How to Engage Resistant Students in Classes of Innovation and Entrepreneurship?

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Abstract

The paper presents a case study of an example in educational design of teaching innovation and entrepreneurship at a higher education (Academy Profession Programme). A challenge when teaching innovation is, that students resist engaging themselves to it, as it represents change (Dibrov, 2015) and is different from other ways of attending classes of education. We experience the same, students at the Administration, logistics and marketing management do not see themselves as innovators or entrepreneurs and resist engaging in the classes. When they do participate, they still do not take on the roles. However, during fall 2018 we experienced some groups of students changing their minds about innovation and entrepreneurship. They went from resistance to enjoying being innovators and entrepreneurs. The goal of the paper is to understand what it takes to create room for students to take on the role as innovator/entrepreneur so we can design classes that invites for this. The purpose of the research is to find out if there is anything we can take into consideration, when we plan and implement our elective courses, which results in more engaged and motivated students.

Keywords: innovation, entrepreneurship, engaged students, motivation, participation, creativity management
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Introduction

In the contemporary practice, teachers experience that students resist participating in innovation and entrepreneurship classes. The students of Administration, logistics and marketing management do not see themselves as innovators or entrepreneurs and thus resist engaging in the classes (the students had the class across educations and as elective). When they do participate, they still do not take on the roles. However, during fall 2018 we experienced some groups of students changing their minds about innovation and entrepreneurship. They went from resistance to enjoying being innovators and entrepreneurs. Our goal is to understand what it takes to create room for students to take on the role as innovator/entrepreneur so we can design classes that invites for this.

Wahlgren discusses what motivates adults to learn. He says, that there are many feelings attached to learning. Positive feelings connected to learning could be desire to learn, engagement and will to take part in the learning process. Those are the motivators. The negatives are lack of desire, fear, boredom and lack of engagement (Wahlgren, 2010). The question is of course, how can we create room for learning, where desire, engagement and will can be found, and where fear and boredom does not have room?

In order to shed some light to this phenomenon, this paper presents a case study of an example in educational design of teaching innovation and entrepreneurship. Authors interviewed a group of administration students that started out saying, that they were very sceptical about innovation, to now saying, that they regard innovation as a necessity. The article discusses the connection between Bjarne Wahlgrens approach to motivation and learning, which also builds on Raymond Wlodkowskis theory about adult learning and motivation (Wahlgren, 2010).

The paper contributes with a better understanding on how to engage (and herby motivate and make students less resistant) in innovation and entrepreneurship courses. Other teachers and consultants working with facilitating such workshops can gain from the results.

The paper research question is: (i) RQ1: How Universities we overcome resistance towards innovation and entrepreneurship classes, and design classes, so it becomes meaningful for the students to engage in them?

The research is of its nature an explorative study, and the methods is a critical incident interviews (Flanagan, 1954; Chell, 2004) with 1 focus group from logistics administration. The students had the course together with administration as an elective course. The interesting thing with this particular group is, that they initially had chosen another course, but since that was in English, they chose the only course in native language: innovation. The group started out being very sceptical and closed minded towards innovation. In this way they nicely represent the common attitude we often meet. The group was chosen because they actually change attitudes and secondly because they are very open and outspoken with both their frustrations and opinions. The question guide is based on events in the class room and on literature about motivation and engagement in the class room.

Preliminary conclusion is that we need to respect their scepticism, that our tradition for setting groups might not be beneficial for opening their minds and that our choice of icebreakers is even more important when working with sceptic students.

Methodology.

The paper presents an explorative study, using case study research, and the methods is a critical incident interviews (Flanagan, 1954; Chell, 2004) with 3 focus groups, one from each education. The question guide will be based on events in the class room and on literature about motivation and engagement in the class room.

So far, one qualitative interview has been conducted with a group of three students of business administration. They were picked, since they matched to criteria: starting out sceptical to finishing the course liking innovation. The interview followed the criteria's known from i.e. Flick (Flick, 2014, p. 250).

The conduction builds on Flicks approach, setting a safe scene, explaining the use of the interview, creating a safe atmosphere with small talk (no need to introduce each other, as they knew each other) etc. We use the open question guide exploring their answers, as the main technique for collecting data. The students no longer have a responsibility to the interviewer, the course has ended, so in spite of a power distance, they tended to speak openly and freely.

The interview itself is reliable, but the above analysis built on this one interview. It is though, a case study of how classes in innovation and entrepreneurship can be conducted in a meaningful way, where it does seem to be able to contribute to this.

Results - Challenges when teaching innovation

A challenge when teaching innovation is, that students resist engaging themselves to it, as it represents change (Dibrov, 2015) and is different from other ways of attending classes of education. It can sometimes be regarded as silly and unserious and it requires as shift in their perception of themselves and their future roles in their work lives.

