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How can the gap between educations and student incubators be bridged at higher educational institutes?

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Coordinators or ambassadors from VIA Student Incubators

Introduction

Student incubators in various shapes and forms are found at many higher educational institutes, they are becoming an increasingly important part of solving the challenges of educating entrepreneurial graduates that has arisen in the wake of the second academic revolution (Etzkowitz, 2003).

It is in the DNA of some educational institutes like Babson and in some educational programs like the business degrees to work with entrepreneurship. But it comes natural for a minority of the total student body to see them self as entrepreneurs and act as such. At some educations and educational institutes entrepreneurship is student incubators is considered a privilege for carefully selected students, though reality is that for most other educations, students enrol in the education with an image of becoming employees. This foster a mind-set where problems are given and the sensitivity towards spotting opportunities are not naturally cultivated. At these educations and for these students there is a large gap between their education and the opportunity of becoming an entrepreneur or intrapreneur (a person who spots opportunities in existing organisations and act on them resulting in value creation), manifesting itself in a lack of applicants for the student incubators. Does this mean that there is no need for student incubators at these institutions? Arguably not, it is merely a symptom of the fact that for some students the path to developing an entrepreneurial mind-set is longer and the gap are wider advocating the need of building bridges between the educations and the student incubators.

With this contribution we wish to exemplify to educators and decision makers involved in student incubators, how students, also from non-business background, can be introduced to entrepreneurship enabling them to spot their own entrepreneurial opportunities and as an extension of this clarify to the students the purpose and relevance of the student incubators increasing the likelihood of students joining them and getting support in acting on their entrepreneurial opportunities.

Leading by example

In theory one of the factors hinder people from acting, i.e. acting entrepreneurially, is lack of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Broadening the perspective The Progression Model, a model of entrepreneurship education, identifies 4 dimensions of entrepreneurship education.

Action

Action is understood as a pupil's or student's ability and desire to implement value creating initiatives, as well as the ability to realise these initiatives through cooperation, networking and partnerships.

Creativity

Creativity is understood as the ability to discover and create ideas and opportunities. It is also the ability to combine knowledge, experience and personal resources from different areas in new ways. Creativity is also the ability to create and revise personal perceptions, to experiment and improvise in order to solve problems and meet challenges.

Environment

Understanding the environment is perceived as knowledge about and understanding of the world, locally as well as globally. Likewise it is the ability to analyse a context socially, culturally and economically as a setting for value-creating actions and activities. Understanding the environment is also an understanding of global issues and problems, such as for instance sustainability, environmental issues and resources.

Attitude

Attitude is the personal and subjective resources with which students meet challenges and tasks. It is the faith in one's own ability to act in the world and thus to realise dreams and plans. Personal attitude is based on the ability to work consistently and overcome ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity. It is also the ability to accept and learn from others' and own failures.

According to the report the ambition should be that all students acquire innovative and entrepreneurial competences, not necessarily the same skills since subjects, professions and study programs have different aims (Rasmussen & Nybye, 2013).

In our experience preparing the students for acting entrepreneurially has a positive effect on their motivation and capabilities to do so and derived from this a latent need for incubators surfaces. By creating an extracurricular workshop programme dedicated to idea generation and idea qualification the number of students working on a start-up project has increased and also the number of applicants for the student incubators.

The workshop programme, Idea Agent, we wish to present in the following paper was developed for all VIA University College student incubators, each of the 7 VIA UC campuses has a student incubator, by Erik Løvgren Brejner and Anne Kirketerp in corporation with the coordinators from the incubators. In the implementation process there has been minor modifications done to the workshop programme to fit the specific need or opportunities at the different campuses but the essence is the same. Idea agent comprises of 5 workshops designed to facilitate entrepreneurial idea generation and idea qualification, thus developing the students motivation, skills and competences to work in entrepreneurial processes.

The five workshops are described in the following.

The Workshops

1: Who am I?

Inspired by the notion that entrepreneurship is a mean driven process (Sarasvathy S. D., 2001) , i.e. the bird in hand principle, the first workshop is designed to give the students personal insight in relation to their preferred behaviour. For successful generation and qualification of an idea it is essential that the students see the strengths and limitations in their personality traits, enabling them to find complimenting team members and understand the foundation of the group dynamics.

