Stimulating Learning in Micro-business Owners Through Introducing External Perspectives

Abstract

Track: Entrepreneurial Practitioner Learning
Topic (s): a) Enhancing and stimulating learning experiences b) Coaching and Mentoring – (Entrepreneurial/SME education and training)

Applicability to the conference theme: This paper relates to a current, collaborative programme that brings together academia, micro businesses and larger regional firms and organisations to develop the leadership and management practices of the micro business owners through drawing on a northern business school's 'anchor institution' status. This may be a cost-effective way of contributing to the immediate development needs of micro-businesses and strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem of a locality, and therefore is relevant to the worlds of academia, policy and practice.

Aim: This paper aims to explore the learning that micro businesses have achieved through participating in a development programme run by a northern business school and the process through which that learning is achieved.

Methodology: The paper adopts a qualitative and inductive approach. The research can be characterised as interventionist (Baard, 2010; Thomas and Rothman, 1994) and enactive research (Johannisson, 2011) where the participants in the programme are fully involved in a 'knowledge-creating process where their experientially gained insights are fully appreciated' (2011: 137). Data collection is by way of field notes, focus groups, survey responses and semi-structured interviews. These are coded to identify 'informant-centric' concepts which ensure the participants are treated as 'knowledgeable agents' (Gioia et al. 2012). These concepts are then developed in light of relevant literature through 'recursive cycling' (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

Contribution: The paper makes a contribution to the debate on the role of business schools in small-firm learning by exploring the way in which the programme was designed in conjunction with a 'pracademic' (Posner, 2009) to meet the needs of the micro business as a 'learning organisation' as described by Gibb (1997). It also identifies how learning by micro business owners can be stimulated by the introduction of an external perspective in a 'novel' form i.e. managers from medium to large sized organisations. This external perspective may be unusual as Robson and Bennett (2000) noted that business friends and relatives were often the preferred and most valued source of advice for micro-business owners, and work by Johnson et al (2007) found it was difficult for a small firm with limited managerial resources to identify the type of formal (market or non-market) advice that they need to produce the development outcome they want and therefore tend to rely on friends and family for advice. The paper explores the types of learning that occur when that external perspective is introduced. Our findings show that this intervention appealed to micro-business managers and enabled them to clarify their vision for their business and its value proposition; focus on how they should invest their time to generate greatest impact; and obtain validation and increase their confidence as a leader of their business.

Through its methodology, the paper simultaneously explores how a research-based intervention that adopts an engaged scholarship approach can enable the researcher to access the 'lived experiences' of micro business owners participating in a development programme

and therefore makes a contribution to the underexplored area of the messy dynamics of implementing engaged scholarship in the context of small business research.

Implications for policy and practice: Micro-businesses are crucial to the economy. UK Government figures show that in 2016, 5.3 million (96%) of UK businesses were micro-businesses – employing 0-9 people. They accounted for 32% of employment and 19% of turnover. Hayton (2015) suggests that the overall impact of leadership and management skills on firm performance tends to be particularly strong for firms with between five and 19 employees. The model that has been implemented in this programme provides a useful form of leadership and management support to micro-business owners and uses the anchor status of a business school to provide a platform for involving larger firms in small firm development as suggested in evidence to the APPSBG/FSB (2014) report.

Introduction

Micro-businesses are a vital part of the global economy. A recent publication (OECD, 2017) found that across all OECD countries, between 70% and 95% of all enterprises were micro-businesses, i.e. enterprises with fewer than ten persons employed[1], and in most countries over half of all enterprises were non-employer enterprises, also referred to by the OECD report as 'just me' enterprises. UK Government figures estimate that at the beginning of 2017, 5.45 million (96%) of UK private sector businesses were micro-businesses, of which 79% were non-employers. Micro-businesses accounted for 33% of private sector employment and 22% of private turnover.

Notwithstanding this significance, micro-businesses remain a comparatively under-researched phenomenon, despite many authors arguing that micro-businesses are distinct, across multiple dimensions, from larger SMEs (Devins et al. 2005; Gherhes et al. 2016; Kelliher and Reinl 2009). At a time when research (Hayton 2015) is identifying that leadership and entrepreneurship skills are both under-developed in the SME population as a whole and positively related to performance in terms of turnover, productivity and growth, it is unsurprising that policy makers are increasingly interested in interventions that can improve these skills (e.g. the Business Basics Programme in the UK[2] and Scale-Up Denmark[3]). However, an understanding of how micro-business owners can be supported to develop the skills they require to develop their businesses is necessary if effective interventions are to be designed, yet there remain few in-depth empirical studies of the learning processes of micro-business owners as they participate in such interventions, exploring the techniques of the interventions, how the micro-business managers learn and what they learn (although cf. Pittaway et al. 2009; Samujh 2011; Zhang and Hamilton 2010).

