A Study of The Learners' Perspective on 'Entrepreneurship'

Prof. Vinod Shastri
Assistant Professor, SIBM, Pune
E-mail id: vinodshastri@sibm.edu

Abstract

An entrepreneurship educator could induct a learner into the learning process by ascertaining in advance, his perceptions of the subject matter. Myths if any need to be unlearnt, as the learner may otherwise reject knowledge contrary to his beliefs. This paper reports the findings of a pilot study on the perceptions of potential learners. This could enable educators to design course contents and teaching methodology so as to dispel possible myths in advance.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurship education, Learner's perspective

Introduction

The researcher has a personal experience of teaching entrepreneurship and is fast closing-in on a quarter century of Entrepreneurship education but every new batch of learners poses a fresh set of challenges apart from posing the same set of challenges afresh! Do they really wish to become entrepreneurs? Do they even believe that Entrepreneurship can actually be learnt in a classroom? Such questions just keep cropping-up and crowding the mind every time one starts with a fresh batch of learners. So the researcher's feeling before starting a new batch of the 'Entrepreneurship' class a couple of months ago could aptly be described as *déjà vu*.

The author observed that experiential learning rather than conventional approaches to concept teaching could enhance the quality of assimilation in entrepreneurship education. This is consistent with the findings/views of other researchers. [Krueger and Brazeal (1994)[1], Kourilsky and Walstad (1998)[2], Gorman et al (1997)[3]]

So it was decided to do a quick informal study of learners' perspectives on certain issues in Entrepreneurship, so as to suitably orient the teaching-learning process. It was felt that understanding their perspective would probably make teaching easier by addressing gaps in their perception of Entrepreneurship, if any. It was also believed that since they had 'chosen' the Entrepreneurship elective, they would certainly have some perspectives on the subject. And moreover, there is nothing cast in stone when it comes to entrepreneurship; there are as many opinions as there are entrepreneurs,

researchers and.....well, educators like this researcher!

Objectives

The study was conceived and initiated with three objectives which are as follows:
1. Understanding Respondents' ranking of important issues related to entrepreneurship
2. Understanding Respondents' opinions on various issues related to entrepreneurship
3. Understanding Respondents' opinions on teaching-learning process for Entrepreneurship

However, the scope was later restricted to the first objective for the purpose of this paper. The study was based on responses of thirty students obtained from a questionnaire. The study explored whether responses are correlated to the profile of respondents in respect of age, gender, educational background (specifically Engineer/ Non Engineer), Work Experience and Family Background. In respect of work experience, respondents were categorized as with/ without experience. Similarly, respondents who were already from family business were distinguished from others.

Methodology

Primary Research:
A structured questionnaire was administered to students who had opted for the 'Entrepreneurship' elective, a four credit course during their final (4th) semester of the MBA program at Symbiosis Institute of Business Management (SIBM) Pune.

Respondents were required to rank 11 variables chosen on the basis of researcher's personal experience of entrepreneurship education as well as of entrepreneurship. The ranking was to be done in the order of perceived importance of each variable. The ranking scheme was '1' for the highest ranking and '11' for the lowest ranking.

Sample Size:
The sample size was set at 30. Table 1 shows the classification of respondents on three parameters: education, work experience and family background. Since there was only one female respondent, data were not analysed on the basis of gender.

Table1

Education		
Engineers (20)	Non-engineers (10)	Total (30)
Work Experience		
Experienced (16)	Fresher's (14)	Total (30)
Family Background		
Business (07)	Non-business (23)	Total (30)

Sampling Method:
The sampling method used was Convenience sampling. Questionnaire was administered to the students present in the class on the given days. No special invitation was sent to

all students neither was the questionnaires sent to all of them.