To support the development of personal insight the E-stimate team-profiles is used as a process tool. It is based on the theories of evolutionary psychology and founded on believe that we are driven by 4 genetically determined characteristics:

- We strive for achievements
- We build relations
- We strive to make sense
- We which to control a situation and defend ourselves and the ones close to us

"It is these fundamental characteristics that together with our ability to make conscious and unconscious decisions and choices that determine our actions" (e-stimate).

By colour coding the four characteristics e-stimate provides an intuitive dialog tool, enabling students to gain insight in relation to their own preferred behaviour and the consequences of these in a team context.

As preparation for the first workshop the students fill out a personality test that is analysed by a certified lecturer who is in charge of the first workshop. During the workshop a number of exercises are done with the purpose of making the participants preferred behaviour explicit.

Core focus dimension according to the progression model: Attitude

2: What do I want (to do)?

For many students visualization is a helpful tool to make an idea or opportunity explicit. The human brain is designed to perceive images (Davidson & Hugdahl, 2004). Images create associations to the design of the product or service, mood, value and emotions (Sibbet, 2010). In the third workshop a visualization methods is introduced and used.

Dream boards provide an opportunity for the students to sketch and/or use existing images to create a collage. The dream board visualizes an idea from a centre, a background and a foreground, through the use of images a

vision of the realization is created. The collage is used to facilitate a cognitive process, with the aim to illustrate how the reality will look like for the designer or user of the product or service (Chapman, 2002). Graphic visualization or recording is used for multiple purposes. It is a challenge in itself for the participants to illustrate their ideas. It is not uncommon that our ability to draw deteriorates in the early teens due to lack of practice. With simple techniques of graphical visualization everyone can learn to create drawings that enable the viewer to interpret the drawings intentions. Furthermore the participants are challenged in the design process because they need to reflect on the idea, what it contains and how this can be presented so the viewer will perceive the essence of the idea (Agerbeck, 2012). For this purpose different scaffolds or templates are used enabling the student to focus on the most important aspect, the idea itself and the thoughts behind it. (<http://www.toolsforschools.dk/>, <http://www.processink.dk/>)

The second workshop also provides the participants with the opportunity to learn about networking and social Medias. Our approach to social media is to create, maintain and use a network that has value for the idea. It is not about technology nor focused on number of likes, but rather on how to get the right followers on the social networks. How to get the followers, readers, contacts who can support the progression of realizing the idea. Focusing on the conditions of the communication on social media and what difficulties and opportunities are associated with these. In other words the students work on how they best circumvents the difficulties and exploit the opportunities of social media, given their idea. The participants are challenged to figure out if the core message of their idea is best communicated through photo, audio or video? Do they want mainly to test, sell or crowd fund their idea through social media? Where are their personal strengths in relation to communications and what media is the best match for them personally? Social media allows us to communicate with people around the world. It is at once frightening and opens up endless possibilities. It means that if the students work smart with networking and social media they can find both potential investors, sparring partners and customers.

Core focus dimension according to the progression model: Creativity, Action and Environment