This paper takes a practice-based approach to exploring how micro-business owners (MBOs) learn. In doing so it responds to calls from Harrison and Leitch (2005) for future work to consider the process of learning in the context of entrepreneurial practice and from Gherhes et al. (2016) for research to explore how management capabilities are accumulated in micro-

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[1] Some countries use different conventions: the smallest size class (i.e. micro) refers to "1-10" for Mexico, "1-19" for Australia and Turkey, and statistics from Canada, the United States and the Russian Federation do not include non-employer enterprise counts.

[2] https://apply-for-innovation-funding.service.gov.uk/competition/192/overview

[3] https://scale-updenmark.com

businesses. The paper also makes a contribution to the debate on the role of business schools in micro-business learning by exploring the way in which a programme in a UK business school was designed in conjunction with a 'pracademic' (Posner, 2009) to meet the needs of the micro business as a 'learning organisation' as described by Gibb (1997). It identifies how learning by micro business owners can be stimulated by the introduction of an external perspective in a 'novel' form i.e. managers from larger organisations. This external perspective may be unusual as Robson and Bennett (2000) noted that business friends and relatives were often the preferred and most valued source of advice for micro-business owners, and work by Johnson et al (2007) found it was difficult for a small firm with limited managerial resources to identify the type of formal (market or non-market) advice that they need to produce the development outcome they want and therefore tend to rely on friends and family for advice. The paper explores the process of learning and the types of learning that occur when that external perspective is introduced. It finds that a social learning process based on questioning and reflection enabled micro-business owners to learn about themselves, their business and enhanced managerial practices.

Entrepreneurial Learning

A full review of the entrepreneurial learning literature is not attempted or appropriate here given the methodological approach of the research described below. However, two themes in the literature on entrepreneurial learning are particularly relevant to the empirical work of this paper. The contextual nature of learning by entrepreneurs (Gibb 1997; Harrison and Leitch, 2005) and a lack of attention to the processes by which entrepreneurs learn (Cope 2005: Politis 2005).

Harrison and Leitch argue that 'Learning cannot and should not be divorced from the specific context, including organizational context, within which it takes place' (2005, p. 360). It has long been acknowledged (Down 1999; Gibb, 1997) that the nature of the learning process in small firms, their learning needs and appropriate responses to those needs are distinct from those in larger organisations. Devins et al. argue that 'managers in micro enterprises should be recognised as a group in their own right' (2005: 541) and learning in micro-businesses is being conceptualised as distinct from that in larger small businesses (Devins et al., 2005; Kelliher and Rienl, 2009). Micro-businesses and their owners are a heterogeneous group, with many sub-classifications e.g. micro and ethnic, micro and family, micro and start-up (Devins et al. 2005), but some common features have been established in the literature that are pertinent to understanding micro-businesses and therefore to designing interventions to support their learning. Ownership and management are synonymous in most micro-businesses (Kelliher and Rienl 2009), with the characteristics of the business being intertwined with the characteristics of the owner and where the 'ups and downs of business performance directly affect monthly income and lifestyle' (Gibb 2009: 213). Gherhes at al. (2016) identify that prior research has highlighted non-economic objectives such as independence, flexibility and work satisfaction as the main motivational factors for micro-business owners and that the majority of owners had a lack of growth ambition, partially due to risk aversion and fear of losing managerial control. As has been established many micro-businesses are 'just me' (OECD 2017) enterprises, but even where there are employees, the micro-business owner is faced with a 'balancing act' in trying to accomplish all the tasks necessary for running and managing the business (Gherhes et al. 2016; O'Dwyer and Ryan 2000) and consequent pressures on the micro-business owner to be "an expert in all fields of management" (Kelliher and Rienl, 2009: 523). Kelliher and

Rienl (2009) also identify that micro-businesses face what they term 'resource poverty' and operate with severe constraints in terms of time, finance and expertise.

Smilor (1997: quoted in Harrison and Leitch, 2005) describes entrepreneurs as 'exceptional learners':

They 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.

Small business managers' learning is thus characterised as experiential (Cope 2005), where the challenge for interventionists is to add value to what is learned from experience (Gibb 1997). This challenge is heightened in the case of micro-business owners given their characteristics outlined above. Where more formal learning is undertaken, action learning is seen as a preferred approach and the need to tailor learning opportunities to the immediate needs of the small business is recognised (Gibb 2009). Cope (2005) argues that, despite the consensus that much entrepreneurial learning is action-oriented, entrepreneurs should not be conceived of as simply 'doers', but should be considered to have the capacity to act as 'reflective practitioners'. However, Harrison and Leitch (2005) quote Senge (1995) who maintains that an entrepreneur's 'ability to actually succeed in continually renewing their organizations is often limited by what entrepreneurs often don't do well. In particular, they very often do not create an environment for reflection'. If the informal learning achieved through "doing" is not recognized as learning, it is unreflective and not conducive to moving the business forward (Clarke et al. 2009).