Being and employee and not Gyro Gearloose?

The experience indicates that students do not see themselves in the role of and innovator or entrepreneur. Bjarne Wahlgren states: often there is a strong link between needing to learn something and the motivation to learn this something (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 84).

The students tend to not see the meaning of learning theories and tools within the area of innovation and entrepreneurship and hereby how they can use the skills and transfer them to future jobs. The reasons among others are, they see them self as employees and not entrepreneurs on the future labor market. They do not express a need to learn innovation or entrepreneurship as they do not see themselves having a role as either entrepreneur (Scrooge McDuck) or as innovator (Gyro Gearloose). They see themselves as employees and in their believe, employees do not need these abilities.

When the students are asked to describe what they thought of innovation before the course began, they even say: *"Innovation is something completely new and very far from me and who I am. We're not compatible"*(from interview march 2019). They regarded innovation as game changing innovations. When they understood, that innovation also could be incremental, (further development of existing products/services), they started to see themselves as possible innovators.

Did outer motivation lead to motivation?

Most teachers begin the classes presenting "what" the teaching is about and the contents, "why" are the students going to learn and "how" the students reach the goals. In other words, the teachers tell, why it is important (e.g learning objectives, the needs of the employer) and practical situations on the labour market, the students can use the content for in the future. This means that the teacher outlines how important it is to have the ability to create value propositions for either an employer or if you are an entrepreneur. The teachers create the outer motivation! The question is, if this actually led to motivation for the student? Or maybe even create inner motivation?

In our case, the students didn't even remember this! The students were presented to a report that states, that Danish companies in general wants employees that can work with innovation, and that only very few companies master innovation and intrapreneurship (Holgren and Lindholm, 2005). Thus, being good at innovation can be a competency, that companies want. In other words, it seems that presenting the outer motivation did not result in motivation to engage in innovation. This only seems to support Wahlgrens point about inner motivation being a stronger motivator, than outer (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 85).

Icebreakers and creative play

In Innovation we use "icebreakers" (small games designed for innovation), try to challenge the ordinary way of thinking by making creative exercises and physically move them by setting up situations, where they are "playing". Everything is designed

to make them think in new ways and thus becoming more creative and also to get them to know each other better. So, there is a sociality connected to these icebreakers, but the students often regard many of these as silly and not being serious studies. The challenge we have is, that if they do not participate in this, they are not able to come up with creative and innovative solutions. At the same time, these activities feed their initial scepticism. Instead of opening their minds, icebreakers seemed to actually make the sceptics worse (interview, marts 2019). They might have helped in more creative ideas, but more often they seem to nourish the sceptics. Choosing the right icebreakers at the right time (at a later time?) might possibly be the way to go.

Setting groups

In Denmark we have a long tradition for group work. In innovation, working in groups across departments and educations is its backbone. One thing we often do, when we start the classes, is setting the groups randomly or across classes. The class was an elective course between administration and logistics. This means, that the students had either already been in class with each other for a year, or they more or less knew of the other students from meeting and seeing each other in the hall way. Secondly, these are grown up students who are used to group work.

However, these adults learn resisted being forced to work together with others, even for just a few hours. Seldom have we seen this much resistance to be in random groups. Even after introducing the need for different approaches and different thinking. Their need for safety was larger.

The students explain in the interview, that they felt insecure, that they didn't want to end up with "bad" students, and that they in general did not like to work with strangers, or just other than the ones they know very well. They express fear, as in Wahlgrens perception (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 85). This means that we do not take into account motivation and needs of the students (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 84).

If we take Wlodkowski´s points for what is crucial for adults developing motivation into consideration, we didn't create or established a learning environment, where respect was the foundation, as we (teachers) formed the groups. In relation to the group formation the students did not feel respected.

The point is, that even though we deal with young adults, we still need to address and work with the emotional side of the learning process (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 85), which we initially forgot.

Wlodkowski (2008, in Wahlgren, 2010) writes what´s crucial for adults developing motivation for learning. He writes, that inclusion and creating a learning environment where teachers and students mutually respects each other and cooperates is crucial. It seems, that we didn't create or established a learning environment, where respect was the foundation, as we (teachers) formed the groups. We have to respect both the need for safety in the new social constellation and that they are sceptical.

Moving towards ownership of their work: mindsets change

The students had exercises, where they in class and as homework, should connect their work with Double Diamond or with Design Thinking (models for working with innovation). At this point they started to master the topic. Every group got feedback on their idea, questions was asked in order to understand the idea better and to the connection with the models and they developed the idea further. They started to own their idea. In the interview they specify ownership as a crucial point of where they start to really like innovation.

