Working Between Two Expert Clients

*Facilitating a Solution Focused approach in Higher
Education through live consulting*

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Abstract

*This paper discusses how creating a temporary learning
community using a Solution Focused approach (SF) can effec-
tively engage participants from the Small and Medium
Enterprise (SME) community, with students of business study-
ing in Higher Education (HE), while still satisfying the
requirements for the latter group's academic assessment
towards a Master's degree. Policy makers for the last three
decades have increasingly introduced measures to support
SME's but business owner managers frequently say they need
answers to their business challenges in the context of their
'life world' and spurn HE management programmes such as
MBA's. HE institutions cite the SME community as very diffi-
cult to engage yet continue to maintain institutional barriers.
Some scholars say that efforts are not made in HE to align
programmes with owner managers' needs. Recently entrepre-
neurship education has become a burgeoning field of practice
and study in HE. Within this field, SF approaches are ideal
for engaging both business owners and students within learn-
ing communities, and a partial account of a Master's
programme that utilises SF is offered as an illustrative case.
SF approaches in this educational context are then discussed
as desirable by comparison with the critical literature regard-
ing entepreneurship education.*

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Business Owners and Higher Education

SME's in the UK can be defined as;

- being managed by their owners in a personalised way
- having a small share of the market in economic terms
- being independent in their principal decisions.

<div align="right">(Bolton Report, 1971)</div>

This sector is largely comprised of sole traders, but it is worth noting that a business can be classified as an SME if it employs up to 200 people. The owner managers of this sector are considered a 'hard to reach group' for Higher Educational establishments yet are a very important sector, accounting for 99.9 % of all enterprises in the UK (ONS, 2009). They make a major contribution to the UK by employing over 23 million people, representing over half of the total in employment. Furthermore, their estimated combined annual turnover stands at £3000 billion (ONS, 2009). This is impressive, given that just over three decades ago small businesses were thought of as irrelevant to the nation by economists (Greene et al, 2002). After the second world war, goverments concentrated their efforts on building large nationalised corporations, believing this to be the way to compete and dominate international markets (Greene et al, 2002, Gregory and Randle 2006).

In the late seventies, a number of factors convinced policy-makers that an enterprise culture was to be encouraged – not least of these being the parlous state of the economy and mass unemployment. Since then, the trend has been to encourage the sector with structural, legislative and fiscal tools. These interventions have included resources for training programmes aimed at business owners and their staff through the public sector educational systems. They continue to be part of the SME policy intervention landscape, albeit in evolving guises. However, the evidence over the last few decades shows that these programmes have been largely spurned by owner managers (Birley and Gibb 1984, Matlay 1999, Gibb 2009a). Indeed there is very poor engagement with Higher Education

from business owner managers in the form of partnerships or learning communities worldwide (Matlay 1999, Gibb 2009[a], Sarasvathy 2001). In particular, when referring to the government subsidies available, Gibb (2009a) notes that owner managers 'need to be bribed' to take up education and training from public educational institutions.

In the nineties, Matlay (1999) found that subsidised Higher Education provision of training was poorly accessed due to a wide credibility gap between the needs of small business owners and the trainers. Researchers continually concur that this arises due to the vast majority of academics lacking 'hands on' business experience (Hopkins and Feldman 1988, Gibb 2009b, Handy 2007). There is also sustained evidence that the artificial functional divides present in University Business Schools are seen as irrelevant to owner managers of small firms (Birley and Gibb 1984, Gibb 2009b). For example, marketing will exist as a seperate department, as will accounting, as will strategy and so on. Typically, students are exposed to these subjects as discrete taught courses, with topics that are expounded objectively. Within these courses teaching methodologies greatly favour a discursive lecture style, supplemented by case studies or problem based learning approaches (Bigg 2003). Without doubt this is the prevailing teaching style in academia.

Through her research, Sarasvathy (2001) observes that MBA programmes worldwide are characterised by students being taught causal reasoning through the case study methodology

> *"…causal rationality begins with a pre-determined goal and a given set of means, and seeks to identify the optimal, fastest, cheapest, most efficient, etc, alternative to achieve the given goal"* (Sarasvathy 2001:1).