Methodology

Engaged scholarship is characterised as an approach whereby new knowledge, useful to theory and practice, can be co-created by interactions between academics and practitioners (Van de Ven and Johnson 2006; Van de Ven 2007). Van de Ven and Johnson's advocacy of engaged scholarship has been vociferously and provocatively criticised by fellow management scholars (see for example McKelvey, 2006 and Kieser and Leiner, 2009) from a traditional, positivistic paradigm and by entrepreneurship scholars (Rouse and Woolnough 2018). That said, Van de Ven's notion of engaged scholarship covers a wide spectrum of approaches on a continuum from 'basic science with stakeholder advice' to 'action/intervention research for a client'.

This project can be characterised as intervention research (IR) which is a practice based approach with roots in social and health services and since the 1990's in management accounting. Baard (2010:23) characterises intervention research as a form of applied research 'scaffolded on basic research that explores problems in real-world contexts, with the aim of providing practical solutions (applicable to organisational practice) and creating knowledge'. Thomas and Rothman's (1994) IR framework identifies three approaches on a continuum:

- empirical research to extend the knowledge of human behaviour relating to human service intervention (intervention KD: Knowledge Development);
- the ways in which the findings from intervention KD may be linked to, and utilised in practical application (intervention KU: Knowledge Utilisation); and

- research directed toward developing innovative interventions (intervention design and development (D&D)).

More than three decades ago, Gibb (1997) highlighted the need for closer engagement of researchers in the SME business development process in order to harness the experience and contextual knowledge of the small business community. Kieser and Leiner (2009) argue that intervention methods 'i.e. methods that support interventions in (in contrast to explanations of) existing organizations' (2009: 526) do not constitute rigorous research. Tushman's contribution in Walsh et al. (2007) argues, on the other hand, that executive education in business schools that takes an action-learning approach is an under-leveraged method of co-producing research with organisations, arguing that 'those most productive relationships start with our adding value through researched-based insight (doing) and then moving to our research (knowing)' (2007: 135-136). It is not the intention in this paper to enter the rigour versus relevance debate, but the authors identify the need to identify a structured approach to achieve rigour and legitimacy and, in Table 1, map the approach taken as the project has developed against the staged model for intervention design and development approach (DD) established by Thomas and Rothman (1994).

Table 1: Intervention Lifecycle

Thomas & Rothman (1994) Design and Development Intervention Lifecycle	Activities	Timeframe
Phase 1: problem analysis and project planning	Calls for projects to improve entrepreneurship and learning skills in small businesses by funder (UKCES, 2015) Literature review Informal conversations with stakeholders Novel concept for intervention	Months 1 - 2
Phase 2: information gathering and synthesis	Logic model development Initial plan for delivery of the intervention Application to the funder	Months 2 - 4
Phase 3: design	Assembly of the research/practitioner team Revised plan for delivery of the intervention	Months 4 - 9
Phase 4: early development and pilot testing	Recruitment of participants (testing methods of recruitment) Initial intervention delivered to six cohorts Observations Conversations with participants, funders and within research team Incremental modification to the intervention	Months 10 - 17
Phase 5: evaluation and advanced development	Formal interviews with participants for evaluation	Months 14 - 18

(experimental social research)	Recursive cycling from intervention to literature Writing evaluation reports Substantial revisions to the intervention	
Phase 6: dissemination (model development research)	Conference proceedings Published articles Ongoing delivery of the intervention Development of new research questions Recursive cycling from intervention to literature	Months 15 – 43 (and ongoing)

Frank and Landström (2016) identify that practice approaches to entrepreneurship studies are relatively rare and draw attention to the promise of 'enactive research' (Johannisson, 2011) as a way of conducting field research to develop qualitative and longitudinal research case studies. In Johannisson's (2011) case, the research project aimed to stimulate regional development by bridging art and science with an art exhibition on that theme which lasted nine months. This project designed and delivered a development programme for micro business owners, as shown in Table 2, enabling research to be co-produced with participants, as Oyadomari et al (2016) found in their study of cost measurement in small manufacturing companies in Brazil.

