

Beyond the Classroom: Online Business as the Lab for Experiential Learning

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Abstract

Information technology infrastructure is expanding at a rapid pace in this era to meet the demands of every industry and field, including education and economy. As such, by developing their skills and potential, students will have an entrepreneurial mindset that can assist them to prepare for the workforce. The objective of this paper is to examine how experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship helps to develop the entrepreneurial mindset among student entrepreneurs in higher learning institutions. This study used the qualitative method specifically in-depth interviews and participant observations. Using purposive sampling, 20 participants from selected fields of study were chosen. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. The findings reveal that experiential learning in online business helped students to manage crises efficiently, increased their autonomy and authenticity as well as developed self-reflection habits. Through consistent practice, students can stimulate their creativity and become more critical of their circumstances too. This will help them to have new interpretations to direct their future actions. Experiential learning allows students to develop their entrepreneurial mindset and intentions, learn about people and their culture. Future graduates should participate in a range of experiential learning activities in online business that may aid in the development of their entrepreneurial mindset. In short, experiential learning is more than ever a practical approach in getting students to engage with real-world situations. It has an enormous impact on students' attitudes and abilities, making them more competitive graduates, particularly in the digital era.

Keywords: Education, Experiential Learning, Online Business, Students, Transformation

Introduction

Information technology infrastructure is expanding at a rapid pace in this era to meet the demands of every industry and field, including education and economy. Oviawe and Uwameiye (2020) point out that, as a result of globalization, there are now many demands placed on the skills of employees. Ferreira (2019) emphasises that as societies become more reliant on digital technology, it is important to consider digital culture. These days, employers

expect their employees to learn new technologies so they can find creative solutions, collaborate, and resolve issues. An entrepreneurial mindset is a way of thinking to make use of possibilities based on knowledge, pattern recognition skills, and information processing (Cui et al., 2021). As such, by developing their skills and potential, students will have an entrepreneurial mindset that will assist them as they prepare for the workforce. Smith (2012 as cited in McDonald, 2020) defines 'teaching' as the process of attending to the needs, experiences, and feelings of learners, and making specific interventions to support their learning. Therefore, learning is not just in the classroom and memorizing theories but it covers all aspects, including physical experience. Although traditional learning may provide students with theoretical understanding, students might to apply what they have learned in practice (Pamungkas et al., 2021).

Experiential learning is a method that encourages students' aptitudes and abilities to think critically through doing. This method is used to assess students' potential on implementing the theoretical knowledge they have learned in the classroom to the real world. However, students' entrepreneurial mindset and applied knowledge potential are lacking and initiatives to implement experiential learning into entrepreneurship education are scarce. Ilhaamie and Rosmawarni (2020) discuss several causes for graduate unemployment, including curriculum content and techniques which are inconsistent with industry needs. According to Mohd Zaidi and Masoumeh (2018), students have no idea(s) how to start a business to increase functionality and profitability. Meanwhile, Hazlina Aziz (2018) mentions that there is a deficiency in highlighting graduates' potential which implies that universities have failed to offer adequate opportunities to develop the necessary skills for the graduates' careers in the current digital age. Daspit et al. (2021) highlight how entrepreneurial experience fosters the development of an entrepreneurial mindset by broadening perspectives and altering how an individual sees and seizes opportunities.

Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine how experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship helps to develop the entrepreneurial mindset among student entrepreneurs in higher learning institutions. This research aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2015-2025, Entrepreneurship Action Plan Higher Education Institutions (EAP – HEIs 2021-2025), and UNESCO Education 2030, all of which aim to provide new insights on teaching and learning to improve the quality of the education system and strengthen the entrepreneurial mindset among students at higher learning institutions. According to Joshi (2023), entrepreneurship fosters innovation, fuels economic growth, and generates new jobs by bringing together novel ideas, products, and services to the market. Particularly with the rise of digital entrepreneurship in Malaysia today, it can act as a catalyst for economic change and development.

