Entrepreneurs acting as mentors in online communities for students enrolled in MA studies

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Abstract

The importance of teaching entrepreneurship for non-business students in the last couple of years have been accepted by Romanian academia but the adoption of successful teaching methods experienced in the Northern countries should be adapted to the students particularities. People exposed to entrepreneurship frequently express that they have more opportunity to exercise creative freedoms, higher self-esteem and an overall greater sense of control over their own lives, which means that entrepreneurship should be regarded as a rather successful career outcome for most people (Parker 2009). There have been conducted several studies on the importance on teaching entrepreneurship using some, let's say, "offline" methods: presentations by entrepreneurs, trainings in entrepreneurship on different topics or workshops with entrepreneurs. This paper will try to approach an "online" based method, online mentoring or eMentoring (Martin & Strunga, 2010), how entrepreneurs should and could be engaged as mentors for students in non-business studies interested in developing their entrepreneurship competences and put their ideas into practice. There will be presented some solutions for setting-up an online community of entrepreneurs, what should be the "eMentoring" skills for an entrepreneur and how this type of community could be sustained by universities and entrepreneurs networks.

Keywords: mentoring; entrepreneurship; skills; attitudes; online community.

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1. Teaching entrepreneurship. Becoming an entrepreneur

Higher education institutions can foster greater entrepreneurship through entrepreneurship education, knowledge transfer, academic spin-offs, spin-ins, the commercialisation of R&D, campus incubators and/or indirectly through networking and training. They are regarded as seedbeds of innovation fostering new knowledge and ideas which could be translated into commercial entities and exploiting the intellectual assets and enhancing economic growth (Fenton, Barry 2014).

Motivation to become entrepreneur comes from various sources. Usually people tends to become self-owner and be own boss in the business area have high motivation to become entrepreneur. High motivation also relates to having high self-esteem in individual aspects. This is because, high self-esteem people tends to drives to take on the risk, the uncertainty and the independent structure of business ownership successfully. Previous researchers mentioned several reasons and causes in individual aspects relates to motivation to become entrepreneur (Munir et al. 2015).

Segal et al. mentioned that being an entrepreneur is often viewed as an aversive career choice where one is faced with everyday life and work situations that are fraught with increased uncertainty, impediments, failures, and frustrations associated with the process of new firm creation.

Entrepreneurship research has also attempted to identify the situational and environmental factors that predict entrepreneurial activity, such as job displacement, previous work experience, availability of various resources, and governmental influences. Motivation is conceptualized as the product of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence.

Segal et al. also mentioned that not all people viewing themselves as effective, and seeing self-employment as a path to acquiring desirable outcomes, intend to become self-employed. To act on the perceptions of feasibility and net desirability, people must be willing to bear the moderate, calculated risk intrinsic to self-employment. People with a sense of entrepreneurial self-efficacy may be drawn to self-employment’s desirable opportunities and benefits, compared to the availability of these benefits obtained through working for others. Segal et al stressed that the intention to become an entrepreneur is a function of these three variables: the perceived net desirability of self-employment (NDSE), the perceived feasibility (self-efficacy) of self-employment (SE), and tolerance for risk (TR).

Segal et al. stated the usefulness of the perceived desirability of self-employment on the intention to engage in entrepreneurial activity. Besides that, individual’s tolerance for risk (TR) had a significant influence on his or her intention to engage in entrepreneurial activity. It was also important that person have a relatively high tolerance for risk to engage in such activity.

Matlay (2006) mentioed that entrepreneurship education can increase both the quality and the quantity of graduate entrepreneurs entering the industry. Most of the initiatives were included a specific entrepreneurship agenda that sought to enhance entrepreneurial motivation and business competency amongst the expanding cohort of new graduates. Besides that, it was also stressed that the propensity of graduates to become growing entrepreneurs is influenced by existing socio-economic and educational conditions that are specific to the country and its position in the global economy.

Galloway et al. examine the potential of entrepreneurship education to develop skills, and of whether students perceive them as having value within the modern economy. The results also suggest that many students expect to work in new and small firms, and that skills developed by entrepreneurship education are applicable to both waged employment and entrepreneurship. According to him, entrepreneurship education seems to have much potential to develop skills appropriate for the enterprise economy. Students perceive that entrepreneurship education has improved their entrepreneurial skills, and the greater proportion of students believe that skills learnt and developed by entrepreneurship education are applicable and important to non-self-employment or business ownership occupations.