3: Qualifying my idea

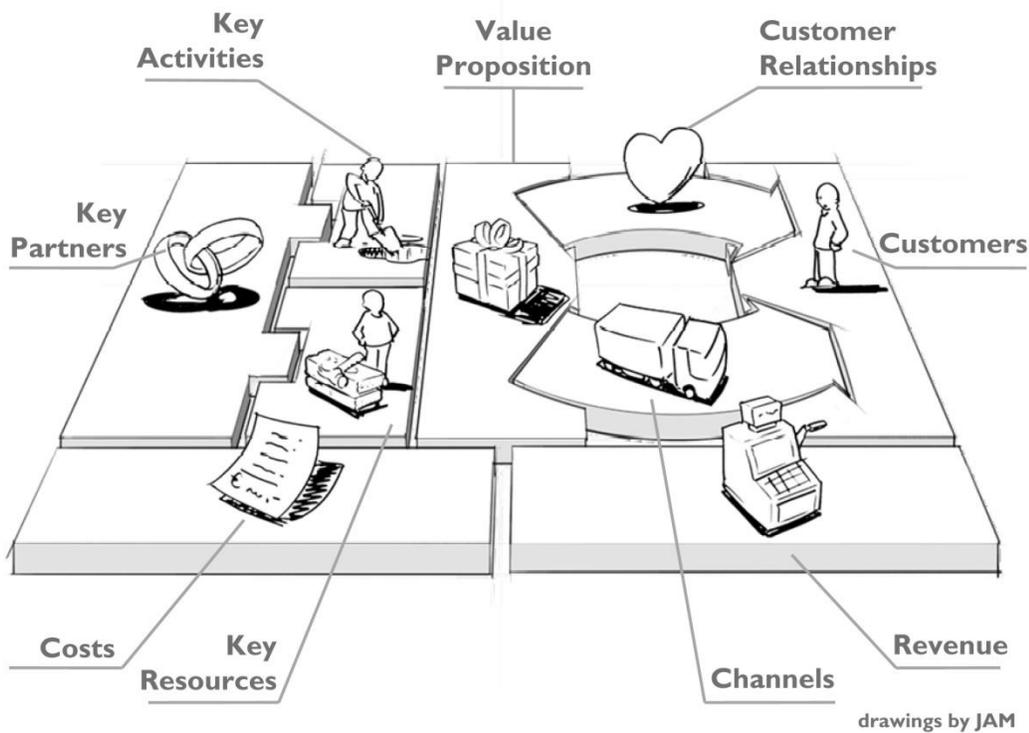
Inspired by the lean start-up approach (Ries, 2011) and Scharmer's Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), the third workshop is focused on qualifying the students ideas through early prototyping. The purpose is to get the participants to engage in a build-measure-learn process, with multiple learning goals. Firstly the students are challenged to become concrete when they have to materialize their ideas in a physical object or process description. This is a learning process where new opportunities and hidden challenges demanding attention and decision making are unveiled. Furthermore students take pride in and get a sense of satisfaction after actually having created a tangible object or illustrated a process description. In conclusion during the workshop the participants learn how to use the prototype when they engage in a dialog with potential stakeholders with the purpose of getting feedback on their idea. Early prototyping becomes a method of qualifying the ideas by becoming concrete and enabled to collect feedback for further learning and development.

Core focus dimension according to the progression model: Creativity and Action

4: My Business model

The purpose of the fourth workshop is to facilitate the development and qualification from an idea to a business model. This is achieved by providing the students with a conceptualization tool, Alexander Osterwalder's business model canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2001), that challenges the students not to only focus on the features of their solution but broaden the perspective and think of target segments, value creation, marketing, customer relations, organization, partners and economic aspects of their projects.

Figure 1: The Business model Canvas



Source: (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2001)

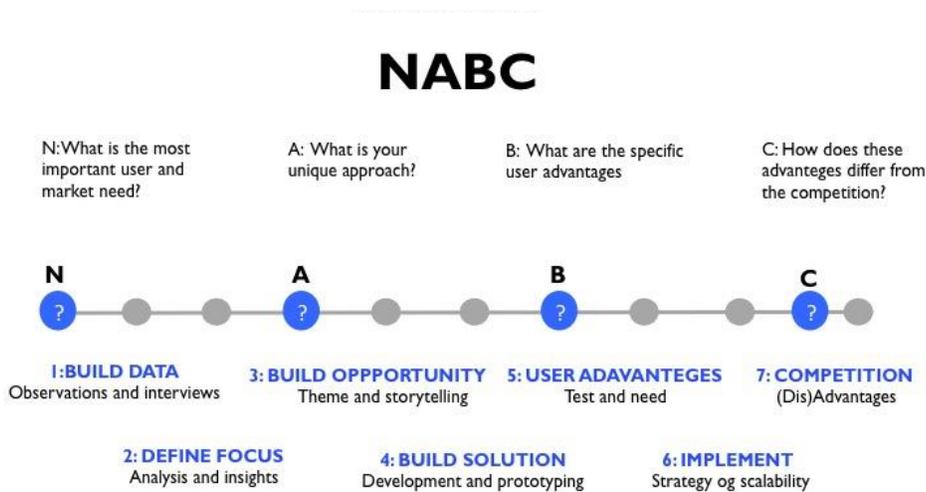
Once the initial business model is created the workshop is used to identify areas where there is a need for more knowledge and critical assumptions that needs to be tested before continuing. This way the participants learn to use the canvas model as a process tool where they identify their next best step and there by divide their entrepreneurial process into small steps they can priorities and take with full control, thus minimizing risk by avoiding all-or-nothing opportunities , this is also inspired by Sarasvathy's effectuation principles (Sarasvathy S. D., 2008).