Results and Discussions

After obtaining responses, the data were duly tabulated so as to find out if there was variability in the responses. Since data collected were of the ordinal type, the nonparametric Friedman Test[4] was considered appropriate, especially since the following three assumptions underlying the Test were being fulfilled:
1. The blocks/rows (Respondents) are independent.
2. No interaction is present between blocks and treatments/columns (Variables).
3. Observations within each block can be ranked (in fact, they were already ranked).

Following hypotheses were formulated and tested:

H_o: The variable populations are equal.
   (Variable population is sum of all the ranks obtained by a variable)

H_a: At least one variable population yields larger values than at least one other variable population

Since number of blocks/respondents (30) in this case is greater than 15 and the number of treatments/variables (11) is greater than 4, the probability distribution can be approximated by that of a chi-square distribution[5]. α was set at .005. Since the study used 11 treatment levels (variables), df = 10 and the critical value $X^2_{.005.10}$ = 25.1881. Table 2 shows SPSS output for the Friedman Test:

Table 2	Descriptive Statistics			
			Percentiles	
	N	25th	50th (Median)	75th
Idea	30	1.0000	1.0000	4.2500
Funds	30	2.0000	4.0000	4.0000
Execution	30	2.0000	4.0000	5.2500
Business Model	30	2.0000	3.0000	6.0000
BPlan	30	2.0000	4.0000	7.2500
Team	30	4.7500	6.0000	7.0000
Technical Knowledge	30	6.0000	7.0000	8.0000
Family Support	30	5.7500	8.5000	9.0000
Govt. Policies	30	7.0000	8.0000	9.2500
Luck	30	7.7500	10.0000	11.0000
Family Background	30	8.0000	10.0000	11.0000

Test Statistics[a]	
N	30
Chi-Square	138.788
df	10
Asymp. Sig.	.000
a. Friedman Test	

Because the observed chi-square X^2_r = 138.788 is greater than the critical value 25.1881 and since p-value = .0001 is lesser than .005 the decision was to reject the null hypothesis.

So collectively, respondents did perceive at least one variable significantly more important for entrepreneurship than at least one other variable. Since there was clear evidence of significant variability in the rankings for different variables amongst the respondents, it was possible and there was a temptation to run *post-hoc* tests and dig deeper to examine where the differences actually occur. But such finding probably would not serve any purpose from teaching perspective. Instead, it was decided to classify the respondents in three stages on three parameters: once on the basis of education, once on the basis of work experience and once on the basis of family background and then do a comparative analysis of their rankings as a group to check whether these factors were responsible for the variability in the rankings.

There was of course a curiosity to find out which variable had received a significantly higher overall ranking and which one had received a significantly lower overall ranking. To facilitate both the purposes, it was decided to find out weighted averages of the rankings. Frequencies for each rank for each variable were then used as weights. By assigning these weights to the ranks obtained, the weighted average rankings were computed for each of these 11 variables. For the sake of convenience and quicker assimilation of results, rows and columns have been interchanged in this table. So variables are in rows and respondent groups are in columns. Table 3 shows overall weighted average rankings for all respondents as well as for category-wise respondents:

Table 3	Final Combined Weighted Average Rankings						
Variable	All Respondents	Engineers	Non Engineers	Students with Work Experience	Freshers	Business Background	Non Business Background
Idea	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Funds	2	3	2	2	3	5	2
Execution	3	4	2	2	5	2	2
Business Model	4	2	4	4	2	4	2
B-plan	5	4	3	3	4	3	3
Team	6	5	5	5	6	6	5
Technical Knowledge	7	7	6	6	8	7	9
Family Support	8	6	8	8	7	9	4
Govt. Policies	9	8	7	7	9	8	6
Luck	10	10	8	9	10	10	8
Family Background	11	9	9	10	10	11	7

Expected observations: 'Idea' as the top-ranked variable was very much as per expectations. Funds came a close second, again as per expectations. The ranks could have easily exchanged places a few years back when most aspiring entrepreneur believed that money was the toughest resource to mobilize. And there was truth in it as well.

