Integrating social responsibility into an entrepreneurship education program: A case study

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship education in the South Africa is often presented as a neutral discipline. Yet fundamental to any entrepreneurship education program should be the integration of key issues, such as ethics, values and social responsibility. This paper reports on a study that set out to explore student teachers experiences of engaging in an entrepreneurship education program specially enhanced to create an awareness of the link between entrepreneurship and social responsibility. It argues that exposure to a program of this nature is a powerful means to dispel the myth that entrepreneurship is a neutral discipline and that such exposure creates useful avenues for student teachers to examine their own constructions and perceptions of entrepreneurship and social responsibility. This paper draws on data constructed in a qualitative research project that engaged the tenets of symbolic interactionism in order to understand how students experienced the program and to understand their changing perceptions.

Key words: social responsibility; service learning; entrepreneurship education

1. Introduction

In recent years South African education has undergone radical change. Since the dawn of a new political dispensation in South Africa in 1994, there have been several initiatives to create a more equitable democratic order that will attempt to reduce unemployment and advance the development of small businesses. Developing economic literacy and basic entrepreneurship skills was seen as one of the ways in which this could be achieved. For the first time, entrepreneurship education has been formally introduced into the school curriculum both at primary and secondary school levels. Teacher education providers have had to respond to the need to train teachers to teach entrepreneurship at both these levels.

Pre-service teachers of business studies experience a dissonance that is brought about by the two distinct spaces that they traverse, namely, the home and community space and the university space. A challenge teacher education programs facing is to create conditions for students to navigate these two spaces. In South Africa, developing sensitivity and acquiring skills for such navigation is crucial as it is likely to increase their levels of preparedness for managing the complexities that are likely to encounter in a country as socio-economically diverse as South Africa.

WONG (2008) in her assessment of the US contexts argues that teachers " … by not having the proper knowledge, skills and dispositions to teach in culturally responsive ways and act as cultural brokers between the

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mainstream educational institutions and home cultures of their students, these teachers might be denying their students significant educational opportunities" (p. 31).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Faculty of Education offers a business management education program that is located in the School of Social Sciences. It is offered as a major in the undergraduate Bachelor of Education curriculum program. A key focus of the level one program is entrepreneurship education. In the 2006 curriculum review process, it was decided to integrate into the entrepreneurship program a strong social responsibility and business ethics focus. While it was important to provide a strong theoretical perspective on the issues of social responsibility and business ethics, program co-ordinators were faced with the challenge of how to incorporate a practical, real life element into the program. The authors were mindful that they were working with teacher trainees, who would eventually become teachers of entrepreneurship. The challenge then was to create a learning experience for the students that would enable them to apply the entrepreneurship and social responsibility theory to practical situations.

It must be noted that the entrepreneurship education program is specially designed to enable graduates to be able to teach basic entrepreneurship at school level.

The first entrepreneurship and social responsibility program was launched in 2007. The program was designed to incorporate opportunities for students to interact directly with community based social welfare organisations. In particular, students were expected to link up with children from disadvantaged communities. In association with an international non-governmental organisation whose work entails facilitating mentorship programs for disadvantaged orphans at children's homes, the entrepreneurship education program of UKZN was able to create opportunities for their students to mentor young orphans.

The programs aims were twofold. The first aim of the program was to help students become aware of their own sense of social responsibility, and secondly, to apply their pedagogical skills to the mentorship endeavour. Each student was assigned to an orphan with whom he or she had to work for a period of a year. Prior to being matched with an orphan, students were subjected to a personal interview in order to ascertain the eligibility of each student to be matched with an orphan. Students were also engaged in three eight hours training workshops that dealt with issues such as values and needs, culture, sexual orientation and leadership. Interaction time was expected to be a minimum of four hours per month. The task was to collaboratively conceive of a business idea and to develop a basic business plan. As with any new initiative, several blockages and breakthroughs were experienced.