Core focus dimension according to the progression model: Environment and Action

5: Presentation of my idea

An idea will never be realized if you are unable to get buy-in from your stakeholders. For this reason the final workshop is about pitching. The participants are introduced the NABC model and encouraged to structure their pitch based on it.

Figure 2: The NABC-model



Source: (Carlson, 2006)

In order to get buy-in the pitch must be credible, convey drive and passion in. But how can this be achieved? The content represents only 7% of what the receiver of a message perceives. The nonverbal communication covers 55% and the it auditative 37% (Mehrabian, 1967), leading to the conclusion that form does matter.

Turning to the world of theatre, the students are encouraged to consider the following factors in their performance:

- How do we enter the stage?
- What is our position in the room/space/environment?
- How can we use the room/space/environment to our advantage?

- How do we create symmetry in the room/space/environment?
- Movement, gestures and facial expressions
- Using the voice
- What supports me if I get nervous?
- Improvise and accept all offers.

Source: (Chubbuck, 2005) (Sørensen, 2002)

When the students are prepared in relation to form and content they are asked to pitch in front of a feedback panel. The panel is typically formed by investors, experienced entrepreneurs, representatives from the local business council, politicians and sometimes the students are asked to invite their stakeholders. The Panel will provide constructive feedback and help identify the "next best step" in cooperation with the workshop facilitators. When the pitching is done the performance are celebrated and awarded with a participation certificate.

After having completed Idea Agent we experience students who are more qualified to spot opportunities, act upon them and there by create value for others. Furthermore we experience students who become motivated to work on realizing their ideas and apply for membership in our student incubators for further process support and networking opportunities.

Core focus dimension according to the progression model: Attitude, Action and Environment

What is in it for us? – Student testimonials.

The following testimonials were collected by Martabolette Stecher during her research about entrepreneurship in VIA University College published in the magazine, where knowledge inspires action, VIA ENTREPRENEURSHIP, 2014.

The motivation for entering Idea Agent varies from student to student; some like Renate joined the course to get the opportunity and encouragement to work with a dormant idea.

"I have had this idea for a couple of years and have not done anything about it. That's why I participated in the Idea Agent."

Quote: Renate Jensen, studying biomedical laboratory science

Other students enter the course because they would like to become entrepreneurs but in their own words they haven't gotten the right idea yet. Finding the right idea becomes the goal and Idea Agent helps the students reach it, as Sanne fraises it:

"I like challenges but I was not aware that the process I was exposed to could end up with a viable idea."

Quote: Sanne Mathiassen, studying business administration.

But whatever the motivation for joining the workshops is one thing is clear, after completing Idea Agent they have been subject for personal development.

“I have used Idea agent to get to know myself- and to test out idea. In the process I have found my answers, I have sharpened my focus and I have discovered how we make progress with the idea”

Quote: Regitze Gjedde, studying fashion design.

And for some the development has inspired them to continue working on realizing their ideas and applying for membership of the student incubator, a place the prior to idea agent have not given much consideration of joining.

Conclusion

By providing students with an opportunity to gain personal insight learn about tools for idea generation, idea qualification and process management, and to develop competences to interact with stakeholders in a learning by doing process, we experience that our participants strengthen their entrepreneurial self-efficacy. One of the effects of the workshops is an increase in applicant numbers for the student incubators, providing evidence to the fact that strengthening the student’s entrepreneurial self-efficacy and providing them with an opportunity to find inner motivation for value creation, using extracurricular workshops as a mean, bridge the gap between educations and student incubators. With this paper we exemplify how practitioners of entrepreneurship education and facilitators of student incubators can bridge the gap and circumvent the hindering of students in exploring their full potential.

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