ISSN 2522-9400 **European Modern Studies Journal** *Vol 8 No 2*
available at www.journal-ems.com
DOI: 10.59573/emsj.8(2).2024.37

Using Hyperlocal Projects to Teach Entrepreneurial Skills

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Abstract. This article presents a comprehensive exploration of employing hyperlocal projects as a pedagogical approach to teach entrepreneurship. Hyperlocal projects entail focusing on specific, localized communities to address real-world business challenges and opportunities. The study emphasizes the significance of integrating hyperlocal projects into entrepreneurship curricula, offering educators innovative methods to engage students and cultivate essential entrepreneurial skills.

The paper outlines the implementation of the Madison Square Business Association project at Grand Valley State University, where students collaborated with a local non-profit to support businesses within a designated area. Through extensive data collection and collaboration with businesses, students developed persona descriptions, identified critical business issues, and proposed tailored support services. The project spanned two semesters, allowing students to iteratively refine their solutions and engage with local stakeholders.

Key findings highlight the benefits of hyperlocal projects in entrepreneurship education. These projects foster critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills by immersing students in real-world business contexts. Moreover, hyperlocal projects facilitate community engagement, providing students with hands-on learning experiences while addressing local economic challenges.

The article also offers practical insights into the implementation of hyperlocal projects, including strategies for project planning, stakeholder engagement, and assessment. Furthermore, it discusses the implications of hyperlocal projects for future research, emphasizing the need for long-term outcome evaluations, examinations of their impact on underserved populations, comparative analyses with other educational methods, and exploration of cross-disciplinary applications.

Overall, this study underscores the value of hyperlocal projects in entrepreneurship education, encouraging educators to embrace innovative teaching approaches that promote real-world problem-solving and community engagement. By incorporating hyperlocal projects into curricula, institutions can empower students to become entrepreneurial leaders equipped to drive local economic development and social change.

Keywords: Hyperlocal projects, entrepreneurship teaching, student engagement, community engagement

Purpose of this Article

The purpose of writing this article about using hyperlocal projects to teach entrepreneurship is to highlight a creative and practical teaching approach that can help students develop critical entrepreneurial skills. The article serves as a resource for educators looking for innovative ways to engage their students and provide them with practical learning experiences.

The article should encourage educators to consider incorporating these projects into their entrepreneurship curriculum by demonstrating the benefits of hyperlocal projects as a teaching

tool. The article also guides how to design and implement successful hyperlocal projects, including tips for overcoming pitfalls.

Ultimately, the article aims to promote entrepreneurship education and encourage more students to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. The article should contribute to a growing body of knowledge and best practices in entrepreneurship education by highlighting the value of hyperlocal projects in teaching entrepreneurship.

Hyperlocal Project: The Madison Square Business Association

Explanation of the Concept of "Hyperlocal"

The term "hyperlocal" refers to content, services, businesses, or approaches focusing on a specific, localized audience, such as a neighborhood, town, or city block. This term is often used as a precursor describing media approaches. It has yet to be found in recent entrepreneurship teaching literature but can be found in representing entrepreneurial businesses or enterprises. This paper defines hyperlocal as "limited to a tiny geographical area" (Merriam-Webster.com et al.).

Description of the Project

Grand Valley State University and the Seidman College of Business professors were first introduced to a local non-profit, Seeds of Promise, at a local community meeting held in December 2021. During the visit, Executive Director Ronald Jimmerson described his non-profit as an organization serving Ward 3 of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He indicated that his organization was developing a new association to help local businesses, The Madison Square Business Association. The new association would provide business support to a small portion of Ward 3, bordered by four streets (Wealthy, Eastern, Burton, and Buchanan). Mr. Jimmerson offered the opportunity to work with Seeds of Promise to develop services to entice local businesses to join the new association and improve the operations of each member's business.

Working with the Madison Square Business Association (MSBA), the MGT330 Entrepreneurship and Small Business classes planned to collect data on the following:

- Follow-up contact information.
- Reasons for joining a local business association.
- Specific business issues.
- Specific desired resources to support their businesses.
- Other community revitalization issues that needed to be addressed.

The official start date of the class project was September 2022 and was intended to span two semesters, Fall 2022 and Winter 2023. It would include six sections, 197 students, and 45 teams. Businesses were assigned randomly, giving a variety of business types to each team utilizing a list of 300 firms from a previous GVSU community project. Once the businesses were posted and student teams validated each was viable, 135 firms were utilized for the class project. Some of the business types included restaurant/fast food/food manufacturing (25.5%), retail/wholesale goods (10.8%), hair/beauty/nails (7.8%), business services (6.9%), and liquor stores (6.9%).

