Promoting a Creative Educational Entrepreneurial Approach in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this article, I communicate and explain what it means for me to have an educational entrepreneurial approach to teaching and research. The communication of what I value requires that I move beyond text-based accounts to include multimedia forms of representation (Eisner, 1997). This explanation includes a responsibility for students and acknowledging my values of passion and care, safety, creativity and excellence within my practice. The paper presents how students on the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) (MEME) programme are prepared for the dissertation practicum journey. The students who complete this form of dissertation are required to present their work at a platform presentation that involves the demonstration of scholarly work using different forms of media.

Keywords: Educational Entrepreneurship, Multimodal, Multimedia, Masters Supervision, Video, Action research

Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis on the use of new forms of multimodal communication as we make the 'gradual transition from a print culture to a digital new media culture' (Voithofer, 2005, p. 3). Yen Yen Jocelyn Woo (2008) advises educators to experiment with as many forms as possible, to communicate what they know about meaningful, just, and humane education to as many people as possible. There is also growing recognition of the need to move beyond narrow definitions of entrepreneurship from solely preparing learners for the world of business, to a broader definition that includes individual, social and economic benefits (European Commission, 2011, p. 2). Entrepreneurship is thus seen as 'an individual's ability to turn ideas into action' and includes 'creativity, innovation, showing initiative and risk-taking, as well as the ability to plan and manage projects in order to achieve objectives' (ibid, p. 327).

In 2012, the European Commission issued a Call for Proposals under Entrepreneurship Education that targeted primary, secondary and tertiary educators. The Call highlighted the need for student centred techniques, learning by doing, teamwork on concrete projects, and pedagogical approaches that help to unleash the creative and innovative potential of young people and enable them to work independently. I would also emphasise the need for students to work inter-dependently. I believe that in combining the skills of teaching/ lecturing with those of entrepreneurship, we can begin to transform our universities into places where students will flourish and enjoy learning, helping to prepare them for the workplace and for life. This is an opportune time to make our knowledge public, as educators in higher education are called upon to engage with the wider society (HEA, 2012).

The students on the Masters in Education and Training Management (eLearning) programme (MEME) start the dissertation journey in Year 2, Semester 2. At this stage, the students have completed six modules, as outlined in MEME Modules, which also shows the Graduate Attributes that are embedded in the programme. Students who choose the practicum dissertation option are required to design and develop a video artefact with a ten -thousand word supporting text. They are also required to present their work at the platform presentation that involves the demonstration of scholarly work using different forms of media. Each student is given minutes for the presentation; this includes time to show the video and time for feedback from the audience. My reason for requiring students to showcase their video artefact and research is to further validate their research in a public forum. The presentation is attended by invited guests and by students from Year 1 of the MEME programme.

An Educational Entrepreneurial Approach

With an educational entrepreneurial approach, I try to bring to life the values of passion and care, safety, creativity and excellence within my practice. Within these safe educational spaces I seek to connect the head with the heart, marry the 'sense and soul' (Wilber, 1998) to create an integral psychology that combines a constructivist, behaviourist, cognitive pedagogical approach in order to avoid a fragmented learning experience. A holistic, enjoyable learning experience that nurtures their creativity and gradually brings people to a point where they fulfil their potential, is central to my pedagogy of the unique (Farren, 2006, p.18). Video 1 captures the relational quality of interaction with students on the MEME programme.

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Video 1. The Enlightened I Using My Enlightened Eye

https://vimeo.com/32960470

According to Ng (2002) traditional methods used by university and teachers quell creativity rather than nurturing it. As an educator, I understand creativity to be 'any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain into a new one' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 28). My belief is that creativity can be developed, but this must be done well and sensitively. Hence I see my role in higher education as that of a facilitator, and caring is a fundamental aspect in my responsibility in creating change in student thinking as they come to realise their creative potential. Csikszentmihalyi claims that 'most people do not know their creative capabilities and are worried about the process involved in finding out' (ibid, p. 3). I believe that it is important to nurture a safe environment where people flourish and find out what those capabilities are and this is also supported by the literature; creative individuals will only come up with ideas in a safe environment where they can make mistakes and are supported and encouraged (Buckler, 1997; West, 2001). I also connect very much with Ken Robinson's idea that creativity involves doing something. Furthermore, Robinson says that this may not necessarily be for economic benefit (2001, p.115).

Care is a value that is central to my work. I care that the students feel safe to learn and explore their own creativity, and that they know that they are free to make mistakes in order to learn. It is vital that students are able to express themselves and know that they are valued and respected for their contribution. It is important to take time to understand their needs and empathise with them, and to help them reach a standard that makes them feel proud and is in keeping with the high standards required of the University.