This method presents a two dimensional approach to learning about other situations in business. However, it is well recorded that business owner managers – entrepreneurs – frequently state that they need solutions to the challenges they are facing as they arise in their business practice (Gibb 1997, 2009b,

Gregory and Beresford 2009, Matlay 1999, Birley and Gibb 1984). It would seem reasonable that if it is to be of value, vocational learning for entrepreneurs should have a direct contextual application. Gibb (1997, 2009b) coined the phrase the 'holistic life world' when referring to how owner managers proceed with ongoing learning in their businesses. This 'holistic life world' of the owner manager is characterised, among other things, by uncertainty, complexity, mental maps of experience, and emotional and egotistical notions of responsibility and ownership (Gibb 2009b). This characteristic 'way of doing things' of entrepreneurs is therefore not aligned with the functional silos of subjects that exist in Business Schools. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Business School practice is criticised for maintaining institutional barriers to SME engagement despite offering programmes ostensibly designed for them. Perhaps we can conclude here that the majority of entrepreneurs view Higher Education as being irrelevant, and unable to meet their learning needs for the reasons discussed.

After extensive work with business owner managers, Sarasvathy (2001) concludes that they display what she calls 'effectual reasoning'. That is, they start with their given means – Who they are; What they know; Who they know;

> *". . . using these means, the entrepreneurs . . . imagine and implement possible effects that can be created . . . they start very small with the means that are closest at hand, and move almost directly into action without elaborate planning. Unlike causal reasoning that comes to life through careful planning and subsequent execution, effectual reasoning lives and breathes execution. Plans are made and unmade and revised and recast through action and interaction with others . . . yet . . . there is always a meaningful picture that keeps the team together, a compelling story that brings in more stakeholders and a continuing journey that maps out uncharted territories. Through their actions, the effectual entrepreneurs' set of means and consequently the set of possible effects change and get reconfigured* (Sarasvathy 2001:3).

Clearly there are similarities between this effectual reasoning and an SF approach to learning; imagining; visualising; small next right steps and counters. Effectuation as an approach is currently finding favour with entrepreneurship educators as it resonates with 'the way things happen' in entrepreneurship, rather than a causal post-rationalisation of events in a case study.

Entrepreneurship as a Vocation

It is worth noting that the vocation of entrepreneurship is now widely recognised and supported not just in business schools, but by other disciplines in the Higher Educational sector. Pittaway and Cope (2007) recently conducted a systematic literature review of the themes apparent in entrepreneurship education in HE to determine the evidence base. A significant amount exhorts the educator to design programmes with an experiential element – 'learning by doing' – as best practice. This is partly informed by the canon of knowledge by Allen Gibb and other researchers. Their work seeks to encourage students to *feel* and experience the 'holistic life world' of the entrepreneur. After all, living with high uncertainty and responsibility levels is not for everyone! Using experiential approaches, there are some engaging and effective programmes that have emerged for nascent entrepreneurs in the last decade. Pittaway and Cope (2007) cite evidence that some students exposed to entrepreneurship programmes intend to start businesses.

At this point it is worth reflecting on the discussion so far. Policy makers for the last three decades have increasingly introduced measures to support SMEs – a highly important economic sector. With regard to training, owner managers (entrepreneurs) frequently say they need answers to their business challenges in their trading contexts. They continue to spurn public sector teaching and training, and in turn business schools cite the SME community as 'hard to engage'. Higher Education's institutional barriers are maintained from within, and programmes offered are not aligned with owner

managers needs. During the last decade, resources have been provided to encoure the student community in HE to consider the vocation of entrepreneurship as a career choice. Entrepreneurship education has become a burgeoning field of practice and study with some excellent experiential progammes on offer. The SF approach outlined below seeks to add to this effective work.