Each team was tasked to develop persona descriptions (broad descriptive narratives of different groupings of businesses) of the different types of companies within the MSBA-designated area. Next, teams would eventually work directly with 1-4 specific businesses (profiles) to prototype services and support tools each might see as beneficial. Final deliverables were assigned to teams as follows:

- Persona Descriptions (market segments).
- Profile Descriptions.
- Identification of critical issues for businesses.

- Proposed support tools and services.
- Cost estimates and timing for development by the MSBA.

During both semesters, student teams identified areas of concern consistent with most businesses within the Madison Square area. These included:

- Staffing.
- Theft.
- Supply chain issues/stock/warehousing.
- Rising Costs.
- Communication with customers/staff.
- Marketing using social media.
- Attracting customers and converting them to buyers.

Student teams worked with their respective businesses to understand what could be created to address the areas of concern. Each team then utilized an iterative process to develop prototypes to help the companies improve their respective businesses. These prototypes were enhanced based on business owner feedback and were ultimately converted to minimal viable services or MVSs. Once the business owners ask when they can use the newly designed services, student teams could begin to develop costing to create the new services, resources needed, and a timeline to implement.

Several success stories emerged from student team and business owner interactions. Business owners offered to mentor students should the student ever develop a new venture. Some students were offered full and part-time positions within the local businesses. In December 2022, teams were invited to a celebration with local business owners and residents at the Seeds of Promise office. The celebration allowed students to engage in conversations to learn more about local culture and traditions.

The biggest surprise with the MSBA project was that over 300 businesses' contact information was provided for students to pursue, and more than half of the companies were no longer in business and had closed their doors for good. Providing replacement businesses for teams began to be a significant undertaking and required driving through the area to identify new companies not listed prior for teams to contact. Some former business owners offered the reason for local failing businesses as COVID-19 and the pandemic, as many relied on foot traffic to support their businesses.

The only failure to describe is that a 15-week semester needs longer to allow students to understand customers, develop service solutions, and implement them. During the first semester, the student teams did an excellent job understanding their customers (local business owners) and began developing service concepts before the semester ended. The concepts needed to be completed so the MSBA could develop and implement their concepts. The second-semester teams focused more on designing and developing service prototypes. They finished the semester with several viable MVSs to entice business owners to join the Madison Square Business Association.

The final outputs for the Madison Square Business Association Project were 135 business profiles, including the business name, address, business owner, and contact information. Each profile could be used as a "splash page" for web pages if an Internet presence is not currently being pursued. Further, each profile will be available for the MSBA to use for initial contact or follow-up. In addition, MVSs were outlined with step-by-step processes, resources needed, and respective costs. The MSBA can use the MVSs to obtain funding and implement each service. This course is not a product/service development but a concept and feasibility course. However, GVSU's MKT370 New Product Development course could take our MVSs and develop each for the association.

Importance of Relevance in Entrepreneurial Teaching

In entrepreneurial education, the term relevance typically refers to learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students (personal relevance) or that are connected in some way to real-world issues, problems, and contexts (life relevance) (Concepts, 2015).

For students, personal relevance occurs when learning is connected to an individual student's interests, aspirations, and life experiences. Advocates argue that personal relevance, when effectively incorporated into instruction within real-world applications, can increase a student's motivation to learn, engagement in what is being taught, assist with career preparation, and even knowledge retention and recall (Concepts, 2013).

Engagement

When students perceive that their coursework is relevant to their goals and interests, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to learn. This can lead to better academic outcomes and a more positive college experience overall (Mengel & Tantawy, 2018).

Retention

Students who feel that their coursework is relevant are likelier to persist in their studies and complete their degrees. This is particularly important for institutions striving to improve graduation rates and reduce dropout rates (Sternberg, 2016).

Career Preparation

Higher education is often viewed as a pathway to career success, and relevance is crucial for preparing students for future careers. When coursework is relevant to their chosen field, students gain valuable knowledge and skills to apply to their future work (Sternberg, 2016).

Real-world Applications

Relevance to students can help bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world applications. When coursework is relevant, students can see how the concepts they are learning can be applied to practical situations, making the learning experience more meaningful and valuable (Morley & Jamil, 2021).

Lifelong Learning

Finally, relevance to students is essential because it can help cultivate a love of learning that lasts beyond college. When students are engaged and find meaning in their coursework, they are more likely to continue learning and growing throughout their lives (Wang & Long, 2022).