As co-ordinators of the program, the authors were eager to find out how students had experienced the program. This paper therefore attempts to provide the findings for student teacher experiences of an entrepreneurship program that was specially enhanced to create an awareness of social responsibility.

2. Literature review

In the corporate world, the issue of social responsibility has been receiving widespread attention so much so that corporate social responsibility, more particularly, socially responsible activities by private enterprises are beginning to become integrated into the strategic plans of businesses with businesses starting to recognise that such initiatives are more likely to yield social as well as economic returns (Cochran, 2007). Social responsibility pertaining to the corporate environment refers to the commitment from business enterprise towards sustainable

economic development, thereby creating a good working environment for employees, their families, the local community and social welfare at large to improve the quality of life.

Students of commerce are often assumed to lack civic-mindedness and are often driven by self-interest (Frank, Gilovich & Regan, 1993). However, students can be influenced to raise their levels of civic-mindedness if such issues are incorporated into the curriculum and pedagogy in a creative manner (Cheo, 2006). Kraft (1996) comments on what is regarded as a disturbing phenomenon in society, namely, a waning sense of civic-mindedness amongst American youth and advances a call to rebuild a citizenship ethic in young people. Higher education has a responsibility towards inculcating in the youth a sense of social responsibility and civic-mindedness (Thomas, 1994). To this end, Krensky and Steffen (2008) suggest that service-learning is a viable and effective means to inculcate the notion of social responsibility into the psyche of students. From their research into art education pedagogy, they argue that the potential of art education to transform and that of service-learning to engage offer a powerful combination that art educators could exploit so as to advance a social responsibility agenda.

Billig (2000) alerts us to the challenge of sustaining service-learning initiatives and draws attention to the inherent tension between achieving high academic results and developing an ethic of service-learning. As long as the former receives priority on the education agenda, the true value of service-learning as a means of fostering social responsibility in youth will not be realized. Reflecting on a community-immersion model of pre-service science teacher preparation, Handa, Tippins, Thomson, Bilbao, Morano, Hallar and Miller (2008) note that a service orientated pedagogy presents the challenge of managing the emphasis of the experience and that both faculty and students have to constantly clarify the focus and the relationship between acquiring discipline knowledge and community immersion. They argue that there is a danger that students could become swamped with knowledge and learning opportunities that may emerge and are likely to become overwhelmed by the multi-facet scope of the learning experience.

WONG (2008), in her analysis of data generated from a pre-service teacher education service-learning program identified three types of relationships between participants and their community partners and categorized these as: transactional, transformational and transcendental. Transactional relationships were typically impersonal, reflecting a fear of working with people who were culturally different. The relationship was businesslike rather than a typical student-teacher relationship. Participants were inward-looking, focusing on their contribution to the relationship and not what the community partners' contributions or feelings. Transformational relationships on the other hand reflected typical student-teacher relationships where the teachers recognized their community partners as individuals and were keen to understand them as people and to find out more about their cultural backgrounds. These transformational relationships allow pre-service teachers to also see themselves as learners in the transaction and show an inclination towards an understanding of the challenges of being culturally different. Transcendent participants showed a deep understanding of their own conceptions and prejudices as it relates to the issue of diversity and had made significant progress to identifying these and moving forward towards a more sophisticated and sensitive understanding of diversity. They were also able to understand how institutional and social structures operate to the detriment of those who are culturally and linguistically different.

3. Research methodology

While this study drew largely on the tenets of interpretive research, it also gleaned insights from critical practitioner inquiry. It entailed a case study of a particular phenomenon in a particular context, namely, student experiences of an entrepreneurship program specially enhanced to create an awareness of social responsibility with the intention of instituting practical interventions and exploring the dynamic relationship between educational theory and practice (Dahlstrom & Lemma, 2008). The study engaged a combination of an open-ended survey questionnaire, focus group interviews and individual semi-structured interviews. Questions contained in the survey questionnaire and both forms of interviews were informed by both the critical question under consideration and the theoretical basis provided by the literature review. Seventy-seven students completed and returned the survey questionnaire. Survey data was collated per question and organized in terms of a collective response to the questions. Twenty students volunteered to be interviewed. Of the twenty willing participants, ten students were randomly selected for individual interviews while two groups of five and seven students participated in the focus group sessions. Focus group interviews lasted for approximately sixty minutes while individual interviews took approximately thirty minutes. Interviews were transcribed by two research assistants. A process of open coding was used to analyze the transcribed data.