2. eMentoring and entrepreneurship. How to set up an online community with entrepreneurs acting as mentors

Mentoring has been studied extensively for more than 30 years in the management literature and many positive benefits have been identified. (Allen, Eby, O’Brien & Lentz, 2008). In the last years, more universities and governments have been attempting to use this powerful tool in an effort to develop potential entrepreneurs. While a
great deal of research has examined the key requirements for mentoring programs within established organizations, less is known about how the demands for effective mentoring change in the entrepreneurial context.

Traditionally, higher education institutions have focused on preparing students and graduates for employment, however, Gibb and Hannon (2006) argued that a degree is no longer a “voucher for a job for life” – it is merely an “entry ticket in to the world of work”. Employability is a key concern of graduates; however, the global economic downturn has had an adverse impact on graduate employment thus rendering the notion of a job for life as obsolete. Handy (2001) likened future workers to “fleas” with the agility and skills to hop from one career to another unlike the “elephants” of the past who worked for a large corporation in what was essentially regarded as “a job for life”. He predicted that future employees would have a portfolio of careers throughout their lives.

2.1. Creating and boosting an online community

By definition, a community is a collection of people (or animals) who interact together in the same environment. Community exists everywhere in nature. From people to penguins, from monkeys to meerkats, the vast majority of organisms exhibit some form of collective grouping. Grouping, however, is a touch simplistic as a means to describe community. It is not merely the group that generates community, but the interactions within it. Building a strong community is an exhilarating and rewarding prospect, but getting there can be complex. Communication is essential in community. It is the metaphorical highway that connects the many towns and people in your world. Effective communication brings together your community members in a manner that is free-flowing, productive, and accessible. At their heart, communities are collections of people united by a shared ethos and most typically by a shared opportunity and goal (Bacon, 2009).

By online communities we mean any virtual space where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other. The term applies to many social configurations, from small close-knit groups to sites with millions of participants. Online communities may be supported by a wide variety of technology platforms, from email lists to forums, blogs, wikis, and networking sites. The common feature is ongoing interactions among people over time, with some of the interactions being technology mediated.

Keeping an active and functional community is quite difficult. Bacon (2010) presents two important things that should be done in this direction:

a) **Encouraging commitment** - commitment represents members’ feelings of attachment or connection to the group, organization or community. Commitment underlies members’ willingness to stay in the community and contribute to it. Both offline and online, people who are more committed to an organization tend to be more satisfied, are less likely to look for alternatives, are less likely to leave, and tend to perform better and contribute more (Mathieu, Zajac, 1990).

b) **Encouraging contribution** - to be successful, online communities need the people who participate in them to contribute the resources on which the group’s existence is built. The types of resource contributions needed differ widely across different types of groups, from the conversations in many online health and technical support groups, to the code in open-source development projects, to the music and video in media-sharing sites. Typically, online communities exhibit a power-law distribution of contribution, with a small minority contributing most of the content.

We would add also a third necessary component of a successful online community, which is represented by:

c) **Community manager** – this is a key person who will orient the discussions, will put questions and will try to bring commitment and contribution from all participants. The common sense will agree with the fact that people with the same area of interest will speak out loud and will find continuously some subjects of discussion. But the practice will infirm that, there is necessary that one person to be actively involved in a community, to have a deeper understanding of its scope and get as many input/ideas/feedback as possible from all.

A community manager should:

- be there;
be a friend, not an all-knowing authority;
be a role model;
help each mentor and mentee have a say in your activities;
be ready to help out.

2.2. eMentoring for developing entrepreneurship competences

eMentoring—also known as online mentoring, telementoring or teletutoring—describes a mentoring relationship that is conducted via the Internet. The primary goal of eMentoring is the same as that of face-to-face mentoring: establishing a trusting, nurturing, positive relationship between a mentor and a young person. Programs may use any of the electronic communications available, including e-mail, secure Web sites or custom communications software. The major benefit of this form of mentoring is that it can overcome some challenges associated with traditional, face-to-face mentoring, especially the time constraints that prevent many adults from mentoring. The following characteristics are common to eMentoring programs (www.mentoring.org/eeptoolkit):

- may take various forms including career exploration, life skills development and academic success;
- may help young people deepen their understanding of the positive potential of online communications;
- may be the exclusive vehicle for young people and mentors to connect or may serve as an additional communication tool for those who ordinarily meet in person;
- typically ask the mentor for a commitment of at least one year;
- require mentor screening and ongoing support and supervision.