This approach is based upon a constructivist paradigm and the empirical work uses an interpretative methodology where data collection has been by way of field notes, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and follow-up surveys conducted over three years (see Table 3). This material is seen to represent participants' perceptions and the data is coded to identify 'informant-centric' concepts which ensure the participants are treated as 'knowledgeable agents' (Gioia et al. 2012). These concepts are then developed considering relevant literature through 'recursive cycling' (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

While recognising the OECD definition of micro-businesses as employing fewer than 10 employees, the programme has been marketed to the owner managers of existing businesses employing fewer than 20 employees on the understanding that these businesses were under-served by existing development programmes in the region and need different approaches to management development. Only five of the businesses had more than nine employees (the maximum size was 17 employees). The programme recruits target firms through trusted intermediaries, face-to-face at regional networking events, and increasingly through referral from previous participants. The business school works with large regional employers to identify managers within their business who have leadership and management experience and might benefit from participating in the programme. Briefings are always arranged for the managers from the larger firms before matching them to micro-business owner. This enables us to get to know the managers so that we can match them appropriately to the micro-business owners. It also gives the managers an insight into the life world of the owner-manager, and it provides an introduction or refresher to skills in mentoring others. Workshops have been held in a variety of locations in the region, including the business school's own premises.

Table 2: Intervention Process and Design

Intervention Process	Promotion Stage	Application Stage	First Workshop	Second Workshop	Third Workshop	Fourth Workshop	Follow Up
Timeline	Ongoing	Ongoing	Week 1	Week 3	Week 5	Week 9	Ongoing
Intervention Design	Choice of wording Distribution Channels	Simple application process	Small cohort of MBOs (up to 8) Informal Setting Discursive	Introduction of external managers 1 to 1 semi-structured discussions Feedback to whole group	Continued involvement of managers 1 to 1 semi-structured discussions Feedback to whole group Action Card completion	MBOs only Follow up on actions Focus Group	
Data collection		Completed application forms	Observations Field Notes Participant 'homework'	Observations Field Notes	Observations Field Notes	Recorded Focus Group	Semi-structured Interviews Evaluation Questionnaire

Table 3: Data Collection

Year	Workshops	Number of cohorts	Number of MBO participants	Interviews	Focus Groups	Number of Focus Group Participants	Follow-up survey responses
2016	21	7	43	9	-	-	10
2017	24	6	27	-	4	13	10
2018	14	4	28	-	2	15	19

Findings

Three main themes emerge from the analysis. These themes emerge predominantly from coding the transcripts of the focus groups and the interviews to understand how the participants narrate their experiences after participation, but they are confirmed by observations during the workshops and analysis of the follow up surveys. The themes relate to: The significance of the learning setting; the specific learning processes occurring; and the learning outcomes.

The learning setting
Certain characteristics about the learning setting consistently emerged as significant in the narratives of the participants. The university and the business school were both seen as trusted and credible, and also distinct from other training providers.

> *So I think when there's a university brand involved then it comes with a certain level of kind of credence. Whereas if it's an unknown third-party training type company then you don't really know what you're going to get. (Year 1, Cohort 4 participant)*

> *So there are sometimes training courses that are funded which are very poor but I didn't feel that that would be true because this was through [northern business school]. So I think there is a huge amount of credibility that came through that, as opposed to just being... even a very good training provider that was on their own would not necessarily have had the same degree of credibility. (Year 2, Cohort 5 participant)*

> *I mean the idea of a university involvement I think does, certainly for those of us from a university background I guess, it probably does add some credibility (Year 3, Cohort 4 participant)*

The 'learning partners' (Gibb 1997), the managers from the larger firms, the facilitators (a 'pracademic' (Posner 2009), who is himself an owner manager, and two academics) and the peer micro-business managers, were seen as neutral and non-competing, engaged in this setting for a mutual, rather than one-way, learning and this contributed to a setting conducive to learning.

> *Richard [the large firm manager] is not going to achieve anything from what I say to him. He doesn't benefit from what I say to him. It's entirely*

neutral. There is nothing to gain for him, etc., etc., whereas in a business forum, they're always thinking, "Well I could get some work here. I could get some work there." It's not entirely neutral, I don't feel, the business networks that you can go to. (Year 3, Cohort 6 participant)

I think part of the dynamic has been that you can be open and honest about everything to do with your business [...]Maybe we should be different about that but that's not normally what you would be comfortable just talking about with anyone. Whereas you feel this is quite a small group, we know each other, we're peers, other business owners who are here for the same kind of thing, managers of large firms who might have answers, you can actually say, "This is what we're struggling with. Help." (Year 2, Cohort 5 participant)

Given the short term nature of the programme it was surprising that a rapport developed so quickly, but the micro-business participants appreciated both the opportunity to work with the managers from the larger firms and the role of the university in convening that setting.