4. What did pre-service teachers say

With any new program or pedagogic approach, it is almost inevitable that some students would resist the changed expectations of them. This entrepreneurship education program required much more simply attending lectures and submitting written assignments. It had a practical component that literally took students out of their so-called comfort zones. Some students were initially reluctant as they could not initially see the value in the exercise. In the discussion that follows later, the authors see how these students had changed their perceptions of the program. The following comment indicates students' initial response to the program:

> It was different at the beginning … I did not want to do the assignment.

This new initiative required close co-ordination between the authors as university co-ordinators, the NGO (big brother, big sister) that was to oversee the interaction with the orphans and the authorities at the children's home. As much as the authors tried to ensure that they planned thoroughly there were several occasions on which they had to deal with matters and issues that they had not foreseen. This was a level one program that was on offer to first entry students. An important comment that was made by some students was that they would have preferred to be involved in the planning of the project. This is captured in the following comment:

> Student should have an input on how the assignment should be done—I was like force to go to the program.

Planning for this initiative had begun in the previous year which meant that first entry students could not be part of the planning process. While the authors attempted to engage with students in an open and collaborative manner, much of the interaction took the form of information dissemination of preconceived plans.

Another logistical difficulty experienced by students was the fact that they had to travel off campus to engage with their community partners. Students felt that this imposed on their limited time as they also had to contend with a full program of study. They felt that the program had to an extent compromised their ability to engage fully with other courses that they had registered for. While the study did not illicit data regarding the impact of the program on faculty and other faculty programs, on reflection, it has become clear that the nature and extent of this

service-learning program has to be communicated to and negotiated with faculty in a more formal manner. The comment below reflects students' anxiety and frustration regarding the extra demands on their time:

> … transportation should be reorganized … it's too costly… we had other assignment to do for other modules, and this was taking too much time.

The above comment also alerts the authors to the difficulty of planning a service-learning program that requires financial outlay on the part of students. South Africa has a working class that makes up approximately seventy five percent of the total population. Unemployment has remained above thirty percent for the last decade. A large percentage of students who enter university in South Africa come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In fact, in the Faculty of Education where this service-learning program is currently running, nearly sixty percent of all students receive financial support from some financial aid scheme. Such funding is limited and serves to just about cover registration and tuition fees of students. This kind of context has implications for the kinds of financial demands that a service-learning program may impose on students and students' ability to travel regularly to the sites where the interaction with community partners is take place. An issue for future planning is the need to secure funding from the university or other potential funding organizations.

While students struggled to negotiate the increased demands that this program imposed on them, they were sensitive to the needs of the country and to the particular circumstances that South Africa finds itself in. They appeared to realize the significance of and the potential that small scale entrepreneurship has for alleviating poverty. More importantly though students had begun to empathize with the plight of disadvantaged young people. They began to develop a heightened awareness of their own responsibility as citizens. This is captured in comments below:

> It is important to include social responsibility in the curriculum of South African education, especially when looking at the economy of the country …. Our country needs entrepreneurs—if people are investing in identifying good entrepreneurs and teaching about entrepreneurship we will be growing our economy and it will be stable. Young people are lacking entrepreneurial knowledge and skills which can be learned in schools.
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> Through teaching business studies I can go out and teach about social responsibility and help people. Be involved in programs, participate in the community projects … give learners projects and assignments that require them to go to the communities and ask questions.
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> I would infuse this flavor of social responsibility in my teaching of entrepreneurship. It is important to bring the real world into the classroom because that will give learners the understanding of the real world …
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> We do not have to stick to teaching how to start the businesses only but we also have to talk about social issues; how to cope with social challenges and how to approach life. This assignment taught me that teachers should not focus only on teaching learners but they have to be involved in going out to the communities and teach them survival skills and entrepreneurial skills.

