to one side, and to focus instead on more important objectives; recognising what really matters. An appreciation that money is merely the means to the end and not the end in itself.

**Love of learning**

Developing a belief that you can learn from anything, being open to the learning potential of all experiences and interactions, actively seeking out new experiences in order to learn from them.

**Psychological commitment to one idea**

Realising the necessity of choosing one idea, and turning your back on all the others.

Conclusions and areas further research

This paper has attempted to start the process of understanding how students of entrepreneurial business management might come to an understanding of what it means to think and behave like an entrepreneur. Further work is needed to justify (or perhaps appreciate the limitations of) the methodological choices, and to analyse the interview data in more depth, to critically analyse it in light of existing literature. It has significant limitations in that the views of only a small academic staff group from one institution, delivering one programme are represented. However, there are perhaps some grounds to be optimistic on the basis of the findings at the present time in that they appear to reveal glimmerings of what may turn out to be some of the threshold concepts in entrepreneurial education.

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