Entrepreneurial Learning - Pedagogical Note Series

46. Facilitating Small Group Work Entrepreneurially

1. What is Entrepreneurial Facilitation of Small Group Work?

It has been argued in Pedagogical Guide 5 that small group work has a valuable part to play in participant learning, largely because of the scope it provides for personal contact, engagement and expression. It also, however, can be the means for support of the development of a range of entrepreneurial behaviours and skills, for example, persuasion, empathy, rhetoric, creative problem solving, development and exploration of ideas, building of self confidence and self belief and feelings of autonomy and ownership. Such developments, however, are dependent on the manner in which the group is facilitated.

2. How is Entrepreneurial facilitation constructed?

In general in small group work the cognitive aims are to provide the means for deeper embedding of knowledge via a n informal process of discussion, exchange and peer questioning in a 'safe' environment. In this respect there is an obligation on the facilitator to set broad learning objectives, bring forward the key questions to be addressed, keep the discussion focused around these (limiting drift that might be dysfunctional), ensure that there is process of engagement of all participants and summarise the final outcome in relation to objectives. Key facilitator behaviours in these respects include summarising, proposing, building, reflecting, clarifying and open ended questioning: all of these to be pursued in a supportive atmosphere.

Over and above these objectives and behaviours the process allows for focus upon development of entrepreneurial behaviours, skills and attributes. To assess success in his respect facilitators can evaluate their 'process' performance in terms of:
- to what degree did they create 'ownership' of the learning process by participants?
- to what extent were new ideas generated?
- what risks were taken in the discussion and how were these useful?
- how much 'challenging' took place?
- to what degree have we built an atmosphere of greater empathy between participants and greater trust?
- how much have participants learnt about each other?
- how much have participants learnt from each other (effective exchange)?
- to what degree has he group developed as a team?
- have we learned anything about effective team work?

To create positive outcomes in respect of the above may require entrepreneurial innovation, for example:
- placing the leadership facilitator role with participants and using group feedback to comment on their role.
- using brainstorming techniques during the discussion
- breaking the group in smaller (one to one) groups to come up with views on different issues for debate by the wider group or seeking dispute resolution between two or more of participants without dislodging the whole group
- inviting role playing of different sides of the arguments as seen through the eyes of selected externals (for example how would an owner manager see this?)
- bringing up for discussion aspects of the process (for example why has Miss X dominated the discussion? Why has Mr Y seemingly opted out?) While these are risky strategies they ultimately will encourage openness and can be approached in a supportive climate.
- allowing time for reflection on what the group has learnt about group management processes
- exploring innovative ways of presenting the findings from the group, this encouraging creativity but also recognition that emotions play an important role in learning
- allowing time for reflection on what the participants have learned about each other (quick exchange feedback)

3. Relevance to Entrepreneurial Learning

The group process is designed to simulate process of team problem solving and ideas generation as in the 'real entrepreneurial' world. It builds recognition of how to deal with common issues in this process, for example individual dominance, 'free-loading' by those who minimally participate, process of informal power and control, conflict resolution and hostility.

4. Outcomes

Participants will have enhanced their capacity to motivate and work with teams in an entrepreneurial manner. Overall. however, the over-riding question remain as to what degree learning outcomes have been achieved/enhanced and knowledge more deeply embedded