Embracing the chaos: Challenges and opportunities of an extracurricular experiential events management learning activity

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Abstract
A comparison of the skills and qualities required in entrepreneurship and those expected in event management suggests similarities between the two disciplines and similar challenges for educators. While there has been increased interest in the education of entrepreneurs, discussion of events management education remains scarce. This account of practice provides an insight into some of the challenges and opportunities that arise when the confines and structure of a curriculum are removed, allowing both students and teacher to embrace the chaos of an unstructured extracurricular experiential learning activity.

Keywords
Case study, education, enterprise, entrepreneurship, experiential learning, events management

The skills and attributes required by events management practitioners have similarities with those expected of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneur attributes and competencies include self-confidence, network development, dynamism, adaptability, leadership, results orientation, negotiation, teamwork, responsibility and troubleshooting (Mitchelmore and Rowley, 2010; Robles and Zarraga-Rodriguez, 2015). Event managers are required to demonstrate a similar range of attributes and competencies, particularly teamwork, responsibility and troubleshooting (Krugman et al., 2014; Robertson et al., 2012; Silvers et al., 2005). Research has identified a gap in students’ abilities, with employers stating that students have poor stress management and problem solving ability and a lack of confidence and proactivity, suggesting a role for educators in the creation of experiences that will instil confidence and increased self-determination (Junek et al., 2009).

A key challenge for events management educators is how to develop effectively those skills and qualities that will prepare students for a successful role in the events management sector. Various approaches (e.g. case studies, problem-based learning and group work) are used in teaching to support learning through application. Where real opportunities are provided, the events are predetermined by academic staff or local business partners; students are limited to specific roles and are managed carefully to minimise risk to the event or the partner. These activities are helpful in supporting skills such as team working, communication and customer services, but they rarely provide opportunities to learn from mistakes and to develop problem solving, decision making or leadership qualities. They also do not give students accountability or responsibility for the outcome of the event.

Event managers are required to operate in complex and uncertain conditions (Getz, 2005). What the classroom experience struggles to replicate is the real world and its unexpected challenges which require dynamic teamwork, decision making and problem solving – with potential consequences beyond an unsatisfactory grade. Real-world event managers are required to lead teams, make decisions and problem solve in order to deliver the event and achieve the desired result – challenges similar to those of an entrepreneur. As in the case of entrepreneurship, learning the process and theory alone does not adequately prepare students for the actual demands of the role: events

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management education, like entrepreneurship education, needs to be experiential as well as theoretical (Gibb, 2002).

The intention of the project described in this account of practice was to adopt an experiential approach that would remove both students and teacher from the comfort and confines of the curriculum, providing an opportunity to embrace chaos and offering students control over and responsibility for the results without the usual parameters or constraints of the curriculum.

The project
Fifteen second-year undergraduate events management students volunteered to participate in an extracurricular pilot project to create and deliver an event of their choosing. The project was supervised by one member of the academic team who had taught the students during their first year. It was initially expected to run for 10 weeks, but the students expressed concern about their ability to deliver an event to the deadline (suggesting a lack of confidence in their abilities). The project was therefore extended to 17 weeks. The students identified a suitable time each week for a 1-hour meeting. The project required a commitment of 2–3 hours per week from the teacher.

The rationale for conducting the pilot as an extracurricular activity was that it would give students the freedom to explore and encounter challenges without worrying about the impact on their grades. An unstructured approach was adopted so that the students could explore and adapt as needed. The group was given the objective of breaking even: there was a need to provide a shared cooperative goal to promote learning from mistakes (Tjosvold et al., 2004).

Participation
All 64 second-year event management students were invited at the start of the academic year to participate. There was uncertainty from staff as to whether students would engage, due to the extracurricular nature of the project. Initially interest was high, with almost 30 students attending an initial briefing meeting. Over the first 3 weeks, this number reduced to 15 participants – the reasons for dropping out included an increased workload in the second year. The project was intentionally run alongside a double weighted and demanding project management module to provide basic knowledge and enable application to a real event. It was not surprising therefore that many students decided to prioritise their academic work (those who did participate, however, commented that the project had helped their understanding of the module by bringing it to life and enabling them to see the real benefits of the tools involved). Secondly, as the ideas began to evolve some students disengaged with the process because the events suggested did not align with their own ideas. Thirdly, two students cited part-time work commitments as a reason for dropping out – highlighting a potential barrier to the inclusivity of extracurricular activity. Finally, the lack of structure and direction also contributed to the dropout: some students indicated that they were dissatisfied with the lack of precise instruction or direction and expressed discomfort with taking responsibility for the project outcome, suggesting a fear of failure or a lack of belief in the prospect of a positive outcome.

