Developing entrepreneurial behaviours in the Chinese classroom through value creation pedagogy

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship education in higher education has been actively encouraged by the Chinese government. However, entrepreneurship education using active learning methods can be at odds with traditional Chinese educational practices. Value creation pedagogy has been posited as an innovative teaching method to bridge the gap between didactic and progressive pedagogy to support entrepreneurship education across a range of students. However, there is a paucity of research into the use of value creation pedagogy and the application of novel pedagogy in the Chinese context. This research explores the views of students at a Chinese university on the value and limitations of value creation pedagogy in supporting learning and developing entrepreneurial behaviours.

Keywords: Value creation pedagogy; Constructivist pedagogy; Experiential learning; Entrepreneurship education; China

Introduction

Higher education has increasingly viewed entrepreneurship as relevant for everybody rather than a select few with the best ideas (O'Brien et al., 2019). Increases in the number and status of entrepreneurship education (EE) programs worldwide have followed (Nabi et al., 2017). However, in China, EE is still relatively young and unstandardized within business education

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(Lin & Xu, 2017) despite active encouragement from the government (Zhou & Xu, 2012). Traditionally, Chinese education has largely been based on the didactic transmission of knowledge. More recently, China has introduced constructivist-based teaching practices as part of a nation-wide educational reform (Tan, 2016), promoting quality-oriented over exam-oriented education and incorporating activity-based learning (Tan, 2017). However, tensions followed (Tan, 2016), including the challenges to Chinese educators delivering and implementing progressive approaches (Bell & Liu, 2019), and challenges for students learning through them (Zhao et al., 2017). Research into the experiences of Chinese students engaging with constructivist pedagogy and experiential is still limited (Bell & Liu, 2019).

Value creation pedagogy (VCP) has been posited to bridge the gap between traditional and progressive entrepreneurship education (Lackéus et al., 2016). This suggests that it may be appropriate for teaching entrepreneurship in the Chinese context. This research thus explores Chinese university student perspectives on the value and limitations of VCP. This meets calls for further research into VCP in different contexts (Lackéus, 2020), its effectiveness, and the student reaction (Bell, 2019).

Literature review

Fayolle (2011) highlighted that the entrepreneurial process requires opportunity discovery and value creation. Value creation can be economic, social, cultural, ecological or emotional (Hindle, 2010). Subsequently, entrepreneurship has been defined as acting upon opportunities and ideas and transforming them into value for others (Vestergaard et al., 2012) and value creation as the application of existing competences to create something, preferably novel, of value to at least one external stakeholder (Lackéus et al., 2016).

Entrepreneurship education is increasingly focusing on value creation in addition to venture creation, allowing students to learn by applying their knowledge to create value to external stakeholders (Lackéus et al., 2016). Blenker et al. (2012) argued that entrepreneurial education should focus on value creation in everyday practice. This allows students to construct their own learning and develop entrepreneurial behaviours, competences, and identity (Lundqvist et al., 2015; Williams Middleton, 2013). Such approaches have been gaining traction (Lackéus, 2018). Aldianto et al (2018) argue that value creation is a vital competency for all students.

Lackéus et al. (2016) argue that VCP can be a bridge between educator-centred behaviourist education and student-centred constructivist education. It offers learning through

the entrepreneurial tools of effectuation, customer development, and appreciative enquiry. Students can develop entrepreneurial skills by interacting with the environment. It can put less focus on venture creation and neoliberal principles, potentially making it more acceptable to educators in different academic areas (Lackéus et al., 2016).

VCP supports the constructivist principles of allowing students to construct their own learning and meaning (Mueller & Anderson, 2014). Learning through experience has been found to reduce the perceptual link between learning and applying knowledge in practice (Bell, 2016). Experiential learning, considered efficacious in entrepreneurship education (Fuchs et al., 2008), is a participatory learning that involves learners in mental processes to synthesise information in an active and immersive environment (Feinstein et al., 2002). Students learn 'by' and 'through' doing (Morris et al., 2012), the latter being based on reflections and lessons from the experience (Krueger, 2007).