It was fortuitous, but I just felt a connection. He was a very nice laidback guy, very easy to get along with, I felt very comfortable very quickly with him. I didn't mind sharing. Some of the things might have been a little sensitive, not confidential or top secret or anything like that, but I just felt like he understood some of the pains that we'd had. And he's been in to meet [my spouse] outside of the programme, and because he's such a nice guy we just felt like we could definitely learn from what he's been through, some of the experiences and it just made it feel like… to take his advice, it felt like the right thing, if that sounds a bit silly. (Year 1, Cohort 2 participant)

if I decided to pick up the phone and phone [COO of a major automotive supplier], with no prior introduction and him have absolutely no knowledge of me, expecting to enter into a series of long conversations whereby he'd quite happily share his business operations and suggestions, it just wouldn't happen. So if there's something that people are willingly contributing to so you know that you can go along and talk to people because they want to be there, they want to be having those conversations then yes, of course it's a no brainer. (Year 1, Cohort 1 participant)

I think another thing that's very important, or rather it seems different in this scenario, is you get to hear about the personal stories as well. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

While the large firm managers were a significant part of the programme, being brought together with peers was also appreciated.

The larger managers bring a different dynamic but for me, the benefit has been listening to what other small business owners are saying and recognising, in myself, the same issues that they have, that it's not something that's necessarily specific to me, it's being a small business owner. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

The notion of a 'safe' space for learning was also prevalent and in turn this led to participants feeling willing to open up and be honest.

it is that safe space where you can actually share what you're struggling with and you can offer help. I found that really useful. (Year 2, Cohort 5 participant)

I think because most small businesses work in a fairly competitive market, it's quite nice to be able to talk about your business in an open and honest way, where there's not competitors and wolves and sharks lurking around the corner. (Year 3, Cohort 1 participant)

The reasons people have opened up is because they feel comfortable to do so, otherwise it just doesn't work, it wouldn't work (Year 3, Cohort 2 participant)

I work in a very competitive environment in which I don't trust people, to actually be able to be honest about where I'm at in my business. So, I felt much freer, and more safe, to be 100% honest in this course because there's none of my competitors and obviously, we've been reassured, in terms of confidentiality, as well, so that's really helped. (Year 3, Cohort 3 participant)

It's almost like you're able to be vulnerable, like show your weakness, and it's fine, nobody is going to judge you (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant).

The programme was designed in a way that was highly sensitive to the idea that the business experience and culture of the micro-business manager versus the large firm manager may be distinct and which avoided the dynamic whereby the experienced manager is expected to advise the micro-business manager. It is interesting to see from participants' responses that all 'learning partners' were perceived as participating in a multi-directional learning space, a learning community, whereby all parties were learning from their participation.

People are willing, after they've met each other and heard their stories and all that, they're willing to offer support or help. So it's more that community feel. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

It was noticeable that the micro-business managers recognised the two-way learning – micro-business manager to large firm manager as well as vice-versa, as can be seen from the following quotes regarding the managers that the micro-businesses had been paired with.

I think he learnt, as well, stuff that he hadn't known. He was encouraging and I didn't feel like it was one way. He kept on saying, "Since we last met, I've had a look at this and this is fascinating me." And all that kind of stuff which was really nice because I feel like it wasn't completely one way. He went over and above, really. (Year 3, Cohort 3 participant)

So, after we have met, and he's said this two or three times, he said he always leaves feeling much more energised and full of ideas himself. He says just listening to somebody else talk about improving their own business sends him away eager to look at what he can do better in his business.(Year 1, Cohort 4 participant)

So he said to me that he had been sceptical but now he really saw the value of, as a big firm manager, engaging with a smaller company because he could see that there was real value in what he knew. (Year 2, Cohort 5 participant)

The learning process

The setting that was created was valued by the participants, but it is necessary to go further to explore how that context, and the structure and timing of the workshops, facilitated a learning process by the micro-business managers, before turning to the final theme of the learning outcomes of the programme.

The workshops were designed to ensure that they were tailored to the individual micro-business managers, and they were adapted in light of feedback from participants. The format was three, and from Year 2 onwards four, morning workshops spaced over two to three months, timed to allow school drop-offs where necessary and to miss rush hour traffic. Participants had time for refreshments before the workshop and the format was an initial short presentation from the facilitators to set the scene, followed by one-to-one discussions in pairs, then feedback to the group, followed by more one-to-one discussion and further feedback to the group before a networking lunch. The facilitators provided light touch frameworks, including a business model canvas, to frame discussions, but the 'instructions' were to share stories and identify areas where the pairs could make most difference for the micro-business owner in light of their resources and business context. The need for questioning and active listening on behalf of the large firm manager and open and honest responses from the micro-business managers were highlighted by the facilitators. This is a less structured approach than an action learning set approach, but shares some similarities.