Both groups one method

Utilising SF to facilate experiential learning in Higher Education can be an attractive way to engage entrepreneurs with students. SF approaches are resource-building. Business owners explore their 'life world' or business contexts and challenges as students engage them in facilitated SF conversations. Students act as reflective team coaches. The facilitator of the SF approach serves both groups.

This SF approach works with students on vocational degree programmes such as entrepreneurship, marketing, finance or any other of the functional disciplines that form the teaching structure of business schools. The advantage is that students are the experts in their subject given that they have been studying it for a degree. The SF approach outlined here can be an opportunity for students to apply their prior learning to live scenarios, told through the conversational narratives of a business owner (as opposed to post-rationalised case studies). As this is emergent, it enables students to feel uncertainty during the learning.

It is a fairly easy task for an educator to find suitable owner managers through their personal or professional networks and invite them to explore a challenge in their business with students. After all, this is what they say they need. The benefits to be conveyed to a business owner are twofold. They have an opportunity for their business to be the focus for a team of (subject expert) students. Through skilful questioning (by the students) the business owner is encouraged to reframe their silent narratives about the challenges and speak about them from a different perspective. As

coaches know, this in itself is very valuable, as the owner starts to revise and devise solutions for themselves. This approach requires the SF facilitator to take time to explain and teach principles of SF to the students, explaining what resource-building questions are, so they can help clients to identify their own resources through the inquiries. Students use this conversational data from the session to inform further research which is synthesised with their own expert ideas into a plan, which the business owner eventually receives. I assess this plan and this grade counts toward their degree, thus fulfilling the instituitonal requirements.

I recently ran such a programme for graduate students of Marketing Communications from an American University who were in Oxford as part of a summer school. A learning community was created, including four business owners, eight students and myself (the SF facilitator). We used the process described below.

Sample SF Live Consulting Methodology

Preparation

Once a business owner (the client) has been identified, SF platform building questions establish whether they are a customer for change. This is necessary to minimise the risk of them dropping out by not valuing the opportunity sufficiently, (this has implications for the students' assessment, which needs the input of the business owner). I asked them to prepare to tell us (in 10 minutes or so) about their organisation. I took this step about a month before the programme began. On the first day of the programme I worked alone with students, introducing them to the SF framework, using appropriate approaches and tools for the questioning methodology. As mentioned earlier, I advised students to seek to ask questions which help the client to find resources present in their business practice. I frequently found myself saying *"The client is the expert at what they do. However you are the experts in marketing communication."* They were only to ask questions, not to engage in a discussion.

Programme Methodology

The students (in this instance) took the role of marketing communications agency staff. The emphasis for the students was on taking an effective brief of the clients' requirements in order to fulfil them through their marketing plans. When the clients arrived, they sat in front of the students who sat in a horseshoe arrangement of chairs. There were four distinct rounds for each client, structured with time boundaries.

Rounds	Method	Time	Actions
Client speaks *How the business/organisation started, where it is now, where I want it to be*	To whole group	10 minutes	Active listening from all others
SF Inquiry (including clarifying and formulating) an initial round of questions to seek clarification from client if necessary. Followed by SF inquiry of the client. Examples; "*what's working well already?*" "*when you say that doesn't work … have there ever been any exceptions?*"	Work in pairs first to formulate questions for the client (5 mins)	30 minutes	All jot down answers to build up a record of conversational data
Affirms what's impressed you about … (name of the client)	Work in (different) pairs first to discuss	3 minutes each, feedback individually	Client listens
Quick wins Students suggest resources immediately obvious and evident to them as marketers, which could be implemented rapidly by the client back in the work place. In the spirit of 'quick wins', typically suggestions are low cost.	Work in pairs first to formulate questions	1 minute each quick win	Client feedback on idea

An example of the approach

I will give a detailed account of aspects of the workshop with one particular client followed by general observations. I invited the owner of a law firm, K, to take a seat facing the team. I introduced her, and invited her to speak. It became apparent that she had turned around a firm that specialised in child and family law. When she bought the business three years ago it had substantial debt and a tarnished reputation. Managing to retain all the staff, it now made a profit. K now wanted more private clients for her legal executive. I sat beside her facing the team. After she seemed to be drawing to a conclusion, I thanked her and asked the team if they needed to ask clarifying questions. There were one or two. Then I asked them to work in pairs, to discuss what they had heard and write down a number of questions to ask the client. I restated the objective – find out as much as possible in order to take a rich and comprehensive brief. This was necessary to design a marketing campaign that would be effective. *"Don't hold back. If you are wondering about something – ask. When she's gone, she's gone,"* I said.