Multimodal is a form of communication that is not limited to one mode, for example text and book form (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) but is a different way of representing information, that includes words, sounds, still and moving images, animation and colour (Lauer, 2009, p. 227). I am passionate about using different forms of media in my teaching and I have carried this into my research. The use of video has been a vital source of data collection for me, both as 'fly on the wall' documentary evidence to support my knowledge claims and as enhanced visual narrative productions that embody my values and endeavour to improve students' understanding of programme content.

The website www.yvonnecrotty.com provides evidence of my ongoing research work and I have linked this website to the International DIVERSE website www.diverseireland.com, which I designed when hosting the International DIVERSE Conference with the theme, 'Creativity - Enhancing our Vision of the Future' which took place at Dublin City University (DCU) in 2011.

Choosing a topic for the Dissertation Journey

I prepare students for the dissertation from the start of the MEME programme and although they are often uneasy at the mention of the word dissertation at such an early stage, I believe that its introduction, in a light-hearted manner, helps diffuse any possible anxiety at a later stage, and it also helps students to start thinking about possible areas of research.

During the first year of the MEME programme, I take time to carefully explain the outline structure and form of a dissertation. My rationale for doing this is to:

● emphasise that each module acts as a 'building block' towards the dissertation.

● encourage students to think about possible areas for research early in the programme so they have time to develop their idea.

● dispel the notion that the dissertation is an insurmountable obstacle or 'add-on' at the final stage of the programme.

● demystify the language around the research process.

● ensure the dissertation journey is a more mindful and enjoyable experience, rather than a paralysing one.

The following journal entry was written by one of the students after the first class session in Year One, Semester One and mirrors my own thinking with regard to the dissertation and the research process:

At this early stage in the course deciding on a topic for a dissertation seems like an impossible task. I am anxious to choose a subject but I have no idea which aspect of the

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course will strike the most interest and functionality for me. Ideally, I feel that having the topic decided upon when setting out on the programme would be of benefit to me. It was mentioned in class that as we make our way through each module, relevant materials could be noted with a dissertation in mind. While I am aware of this, I feel that it is important that I allow time for an area of interest to emerge rather than force this issue. I look forward to finding a favoured subject area as the course progresses. (Deirdre Shelly, personal communication, October 7, 2010)

From the start of the MEME programme, I try to minimise any anxiety on the part of the student, by incorporating at least two coursework assignments that introduce them to the structure of a dissertation. This helps them to gain a better understanding of how to carry out a piece of research. It also offers students an opportunity to learn about the elements that make up a dissertation and the importance of learning from feedback, and having evidence to back up any claims to knowledge.

I care that students enjoy the dissertation process and that they feel a sense of worth and pride at the end of the dissertation journey. In the process of doing assignments that link to the dissertation students gain confidence and are prepared for the dissertation journey. I provide feedback to individuals at the end of each assignment because I believe that this helps them to take responsibility for their learning and to see how they can make improvements to the work. Giving timely feedback has ensured that students stay focused and understand what they are required to do.

In discussions with work colleagues I decided that more time was required for students to produce a quality video as part of the dissertation practicum. I therefore set about developing a new module called Digital Creativity in the Workplace for students interested in developing a multimedia video resource as an integral part of their dissertation. The new module enables students to develop knowledge of design theories and multimodal approaches to learning and to further develop the multimedia skills from the Educational Applications of Multimedia module. While doing the Educational Applications of Multimedia and the Digital Creativity in the Workplace modules, students often remark on how the module encourages them to think 'outside the box'.

In order to learn about the content of the Research Design module which takes place in Year 2, students who take the Digital Creativity in the Workplace module create educational multimedia resources linked to the content of the Research Design module. In this way, they are practising their technical skills while at the same time finding content related to various research approaches. This serves to prepare them for the dissertation as noted by a student in the following journal extract:

In the same module we also had to create an interactive e-Learning course explaining our proposed research methodology using Articulate software, which is an e-Learning authoring tool. This assignment proved invaluable in demonstrating how learning materials could be transformed to engage the learner more by allowing them to interact with the content.
(Sinead Murphy, Masters dissertation, DCU. June, 2012, p.26-27)