Literature Review

The Entrepreneurial Mindset in the Digital Age

Experiential learning refers to learning through doing (Lewis & Williams, 1994). On the other hand, experiential learning according to Tanaka et al. (2016), is the process of learning by acquiring experience. The experiential learning technique's goal is to influence students by changing their knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and enhancing their current skills (Pamungkas et al., 2021). To add, Kerner (2018) also highlights five benefits of experiential education: 1) the ability to learn and develop quickly, 2) obtain actual guidance and input, 3) teamwork and communication skills development, 4) the formation of self-reflective habits and 5) the obvious achievements. According to Pitan and Muller (2018), Through an experiential learning

method, it proved by 402 respondents in South African that university reputation had a favourable influence on students' perceived employability. All of these studies have been found to centre on the meaning and purposes of experiential learning as well as its effects on students' academic performance.

Experiential Learning and Student Advancement

The entrepreneurial mindset, according to Walter and Block (2016), is a way of thinking that considers any chances rather than failures, looks for solutions rather than complaints about a problem, and looks for possibilities rather than difficulties. Kooskora (2021) explains, to deal with the new challenges brought about by various environmental changes, a new mindset about what we do and how we interpret the world as well as a new set of skills, are required. Asenge et al. (2018) claim, having an entrepreneurial mindset result in more high-quality products and services being offered, more jobs being created, and increased wealth creation. In connection with that, Korte (2018) discusses several advantages of having an entrepreneurial mindset in the 21st century, the majority of which are the requirement to develop agility, adaptability, creativity, and social impact. As stated by Jackson et al. (2021), the idea of the entrepreneurial mindset is based on the idea that to advance and develop society in the modern world, people must acquire entrepreneurial skills. Moreover, the entrepreneurial sector is still seen as the best method for reducing youth unemployment in Malaysia (Dzuhailmi et al., 2018).

In short, those studies emphasize on the values and necessities of students having an entrepreneurial mindset. However, how an entrepreneurial mindset can be built via experiential learning among students is missing from the literature. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopted Roger Greenaway's (1992) model of Four Stages Reviewing Cycle in integrating the concept of experiential learning with the entrepreneurial mindset. This model has four stages which are experience, express, examine and explore (see Figure 1). According to the University of Edinburgh (2018), the reviewing model was designed for experiential learning which examines the situation individuals wish to review and reflect upon while considering ways to apply it in the future. Greenaway's model emphasizes that reviewing is a method to discover what the students gain from experiential learning which then allows for changes to be implemented ("Greenaway Model of Reflection", n.d.). In other words, the experience of reviewing will certainly contribute to one's learning and success. Greenaway (1992) states that a good review helps to convert a powerful experience into an empowering process of learning in which the connection between an individual and his/her interpersonal development is more evident. However, experience alone does not always result in new learning; critical reflection on the experience is thus required (Schon, 1983).

According to Greenaway (2008 as cited in Ord & Lather, 2011), this model is useful because the stages simplify and reduce complex and variable processes into a regular and consistent pattern. Based on Greenaway's (2013 as cited in Gordijn et al., 2018) work, reflection, reviewing and debriefing might well assist individuals in learning from their experiences and by using interactive methods, more engagement, focus, learning, change and impact can be achieved. This concept may prompt reflection and discussion, resulting in recommendations that are then incorporated into a plan that is ready to be used in the future ("Greenaway Model of Reflection, n.d.).

