

# **BEYOND INTENTION TO START: WHAT DISTANCE LEARNING CAN PROVIDE TO ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper presents lessons learned from the experience of the University of the Philippines Institute for Small-Scale Industries, a first-time adopter of electronic or distance learning, in conducting its training program for aspiring entrepreneurs. While some of the aspects of teaching were either automated or digitized, there still remain some human factors such as motivation, interest and intention that come into play and therefore cannot be enhanced through distance education or e-learning alone. The paper also presents some recommendations for a successful conduct of online training for aspiring entrepreneurs.

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## **BACKGROUND**

The University of the Philippines Institute for Small-Scale Industries (UP ISSI) traces its history back in the sixties, when UP ISSI was then what was called the Red, White and Blue Project, an initiative formed through a bilateral agreement between the Royal Government of the Netherlands and the Republic of the Philippines. Its principal objective then as now was to assist the development and growth of small-scale industries in the country.

On August 4, 1969 then Pres. Ferdinand E. Marcos signed Republic Act No. 6041 making UP ISSI an organic unit of the University of the Philippines. Originally established as a training institution to build up the capability of small firms, the Institute gradually expanded its activities to include research, extension, and information programs to promote entrepreneurship and enterprise development in the country.

For more than 40 years, UP ISSI conducted several consultancy training courses, seminars, technical studies in the field of enterprise development with emphasis on Philippine industries.

One such training program is the Start Your Own Business (SYOB) Course. Started on 5 September 1998, the program trains aspiring entrepreneurs to set up their own businesses and others "who may want to enhance their business planning skills" (University of the Philippines Institute for Small-Scale Industries, n.d.). The program is an offshoot of the New Enterprise Planning and Personal Entrepreneurial Development courses UP ISSI developed for the UP Open University (OU) in 1996.

While the Institute had been regularly conducting similar programs in the past, such as the Young Entrepreneurs Program, an Appreciation Course on Entrepreneurship, the Entrepreneurial Career Development Program, and various similar special courses that were contracted by local and international institutions, SYOB was the first course offered to the public and the first to have been designed to expose the participants to training in idea generation of the enterprise to the preparation of the business plan (De Vera, 2013).

Besides completing a certain number of hours of classroom attendance in ISSI for six days, each participant is also required to submit a complete business plan, which is expected to integrate all the insights obtained from the course.

In 2009, the Institute started the "hybrid online project" with UP ISSI's major private-sector partner, the Small Enterprises Research and Development Foundation, Inc. (SERDEF). The project's primary objective was to hybridize the conduct of ISSI's residential training courses with online content and materials.

A year later, through the help of the UP OU, ISSI, still under the auspices of SERDEF, initiated the e-learning project. The primary objective now shifted from hybridizing lecture room-based training programs with adjunct online content to developing a complete, blended distance learning program.

Soon thereafter, it was decided that the residential course SYOB would be the one to be developed into an e-learning mode. Thus, e-Start Your Own Business or eSYOB was born. With SERDEF's funding assistance, the Institute invested its time and resources in developing modules and instructional materials for the online course by banking on the staff's experience in handling residential or lecture room-based training programs.

Finally, on 31 March 2012, UP ISSI started beta testing its very first distance learning course with 15 volunteer learners. The beta offering of the e-Start Your Own Business (eSYOB beta) was UP ISSI's first step in leapfrogging the technological divide and upgrading its training delivery systems to benefit a wider audience. Primarily targeting aspiring entrepreneurs who were unable to attend the Institute's residential SYOB course, such as overseas Filipino workers, nonManila-based Filipinos, and professionals with eight-to-five jobs, the eSYOB beta aimed to provide tools to assess one's entrepreneurial readiness; identify, screen, and select business ideas; and plan, start, and manage a new business.

It is against this background that this paper presents lessons learned from the experience of UP ISSI, a first-time adopter of electronic or distance learning, in conducting its training program for aspiring entrepreneurs. This paper will also present some recommendations for a successful conduct of online training for aspiring entrepreneurs.