Although experiential learning can take many forms, authentic experiences can promote deeper learning, encourage engagement, and effectively prepare students (Macht & Ball, 2016). VCP allows students to learn by doing; they engage in the entrepreneurial process to identify opportunities and create value for stakeholders, thus it can be considered an authentic experiential opportunity.

Despite increased emphasis on EE in China (Zhou & Xu, 2012), it is still relatively new and under-researched there (Lin & Xu, 2017) and there have been calls for further research into the effectiveness of different teaching methods and pedagogical approaches to EE in China (Cui et al., 2019). Student-centred approaches with authentic assignments promote deep learning and the development of student ability in Chinese classrooms (Wang & Zhang, 2019).

Tan (2015) argued that Chinese culture impacts classroom culture and tradition, which impacts the introduction of progressive pedagogy and students' reaction thereto. Liguori et al. (2019) highlighted that the use of constructivism in pedagogy brings a culture clash to a classroom based on traditional pedagogy. Hofstede's (2003) cultural dimensions can lend perspective. Hofstede's (2003) power distance paradigm is borne out in the high power distance within the Chinese culture in the one-way delivery of knowledge by the instructor and the reception of that knowledge by the students. Traditionally, power is rooted in the instructor and the students' role is to receive and memorize. Similarly, Hofstede's Individualism vs Collectivism dimension highlights how culture may integrate individuals into primary groups; these groups may impact group work dynamics in experiential learning. These elements add a

layer level of newness that students may find uncomfortable, making existing societal and classroom culture crucial considerations when designing a new learning experience.

While VCP may bridge the gap between traditional and progressive entrepreneurship education (Lackéus et al., 2016), research into VCP is limited in contexts beyond western Europe (Lackéus, 2020).

The aim of this research is to explore the views of Chinese students on the value and limitations of VCP in supporting learning and enabling the development of entrepreneurial behaviours, thus addressing calls for exploration into: How Chinese students react and relate to VCP (Bell, 2019); Chinese students' experiences of constructivist pedagogical innovations (Zhao et al., 2017); and novel pedagogy in the Asia Pacific region (Cui et al., 2019; Wu & Wu, 2017). Understanding Chinese students' experiences can support the design and implementation of VCP in China.

The course

The course was an entrepreneurship elective for first-year undergraduate Business English students attending a Chinese university. The students were of a similar age and had no previous entrepreneurial background. The course guided students to develop and complete group projects that created value for the University's international community. It was designed to provide an authentic experiential learning opportunity, through which students could engage in the early entrepreneurial practices of opportunity recognition, innovation, and problem solving, and develop their learning through the constructivist practice of reflection. Working with authentic projects has been found vital in experiential entrepreneurial learning (Ramsgaard & Christensen, 2018). The course sought to incorporate progressive teaching practices into the class alongside more familiar traditional didactic approaches. The learning outcomes and student value creation projects are presented in Table One.

The sessions were designed to support value creation projects. The instructor introduced each session topic and outlined its value in the projects' development. The students then worked in eight groups of four or five to assimilate these ideas into their projects. The instructor provided guidance, but, over time, gave the groups greater freedom, while remaining available for questions. Each session included time for structured reflection, enabling students to develop their understanding of the value-creation process and for encouraging students to question and understand their experiences (Ross, 2011). Students were asked to keep logs of these weekly

reflections. For assessment, each student wrote a 3000-word reflection. In addition, each group submitted a project report outlining their project business decisions. Other courses offered by the university were delivered in a more traditional format in which the educator was the sole purveyor of knowledge with little participation from the students. In this class, students had a new experience by actively participating in their learning. They also experienced a new assessment style, with a portfolio of outputs and reflections rather than an exam.

Table 1. Course learning outcomes and value creation projects

Course Learning Outcomes
1. Critically assess stakeholder needs to determine how value can be developed and delivered
2. Identify and evaluate the steps, key resources, and capabilities to create and deliver value
3. Understand and apply entrepreneurial skills to the development and enactment of value creation
4. Reflect and appraise project activities and decisions and assess the degree to which they fulfil the project goal
Value Creation Projects
Interactive Campus Map
Student Speed Networking Event
Administration and Social Point of Contact Guide
Activity Information Pack and calendar
Campus and Local Nightlight Guide
Restaurant Reviews and Recommendation Guide
Study Abroad Student Information Pack

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach to analyse the experiences of a group of students undertaking a novel entrepreneurship module at a Beijing-based university directly under the leadership of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The institution's specialism was international studies and thus had a relatively diverse faculty and student body, making openness to pedagogical innovation potentially more palatable compared to other institutions. The research passed the institute's ethical review and informed consent was given by the individual participants.