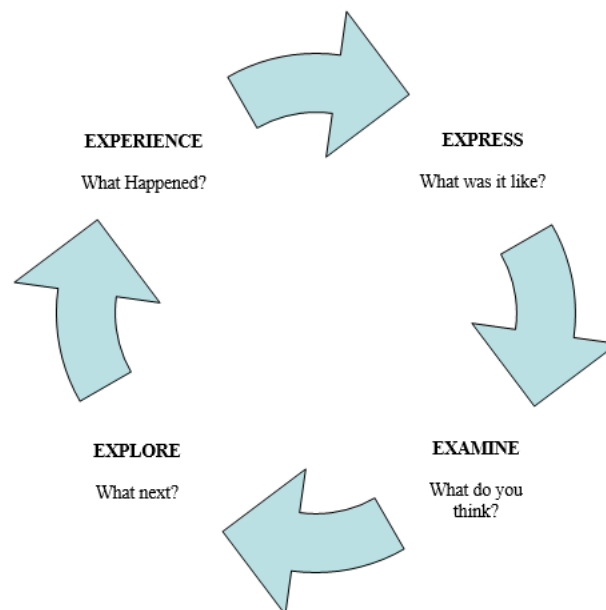


Fig. 1. Greenaway's (1992) Four Stages Reviewing Cycle

The first stage looks at *experience* which is the starting point of the situation the students find themselves in. At this stage, students discover what happened and learn from the experience. To understand the meaning of an experience, much of the understanding must be elicited before the activity and explored during its commencement as well as afterward (Ord & Leather, 2011). To relate, this study looks at the students' experiences gained from the experiential learning process. Then, the students move to the next stage which is *express*. The students see the quality of the experience at this stage where they discover their feelings and make judgment on applying experiential learning. The next stage is *examine*. This stage is used to remind students of events they may have missed or overlooked to gain new experiences. Lastly, in the *explore* stage, the students are getting ready to experience a new situation by overcoming some of the challenges faced and lessons learned from before. It is expected that the process of developing the entrepreneurial mindset develops between the *experience* and *express* stages. Whereas, between the *examine* and *explore* stages, this is where the entrepreneurial mindset has fully developed but the process keeps continuing.

Methodology

To better understand individuals' social realities, this study employed a qualitative technique that focuses on how people interpret and make meaning of their experiences. It aims to explain 'how' and 'why' a certain social phenomena or initiative occurs in each environment (Mohajan, 2018). This study focuses on learning in depth about the participants' experiences in digital entrepreneurship. By using this approach, the objective of this research has been achieved since the data collected is non-numerical in nature. The data collection techniques used are in-depth interviews and participant observations. These techniques are suitable to be applied in this study because the researchers could understand deeply the research participants' perspectives based on their experiences being involved in digital entrepreneurship and the researchers were able to understand their circumstances and ensure their claim by becoming their customers and monitor business activities through their digital platforms. The participants of this study were local undergraduate students, both male and female, who are still in their degree years but involved in digital business at the same

time. They were recruited via purposive sampling. The participants were recruited based on the following criteria: 1) gender, 2) field of studies, 3) online platforms used for digital business and 4) duration of digital business experience. Twenty students from various fields such as engineering, human sciences, economy, medicine, and pure science participated in this study. There were four participants from the Pagoh Campus, four participants from the Kuantan Campus, and 12 participants from the Gombak Campus. The age of the participants involved in this study ranged from 20-24 years old. They consisted of five male and 15 female students. All participants run online businesses using various platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and E-commerce platforms. They have been engaged in online business for at least six months prior to participating in the study. Thematic analysis is a suitable method of analysis when seeking to comprehend experiences, ideas, or actions across a data collection. (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Therefore, the data had been analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

According to the study's findings, the participants clarified that they learn from running their businesses, which refers to consistent practice, learning from crises and self-reflection habits. The first finding shows that frequent practice can help them to develop their skills. Participants stated that running an online business provides them with personal exposure, which allows them to improve their business. For instance, one of the participants named Jaja mentioned

After running my own business, I now understand how to handle business such as commissions, etc. Before, I'm not aware how the procedure works, pricing of products and many more until I do it on my own.

To always ensure that student entrepreneurs do not lag behind the quick advancement of technology, consistent practice is very helpful. It is a strategy that digital entrepreneurs should employ because it can help them develop their businesses over time and hone more skills. All of the participants shared that technology is very useful and meets their daily needs in running their business. Therefore, they need to frequently practise to master digital skills, as shared by Melur

I learned to choose the right music for the video several times. It is a skill that I always practise. Plus, how to edit my pictures and do posters.

