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Journals and Jottings on Entrepreneurial Learning Journeys

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Abstract: Review of relevant literature highlighted that entrepreneurs need help to reflect on, and make sense of, the challenges and opportunities that occur during the entrepreneurial process. For students who are unfamiliar with the entrepreneurial process, the notion of reflection can be even more daunting. The project outlined in this paper was set up to explore the design and development of learning resources to help students make sense of the complexities of an entrepreneur's learning environment, and to develop effective reflection habits as a means to improving their own entrepreneurial practice. A guided approach to reflective practice was devised for students for use as they enact the entrepreneurial process during their venture creation projects. Although a full evaluation of the project is not yet complete, initial results indicate that students are finding the approach helpful, their fluency in reflection is increased and their understanding of the value of "chewing over" entrepreneurial challenges and opportunities has grown. The breadth and depth of their learning environment seems to be clearer to them, and the importance of developing the habit of reflection is taken on board. Wider application of the project outcomes and outputs is envisaged among nascent entrepreneurs in mentoring / business advisory contexts.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; experiential learning; informal learning; incidental learning; professional development; learning journal; reflective practice; enactment

> *"If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don't bother trying to teach them. Instead, give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking." (Richard Buckminster Fuller)*

1. Introduction

The document *"Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: guidance for UK Higher Education providers"* published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education" (QAA 2012) contains *inter alia* a timely reminder of some of the key national and international drivers for enterprise and entrepreneurship education, and of the importance for Higher Education Institutes to "offer learning opportunities that are meaningful, relevant and lead to skills that enhance lifelong learning" (QAA 2012:2). The benefits of "learning about and experiencing enterprise whilst still at university" are stressed:

> *It gives students an alternative career option and confidence that they can set up their own business or social enterprise. Enterprise skills will also be useful to those in employment, or those who will become self-employed and work on a freelance or consultancy basis, helping develop a 'can-do' confidence, a creative questioning, and a willingness to take risks – important to provide readiness for a rapidly changing economy, and to enable individuals to manage workplace uncertainty and flexible working patterns and careers (QAA 2012:4).*

One aspect of the Guidance is concerned with the active promotion of teaching and learning strategies that will:

- *Foster enterprising and entrepreneurial mindsets*
- *Develop enterprising and entrepreneurial graduates*
- *Help students develop enterprising and entrepreneurial capabilities that can be applied in a range of contexts*
- *Encourage students to consider new venture creation and self-employment as valid graduate career options*
- *Help students develop an awareness of intellectual assets and enhance their capacity to manage and exploit them*
- *Enhance graduates' lifelong learning skills, personal development and self-efficacy, allowing them to contribute to economic growth and to society more generally (QAA 2012:3).*

According to the QAA Guidance, the "ultimate goal of enterprise and entrepreneurship education is to develop entrepreneurial effectiveness" (QAA 2012:11), with this effectiveness being defined as the "ability to behave in enterprising and entrepreneurial ways", and which can be achieved through the "development of "enterprise awareness", "entrepreneurial mindset" and "entrepreneurial capability" (QAA 2012:10). The Guidance further

emphasises the value of including both opportunities for learning "about" entrepreneurship as well as learning "for" entrepreneurship, the latter typically being achieved through "experiential learning opportunities that engage and enhance the student's abilities and skills " (QAA 2012:9). However, it is stressed that the focus of experiential learning should not simply be on action, but rather also on reflection:

> *… It is important to encourage students to reflect on their experiences, and to appreciate the capabilities they are developing and how these can be applied or extended (QAA 2012:14).*

Turning to the section of the Guidance on learning outcomes, more detail is provided regarding reflection:

> *Individuals successful in enterprise or entrepreneurship often have heightened levels of self-awareness developed through reflecting upon, and continually learning form, their actions.*
>
> *Students should be able to:*
> * *Reflect upon, review and evaluate the solutions they have explored*
> * *Identify personal development needs and other changing factors through the reflective process*
> * *Evaluate their own learning and respond to identified shortfalls (skills gaps)*
> * *Show resourcefulness in seeking development guidance or mentoring from both external and internal contacts.*
>
> *Delivery should include opportunities for:*
> * *Developing reflection techniques*
> * *Skills analysis*
> * *Reviewing networks*
> * *Self-development*
> * *Action planning*
> * *Use of iterative, discovery and learning processes, including learning from failure (QAA 2012: 20).*

Emphasis on the importance of reflection has been stressed for some time in the literature of enterprise and entrepreneurship education. Jack and Anderson (1999), for example, argued that universities should play to their strength of "developing higher level skills and nurturing analytic ability" rather than focussing on a "production line for the creation of low value SMEs" (1999:111). They went on to suggest that the role of universities in "enhancing entrepreneurship" is the "production of reflective practitioners", that is to say "individuals who, through their knowledge and critical ability, are capable not only of starting new businesses but also of ensuring the continuing viability of businesses by enhancing the capacity for them to develop through a richer understanding of the entrepreneurial process" (1999:111). Pittaway and Cope (2007), in their article on simulating entrepreneurial learning, suggested that the "development of the reflective practitioner" could be achieved in experiential learning "via learning coaches and assessment techniques" (2007:218). The importance of reflection in assessment of practice in enterprise education was stressed in (Pittaway et al. 2009), particularly in activities in which "students 'feel' the life-world of the entrepreneur" (2009:81). More recently, Neck and Greene (2011) noted that:

> *Reflection is particularly important for perplexing experiences, working under conditions of high uncertainty and problem-solving. As a result, it should not be a surprise that reflection is an integral component of entrepreneurship education and also a way of practising entrepreneurship (2011:65).*

In their discussion of Donald Schön's work on reflective practice, Neck and Greene commented that:

> *… Schön distinguished "reflection-on-practice" (do-learn-think as a process) from "reflection-in-practice" (do-learn-think as a behaviour). […] Given the nature of entrepreneurship as a continuous cycle of action, learning, testing, and experimenting, developing students as reflective entrepreneurs requires reflection-on-practice and reflection-in-practice as part of a pedagogy portfolio (2011:66).*

Despite references, such as those noted above, to the importance of stimulating reflective practice in entrepreneurship education programmes, there is relatively little detail in the research or teaching literature about how enterprise and entrepreneurship educators can, or should, approach this task.

In the light of this gap in the research and practice literature, a project was set up to explore the design and development of learning resources to help students make sense of the complexities of an entrepreneur's learning environment and to develop effective reflection habits as a means to improving their own entrepreneurial practice. The project team was able to draw on experience working in a number of areas, permitting us to bring together insights from working with graduate interns on work placements in small businesses (Fulford, Marcella and Levie 2013), the design and delivery of entrepreneurship education programmes (see for example Fulford 2010), and research on formal and informal learning in professional practice (see for example Bailey 2011; Bailey 2013; Fulford 2012).

From the outset of the project, it was noted that the task of stimulating reflective practice presents the entrepreneurship educator with challenges which are not unique to entrepreneurship education. First, reflection is perceived by some to be a difficult task (Moon 1999:173), with the "difference between a descriptive account and a reflective or analytical one" often not appreciated (Thompson and Thompson 2008:148). Second, some do not recognise the validity of reflective practice. As Senge et al. (1994) commented in his well-known book on organisational learning (*"The Fifth Discipline"*):

> If someone is reflecting, it's considered perfectly acceptable to interrupt them, because "they're not doing anything." (Senge et al. 1994:60)

The key implications of these challenges are arguably that in order to be able to integrate reflective practice into our entrepreneurship education programmes, we need to help students grasp the difference between description and reflection, and second demonstrate to them the value of devoting time and effort to reflection during their action-oriented entrepreneurship projects.