It was evident that the program had significantly influenced the way these pre-service teachers saw their roles as teachers. They had begun to articulate deeper understandings of pedagogy and had begun to see their roles as moving beyond the traditional role of teachers and teaching. It became apparent that students had shifted their level of consciousness about their roles and responsibilities as teachers.

When asked to comment on their perceptions of the effect, they may have had on the children they worked with from the orphanage, these pre-service teachers were confident that they had begun to engender a spirit of hope amongst the children:

This program changed the mindset of the children to the extent that they thought of starting their businesses, becoming the entrepreneurs.

Inspired them to change … not to feel sorry for themselves ….

I talk to the child about things that are happening in the world, this started as the talk of about entrepreneurship, but it went to social life to the sense that we were like the brother and sister. I am still having contact with the child. Helping the child to look out for themselves, I thought it good to take care of oneself before looking out for other people but now I understand that we have to look out for each other. Helping each other is being socially responsible for each other. I will like to protect the child, for example making someone my responsibility. I did not want to go to the program but I realized within the little time I spent with them that children became confident about everything like talking and their life.

While the pre-service teacher in the above extract reflects on how she impacted on the child who she was working with, it was clear that she had underwent a life altering experience herself. This was an incredible journey for this pre-service teacher as she recognized that in the past she put her needs above those of anyone else. It is clear that she had made a distinct connection with the child and articulated the need to "protect" the child. Another pre-service teacher describes below how the project had allowed him to venture into a space that he would not previously have considered, namely, taking responsibility for developing a relationship with people he would not previously have engaged with and recognizing and acknowledging his personal growth:

… when I got myself involved into it, I found that it gave me the courage to do something that I have never thought I would ever do in my life.

5. Discussion and conclusion

While the service-learning project afforded many benefits, there were several difficulties that the program had to manage. As program co-ordinators, the authors were keen to establish students' experiences of the service-learning program. Two broad issues appeared to dominate students' responses.

Firstly, a program of this nature requires sound organisation and clear communication. As co-ordinators, the authors made several assumptions about students and their abilities to participate in the program. While they had some idea of the socio-economic status of students, they did not anticipate the effect that this was likely to have on students' ability to participate fully in the program. It was clear that the service-learning program had imposed additional pressure on students limited time and this may well have impacted on their performance in other courses.

The authors also realised that students wanted a bigger role in the planning of the project even if this happened at a late stage in the planning process. On reflection, this kind of involvement would have facilitated the communication process and would have helped wean students onto the expectations of this kind of learning. There would certainly have been less initial aversion to the project. To be able to sustain this service-learning program, there needs to be a process of lobbying economic and curricula support for this initiative from both faculty and university management.

Secondly, this service-learning program had created a space in which pre-service teachers had begun a process of deeper introspection about their roles as teachers. These pre-service students had begun to articulate shifts in their thinking of the pedagogic process, viewing their roles as more than that of teaching disciplinary content knowledge. They had begun to initiate a discourse of caring and compassion. While it was difficult to discern the extent to which students may have achieved transcendental change, it was evident that these

pre-service teachers had started a process of transformational change. Of particular significance was the developing ability to describe themselves as both teachers and learners in the service-learning enterprise. Pre-service teachers started to allude to notions of deep personal change.

This paper sets out to explore pre-service teacher experiences of engaging in an entrepreneurship education program specially enhanced to create an awareness of the link between entrepreneurship and social responsibility through a service-learning program. While certain shortcomings of the program were signaled, there is much potential to refine and strengthen this endeavor. The program allowed for sowing the seeds of social responsibility by creating conditions for students to inhabit a social responsibility space. It revealed a refreshing richness that that was created through infusing social responsibility with pedagogy. It presented as a powerful means of bringing about profound change in student teachers' approaches and attitudes towards teaching.

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