The Potential Benefits of Hyperlocal Projects for Entrepreneurship Education

Using hyperlocal projects in the classroom has several potential benefits, such as:

Develops Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking remains one of the top ten business skills university graduates should possess to become hired. Entrepreneurs actively practice crucial thinking when researching customer needs and problems customers might experience. Matching potential solutions to customer needs in the most valuable way requires critical thinking skills (Calma & Davies, 2021).

The Madison Square Business Association project allowed students to focus on a significant problem in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, business community. In addition, the project provided opportunities to apply entrepreneurial models and approaches for the various businesses within Ward 3.

Enhances Creativity and Innovation

Student entrepreneurs only sometimes see themselves as creative. However, as the student engages with their customers to solve problems described to them, creativity naturally happens when the student explores possible solutions to issues they might not have experienced before. Hyperlocal projects can provide these opportunities to students in a manner that

requires each to apply creative thoughts to solve the unique problems of a customer demographic foreign to the student. When the student uses creativity in their problem-solving processes, innovation often occurs (Lanford & Tierney, 2022)

Fosters Community Engagement

In many schools' efforts to engage local communities, the focus is often on either student learning or faculty research. With a hyperlocal approach, students engage directly with customers, focusing primarily on community improvement. Student learning becomes an outcome of hyperlocal projects. Community members help students understand their problems and issues throughout the problem-solving process students utilize. The potential for student engagement beyond the project is not an expectation, but students often stay connected depending on the bond with community members (Yamamura & Koth, 2018).

Teaches Project Management Skills

Each student team is assigned customers to assist, and project deliverables are due at the end of the semester. The online application Bluescape™ is used to help each team manage customers and respective deliverables. Students learn how to manage their projects and provide milestone updates to the professor during and after the project. Bluescape™ is a collaborative tool for teams to manage their projects and observe other student teams.

Encourages Problem-Solving

Problem-solving is a competency developed over time when students use the tools provided in class, such as the Business Model Canvas and the Value Model developed by Osterwalder (2010). Students interview customers to discover customer context and the problems encountered. Students solve problems using course tools and post their progress on their Bluescape™ Canvas.

Implementation Strategies for Hyperlocal Projects in Entrepreneurial Education

Planning the Project

Planning the project will ensure success and client satisfaction in a hyperlocal project. There are several steps recommended to design and develop the project. These include:

Initial exposure to the client

If the university has a philanthropy or community engagement department, project clients can more easily be identified. If not, the National Council of Nonprofits can be used to identify organizations within each state to contact. In Michigan, the organization recognized is the Michigan Nonprofit Association. Each of these organizations has contact information and a web presence.

Once nonprofit organizations are selected for initial contact, they must connect with their executive director to see if any projects could help with student involvement. The professor must be mindful not to oversell the impact on the nonprofit's project as most university courses are taught in 15-week semesters, and the work must be completed before the semester concludes. The nonprofit should provide contact information, including names, addresses, and telephone numbers for people or businesses they serve. This information will be crucial to student teams as each proceeds with the project.

Student teams must be exposed to the nonprofit, including a presentation on its mission, values, goals, and objectives. If these do not exist, it is recommended that we move on to another nonprofit that has this crucial information. It is helpful to ask the executive director to prepare a presentation like the nonprofit's annual report given to the board of directors. Many nonprofits have video presentations to secure donations from local organizations or individuals.

Developing the scope of the project with the client

Most nonprofits assign committees or teams to achieve goals, and a thorough review of their objectives can be a way to identify areas on which to focus the classroom project. Then,

course learning objectives may need to be adjusted to align with your client's needs. These new course objectives should be discussed, and the executive director and nonprofit team leaders should agree on the project scope.

The nonprofit's teams may be working to a schedule, and the professor and executive director may need to negotiate the timeline. Client check-in meetings are a way to share project progress and discuss any roadblocks students might be experiencing. It is important to quickly address roadblocks as these can cause delays to the course project and client objectives.

Organizing the semester with students

Once the project scope and timelines have been solidified with your client, these details should be documented and included within your course learning management system (LMS). They should be discussed at the beginning of the semester, focusing on outcomes/expectations with student teams.

Bluescape™ is a collaboration tool recommended to assist teams working on the project. Team project templates can be placed within Bluescape™, allowing students to work on the project in real time with teammates. Deliverables can be identified via various headers that must be completed as the project develops. Then, the professor can monitor and review student work, and notes can be placed with recommendations or changes for students to address.

Project time stamps are updates provided by student teams and are expected to be posted within the team's Bluescape™ canvas. Time stamps include prototypes (anything shared with customers), business model canvas (used to develop a business model), and value models (used to explore value created by MVSs) (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). Each time stamp allows the professor insight into the progress of critical elements of the project and should include a narrative describing how each item has changed since the initial time stamp.