We turned to the literature on entrepreneurial learning to gain insights into the issue of reflective practice among entrepreneurs. A brief summary of that literature is provided in the next section, and acts as a basis for the development of the core resources explored and developed during our project. A framework for reflection triggers and a guided / structured approach to reflective practice have been devised to help students learn the skills of reflection and develop the habit of reflective practice. Presentation and explanation of the framework and guided approach to reflective practice form the focus of the remainder of the paper.

2. Background

In his discussion of what makes for an effective entrepreneur, Smilor (1997:344) claimed that "effective entrepreneurs are exceptional learners". He noted that they require "quantitative information and qualitative insights" and rely on a mix of data, experience, judgement, objectivity and "personal involvement and commitment" 1997:344). Smilor further suggested that as "exceptional learners", entrepreneurs "learn from everything":

> … They learn from customers, suppliers, and especially competitors. They learn from employees and associates. They learn from other entrepreneurs. They learn from experience. They learn by doing. They learn from what works and, more importantly, from what doesn't work." (1997:344).

Elsewhere, it has been recognised that Smilor's assumption of a link between entrepreneurship and learning cannot necessarily be taken for granted (see for example Harrison and Leitch 2008:5). Instead, reality tends to present us with a rather more complex situation, in which learning can in fact be inhibited by a tendency to focus on action rather than on reflection (Senge 1995, cited in Harrison and Leitch 2008:5). Deakins and Freel, in their earlier study of entrepreneurial learning and growth in SMEs, also suggested that entrepreneurs need help to draw out the learning from what they experience through enactment of the entrepreneurial process. Focusing specifically on novice entrepreneurs, they argued that:

> *… there is a role for mentoring support for new and early-stage entrepreneurs, mentors who can show entrepreneurs how to reflect from experience and to absorb knowledge from learning events (Deakins and Freel 1998: 53).*

Other researchers have endeavoured to unpack the notion of entrepreneurial learning in order to understand *inter alia* where and how learning occurs, and to provide rather more detail to Smilor's rather broad-brush suggestion that "entrepreneurs learn from everything" (Smilor 1997:344). For example, in their study of entrepreneurial learning and growth processes in SMEs, Deakins and Freel (1998) highlighted that:

> *… for SMES to grow, entrepreneurs must be able to learn from decisions, from mistakes, from experience and from their networks (Deakins and Freel 1998:153).*

They further observed that the "entrepreneurship and growth process is essentially non-linear and discontinuous" and that it is a "process that is characterised by significant and critical learning events" (1998:153). Importantly, their study found that "the ability of entrepreneurs to maximise knowledge as a result of experiencing these learning events will determine how successful their firm eventually becomes" (1998:153). This seems to align with Harrison and Leitch's comments (2008:5) mentioned above regarding the fact that learning cannot necessarily be assumed in entrepreneurship.

In their study of the life stories of entrepreneurs, Rae and Carswell (2001) highlighted the important role played by "social relationships" in their learning. All of the participants in Rae and Carswell's study noted instances of how "they had learned skills and insights from others, including parents, business owners and managers, employees and non-executive directors" (2001:156). Taylor and Thorpe (2004) stress that an entrepreneur's learning network may be complex, involving a variety of relationships, not simply "a definable spatial entity made up of a finite, identifiable set of individuals such as a breakfast club, business unit or cluster" (2004:204). The entrepreneur's network is likely to be "fluid", with the actors in it playing different roles according to the critical events or episodes the entrepreneur experiences and the decisions he or she is faced with making.

Cope and Watts (2000) explored the "learning process of entrepreneurs and its impact on both their personal development and that of their firms" (2000:104). Like the authors cited above, Cope and Watts noted that entrepreneurs' learning often takes place through "critical moments" or incidents. Echoing Deakins and Freel (1998:53), Cope and Watts also noted, however, that entrepreneurs may need support or mentoring to help them reflect on those moments in order for the learning to take place. Cope (2003) developed this discussion further in his paper on entrepreneurial learning and critical reflection (2003), suggesting that "entrepreneurs can experience distinctive forms of 'higher-level' learning from facing, overcoming and reflecting on significant opportunities and problems during the entrepreneurial process" (2003:432).