Micro-business managers were exposed to multiple versions of entrepreneurial practice through shared, detailed discussions of other micro-business manager's contexts, challenges, and behaviours and this was valued.

Sometimes it's very interesting listening to other stories. You get to take in and then just rethink for yourself. (Year 2, Cohort 4 participant)

I think it's great always to meet other people in businesses. I think what stands out is everybody is in the same boat. It's quite nice that the university can put something like this on because you get to meet other people that are small businesses in the same boat. (Year 2 Cohort 3 participant)

The external perspective, largely but not exclusively coming from the one-to-one discussions between the micro-business manager and the large firm manager, was highly valued.

Having a complete external mentor who had no previous knowledge of the business and no expectations around, you know, what I was going to say to them was very, very useful to have that almost like a clean slate. (Year 1, Cohort 4 participant)

Sometimes you need that outside perspective or someone that is experienced, but in another area, that will listen to you, obviously that's the most important thing, and then give you that feedback or take that in and

then give you stuff that you might not have thought of or might not have considered. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

I think it's actually better to be paired up with somebody who's outside the sector and they'll give you the perspective, hopefully, that somebody inside your sector can't because they can't see the wood from the trees. (Year 3, Cohort 4 participant)

The process was designed to encourage conversations and questioning, rather than teaching and this was reflected in the responses.

I started off feeling like the business was stagnating a little bit, I'd lost my focus a bit. I was too bogged down in keeping it running to actually work out what was going on and what we wanted to do next. We're now at the point where I've, just through having the conversations, and a lot of those conversations, I've found, were not necessarily the managers or [facilitators] necessarily teaching me anything but asking pertinent questions. Usually I had the answer for those questions, I just needed someone to ask them. (Year 2, Captured 3 participant)

Many participants narrated that they had been challenged and even shocked by the programme, but that had all been taken in a positive way.

It only becomes clear when you have a critical friend to take a look down that path, whether that critical friend is the in-depth conversation you have with the senior manager or even just right up front in that first workshop. You get a bit of a, not a rude shock, but a gentle shock. (Year 1, Cohort 1 participant)

So things come out of situations and conversations that when you look back you go, "Well God, yes, maybe that's why I thought about that," because he said that and it did stand out. I was quite shocked that he said that. (Year 2, Cohort 3 participant)

If you're challenged by somebody who says, "Well why do you want to do that?" or, "In what way is that going to help?" or whatever, it makes you think about what you want to do so it just helps yourself to make the decision. So it's like a facilitation of you developing your own business rather than somebody saying, "Use this model and do that." (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

I think, for me, just to reiterate, the challenge from Nick, he challenged me and I squirmed, quite a lot, actually. I did squirm and he just sat in silence to wait for me to answer because you sit in your comfort zone, as well. So, we sit and do what we're comfortable with. So, I enjoyed coming out of my comfort zone but I also squirmed a bit but afterwards, I reflected and thought, "That was a really good thing." Because nobody challenges me at work. (Year 3, Cohort 3 participant)

That challenge and the need to feedback to the group, was often conceived as a stimulus to reappraise and formalise the micro-business manager's thinking.

Having the opportunity to talk through things and formalise stuff that you're doing that you just do. But discussing it, having to explain it and justify really to both the large business managers and everybody, to explain it and say, "Well this is why I do it," has made me think, "Well why do I do it?" It's provided the space to focus in and get a clearer plan going forward than I would possibly have muddled towards without it. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

So, I think the way the mentors question you in that reflective manner, it's challenging but in the right way, as opposed to being, "Well, you should be here." So, they completely embrace and accept that you are where you are and allow you to start from there. As opposed to expecting you to know exactly where you're headed, where you want to be headed. I am much clearer now on where I want to be headed, compared to what I was, three months' ago or whenever we started. I feel like I've achieved more, in the two days of the course than I have in a year, in terms of reflection and making decisions. It's somehow clarified my thinking. (Year 3, Cohort 3 participant)

Participants narrated that through the learning process and learning setting they had been prompted to reflect and formalise and prioiritise their forward planning.

This is a very different format in that it's here to look at my business, your business, everybody's business and dissect it and put it together and try and improve it. Whereas if you're just having a general chat with other people, you don't go into that depth, then it might be to explain what you're doing but not necessarily to do the analysis part and the future planning. I think that's definitely something that I've benefited from and will be able to work with going forward.

I mean for me, the real big thing has actually just been having conversations with people who know about business but are outside of my business because what I find with a lot of things is that to get my thoughts in order and focus I need to tell someone about them. (Year 2, Cohort 3 participant)

Accountability was something that the micro-business managers relished, recognising that while it is great being your own boss, it is difficult to step away from the day-to-day running of the business with only self-enforced deadlines.