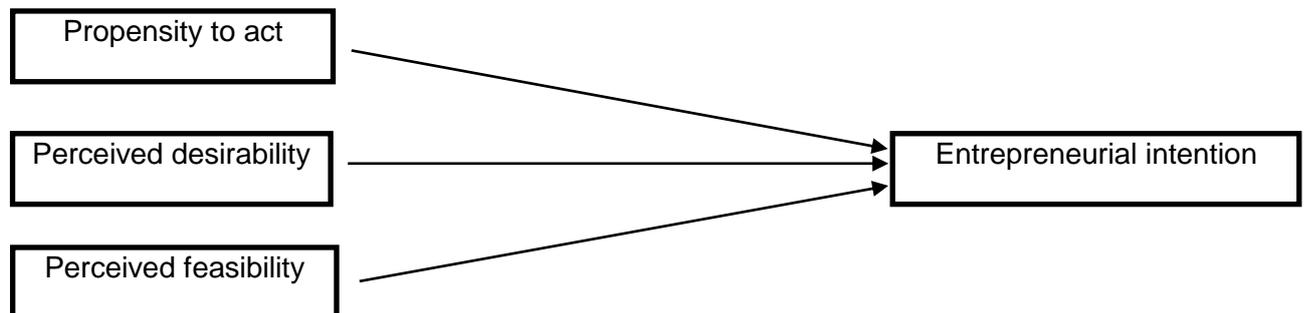
## LITERATURE REVIEW

### On the Entrepreneurial Mindset

According to Wang, Lu and Millington (2011), the entrepreneurial psychological traits that are often discussed in the literature include: risk-taking propensity (Brockhaus, 1987; Luthje and Franke, 2003; Ang and Hong, 2000) innovativeness (Ang and Hong, 2000; Rauch and Frese, 2007) independence (Ang and Hong, 2000) and internal locus of control (Brockhaus, 1987).

Shapero and Sokol (1982) proposed the Entrepreneurial Event Model as shown in Figure 1, where intentions to start a business derive from a propensity to act upon opportunities and from perceptions of desirability and feasibility. Summers (2000), on the other hand, stated that the propensity to act are in individuals who have the psychological traits that make them likely candidates to attempt to become entrepreneurs. And many researchers according to Wang, Lu and Millington (2011) believe that entrepreneurs have a special personality and their traits cannot be taught.

**FIGURE 1. SHAPERO AND SOKOL (1982) ENTREPRENEURIAL EVENT MODEL**



### On Entrepreneurship Education and Training

While an entrepreneurial mindset cannot be taught, education and training may enhance a person's entrepreneurial intention. Noel (1998), as cited in Basu and Virick (2008), found that entrepreneurship education is strongly related to entrepreneurial intention, with entrepreneurship majors expressing higher intentions to start their own businesses. Dyer (1994) and Wilson et al. (2007), also cited in Basu and Virick (2008), opined that entrepreneurship education can boost the students' interest in entrepreneurship as a career option while Souitaris et al. (2007) found that entrepreneurship programs significantly increased the students' norms and intentions toward entrepreneurship by inspiring them to choose entrepreneurial careers.

Nonetheless, little attention has been dedicated to how to measure the overall effectiveness of entrepreneurship education programs towards individuals and society (McMullan and Gillin, 2001). The main problems related to the assessment of entrepreneurship education may lie in measuring output from the entrepreneurial education process according to Alberti, Sciascia and Poli (2004). Although it seems difficult to determine causality, some output measures (such as changes in entrepreneurial values, in orientation towards entrepreneurial careers, in personal assessment of entrepreneurial skills and so on) could also be examined (Wyckham, 1989). The methods for assessing the results of entrepreneurship education are not well defined, neither are any standardized means for measuring the results generally accepted (Alberti, Sciascia and Poli, 2004).

Solomon et al. (2002) confirm the positive role of teaching entrepreneurial and small business management skills for new venture creation and success.