While not as thoroughly researched empirically, it makes perfect intuitive sense that having the benefit of a seasoned entrepreneur or businessperson who can share their hard-earned wisdom and experience with a student or an aspiring entrepreneur would prove to be extremely valuable. Indeed, this has been recognized by entrepreneurial practitioners and educators for decades before the scholarly study of mentoring within large organizations became widespread. From the standpoint of small business development and entrepreneurial assistance programs, it is a long standing tradition to provide mentoring to aspiring entrepreneurs (Wilbanks, 2013).

Sullivan (2000) summarized the research on entrepreneurial learning and mentoring that had taken place before the turn of the century and noted that learning is a necessity for successful entrepreneurship, and that mentoring is an effective teaching tool which allows entrepreneurs to take advantage of the experience of others. For example, Cox and Jennings (1995) found that the ability to learn from mistakes was critical for successful entrepreneurship, but that many entrepreneurs could not identify a single individual who met the classic definition of mentoring. Most of the successful entrepreneurs studied by Cox and Jennings (1995) did agree that learning from the experience of others, with particular emphasis on critical incidents, was very important and had been a key to their success. This supports the idea that the type of mentoring that is most successful in the entrepreneurial context differs from that of the large established organizational context.

2.3. How to implement an eMentoring community for developing entrepreneurship competences

According to MENTOR program, here are the main steps in developing an eMentoring community with entrepreneurs who will act as mentors:

- establish goals for the program;
- select technology for communication;
- develop the communication structure;
- develop guidelines for protégés, mentors;
- recruit participants;
- orient participants;
- introduce new mentors and protégés to community members;
- provide supervision and ongoing support of mentors;
- manage online discussions;
- evaluate the program.
There is also important to:

- be realistic about what you can achieve;
- protect participants’ confidentiality and privacy;
- make sure your e-mentoring program is all technology based;
- make sure you have resources, initially and later on, for Web and technology development;
- establish a policy for how often mentors and mentees connect with each other;
- offer structured activities that encourage mentees to open up and write more;
- recruit mentors who are technologically savvy and like to work with computers. Such people will be more likely to go the distance.

Also, in How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice are mentioned the qualities of successful mentors, which would be the entrepreneurs in our case:

- personal commitment to be involved with another person for an extended time;
- respect for individuals and for their abilities and their right to make their own choices in life;
- ability to listen and to accept different points of view;
- ability to empathize with another person’s struggles;
- ability to see solutions and opportunities as well as barriers;
- flexibility and openness

3. Conclusions

The benefits of mentoring for entrepreneurial education and development are evident from both an academic and practitioner standpoint. Mentoring is a useful learning tool that incorporates the transfer of knowledge, skills, and ability through shared experience, as well as developing and strengthening self-confidence and entrepreneurial self-efficacy in the mentee. Universities which engage in entrepreneurial development within communities and entrepreneurial educators wishing to give their student business plan competition team the greatest learning experience should definitely work to provide access to experienced mentors. In order to help maximize the benefits to the mentees, it would be helpful to provide volunteer mentors with information regarding the mentor functions for entrepreneurs. By making them aware of the psychological, career-related, and role-modeling functions that are utilized in high-quality entrepreneurial mentoring relationships, they can strive to make sure they are meeting the developmental needs of the mentees. Also, with regard to the manner in which mentors deal with mentees, Robert and Wilbanks (2012) noted that the appropriate use of humor can help to strengthen mentoring relationships and improve mentoring relationship quality. Additionally, making the mentors aware of the fact that the best mentoring results occur when utilizing a low directive and high involvement style will help them to encourage the mentees to develop their own problem solving skills and learn through the examples provided by listening to stories about the mentor’s experience.

Also, experience-based learning as the best method to acquire tacit knowledge associated with setting up and running a business and as a useful way of improving a technical person’s business skills. Entrepreneurship learning is dependent on an individual’s exposure to experience, and includes observation of an entrepreneurial role model. The effectiveness of authentic experience in developing entrepreneurial skills, attitudes and intentions make it an important issue for policy and curriculum designers to address. Links between higher education institutions and entrepreneurs, particularly if entrepreneurs are willing to engage with students, to mentor business plans and or to help in the creation and analysis of case studies would encourage deep learning and aid experiential learning. The researchers recommend embedding elements of authentic experience into entrepreneurship education programmes if they are to have enduring effects on entrepreneurial intent and self-efficacy (Fenton, Barry, 2014).

Networking with real-world entrepreneurs is regarded as a vital component of successful entrepreneurship education and the lecturer is instrumental in facilitating and developing both formal and informal networks between students, SMEs and universities.
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