While they were engaged with this task, I noticed that K seemed thoughtful. *"That must have been a very difficult situation to overcome,"* I said to her. She began to talk about her self doubt, and how she had felt so responsible for her staff. Soon I called the group back to task. One by one they asked highly relevant questions, for example; *"What would your ideal private client look like?"* My favourite was *'Who's your role model?"* K took a while to answer, and then spoke about a pioneering female judge from the past *"when women in law were virtually unknown…"* She recounted that this woman was passionate about justice and continually put her own head above the parapet. I felt elated as the students' questions, although intially hesitant, were very perceptive. Unsurprisingly, the client possessed a wealth of knowledge, but their skilful questioning revealed many other previously hidden resources available to her. I stopped the session at the time boundary, and invited the team to form different pairs

to answer the question, *"What's impressed us about K?"* with a 1 minute suggestion from the students for a "quick win".

The experiences with the other clients proceeded in much the same way. Through practice the students seemed to grow in confidence and boldness, some displaying a favourite question that they posed towards the end of the sessions. Only on one occasion did I intervene to prevent a one to one discussion developing. A commitment to the discipline of the methodology was well observed by everyone. After a break, the whole process was repeated with the second client. The afternoon was dedicated to a review of the two client situations from the morning, to start to order the 'data' and make sense of the learning for their marketing communications plans.

Jackson and McKergow (2007) observe that giving compliments is *"one of the most underrated tools of SF"* (Jackson and McKergow 2007, p. 80). I agree. The Affirms round was very meaningful and powerful. As each student offered their affirmations it was obvious that the clients were visibly moved or changed in some way. Some were tearful, and one even seemed to swell and grow taller. As they accepted and thanked the students for their comments, I was aware that we felt and shared these emotions as a group, we were part of what I would like to call a 'sacred' space, where we felt very connected and quiet with each other. This experience happened each time the round of affirms was practiced. Although affirms are a crucial part of SF practice, I was mindful of the potential for clients to feel quite vulnerable after being questioned for twenty minutes or so. None of them had had any formal prior management training, which can at least form a 'way of speaking' about business practices. In my experience many SME owners can be plagued by inferior feelings or negative self-talk such as *'I muddle through . . . I bet other business owners know how to do this properly/more efficiently . . .'* and so on. They might feel judged by the process. However, it was a pleasure to see the positive and noticeable effects the affirming words had on the clients, and on us all.

The 'quick wins' round followed the Affirms. Students tentatively ventured their ideas. They needed to be courageous to suggest an innovation or tactic that the client could employ straight away, or an untapped market segment that they had identified. The clients found their insights and ideas very helpful, sometimes in a *'not seeing the wood for the trees'* way – but not always. This round was designed to encourage them to think and apply their knowledge of marketing to the live business situation, utilising what they had heard. For example, one of the questions in the SF inquiry session to the president of a motorcycle lobbying organisation was *'what would life be like for motorcyclists without (name of organisation)?'* This brought forth a fantastic articulation by the client of the triumphs achieved over the years. It was also highly amusing as he described *'a massive crash helmet', 'leg guards that covered your lower body' 'all bikes restricted to 50mph'* … Taking his turn in the quick wins session, one of the students said, "*that was so funny – why don't you make a 2 minute video for the front page of your website – link it to You Tube – make it searchable. It would convey the whole point of (name of organisation) in a few minutes in a very humorous way.*" I felt very proud of the student group.

SF – the outreach solution?