Two relevant models of entrepreneurship education and training are described briefly as follows:

### ***Entrepreneurial Performance Education Model (E/P Model)***

The entrepreneurial performance education model (E/P model) is concerned with the elements that drive entrepreneurial performance and was developed to guide syllabi and curriculum development (van Vuuren and Nieman, 1999). The direct linear model suggests that entrepreneurial performance is a function of motivation, entrepreneurial and business skills and can be depicted as:

$$E/P = f(aM(b E/S x c B/S))$$

where: E/P is the entrepreneurial performance; M is the motivation; E/S is the entrepreneurial skills; B/S is the business skills; and a to c are constants.

Pretorius, Nieman and van Vuuren (2005) describe these three elements:

- Motivation. The development of performance motivation of the entrepreneur is advised for incorporation in all programmes. It is suggested by the authors that it contributes towards qualities like inner control, persistence, leadership, decisiveness, determination and shear guts. The associated skills include specifically the development of achievement imagery.
- Entrepreneurial skills. Included in this category are various creativity, risk taking and opportunity identification.
- Business skills. This category covers skills such as financial, marketing, operational, human resource, legal, communication, management and business plan compiling skills

### ***Entrepreneurial Education Model (E/E Model)***

Entrepreneurial education model (E/E model) considers not only the content of entrepreneurial education programs but also the context wherein such programs are operated by the facilitators and the approaches that they use (Pretorius, 2000a, b). The model identifies five constructs relevant for entrepreneurial education to increase start-ups and also indicates the relevance of the program context. Its focus during development was specifically to increase "startups" as outcome requirement (Pretorius, 2001) through education. The E/E model constructs include:

- entrepreneurial success themes (Gartner et al, 1999; Timmons, 1999);
- business knowledge and skills (Gartner et al, 1999; Harris, 1994);
- business plan utilization (Brush et al., 1995; Timmons, 1999);
- learning approaches (Mayfield and Weaver, 1997; Ulrich and Holman, 2000);
- the facilitator (McMinn, 2000; Nonis and Hudson, 1998); and
- the program context.

The E/E model can be depicted as follows:

$$E/E = f[aF(bA x cB/P) x (dE/S x eB/S)]$$

where: E/E is the entrepreneurial education for startups; F is the facilitator skills, knowledge and motivation; A is the approaches used by facilitator(s); B/P is the business plan utilization; E/S is the entrepreneurial success themes and knowledge; B/S is the business skills and knowledge; and a to e are constants.

### ***Integrated Model***

Through the integration of the entrepreneurial performance model and the entrepreneurial education model, the following model is derived:

$$E \text{ for } E/P = f(aF x bM (c E/S x dB/S) x (eA + fB/P))$$

where: E for E/P is the education for improved entrepreneurial performance; F is the facilitators ability, skills and experience (E/E model); M is the motivation (E/P model); E/S is the entrepreneurial skills (both models); B/S business skills and knowledge (both models); A is the approaches of learning used (E/E model); B/P is the business plan utilization as an approach (both models); and a to f are constants (0 > constant < 1).

Education for E/P, therefore, is a linear function of the facilitator's ability and skills (aF) to enhance motivation (bM), entrepreneurial skills (cE/S) and business skills (cLB/S) through the creative use of different approaches (values of e<sup>Λ</sup>L) and specifically the business plan (iB/P).

### **On Distance Learning as It Relates to Entrepreneurial Intention or Intention to Start a Business**

Not surprisingly, an extensive literature on entrepreneurship training or education in e-learning mode, more so as it relates to entrepreneurial intention or intention to start a business, does not exist. Nonetheless, research has revealed that both students and administrators believe that the quality of e-learning responds to the traditional teaching methods in terms of quality (Radović-Marković, 2010). According to this research, three quarters of leaders in state faculties and universities trust Internet-based learning quality to be the same or even better than face-to-face learning (Radović-Marković, 2010).

The Small Business Institute at the University of Turku, together with the Finnish National Board of Education and the Finnish Ministry of Education, developed an entrepreneurship training course for delivery through the Internet and the use of radio programs in 1998. The program did not aim to facilitate the creation of startups, but to generate overall entrepreneurial attitudes and to increase know-how on entrepreneurial activities, both related to startups and to the development of the skills base in existing companies (Kuhle, 2007).