The experiences shared by the participants are consistent with what Pamungkas et al. (2021) described previously, which is that experiential learning may increase one's knowledge, talents, and present skills. When they consistently practise, they see a shift in their talents and capabilities. Apart from that, Alia also said:

I start my business and its impact is enormous for me as a person and entrepreneur. If we have knowledge but we did not practise, it's a waste. Practise makes perfect

All of the participants' experiences corroborate with what was discussed by Kerner (2018) who states that practice fosters instant learning and development also provides access to

real-time coaching and feedback. Correspondently, the findings align with that of Greenaway's principles of express and explore, where participants experience cycles of learning through consistent practice and attempts to perform the task.

Next, the second finding is learning from crises. This way of learning shows that student entrepreneurs learn to act based on the crises that they face while running their businesses. At times, people will always learn from problems that occur in their lives. Such crises listed by all the participants are from competitors, customers, and ways to maintain the quality of their business services. One participant named Yamni stated that having an entrepreneurial mindset influences her attitude to become wiser and calmer when handling problems. This is also Sarah's experience when she said

My brand is not known compared to my competitors. I need to reach out to more people. So, I plan to engage more on the social media and improve my marketing strategies.

Competing with competitors is a significant challenge for participants. However, experiential learning appears to assist them in identifying ways to deal with this risk. For example, Shiha stated:

I have three competitors. How am I going to compete with their sales that reach thousands? So, I came out with gift ideas or free delivery.

Besides dealing with the crises of competitors, some participants learn from the challenges that arise from customers. Nuh shared his experience dealing with a customer

Once, a customer requested to receive the product in less than 3 days. It's impossible to do that. So, I outsourced the job to my friend to keep the customer.

To find solutions and be open in developing their products and company, a good entrepreneur must be critical and creative. This is how crisis learning helps student entrepreneurs develop their entrepreneurial mindset. Lastly, the participants quantified that learning by doing not only improves skills but can also shape their personality in terms of thinking and behaving where it is not something that can be achieved from theory. This is referred to as self-reflection habit. Participants are better able to identify, evaluate, and seize opportunities after experiencing them. Yamni shared her experience

As a seller, I need to be responsible in researching my product to serve the best quality and services that I could to the market and benefit me as well.

Customer selection and product quality should be prioritised, especially in digital entrepreneurship because they are inextricably linked to customer communication and engagement with the entrepreneurs. In addition, to deal with new challenges, a person needs to adjust his/her perspective on what is being done and how he/she interprets things, as discussed by Kooskora (2021) in his work. As a result, entrepreneurs with an entrepreneurial mindset will always question their thoughts, actions, and experiences. It provides them with important insights into their strengths, weaknesses, values, and beliefs. This statement aligns with Nadirah's self-experience. She said

From the beginning, I am really into business. I feel like I have many opportunities and should not give up. I will always learn from my mistakes and failure today as a lesson to improve in the future.

Self-reflection practices can help an individual establish an entrepreneurial mindset. The majority of the participants agreed that they need to learn the skills required to constantly be up-dated with technological improvements. As a result, they must constantly self-reflect and seek out new methods to learn and enhance their entrepreneurial abilities. To add, self-reflection habits are also applied through the observation of competitors, professionals, or successful entrepreneurs. Participants compare and improvise the patterns and areas to make their business more interesting and unique. Likewise, Najwa mentioned

Once, I think people will not buy my product, so how am I going to earn? Then, I learned by looking at others' achievements and personal experiences.

She became more mindful of her actions and behaviours for improvement by taking the time to reflect. Her experience is similar to those of the other participants. They will always self-reflect on how to improve their skills and grow more fascinating services and products for their business.

The above findings align the participants experienced with the theoretical framework of this study. The participants went through all four stages of the reviewing cycle. They begin by gaining experience in doing something, then evaluating the quality of their experience, which leads them to analyse the root of the problems and formulate the benefits and drawbacks of their previous experiences to continue improving while moving forward.