The sequence of 'Ideas' followed by 'Funds' clearly shows the respondents' belief that if you have a great idea, money will somehow follow. This is a good testimony to the changing entrepreneurial ecosystem where funds are actually chasing ideas; albeit, ideas backed by a strong team. In his blog entry titled 'No Money? No Problem!' Tim Berry[6], Founder and President of Palo Alto Software and a renowned planning expert says, "You

don't necessarily have to have the money and collateral yourself because for a good business, the idea is that you raise the money from other people who want to participate in the upside of the investment".

Heartening observations: The most important and heartening observation was the lowest rankings for 'Luck' and 'Family Background'. Traditionally, these were considered of utmost importance. When someone succeeded, it would be attributed to luck and when people did not aspire to become entrepreneurs or found it extremely tough, it was attributed to non-business background of the family.

Another heartening observation was the high rankings of 3 and 4 accorded to "Execution' and 'Business Model' respectively. Especially business model was an entity either unknown or ignored just a couple of decades back. As Guy Kawasaki[7], well known entrepreneur, venture capitalist and the former Chief Evangelist of Apple Computers says, "The greatest idea, technology, product or service is short-lived without a sustainable business model".

Concerns: One concern could be the very low 8th rank for 'Family Support'. Entrepreneurship is a high-stress career so family support becomes very critical. While teaching the subject, one could probably give a deliberate positive stress on this aspect and share relevant examples to underline the importance of family support in tiding over stressful situations.

A) Engineers V/S Non-engineers

The data were then segregated on the basis of education of the respondents only in terms of engineers and non-engineers and weighted average ranking were computed for both the groups to check whether there were significant differences in perception. (Refer Figure 1)

Expected observations: 'Idea' at the top and 'Family Background' and 'Luck' at the bottom were expected because of the overall rankings.

Figure 1
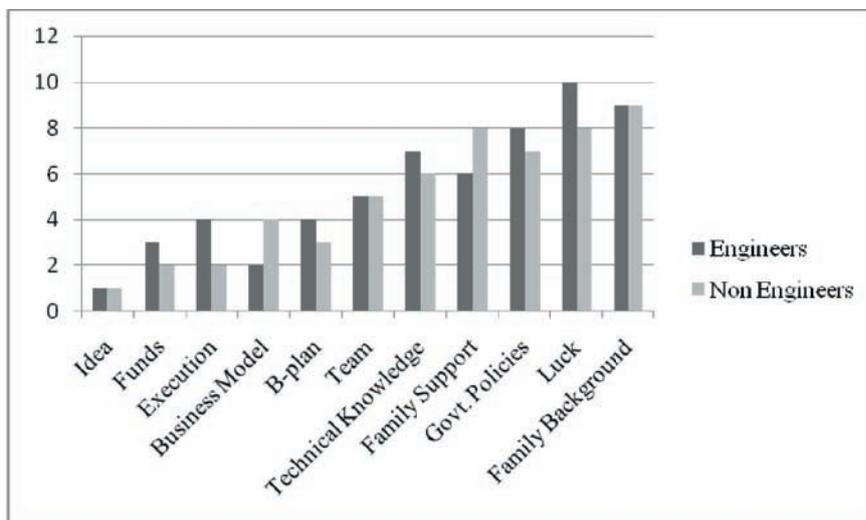
Heartening observations: The most important and heartening observation was the high ranking of 2 accorded to 'Business Model' by engineers. Especially the fact that they have ranked it way ahead of 'Technical Knowledge' is a clear reflection of the changing times.

As mentioned earlier, it is not so much about the technology itself but how well you are able to monetize the technology is more important for a sustainable business. Irrespective of how stringent the laws of the land are, protecting intellectual property is always a tough act with imitators finding their own way out, so apart from continuously evolving technology, it actually boils down to a robust business model to keep you in business.

Concerns: There were no specific concerns especially for this classification apart from the ones observed and recorded in the overall rankings.