This brief discussion of some of the literature on entrepreneurial learning serves to remind us that entrepreneurs learn in a variety of ways and in a range of contexts, some formal and some less formal, some planned and some unplanned. What is also clear from the literature is that entrepreneurs may need help to draw out their learning and master the skills of reflection. Returning to Smilor's (1997:344) statement about effective entrepreneurs being exceptional learners, it can perhaps be argued that those who recognise the breadth of their entrepreneurial learning environment and have also mastered the skill of deep thinking through reflection are the "exceptional learners". In the next section, we show how we have drawn on these notions of the breadth and depth of the entrepreneurial learning environment in order to devise a framework of reflection triggers for students participating in enterprise and entrepreneurship learning programmes, which then forms the basis of our guided approach to reflective practice.

3. A guided approach to reflective practice

The guided approach to reflective practice outlined in this section was established to help students begin to grasp the complexities of the entrepreneur's learning environment and to understand how and where learning may occur for an entrepreneur. An important underlying aim of the approach was to alert students to the fact that their learning, in an experiential entrepreneurship learning programme, will take place both inside and outside the classroom, and will typically involve a mix of the formal, informal and incidental (see Marsick and

Watkins 1990 for detailed explanations of the distinctions between each of these forms of planned and unplanned learning).

Before detailing the development of our guided approach to reflective practice, a word of explanation and background regarding our enterprise and entrepreneurship teaching programmes to which our approach is being introduced is needed. Our enterprise and entrepreneurship staff members have responsibility for designing and delivering modules and units to students on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in a number of faculties and departments, including business and management, law, art and design, and commercial photography. We also contribute enterprise workshops to a range of employability awareness training days for students. In addition, we are involved in a national project with responsibility for delivering enterprise and employability training to both undergraduates and graduates who are employed on placements in SMEs.

Our modules and units include a mix of learning *about* and learning *for* entrepreneurship, and involve case studies, discussions of theory, talks from local entrepreneurs, and a range of experiential venture start-up projects. For these projects, we utilise Anderson's metaphor of theatricality and "enactment" (Anderson 2005) as a means of helping students to adopt the mindset of an entrepreneur and to enact the behaviours of an entrepreneur as they progress through the various tasks required to complete their projects. Anderson made the point that the metaphor of theatricality is a useful one particularly for nascent entrepreneurs (2005:597). In our experience, it is a fruitful one to explore in our learning environment as the notion of enactment helps students enter more fully into the entrepreneurial process.

A feature of our delivery is the use of a number of structured approaches for idea generation, opportunity recognition, business modelling, and so on. To date, whilst reflection has been integrated within our learning programmes, it has perhaps not been as explicit a feature as it is now becoming with the introduction of our guided approach to reflective practice. The approach allows us to highlight to students that reflection is one of the behaviours they need to learn to enact as they go through the entrepreneurial process and develop the mindset of an entrepreneur.
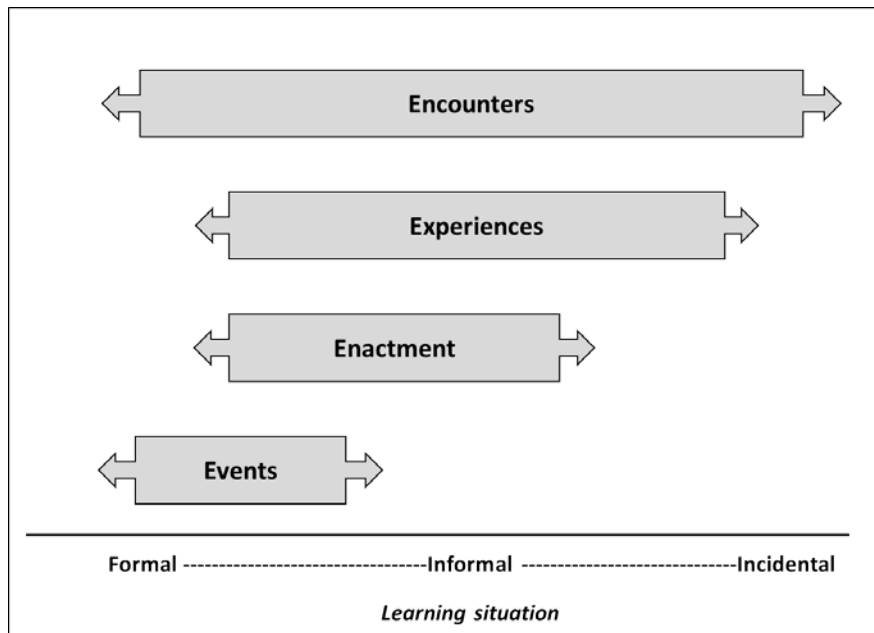
The design and development of our guided approach to reflective practice is detailed below, broken down into a number of stages.