When you work by yourself, that was one of the reasons why I gave up becoming an employee, you're not accountable to anybody but yourself. When you say, "Yes, I'll get that done," well if you don't get it done there's only yourself to blame at the end of the day but it means that you can plod on. Having Richard here meant I had to get the branding done. It was great. I needed to get it done. There was no reason why I wasn't going to get them done so I've got it done. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

I think as well accountability has been really important for me in that I work to my own timescales which aren't really there. So although it hasn't been too strict but it's been strict enough in my own head to think, "I must get my homework done," or, "I must make sure I've done this," or I've made

some sort of progress in whatever it might be. It could be something quite small. So I think that's been really useful and helpful. (Year 3, Cohort 2 participant)

Or more succinctly,

It's given me the kick up the proverbial that I needed to get a few things done. (Year 1, Cohort 3 participant).

Learning Outcomes

Due the heterogeneous nature of micro-businesses standardised 'one size fits all' learning outcomes were neither anticipated or desirable. The one-to-one nature of much of the process enabled each micro-business owner to tailor the outcomes to them and their business and the level of their prior knowledge. However, certain themes can still be detected including the micro-business manager gaining validation and confidence in their role and an ability to articulate their business's value proposition, business model, and strategic opportunities.

It hasn't come from nowhere but I think it's been affirmation and validation but also, I've been given direction...ideas that I didn't know where to take, I've been given a direction. (Year 1, Cohort 3 participant)

One other thing that this programme has done is it's made me respect my own business a little bit more rather than just thinking, "It's just a little thing that pays the bills." It's actually a little entity in its own. So I've learnt to respect myself a little bit more. I need to improve a bit more on that but yes, that's another positive. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

I actually feel, more competent, is that really what I want to say? I don't know about more competent but more confident in my choices rather than flopping around trying to find my way. So I think, without a doubt, it's been beneficial. (Year 2, Cohort 6 participant)

It was quite nice to have some of my ideas and feelings reinforced. So I actually have got the right idea that needs to be done and some issues and it was nice to run those by somebody who is far more experienced than me and talented and actually be confident, "Yes, I do have the answers." I just need to try and work on them a bit more succinctly. (Year 3, Cohort 2 participant)

Probably for the first time I actually feel like a business owner rather than just somebody that runs classes, which is quite a big step forward because I actually look at the business like a business now and look at it rather than just thinking, "I'm just going to live hand to mouth." (Year 3, Cohort 2 participant)

I think what I really appreciated, in the process, was the realisation that what I was doing, none of it was actually wrong but it needed refining. I didn't come in to fix anything because I was on the start of a journey so there was nothing to fix, it was all fine. It was just recognising the value and the structure that needed to be put behind it because it can be better. (Year 3, Cohort 4 participant)

Where the micro-business managers were employers there was also evidence that the input from the larger firm managers had encouraged the adoption of better people management practices.

> *I was trying to unravel this massive ball of string, when actually my role was better to kind of oversee that and apply other people to fixing different parts of things and improving different parts of things. So, I've definitely had a lot more of my focus on not just fixing things and helping other people to either sort of empower them for… it's a bit of a crappy expression but it's the best I can think of. (Year 1, Cohort 4 participant)*

Figure 1. provides a graphical representation of the material that has been presented through the programme participants' quotes. In the discussion section this representation will be related to what is already known about micro-business learning, enabling the distinctive contribution of this paper to the entrepreneurial learning literature to be established and wider lessons drawn for those designing interventions for micro-business development.
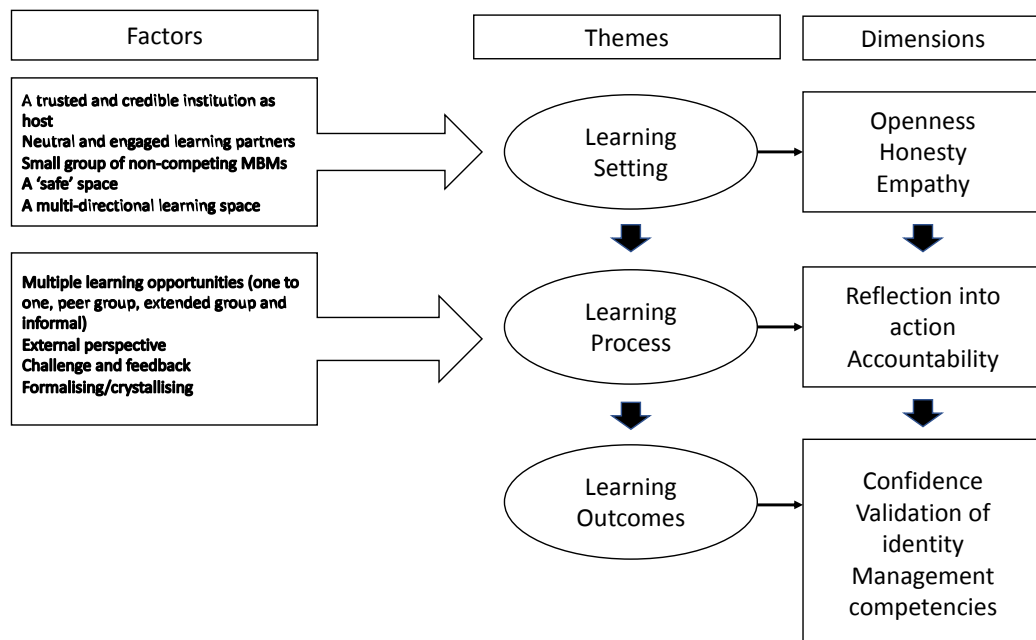
Discussion and conclusions