Data from 34 post-course reflections and 26 post-course interviews formed the basis for this research analysis. For the former, students were asked: what they had learned and gained through the process; what they still needed to learn; how they had felt during the

process; and to assess their ability to create value as an entrepreneur. It was a narrative of personal learning and experience, supported by the individual's weekly logs. The use of reflection in the study of students' reaction to pedagogy and teaching has been argued to be particularly suitable as it leads students into not only the details of the interactions, but also to the elements underlying those interactions (Nind et al., 2016).

Post-course interviews made the study more comprehensive and enriched the data. Their objective was to complement, rather than question, the written post course reflections (Greene et al., 1989). Separating the post-course reflections and interviews meant that they could be integrated and cross referenced to validate the research findings. Convergence and corroboration of the data can provide credibility in the themes identified and the research conclusions (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

The post-course reflections and the interview data were analysed separately, coded, and labelled. The data was then collated and analysed to identify themes and subthemes in relation to the value and limitations of VCP.

The codes from the data sets were then compared and similar codes from both were merged into the identified themes. This provides confirmation that the same topics associated with the value and limitations of VCP were discussed in both the reflections and interviews. This approach helps validate qualitative research themes (Johnson & Jehn, 2009). A Chinese researcher familiar, but not directly involved, with the research reviewed the results, acting as a peer debriefer, supporting the findings' interpretation and validity (Creswell, 2014).

Results and discussion

Top-down thematic analysis produced three main themes regarding the value of VCP and three regarding the limitations. These will now be considered alongside comments from the individuals' feedback.

The value of value creation pedagogy

Three main themes are: the search and identification of value; the development and application of theory and skills; and an awareness of the skills required and individual skillsets.

The search and identification of value

The data highlighted a new approach in students' thinking in terms of value creation.

> *Through the class I learnt to look for problems and opportunities to add value to potential customers and users.*
>
> *I learnt the importance of looking for opportunities to add value, rather than only thinking about innovation and new products and services.*
>
> *This different approach provided a customer-centred way to look for opportunities.*

The value creation perspective opened new ways of thinking and the practice of entrepreneurial skills such as opportunity identification. It highlighted a customer-centred perspective, and how that could be achieved. In entrepreneurship terms, it encouraged thought processes that could lead to planning, effectuation and lean start-ups (Lackéus et al., 2016).

Comments highlighted better understanding of value creation and some reflected a more social or outward looking view:

> *I enjoyed looking for ways we could add value to the international community, it helped us focus on finding opportunities people would like and find useful.*

This indicates that students benefitted from an advantage of value creation approaches: emphasis on both the individual and social elements of learning (Lackéus et al., 2016) while developing general entrepreneurial skills (Williams Middleton, 2013). Overall, the feedback suggested a positive response to the value creation approaches and the possibilities and benefits that could accrue.

The development and application of theory and skills

Students reported that the experience had helped them to develop their theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Typical comments included:

> *It was interesting to see how some of the theory and textbook material actually played out in our projects, as it was not always expected.*
>
> *The course brought the topic to life, but it was challenging to apply some of the concepts taught.*

It was noticeable that students still emphasized previous textbook learning and lectures and how the project played out in practice compared to theory. They sought to understand the experience through the lens of what they had been taught. Many Chinese students have

experienced more educator-led objectivist approaches; they may prefer to lean towards approaches they are most comfortable with (Neergaard & Christensen, 2017).

However, the data indicated development of students' perceived entrepreneurial skills, a benefit of constructivist approaches.

> *The project allowed me to develop lots of practical skills, which I now feel more confident in.*

As students engaged in the entrepreneurial processes, the data showed they felt they gained experiential knowledge of entrepreneurship that was appreciated upon reflection.

The awareness of the skills required and of individual skillsets

Constructivism emphasises the individuals' role in creating their own meaning from knowledge in context (Mueller & Anderson, 2014) based on background and existing knowledge. The data showed that students felt they better understood their strengths and limitations vis-à-vis the entrepreneurial process.