Discussion

The results show that experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship proved to assist in building entrepreneurial mindset among student entrepreneurs in higher learning institutions. In this context this study discovered from the participants' responds that consistent practice, learning from crises and self-reflection habits in experiential learning help in shaping their entrepreneurial mindset. The participants seem to prioritize market demand, customer preferences, and service quality when practicing experiential learning in their online business; all of which are aspects of an entrepreneurial mindset and their learning process.

Previous studies (Awaysheh and Bonfiglio 2017; Anwar and Abdullah 2021) revealed that experiential learning influence students to develop and contribute many benefits especially in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, other studies discussed (Mason and Norin 2013; Isabelle 2020) shows positive feedbacks on their results towards experiential learning in entrepreneurship. Thus, this study analyzed the way experiential learning develop entrepreneurial mindset. This present study shows when students practice experiential learning, benefits previously mentioned on other studies become more prominent. Research participants of this study believe that consistent practice, learning from crises and self-reflection habits help them to be a better entrepreneur as the time goes by. When they enhance their skills and abilities, the desired outcome is achieved.

To add, the students have to deal with problems that can only happen if they experience the situation firsthand; this method will promptly strengthen them in improving their critical and creative thinking while dealing with the situation. The results show that experiential learning helps in navigating crises and how young entrepreneurs learned from their experiences. The results back up earlier research that mentioned on having an entrepreneurial mindset in the

twenty-first century could culminate greater quality of services, overcome unemployment difficulties, and increase wealth development. This study is also in line with other studies which consider that entrepreneurial mindset helps to improve oneself by identifying opportunities than challenges by viewing the world from a different perspective in order to enhance agility, creativity, and social impact. This study shows that this experiential learning strategy is perfect for students to put into practice since it allows them to experience what it is like to be an entrepreneur and learn how to improve via personal experiences which directly proved the benefits of entrepreneurial mindset. Consequently, this study discovered, instead of only hearing theories in class, experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship encourages student entrepreneurs to interact more freely with reality.

This study provides students' point of view regarding the experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship in the context of building an entrepreneurial mindset. Nevertheless, this study also has certain limitations. First, the participants are only from few various fields of studies and this study was conducted only one university. Thus, the results cannot generally represent the whole population of student entrepreneurs in the university and Malaysia higher institutions education system. For future research, it would be essential to broaden the study sample to other universities and student entrepreneurs from more fields of study. Furthermore, this study is primarily concerned with the participants' points of view. Consequently, it excludes the perspectives of all other parties involved, such as the institution and educators. Hence, further research should be conducted from the perspective of other parties involved to strengthen the practical value of this experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, experiential learning influences students' entrepreneurial mindsets in a variety of ways which helps to improve the quality of education and strengthen learning even more, motivating student entrepreneurs to understand things better and keep learning consistently. It has made significant contributions that ensure agile curriculum, foster lifelong learning, produce competitive graduates, and improve the marketability of graduates. An entrepreneurial mindset is important for all people, not just business owners. Employees with an entrepreneurial mindset are needed for every position because they are better at a wide range of skills, especially problem-solving, creative thinking, and critical thinking. Thus, if students have an entrepreneurial mindset, the difficulties and future challenges they encounter will not be seen as problems, but as opportunities to keep searching for the best solutions. All parties involved, including students, the government, universities, educators, families, and friends must play their respective roles to shape students with an entrepreneurial mindset and ensure that the experiential learning method can be used more practically in the future. Particularly, universities must play an important role in designing advanced curricular methods and learning environments that are up-to-date with digital advancement to boost graduates' marketability and competitiveness. There are currently few studies on experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship, particularly among Malaysian university students. As a result, the researchers recommend that more research on experiential learning in digital entrepreneurship should be conducted in the future. Many in the community are still unaware of the existence and importance of experiential learning. Thus, it is a good topic to research to provide detailed exposure to the community.

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