### **THE UP ISSI EXPERIENCE IN TRAINING ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS ONLINE**

Capitalizing on its more than 40 years of training aspiring and existing entrepreneurs as well as developing small businesses in the Philippines, the Institute for Small-Scale Industries under the University of the Philippines System on 31 March 2012 started beta testing its very first distance learning course with 15 volunteer learners. The beta offering of the e-Start Your Own Business (eSYOB beta) was UP ISSI's first step in leapfrogging the technological divide and upgrading its training delivery systems to benefit a wider audience. Primarily targeting aspiring entrepreneurs who were unable to attend the Institute's residential SYOB course, such as overseas Filipino workers, non-Manila-based Filipinos, and professionals with eight-to-five jobs, the eSYOB beta aimed to provide tools to assess one's entrepreneurial readiness; identify, screen, and select business ideas; and plan, start, and manage a new business.

All these training objectives were to be realized via the Institute's Virtual Learning Center operated by the open-source e-learning software platform Moodle. Only two face-to-face sessions were required of the course, the first one being the course briefing and walkthrough during the launch; and the other being the presentation of the business plan, the main output at the end of the eight-week distance learning course. All throughout the course, the e-learners' progress was to be supervised and monitored online by their e-tutors.

The result of the said beta test was not promising, as none of the 15 learners were able to finish the entire eight-week course because of varying reasons that ranged from lack of time on the part of the learners to the inability of the online tutors to follow up on the participants' outputs. Hence, a move was made to trim the length of the course from eight weeks down to four weeks.

The e-learning project went on hiatus until the latter part of 2014, when, taking inspiration from a webinar held for the Department of Agriculture back in 2012, UP ISSI resurrected eSYOB, this time through a series of webinars for a learner in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

### **OBSERVATIONS AND COMPARISONS**

From UP ISSI's experience in handling the online version of its business planning course, Start Your Own Business, the following observations and comparisons from the residential version of the course can be made:

#### **Payment of the Course Fee**

Unlike its residential version, eSYOB or Start Your Own Business in e-learning mode, the course developed and delivered online by the UP Institute for Small-Scale Industries, was offered for free or at no cost on the part of the trainees.

#### **Length and Schedule of the Course**

Under the premise that the course would be delivered online, providing more time for the participants to finish their homework, the beta test or the first run of eSYOB was delivered asynchronously and longer than its residential version. The first run resulted in a failure to graduate learners, as no participant went on to finish the

course. Learning from the experience of the beta run, the next iteration of the course was delivered through a series of one-on-one live webinars for six days, which is the same length as that of the residential program. Still, the lone participant was not able to make a business plan of her own.

### **Delivery**

In the first run or beta test of eSYOB, each participant, who volunteered to undergo the eight-week program, was provided with modules and materials for one's self-study within a period fixed for all the other learners. The participants did their homework and interacted with their tutors using Moodle, a popular e-learning software platform.

In the next run of the course, the sessions were delivered through a series of one-on-one live webinars between the tutor-facilitator and the learner for six days in a common schedule agreed upon by both parties. In both runs a tutor (the equivalent of a coach in the residential mode) was assigned for each learner.

### **The Business Plan as the Course Requirement**

In both the residential and distance learning modes of the SYOB course, the completion of a business plan is required for finishing the program. Thus, the course content, divided into four modules (marketing, production and operation, organization and finance) was designed to enable the participants to finish their own plans.

### **Outcome of the Course**

Non-completion of the business plan, hence non-completion of the course, was experienced in both the residential and distance learning modes. But the success of the program in inspiring the trainees in opening their businesses occurred in both modes.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

In both the residential and distance learning modes of the Start Your Own Business course developed and delivered by the UP Institute for Small-Scale Industries, the completion of a business plan is required for finishing the program. This makes SYOB as a business planning course and not a program for starting a business. Thus, the duration of the course is hinged on the training or tutoring of the participants or learners in completing a full-blown business plan. Manifestation of an intention to start a business on the part of the trainees would have been defined by the number of business registrations they filed, for example; this number, however, is currently not available.