Stage one:
Through review of the literature, four key triggers to reflection were selected for use in our approach. In summary, these triggers are:

- **Events**: Refer to reflection triggered by participation in training sessions (typically classroom-based learning activities) or professional development events, and personal / private study.
- **Enactment of the entrepreneurial process:** Refers to reflection triggered by performing tasks during an enterprise or entrepreneurship project, such as the tasks typically forming part of a project to set up a student business (including idea generation, market research, marketing, financial management, and so on).
- **Encounters:** Refer to reflection triggered by networking activity, whether organised and scheduled professional networking events, or more *ad hoc* meetings or discussions with individuals or groups of individuals.
- **Experiences:** Refer to incidents (positive or negative) that occur during enactment of the entrepreneurial process, including things that go wrong, mistakes made, or opportunities that arise.

Figure 1 below provides an indication of the learning situation for each of these triggers, ranging from the formal, through the informal, to the incidental. It serves to illustrate the breadth of the learning environment that students will be operating within during their experiential learning. We use it as tool to help students understand the range of contexts in which their learning is likely to take place during an experiential learning project in entrepreneurship, and as we introduce to them the notion of enacting the role of an entrepreneur.

Figure 1: Reflection triggers

Stage two:
Having considered the breadth of the learning environment, our next stage in the development of our guided approach to reflective practice was to look at fostering reflection skills in order to help students grasp the depth of their learning environment. The challenge here, as noted earlier, is that reflection can be poorly understood, with some finding it difficult to move from mere description to analysis and sense making.

A glance at the literature of learning and professional development reveals that a number of examples of tools and resources to aid reflection have been developed, with reflective journals or learning logs perhaps being among the most commonly discussed (see for example Moon 1999; Moon 2006). From our own experience of using learning logs with student and graduate interns on residential training programmes (see Fulford, Marcella and Levie 2013), as well as in classes in various business and management disciplines, we recognised that students need help in understanding the difference between description and reflection, and that it takes time for them to develop fluency in the skills of reflection. So, inspired by the "Left-hand Column" technique outlined in Senge et al. (1994) and the "double-entry journal" technique described in Moon (1999), we devised a visual resource to aid the development of reflective fluency in our students.

In summary, we produced a two-sided postcard system for students to use, allowing students to respond to each of the four triggers outlined above (events, enactment, experiences, and encounters) by recording what happened (descriptive) and then reflecting on it (analytical). The visual tool of postcards is introduced to students by discussing with them typical picture postcards from holidays and so on: the picture side representing the recording of the situation (descriptive) and the text side of the card representing the reflective side (analytical). A sample of each side of the cards is shown in Figures 2 and 3 below. Our entrepreneurship modules lend themselves well to the use of these cards as mentoring-type tutorial sessions form an integral part of the students' experiential learning projects. Students typically work in small teams, and are given copies of the postcards each week. They are encouraged to return to their tutorial the following week ready to discuss the progress of their business start-up project with their mentor/tutor. Part of this discussion involves them bringing their completed postcards, indicating the areas or issues they have been reflecting upon during the week. Through these discussions, and using the two-sided postcard approach, it becomes much easier to convey to students the distinction between recording and reflecting. Experience to date has shown that as a module (or student project) progresses, the students tend to need less help understanding this distinction between description and reflection, and so reflection starts to become a more natural and habitual activity.