> *At the start of the course, I thought it would be easy as there was no exam. But I realised that the practical nature of the course was challenging as my practical entrepreneurial skills are not so strong.*
>
> *After completing the project, I now am aware of what skills I must improve to be entrepreneurial.*
>
> *I learnt to look for opportunities to add value. There are lots of entrepreneurial opportunities to add value around me.*

VCP allows students to connect and empathise with target groups to find ways to provide them value. In so doing, students consider their resources and competencies in the process, constructing their own value-creation concept. They thereby construct their own entrepreneurial learning and meaning. This means that value creation learning differs for each student; groups will be influenced by context, background, and abilities of its members. This learning approach emulates the principles of effectuation, bricolage, planning, and opportunity identification. This constructivist-based pedagogic approach complements entrepreneurship as there is no single appropriate business/project idea that works for everyone. The experience can help identify strengths and weaknesses, leading to greater self-efficacy and understanding of the skills to develop. Overall, the data reflected students felt positive about their learning

from the value-creation experience. Nevertheless, some the data showed concerns with the module, which follow.

Limitations of value creation pedagogy

The research identified three main themes under the category of limitations, which are all largely based on expectations and what can be gained through value creation projects.

Difficulty connecting the process with real world commercial ideas

Students found it difficult to link the skills developed in the process to the wider context of real-world entrepreneurship and business. Students questioned how their small-scale projects could translate into starting a business outside a classroom setting.

> *The course was fun and I enjoyed the project, although I do not think I am more ready to start a business as what we did was very small scale.*
>
> *I think starting a business would be very different and the experience would be different. Because we are students it is not the same as doing it for real.*
>
> *I am not sure how much of what we did could be used in a real business, as they do much bigger projects.*

Value creation approaches can be used widely, not just for those interested in venture creation, but also for anyone who may wish to develop their entrepreneurial/enterprising skills. Value creation projects can be a useful stepping stone in which students can be involved in constructivist experiential learning, reflection, and learning 'by' and 'through' doing (Morris et al., 2012). Students who wish to go on to entrepreneurship and venture creation will find value creation approaches particularly suitable for using their entrepreneurial skills. However, the data indicated that this was not obvious to all students at the end of the module. The data highlighted that students may equate 'entrepreneurial' with 'large-scale,' for example:

> *The project that we completed was very small, so I am not sure how well prepared I would be for something big.*
>
> *Developing a product for a mass market would require some similar steps, but these steps would be different when preparing to launch a big product.*
>
> *The focus of the project meant that what we did could not have a big impact. So did not allow us to practice developing big entrepreneurial opportunities and ideas.*

This suggests that value creation projects may not meet expectations of business-oriented students interested in venture start-up. The projects may lead to a sense of frustration for students expecting something more challenging and closer to real-life entrepreneurship. It could be that students' benefit through this process, which is aimed at developing general core entrepreneurial/enterprising skills, even if they do not initially appreciate such introductory steps.

The process doesn't lead to innovative products

Students commented that they were unable to be as innovative as they desired, i.e., they believe innovation should have been the goal rather than value creation. Others would have preferred developing a product.

> *The level of innovation in what we did was limited.*
>
> *As part of the project we did not manufacture or develop a product. But instead focused on something we could do amongst ourselves. This meant that we did not develop a new and innovative product we could sell to others.*
>
> *For the project we created value, but not a product which could be sold to a wider audience.*

It is important to emphasise that the instructor did not specify whether value creation was to come from product or service. Indeed, one group created an interactive map for international students. That groups developed a service was probably based more on groups' assessments of their knowledge, resources, and skills, with groups leaning towards services.

Regarding innovation, this approach is designed to develop the ability and willingness of students to create value for others through the development of creativity, opportunity orientation, innovation and proactivity skills (Aldianto et al., 2018), rather than being focused on an innovative product or service. However these feelings may have been exacerbated by over-expectation as to what could be achieved within the groups' timeframe, resources and abilities. Even with an instructor setting expectations, such an underpinning first step to the entrepreneurial process may be hard for students to appreciate.