A frustrating false start
As expected in this type of experiential activity, a facilitative and coaching approach was adopted by the teacher. After the first 2 weeks and the initial excitement about generating event ideas, maintaining this approach became challenging. Students repeatedly wanted answers or to be told what to do and were reluctant to make decisions or complete actions themselves or to demonstrate initiative. Ideas for their event were for the most part unrealistic and were followed by several frustratingly slow and seemingly unproductive weeks. Students would unapologetically attend the weekly meetings without having attempted agreed actions, resulting in little progress.

At this point, individuals started to comment that they were ‘going round in circles’ or ‘getting nowhere’ and voiced their frustrations. These frustrated students appeared to fall into two categories: (a) those who were annoyed by the lack of progress and took the initiative to make things happen and (b) those who complained or seemed surprised that they were not being told what to do. For the teacher this was a critical and uncomfortable stage because it felt as if the students were criticising or blaming the teacher for their lack of progress, and it did seem that the whole project was destined to fail. At this point three further students, who had provided a limited contribution and had commented on the lack of help, confirmed they would no longer be involved in the project.

Pause . . . review
Rather than admit defeat, a new approach was taken. The next meeting was used to ask the group what it wanted to gain from the experience, to help manage expectations and understand why they had chosen to give up their time. On reflection, the students’ motivation was not clear to the teacher. Three themes emerged.

Enhancing their employability was the main priority for most, through gaining valuable experience to include in their CV and/or tangible examples to discuss in interviews. Some students were hoping to secure work placements and others viewed the project as an opportunity to compensate for not taking a year in industry before their final year. While the employability motive was no surprise, understanding exactly what students wanted to achieve provided opportunities to encourage individuals through the project.
Having the freedom to create their own event, in the way they wanted, resonated strongly with the students. Equally important was the perceived trust from the teacher manifested in creating the opportunity. As a group, the students shared the goal of wanting to prove they could rise to the challenge. On reflection, this was a significant element and a powerful motivator throughout the project.

The third motivation was to meet others on the events management programme. It was surprising to discover that the students did not know each other prior to the project. Although they had spent the first year together, many had been in separate seminar groups and few had friends on the programme. This may have partly explained some of the hesitancy and lack of participation in the early stages and had not been taken into account because the teacher had incorrectly assumed that they knew each other.

This pause was a critical moment. It was a moment for challenging assumptions and it allowed the teacher to learn more about the students. It also seemed to bring them together as they realised that they shared motivations and personal goals in relation to the project. Following the refocusing, the group started to complete actions and make decisions. Although still lacking in familiarity with one another, the students gradually started to express frustration at others’ failure to complete actions and, if work had not been completed, the more proactive students were claiming the action. Slowly, each week, more students started to claim actions and to get involved. They started nominating each other for tasks, suggesting ‘you could do that’, ‘you would be good at this’ – which gave those who were not inclined to self-nominate an opportunity to become involved. Occasionally nominated students would refuse, but more often they seemed pleased with the suggestion and would take the action forward. They were, then, starting to take responsibility for themselves and the project and were beginning to function as a team. This may have been due to their increased familiarity with one another and with the project tasks, and to recognitions of small successes such as achieving a cost saving or gaining support for an idea from other group members. All this led to greater confidence and in turn to greater participation.

At this point there were still two students who were only sporadically involved and two who attended weekly but remained silent during the sessions, despite efforts from other members and the teacher. They seemed more interested in observing passively than in actively participating and reported satisfaction with the project – an indication perhaps that they were also obtaining some benefit by attending but in a different way from the other students.

**Challenges and turning points**

Cope (2011) states that failure should be allowed to occur to develop entrepreneurial learning. A key aim was to enable potential ‘failure’ by allowing students to explore potentially unsuitable options and deal with unexpected problems. Nine weeks into the project a clash with another event was identified. The students arrived at the meeting to deliver the news and were upset and worried the project could not continue. This was the first time they had really shown that the project was important to them. They were asked to consider options: it was important that the teacher remained calm and did not rush into offering solutions, as this was an unexpected learning opportunity that mirrored an issue they might well face in the events industry. With a little coaching and reassurance, the students ended the meeting with a plan in place and a sense of achievement in having averted potential disaster.

In week 13, a partner who was expected to support the event became increasingly unreliable and then stopped responding to correspondence. By this stage the students were running productive meetings with clear reporting procedures which highlighted the issue and impact. The response was surprising. Instead of deferring to the teacher, the group decided almost immediately to sack the partner. They now had the confidence to make a difficult decision together. The teacher silently observed as the students organised themselves and worked together to revise their plans. They provided a brief overview of their ideas to the teacher, but this time they were not asking – they were telling the teacher what would happen. Hasse and Lautenschlager (2011) describe the evolution of the teacher’s role in experiential learning as it was experienced in this project.