Typical examples that students bring to these discussions include planned or unplanned meetings with potential suppliers or potential clients, new opportunities or offers of support that were not originally

envisaged, problems (incidents) or setbacks that have occurred in their projects, challenges of team working, and so on.

Using the cards serves also to provide focus and structure to their discussions with their mentor/tutor, ensuring that their contact time is well spent and constructive. We sometimes encourage team reflections, whilst at other times we encourage individual reflections and then use the tutorial sessions to explore the similarities and differences in their recording and reflecting on what has occurred in their project during the week.
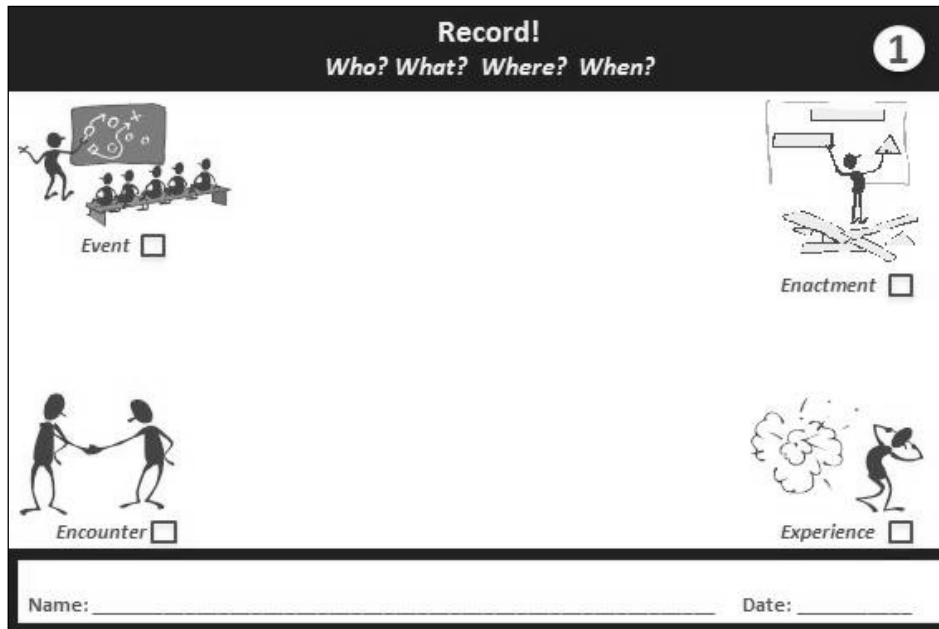

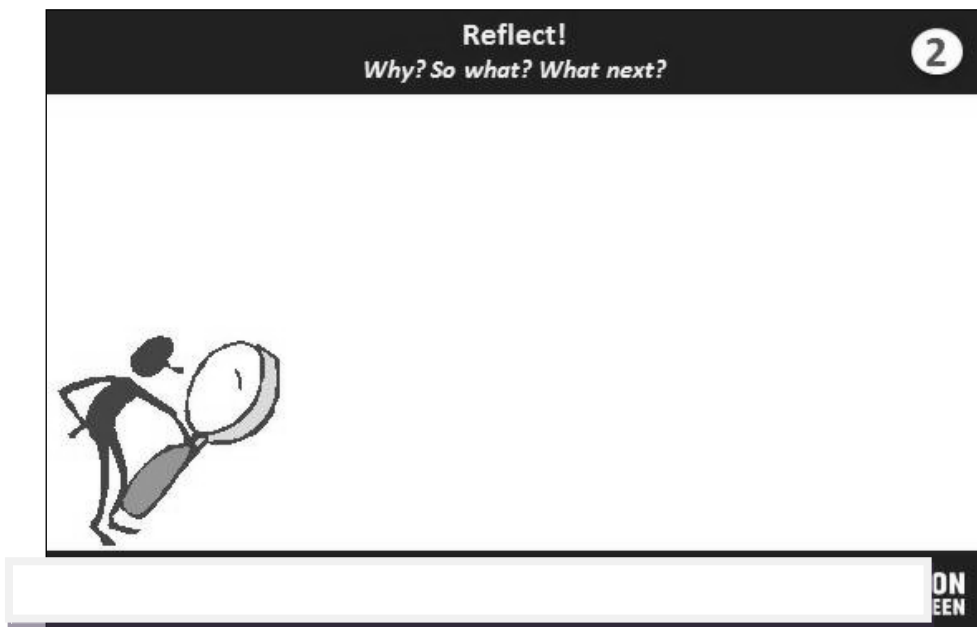
Figure 2: Postcard: the "recording side"