The process doesn't provide the knowledge as expected

Some students felt that they learnt less about entrepreneurship through the value creation process than through the traditional didactic teaching approach. Despite positive feedback

about the module, some commented that the process did not utilize textbooks as much or provide as much lecture as expected. Students equated both of these with learning and thus believed they did not learn as much for lack of them.

> *The course was interesting, but I did not feel as though I learnt as much as other classes about the topic.*
>
> *The scope of the value creation project was only limited and did not allow us to cover everything in the textbook*
>
> *I am not sure that I learnt as much as other courses (knowledge), although it was a good experience doing the project.*

Such comments may reflect a discomfort and wariness about embracing a new learning approach (Neergaard & Christensen, 2017) and a preference for the traditional educator-led knowledge transmission (Tan, 2016), despite the VCP's endeavour to bridge old and new styles.

Conclusion

VCP is claimed to offer students the opportunity to learn and develop entrepreneurial competences and behaviours through the creation of value for others (Lackéus, 2020; Lundqvist et al., 2015; Williams Middleton, 2013). It has been argued that it can help bridge the gap between traditional and progressive education (Lackéus et al., 2016). This research was undertaken in the Chinese context where tensions between these approaches have led to conflicts for educators (Tan, 2017) and students (Bell, 2019). This research has highlighted some of the values and limitations of such a value creation project, illustrating the role of VCP in practice. Similar to other innovative pedagogies, both positive and negative attributes can be experienced by the same student (Fisher et al., 2019).

Student feedback suggested that they found VCP both challenging and interesting as they applied the theory they learned to their projects. This was supported by a reported overall student satisfaction score of 92 percent, a teaching method score of 92 percent, and a course effectiveness score of 91 percent. The data indicated that VCP provided students with an opportunity to think differently, produce ideas, develop new skills, and connect and empathise with a target group and identify opportunities to provide value for them. It also helped them to identify their existing skills and skills to develop. The feedback emphasised the importance of reflection, which enabled students to maximise the benefits of the authentic 'learning through

doing process' (Morris et al., 2012). In short, this research supports the premise that value creation approaches develop entrepreneurial behaviours and competences within a social setting, emphasizing both individual and social components, which can widen its student applicability.

However, data suggested some potential limitations, all largely based on expectations that need to be considered. These comments may reflect expectations within the cohort for traditional teaching methods over the development of skills through experience, and the desire for a greater focus on product innovation. Both of these may be particular features of the Chinese context in which education has traditionally been based on didactic transmission learning and where an experiential approach to lay the groundwork for larger skills, like entrepreneurship, may be unfamiliar. This may have led to unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved and suggests that value creation approaches should be tailored to specific cohorts and context, and expectations defined and moderated. Value creation approaches can help to develop certain entrepreneurial or enterprising skills, behaviours, and new ways of thinking, but are not designed to turn students into fully-fledged entrepreneurs or provide tailored instruction on venture creation. For students without experiential learning bases, extra guidance and lecturing may help with the introduction.

This exploratory case study research was conducted at one university in China and was designed to seek depth and transferability rather than generalizability. The results could potentially be transferable to other similar progressive institutions seeking to innovate their entrepreneurship education curricula, although students with different backgrounds and skillsets will likely create value differently. Student experiences may thus differ and influence their views as to the value and limitations of VCP. Future research can examine the transferability of these findings and the impact of a range of variables including age, gender and backgrounds. Institutional context may be an important consideration, particularly in less international institutions, so future could seek to explore institutional comparisons. These findings may also be applicable in other countries with a didactic teaching culture where VCP can be used to bridge the divide between experiential and traditional didactic learning. Future research could explore how educators perceive the value and limitations of VCP in bridging the gap between traditional and progressive education in different contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributors

Robin Bell, PhD is a Senior Lecturer at the Worcester Business School. He led the development of the School's first online undergraduate and graduate programs. Previously, he spent four years as the Business School's Director of International Partnerships and was responsible for collaboration with partners and supporting inbound and outbound student and staff mobility to achieve the school's internationalization agenda. He is also an Associate Professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, teaching entrepreneurship and innovation. As well as being an academic, he is an entrepreneur and has acted as a consultant for the development of numerous entrepreneurship programs across China.

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