As the class should start working on a specific idea, they were encouraged to make their own groups. The case-group chose each other because they had worked together before and define themselves as ambitious. This might possibly have a positive impact on the success for the group. They felt very safe in each other's company.

They explain when their engagement and motivation shifted: when they could pick their own groups (secure environment), when they realised, that innovation also can be incremental (they got a feeling of mastering innovation, as it can be development of something already existing), when they got ownership of their idea and could apply creativity.

When asked what made the difference going from being sceptical to thinking that innovation is necessary, they immediately say: *"Ownership! That we got to have ownership of our idea and could work with it independently. And prototype!"*. The turning point for when they started to really like innovation, was when they spent a day building a prototype. The class first worked with an article introducing different prototypes. They should pick one and start making one for their idea. This group chose a video presentation, but filming a scene made in cardboard and with people made of clay. They express, that this was fun. That they enjoyed having fun and that it made sense making the prototype. Maybe not in the beginning. At that point it again seamed silly. But as they were working with it, they realised, that their idea grew and that *"We could be creative, find our inner child. It was great! We are not used to being able to working creatively and it was actually really great!"*. The group made a good video, that could be used to pitch the idea to potential investors. It shifted from being a silly, to being serious.

This helped them to sharpen their idea, to develop it and adjust it. In this way they gained more ownership of their idea. They became prouder and believed in the idea even more. Not only in the idea, but they also realised that building the prototype had a meaning besides being fun. The having fun became a bonus and their approach shifted: from having fun being something not serious, to having fun and working hard at the same time. Having fun changed for them and became meaningful and acceptable.

When they could pick their own groups and realised that innovation also can be incremental, which resulted in ownership of their idea and by that they started applying creativity in the work. As teachers we gave the students room to work independently and this led to ownership not only to the idea, but also to the next phases in Design thinking, including prototype building. When the students gained ownership, they started having fun and work at the same time. Having fun changed for them and became meaningful and acceptable. They were proud with their work.

Conclusion

The question was: how can we overcome resistance towards innovation and entrepreneurship classes, and design classes, so it becomes meaningful for the students to engage in them?

It seems, that making a safe environment still is very important for adult students. Setting the scene and cementing the group is important, and even more important, when the task is innovation and icebreakers, where thinking in new ways and being creative is a big part of the task. In the beginning, we did not cement the class socially and did not give the students room to work independently. By using Wahlgren we found out that it is very important for the students, which group members they work with during the classes. The need to feel secure. The only way we can do that as teachers, is to let the students make or choose their own groups. At least until they feel

secure with other members of the class. As teachers we have to let go detailed planed and designed classes and focus more on each student and how we motivate each student.

One way to do this can be working with their scepticism: make workshops, where they share their ideas and work with something they regard as relevant i.e. challenges they see within a given topic. Then putting post, it's on a wall, grouping these in themes and from there letting the students choose groups based on which theme they find most interesting. In this way, they can form the groups themselves, they work with something relevant (instead of icebreakers) and they've seen other members of class working instead of "playing". The chosen group will also have something in common: a shared interest for the topic. In this way we hope to enhance the focus on inner motivation.

Maybe from here, we can introduce icebreakers. And even then, the type of icebreakers is important. If someone is already sceptical, asking them to identify with an animal or having a clapping hands game might not be the right approach. These work only with a very secure and open-minded class or maybe with youngsters. Not with adults filled with scepticism. We have to respect, that they are sceptic and work from there. Icebreakers has to have some sort of seriousness in them, or foster development within them, as Wahlgren states (Wahlgren, 2010, p. 86). Of the many different types of icebreakers, we've tried, some seem to foster better feedback; those that foster group work in smaller groups, where cooperation is needed and where they positively enforce each other. Icebreakers that do not work are many of those found on the market: "pointless" kid's games like clapping hands with eyes closed, taking the metro, interviewing each other to identify type of animal/persona they are etc. These more playful icebreakers can come when the group is better consolidated, but in the beginning. And even then, we still have to remember and respect their scepticism.

In short, we can conclude, that high attention the sociality and their need for safety is very important. Secondly, choosing the right icebreakers are very important, as the "wrong" ones can foster even more scepticism and lastly, crating room for ownership of the process and their ideas is beneficial in order to have classes, that motivates and engage students in innovation and entrepreneurship.

The following limitation should be taken into account when considering the results of this work as the basis for further research and practice improvement. The paper is made from only one focus group interview, which means that it only represents a small number of students and only this groups approach. The research is valid, but it might not be reliable, as interviews with other students might have shown something else and hereby gotten more insight on other topics. In other words, the result might be different more students, but our results are still useable, as they do represent some of the resistance we find when teaching these classes.

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