Another change occurred. A small group who had been emerging as democratic style leaders shifted to an urgent pace-setting style of leadership and everyone responded in line with this change. Later, external issues caused delays to the ticket sale launch, but again they organised themselves and developed a variety of opportunities to successfully sell the tickets – again problem solving with little support. Shortly afterwards, the students reduced the published ticket price and then realised their error which resulted in a shortfall. Solutions were discussed and action was taken without consultation with the teacher, who was now hearing of problems after they had been resolved and was no longer being asked for advice. As a key part of the experience, the students were given the space to explore different avenues and evaluate options for themselves, sometimes incorrectly. Although it was tempting to step in and offer a solution, the teacher took a step back and enabled them to resolve problems themselves. As a result, some students became annoyed or frustrated and complained that the teacher was not helping. However, by the end of the project these same students commented that, although they had been frustrated, they had a sense of achievement and realised that they were gradually building confidence to make decisions and overcome problems.
Impact of the timescale

The project was extended by 7 weeks by request of the students. On reflection, the extended time scale provided students with greater scope for the emergent nature of the project, allowing time for mistakes, evaluating options and making connections for themselves. It could be argued the timescale contributed to procrastination and indecisiveness experiences early in the project. While reducing the timescale may have focussed students and encouraged action, the weeks of ‘exploration’ and ‘realisation’ appear to be some of the most important in terms of the development of the team. Firstly, it enabled students to make discoveries for themselves. For example, several weeks were spent researching and presenting venue options that the teacher knew were inappropriate. The longer timeframe enabled the teacher to observe, listen and encourage. It also allowed for students to explore ideas, discuss and challenge each other through the weekly meetings. With a shorter timescale it would have been difficult for the teacher not to intervene as the need to make progress may have become too great. Instead the teacher could question and coach without providing instruction, asking questions such as ‘how might you . . . ’, ‘what is the impact of . . . ’. Even with these prompts, it took several weeks for the group to exhaust the options and decide on a viable option. As the project progressed several students recognised the need to go through this process and commented how it felt frustrating at the time they were not being told which venues to use but understood they had to make the decision for themselves. Many expressed gratitude for the approach and suggested it made them feel very uncertain at the time, but more confident in being able to perform some of these activities again.

Challenging assumptions

There was a gradual realisation of the value of ‘boring’ tools, theories or frameworks applied to the project. There seemed to be two main reasons for this development. As these were second-year students it was assumed that there would be a basic level of knowledge, which proved to be incorrect. There were instances of conversations with students highlighting a knowledge gap or a lack of confidence to apply knowledge which had led to procrastination. For example, from one of these conversations it appeared that the students did not know how to produce a working budget and were overwhelmed by the task. This was surprising: a working knowledge had been assumed as the students had taken a finance and accounting module in their first year and had not explicitly referred to the problem, perhaps because they had not realised the inadequacy or did not want to show weakness. At this point, it seemed appropriate for the teacher to move from coaching to a more directional approach, but it was important that the task was not completed for the students. A separate meeting was arranged and students were asked to come equipped with costs – they then received an overview of the construction of an event budget and calculation of pricing. This proved to be enough for the group to feel confident with the task and to progress independently. As the project continued, there were occasions when students asked questions while offering a solution, illustrating a shift from expecting the teacher to provide the answers to taking the initiative to develop a potential solution.

Additionally, students had not yet recognised the value of actions, processes or etiquette required, such as the need for minutes, plans, communication or budgets. Part of the project’s aim was to recreate a real event situation which included the formalities expected in a work environment. Therefore, with the exception of the ‘ideas sessions’, most of the meetings were conducted in a boardroom to provide the formality of a real work project. All participants sat around the table and volunteers took minutes to record the discussion, decisions and action points. It had not been anticipated that the students would not be familiar with the format or etiquette of a formal business meeting, or that the concept of agendas and minutes would be new to them. Consequently, an agreement of conduct was developed along with templates to support minute-taking. To varying degrees, the students began to understand the importance of the documentation and etiquette. As the project progressed a small group of ‘hangers on’ would attend sporadically and hijack the meeting with questions relating to decisions previously made or inappropriate suggestions based on the progress made. At this stage, individuals started to refer the ‘hangers on’ to the minutes, thus realising the importance of recording decisions and actions. There were other moments of enlightenment, when one individual would suddenly make a connection and would share it with the group in the form of a suggestion or question and others would follow. This was frustrating in one way, as these connections often related to concepts previously explained in the curriculum, but the ‘doing’ within the project embedded understanding in a way that had not been achieved in the classroom.

Conclusion

This account of practice provides an overview of one experience in an extra-curricular experiential project delivered outside the constraints of the curriculum and assessment. It was designed to give students the freedom, responsibility and opportunity to explore and discover for themselves what they were capable of achieving without teacher direction. At times the experience was uncomfortable, messy, seemingly disorganised and reactive; however, the freedom enabled the students to find their own way, contributing to increased confidence and leadership, responsibility, decision making and problem solving abilities. For the teacher
it was exhausting, frustrating and rewarding, often challenging existing assumptions, knowledge and capabilities. The project aimed to create a break-even event. Collectively, the chaos was embraced and achieved so much more.

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