A) Experienced V/S Freshers

The data were then segregated on the basis of 'Work Experience' of the respondents and weighted average ranking were computed for both the groups (Experienced and Freshers) to check whether there were significant differences in their perception. (Refer Figure 2)

Expected observations: 'Idea' at the top and 'Family Background' and 'Luck' at the bottom were expected because of the overall rankings.

Figure 2
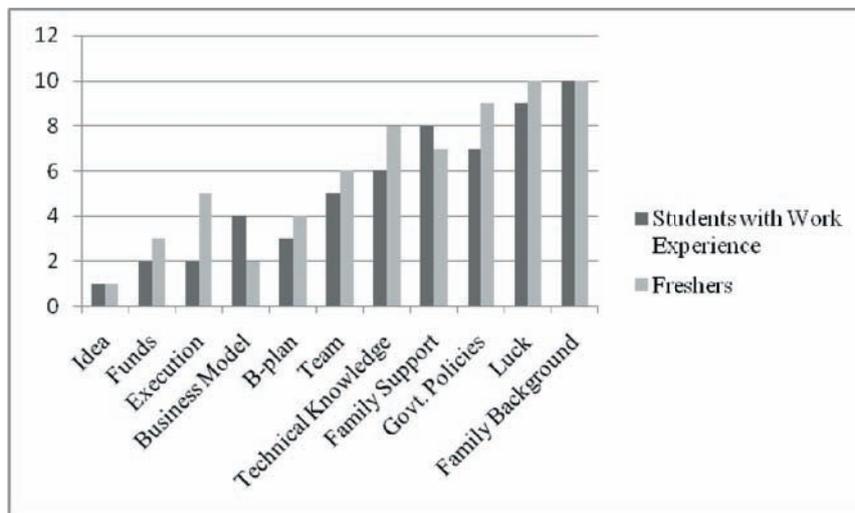
Heartening observations: The most important and heartening observation was the high ranking of 2 accorded to 'Business Model' by freshers just like engineers. They have ranked it ahead of even 'Funds', a clear reflection of the changing times again.

**Concerns:** The low ranking for 'Execution' by freshers as compared the experienced

lot was of slight concern. It clearly shows that freshers do not realize the importance of execution as they are likely to have very romantic ideas about the 'Idea' itself. They probably believe that they would win half the battle with an apparently good idea. Ironically, every idea is only an 'apparently' good idea till it is executed well and taken to its logical potential by an efficient and effective team. In fact, it's quite fashionable for the venture capitalist community to say that they would rather fund a B-grade idea backed by an A-grade team rather than backing an A-grade idea backed by a B-grade team.

B) Business V/S Non-business Background

The data were then segregated on the basis of 'Family Background' of the respondents and weighted average ranking were computed for both the groups (Business V/s Non-business) to check whether there were significant differences in their perception. (Refer Figure 3)

Expected observations: 'Idea' at the top was expected from both the groups in light of the overall rankings. It was also expected that business background respondents would give lower ranking to 'Family Background' and 'Family Support' as they would take it for granted while the non-business background respondents would give both a relatively higher ranking was also expected. That the business background respondents would give a lower ranking to 'Funds' while the non-business respondents would give it a higher ranking was expected for the same reasons as the above; business background respondents would take availability of funds for granted. They would either have funds or will have established access to funds.