The presence of a coach or online tutor did not help either in motivating the learners to finish their homework. This renders business planning in the course as a purely academic exercise and not really a requirement to pursue entrepreneurship on the part of the learners.

The business plan construct is implied as part of the business skills required for the E/P model while in the E/E model it is regarded as an important tool for training especially to assist in the conceptualization of the holistic picture of the venture and its future operations. The business plan construct can also be regarded as part of the approaches construct as it forms part of the pedagogy used to develop insight into the holistic business. The value of the business plan itself is probably less than the value of the creation process and opinions vary widely between academics, financiers and entrepreneurs (Pretorius, Nieman and van Vuuren, 2005).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While some of the aspects of teaching were either automated or digitized, there still remain some human factors such as motivation, interest and intention that come into play and therefore cannot be enhanced through distance education or e-learning alone. Motivation and intention to start a business as well the problems that they pose within a working environment emphasize that the motivation and intention of an aspiring entrepreneur to start a business are probably the toughest challenge to the facilitator to achieve, compared to business skills and scanning the environment.

Education or training alone nor perceived feasibility (in the form of a dedicated structure for startups) will not cause a student to move and become an entrepreneur. As Summers (2000) stated, propensity to act are in individuals who have the psychological traits that make them likely candidates to attempt to become entrepreneurs. And these traits cannot be taught (Wang, Lu and Millington, 2011).

Exogenous factors such as prior experience and family background also play an important role in the entrepreneurial makeup of an individual (Basu and Virick, 2008; Krueger, 1993).

To summarize the observations in handling the business planning course designed by the UP Institute for Small-Scale Industries for aspiring entrepreneurs, it could be stated that the success of any entrepreneurial or new venture creation training overwhelmingly depends on the facilitator construct of the program despite having the same value as the other constructs in the model. A good facilitator such as the trainer, coach or online tutor could therefore achieve more with poor program content than poor facilitators could do with good program content. Throughout this study, the important role of the facilitator in the learning process is constantly implied. It thus seems that the facilitator is the key construct of any entrepreneurship education or training program while the other constructs serve as the tools with which to achieve the desired outcome.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The integrated model is proposed to educate aspiring entrepreneurs for entrepreneurial performance. The integrated model is in line with Solomon et al. (2002, p. 6) who suggest that entrepreneurial activities are a function of human, venture and environmental conditions (Pretorius, Nieman and van Vuuren, 2005). Motivation and entrepreneurial skills would be elements of the human skills while business skills and the business plan utilization are elements of the venture skills (Pretorius, Nieman and van Vuuren, 2005). Except for the normal environmental factors governing a strategy and operation of the venture, the approaches used and the facilitator will contribute as elements of the learning environment (Pretorius, Nieman and van Vuuren, 2005).

The ability of the facilitator can match the constructs in the model mix to its context by applying the environmental imperatives through a multidisciplinary approach to achieve the behavioral changes required.

The use of webinars is preferred over the use of self-study modules since it is in this approach where the facilitator can blend motivation, entrepreneurial and business skills differently depending on the contextual requirements of the participants or learners.

The proposed model demands above average human abilities from the facilitators of entrepreneurial education or training, especially if it is done in e-learning mode. These capabilities are geared towards leading learning and motivating the participants or learners to acquire business skills.

Learning to start a business requires different and creative approaches of which the preparation of the business plan is one of the most important approaches, but not the only important approach. To achieve the integrated model successfully, the motivation of the learner or participant must be sustained throughout the course. This can be achieved if one of the requirements of the program is to develop not a full-blown or lengthy business plan (which is not a requirement in starting a business in the first place), but a shorter version such as a business model canvas.

A business model canvas is a strategic management and lean startup template for developing or documenting new or existing business models. A visual chart with elements describing a firm's value proposition, infrastructure, customers, and finances (Osterwalder, Pigneur and Clark, 2010), the template can help an aspiring entrepreneur develop a comprehensive plan for a new business without necessarily devoting too much completing it such as the length of time needed to finish a full-blown business plan.

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