There are important benefits from utilising an SF approach to learning in HE. Programmes can be aligned and *designed around* the needs of SME business owners, which makes them relevant and attractive to this important group in society. SF approaches uphold and affirm the business owner as the expert, thus respecting their experience. SF does not seek to impose any models, frameworks, or other scholarly expertise on their 'ways of doing things'. The learning is centred around the owner, and their business challenges. Subjects are explored, discussed and enquired about using a disciplined method such as that shown above. The entrepreneurs involved expressed very positive reactions to the

process, mentioning that it had helped them to '*think more clearly*' and in one case '*be more proud of what I had achieved.*' All said that they had '*really enjoyed it.*' I mentioned earlier that business schools' programmes were seen as largely irrelevant by the SME group (Birley and Gibb 1984, Matlay 1999, Gibb 2009b), yet SF approaches overcome this by placing the entrepreneur firmly in the context of their challenges without any abstraction. SF does not seek to minimise or deny the prevailing complexity experienced in their business 'life world', rather it works with what is, the SF 'inbetween interaction' and 'staying at the surface' (McKergow and Korman, 2009). This happens by listening and using the clients' descriptions of their current experiences with no judging, analysis, or definitional catergorising.

Furthermore, this SF approach does not introduce problem definitions, or search for linear 'cause and effect' scenarios or postulate interminable definitions, which do not help people to 'move on'. This kind of approach is often seen in the case study method of teaching in HE, and is criticised as an unsuitable method for entrepreneurship education, given that entrepreneurs use 'effectual reasoning' to get things done – 'who I am, what I know, and who I know' being core components of their decision making when venturing and growing firms (Sarasvathy, 2001). SF enquiries are based around this effectual reasoning: recognising the skills, attributes, experience and expertise of the business owner and the people that make up their ego-centric networks. SF will notice and collect these resources as 'counters'. The 'quick wins' round in the example demonstrated the SF 'small steps' that the students noticed, but through the enquiry round and the affirms, the owner managers also recognised their own counters and saw some new avenues for their own small steps.

From the students' perspective, as learners of vocations, this live consulting with an SF approach to the process gives them very valuable insights into Gibbs' 'holistic lifeworld' of the business owner (Gibb, 1997, 2007, 2009a). These insights quickly dispense with the notion of boundaries

around a subject, the functional specialism paradigm of business schools worldwide (Gibb, 2009a, Matlay, 1999). Through their SF questioning, and subsequent client responses, students rapidly learn that any marketing intervention –however small – impinges on all other aspects of the firm, and the organisational complexity becomes apparent. Not least the skills of the business owner are more readily seen. One student used the metaphor '*they keep all the plates spinning.*' This valuable insight is more precious than problem solving issues in a case study, (necessarily post-rationalised by the author in order for it to be written concisely).

Upholding students as experts through their studies and life experience encourages them to apply their learning, to experiment and to test their mettle, which leads to growing confidence as they take mitigated risks through venturing ideas in the SF learning environment. Applying this new knowledge, students research a self-directed piece of work. They produce a report that proposes the most effective and creative marketing interventions and tactics. Some of the most gratifying discoveries came after the programme review with the students. Some spoke about their intentions to change direction in their careers and seek marketing jobs in agencies where they could experience a similar process again. The SF approach had allowed the students to participate in a community where the learning was both immediate and vicarious, and directly led to transformational change, by their own admission.

I am recommending that a SF approach to learning is utilised in Higher Education, specifically for entrepreneurship education for the reasons outlined above. Generally, however, the SF learning community approach would work with practitioners from most sectors, for example nurses or artists working with multi-discipline teams of students to experience and feel the 'life world' of practice in these chosen vocations. What is necessary is a creative SF practitioner to design and facilate the learning outcomes between both 'expert' groups.

An SF approach in an educational setting does in fact, *'powerfully enable us all to do more with less' (*McKergow & Korman, 2009). In this case, facilitating SF approaches between two expert *and enterprising* client groups leads to a richer and more relevant learning experience for all, with much less didactic and discursive lecturing interventions from the teacher.

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