Figure 3
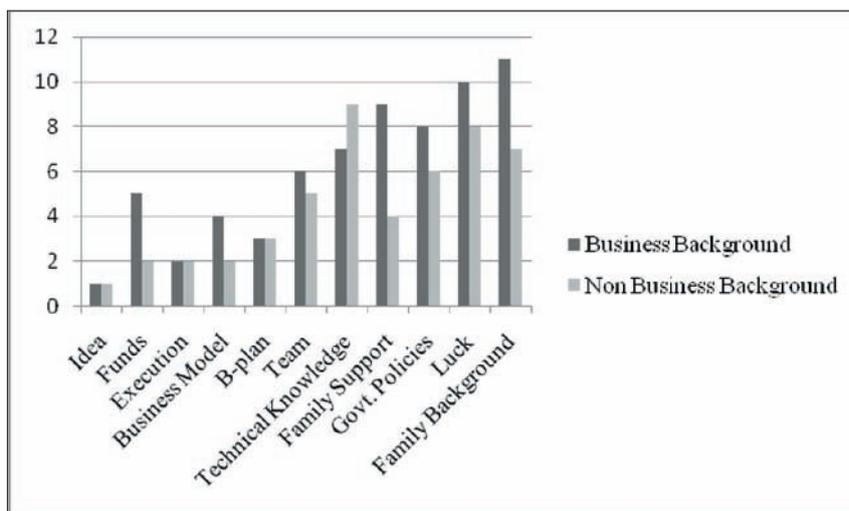
Heartening observations: The most important and heartening observation was the same rankings accorded by both sets of respondents to 'Idea', 'Execution" and 'B-plan'. In fact, they came very close for the ranking of 'Team' as well. Again a testimony to the changing times; there is now a fair amount of awareness about entrepreneurship even

amongst the non-business families. That said, immediate family support might still be a few decades away; whether financial or emotional.

Concerns: Quite surprisingly, there were no specific concerns observed in the comparative analysis between business and non-business background respondents.

C) Overall Comparative Analysis

Expected Observations: 'Idea' topping the rankings irrespective of education, experience and family background of the respondents was an expected observation.

Heartening Observation: 'Family Background' and 'Luck' being relegated to lower ranking across the board is a heartening observation.

Concern: While it is an expected observation, such obsession with 'Idea' as the most important variable in Entrepreneurship is probably misplaced. Over the years, researcher has had opportunities to speak to a large number of entrepreneurs and most of them seem to believe that it is the ability of the team to execute which is more critical than the idea itself. You may build a great business out of a simple idea but you may spoil a great idea with shoddy execution.

Conclusion and Implications for Teaching

Looking at the results in the light of the first objective with which the study was done, the rankings give a decent insight into the mindset of the learners. However, it would be naïve to base the entire content and methodology on this study. That said, one would certainly find at least a couple of points to ponder.

The most critical concern would obviously be about 'Idea', the vastly overrated variable. In fact, most ideas change along the way to execution and the final shape that a business takes might be completely different from the idea it started with. Examples like Nokia and MRF are aplenty. Nokia started by making Fishing Nets and ended up being one of the most successful mobile handset makers. MRF started by making balloons and ended up being one of the most successful automobile tyre- makers.

It would be appropriate to quote John Mullins and Randy Komisar[8] at this point. They say, "New businesses are fraught with uncertainty. To succeed, you must change the plan in real time as the inevitable challenges arise. In fact, studies show that entrepreneurs who stick slavishly to their 'Plan A' stand a greater chance of failing- and that many successful businesses barely resemble their founders' original idea."

The other issue that an educator might like to ponder over is the relatively underrated 'Family Support'. Young learners who have not had to financially support families or to face family resistance to entrepreneurial ambitions might not readily realize the importance of having the family not just *on* but *by* your side in times of sacrifices and stress. Findings of the study conducted by Kim Klyver[9] (2007) show that family members are most strongly involved in the emergence phase when the final decision

to start or not has to be made.

This needs to be clearly brought out and underlined so that the ones harbouring entrepreneurial aspirations start keeping their families in the know of their ambitions and plans since such support takes time coming across, especially in the Indian scenario. It would help to refer to stories of entrepreneurs who never forget to acknowledge the contribution of the family to their success.

Limitations

1. The study was conducted with the students of only one college.
2. Being a pilot study, sample was restricted to only 30 respondents.
3. Not all the questions in the questionnaire were statistically analyzed since the scope of the paper was later restricted only to the first objective of the study.
4. The variables were chosen based only on the researcher's own experience.

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