Teams should be allowed to view other team canvases. Students may only sometimes grasp the various models and tools needed to develop their MVSs. Viewing other canvases helps students see how to complete deliverables. In addition, the professor can highlight team canvases, creating a competitive environment where teams try to outperform others.

Students may only sometimes interview customers as the project requires. Random professor follow-up within the hyperlocal area is recommended to ensure teams perform as expected. This follow-up will also apply to MVS development, as this project step is critical to meeting client expectations.

Bluescape™ is a tool to provide students instant feedback to teams as their respective projects progress. The note feature allows the professor to give students feedback to change their canvases.

Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders

Teaching entrepreneurship with a course project requires clear descriptions of the stakeholders/customers, their expectations or needs, and their respective influence on project outcomes. Once a project sponsor is identified, professors can work to understand expected project deliverables. It will help student teams identify customers they seek to understand and ultimately identify problems that need to be solved with new products or services. The project's success will be highly influenced by how healthy teams address stakeholder/customer needs with their work.

Selecting Project Themes

The project sponsor should describe how the class could help the stakeholders/customers with new products or services. Then, the professor can decide what project theme would be appropriate to address sponsor expectations and successfully teach entrepreneurial themes. The professor must share the final theme for the class project to get acceptance and ensure the sponsor views the project as successful.

This is the time in the project when the professor should describe the problem-solving process used while teaching entrepreneurship. Utilizing the design thinking process is recommended, which emphasizes understanding customers before developing products or services (Leifer & Kelley, 1991) (Auernhammer & Bernard, 2021).

Assessing Project Outcomes

Sponsor satisfaction with your project outcomes should be the priority, as continued access to the local community will be influenced by your sponsor. Once the project is completed, reviewing project outcomes and gauging the overall impact on customers can be accomplished through assessment discussions with the sponsor.

Your student teams will address customer outcomes throughout the project with professor input on project teams' Bluescape™ canvases. Depending on your project and outcomes, teams can provide updates at significant milestones such as identification and understanding of the customer, identification of customer needs, identification of minimal viable products/services, and final product/service feasibility analyses.

Reporting to Client

There are three suggested meetings to develop and report on the project. The first meeting should be held to outline the project deliverables and to set sponsor/client expectations. Future reporting meetings and the final project briefing should be determined during the initial meeting. The second meeting should be used to discuss project progress and make necessary adjustments based on sponsor input. The third meeting should include a discussion of the results of the project. Including community members in the final meeting can be helpful to nurture the relationship between the locals and your school.

Sustaining the Project

The main issue of a semester-long project is the limitation of fifteen weeks for students to utilize the design thinking process. Half the semester is spent learning more about their customers, and the second half is spent prototyping potential solutions. The project can be sustained by passing along customer data to future semesters. Then, the project teams can further refine product/service solutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has several considerations for future teachers and researchers. These include:

Call to Action for Educators and Entrepreneurs to Implement Hyperlocal Projects

Entrepreneurship educators should consider giving their students opportunities to not only learn tools and models for starting new ventures but also give them experience working with actual businesses in a hyperlocal environment.

Implications for Future Research

Future research has several implications regarding using hyperlocal projects to teach entrepreneurship. Here are a few possible areas for further investigation:

Long-term outcomes

While some studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of hyperlocal projects in teaching entrepreneurship skills, more research is needed to determine whether these skills translate into successful entrepreneurial ventures over the long term. Future studies could examine whether students who participate in hyperlocal projects are more likely to launch successful businesses or pursue careers in entrepreneurship.

Impact on underserved populations

Hyperlocal projects may particularly benefit underserved communities and populations, such as low-income or minority students. Future research could explore the impact of hyperlocal projects on these populations and whether they are an effective tool for promoting entrepreneurship and economic mobility.

Comparative analysis

While hyperlocal projects have shown promise as a teaching tool, comparing their effectiveness with other entrepreneurship education methods, such as traditional classroom instruction or experiential learning, would be useful. Future studies could compare the outcomes of different teaching methods to determine which are most effective for teaching specific entrepreneurial skills.

Cross-disciplinary applications

Hyperlocal projects may have applications beyond entrepreneurial education. Future research could explore the use of hyperlocal projects in other disciplines, such as community development or public health, and whether they effectively promote innovation and social change.

Further research into using hyperlocal projects to teach entrepreneurship could help refine and improve this teaching method and contribute to a deeper understanding of effective entrepreneurship education strategies.

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