Figure 3: Postcard: the "reflecting side"

Stage three:

The postcard reflection system outlined above, and used in the tutorial context as a student project progresses, covers essentially quite short-term reflections (typically involving looking back at learning triggers from just one week). We have found that this helps students to rehearse and refine the skill of reflection and

move away from being merely descriptive. The use of the postcards means that the task is also not terribly onerous from the students' point of view, but has the advantage of encouraging them to be concise. At this point their reflections are essentially in the form of brief jottings. However, we recognised too that the students need to develop longer term reflective skills, enabling them to aggregate their reflective jottings over the life of a project and piece together a more substantive reflective account of the overall experience. To this end, we use more reflective journals towards the end of a project.

In order to facilitate this, in the third stage of our guided approach to reflection, we have introduced a database of tools to help students plan their learning, produce reflective journal accounts of their projects, and so on. It is envisaged that this database will be a tool they can go on using as they move beyond education into employment or self-employment. Having rehearsed and refined their reflective skills in their taught environment through using the postcard system, we would anticipate that students would be able to use the database resources independently as self-directed learners. In other words, the habit of reflection will have been developed and incorporated into their professional mindset and form an integral part of their professional and entrepreneurial behaviours.

The current features of the database are: an electronic version of the "postcard reflection system", a free-text journaling facility, a professional skills audit tool, a personal development planning tool, a CV repository, a facility for recording professional contacts, a learning record tool, and an audiovisual guide to developing the skills of reflective practice.

4. Concluding remarks and next steps

Review of relevant literature highlighted that entrepreneurs need help to reflect on, and make sense of, the challenges and opportunities that occur during the entrepreneurial process. For students who are unfamiliar with the entrepreneurial process, the notion of reflection can be even more daunting. The project outlined in this paper was set up to explore the design and development of learning resources to help students make sense of the complexities of an entrepreneur's learning environment and to develop effective reflection habits as a means to improving their own entrepreneurial practice. A guided approach to reflective practice was devised for students for use during their venture creation projects.

Although a full evaluation of the project is not yet complete, initial results indicate that students are finding the approach helpful. Scrutiny of their completed reflective postcards and analysis of their discussions during sessions with their tutors suggest that as projects progress, their fluency in reflection increases. and their understanding of the value of "chewing over" challenges and opportunities grows. The breadth and depth of their learning environment seems to be clearer to them, and the importance of developing the habit of reflection is taken on board. We note also an increased focus on decision making based on reflection of what has gone before. One finding that we are starting to explore in more depth is the notion of networking: through the use of the reflective postcards, we see evidence of the students beginning to develop contacts who can help them in their projects, and in so doing they are starting to grasp more fully the value of fostering their own learning network. A full evaluation of the approach is currently underway, results of which will be reported in due course.

Beyond the current project, we envisage application of the tools and resources with nascent entrepreneurs in mentoring / business advisory contexts. Furthermore, we are introducing the tools and resources to business and management modules outside entrepreneurship to increase our emphasis on the value of developing reflective practice.

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