Business Schools have been much criticised by leading voices, respected by the authors, most notably Gibb (2009) for their approach to small business development, yet other studies have shown that programmes like LEAD, run by Lancaster University, have been attuned to the needs of small business owners Gordon and Jack (2010). Zhang and Hamilton (2010) note that universities have an important role in building effective learning community for small business owner-managers, a role that has not been met by other policy initiated business networks. This ability to create an effective learning setting due to the credibility and perceived neutrality of the university and business school was a significant element of this programme, but equally

significant was the design of the programme to provide neutral and engaged 'learning partners' who could focus on the customize and individualize learning with micro-business managers (Kelliher and Reinl 2009). Zhang and Hamilton (2009) argue that for a learning community to function effectively, participants must not only have confidence in the institution delivering the intervention, but also trust in their peers. In this case there were not only peers, but also external managers from larger firms, but the participants' accounts bear out the achievement of a 'safe space'.

An appropriate learning setting is a crucial component of the learning process. Given the context of micro-business managers an action learning approach is seen as a suitable process. Higgins and Aspinall describe action learning as 'based on the relationship between reflection and action, it involves a group of people working together on their "doing" and "learning", allowing time and space for questioning, understanding and reflecting' (2011: 49). Action learning sets, have been used in a variety of settings to encourage action-oriented critical learning (Clarke et al 2009; Gibb 2009). Cope (2005) argues that learning 'can be viewed as a responsive, rhetorical and argumentative process that has its origins in relationships with others". Clarke et al. concur that the learning process can be conceived as 'socially and argumentatively based' (2009: 444) and from their study, as in our case, they found that the discursive and critical reflection aspects of the action learning sets were valued by the participants. However, the approach adopted in the programme under discussion in this paper was novel to the extent that it brought external 'learning partners' into the learning setting in the form of managers from larger, unrelated firms. Devins et al (2005) apply their notion of 'close others' (e.g. family and friends) and 'network agents' to their conceptual model of micro-business learning, but it is unusual to find managers from larger firms in that world. Indeed, O'Dwyer and Ryan (2000) found that micro-business owners looking for development wanted someone who knows about small businesses "rather than someone from a large company or a consultant preaching a message that is over their heads" and report one of their respondents as saying "You feel a bit inferior. These guys come in with their suit and tie and briefcase, and you go out to meet them in your overalls. There is an intimidation factor" (p.350).

That said, Deakins et al. (2000) found that small firms who had external directors identified that those individuals contributed to entrepreneurial learning because they had the ability to contribute knowledge; set challenges and influence strategic planning; and provided a comparison of impact with critical events. Entrepreneurs tended to want someone independent who could offer a different perspective, but did not want someone from a large corporation, rather wanting a fellow entrepreneur. Kelliher and Rienl (2009) argue that 'while significant knowledge may already be present in the micro-firm, external impulses are sometimes needed in order to trigger off internal development, and stimulate a learning dynamic within the firm' (p. 524). What this study has found was that the managers from the large firms could stimulate a learning dynamic by both offering a different perspective and providing the challenge that Deakins et al. (2000) found that external directors provided.

Anderson and Gold (2009) identified that the functional isolation of many owner-managers meant that their learning was limited by insufficient active reflection and that "Consciously inviting and responding to others' reactions to us or paying attention to how we construct, maintain and develop relationships with others can lead us to devising novel forms of talk and

shaping a new identity". This was borne out by our study, as was the finding from Zhang and Hamilton (2010) that the LEAD programme enhanced the self-confidence of entrepreneurs.

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