As students produce the multimedia resources for the Digital Creativity in the Workplace assignment, they also become familiar with the research process and, the different research methodologies and methods. I allocate a different research topic to students so they can learn from the various educational multimedia resources that have been developed by the group. This learning activity also helps cultivate their skills in preparation for the creative production work that they will carry out as part of the dissertation practicum. As they incorporate the content into the educational multimedia resource they become familiar with the language of research as well as learning how to present content in an interactive and visual way. There is a *performance* element incorporated into the Digital Creativity in the Workplace assignments as students present to their peers the educational multimedia resource that they have developed. The fact that they have to make the video resource public sharpens their focus as they work on their voice-over and take care to use good intonation and correct expression in order to enhance the production. Resource 1, 'There's method in my Madness' resource links to an educational multimedia resource that I developed which includes a collation of students' assignment work.
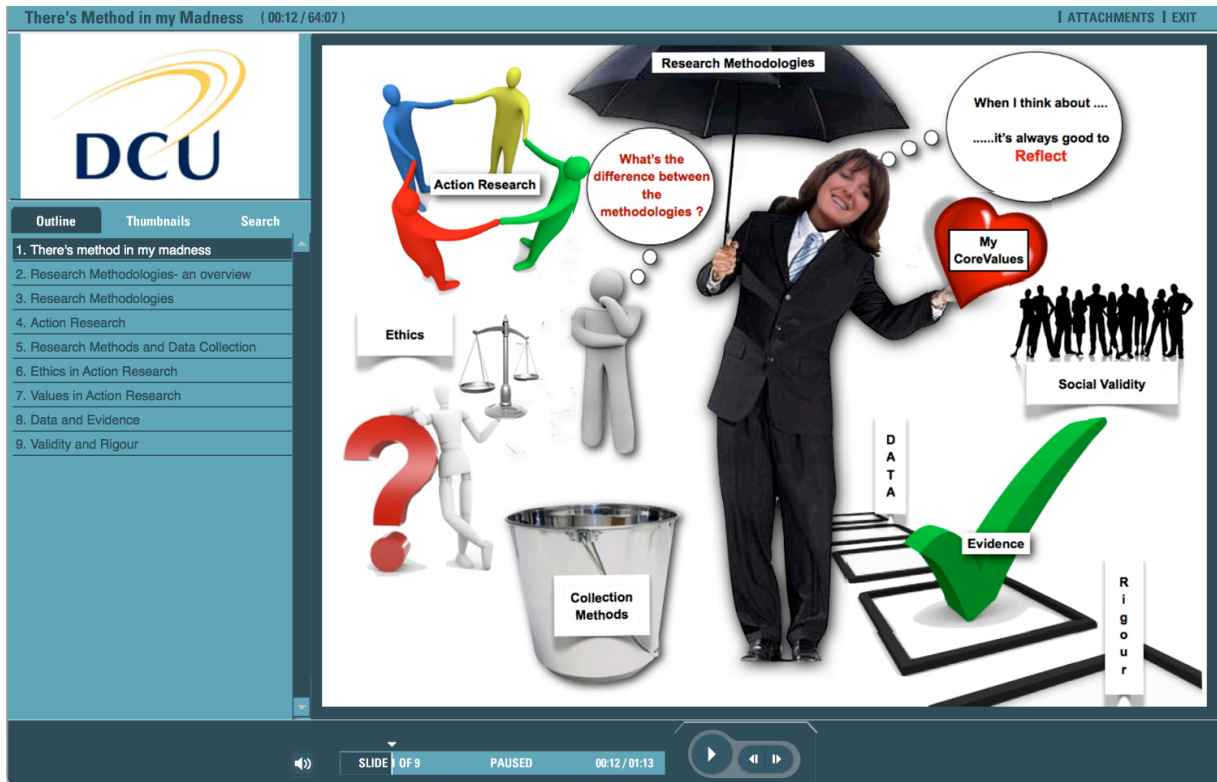
Resource 1. There's Method in my Madness

Educational Resource on Research Design

http://www.yvonnecrotty.com/uploads/Method/player.html

In producing Resource 1, I wanted to design and develop a educational multimedia resource

based on the content of the Research Design module that would better prepare students for

the dissertation. Through the production of relevant content they become familiar with the

language of research. This online resource is available for students to access and to learn

more about the research process. It is also available to future students. I assign a range of

topics, for example, research methodologies, data collection methods, validity, rigour and

ethics. Students upload their individual multimedia educational resources to Moodle so that

the resources can be shared with the whole group. There, sources are also uploaded to

video-sharing websites, such as Vimeo and YouTube. It was evident from the data logs of

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online input that students were taking the time to view each other's work. For example, the very act of observing a three-minute vodcast on a research topic can assist students in their own understanding of the topic.

Having evidence to back up your claim

Over the past five years of teaching on the programme, I have observed that students tend to make general claims about their research without having the necessary evidence to support their claims. A question such as: 'how do you know?' often highlights the lack of evidence to back up their claims. In order to prepare students for the research inquiry I designed an exercise that clearly demonstrates how data can be collected, analysed and then presented as evidence to validate a claim to knowledge. As part of the Collaborative Online Inquiry module, which I co-ordinate and lecture with Dr Margaret Farren, students participate in a five-day planned online discussion on the topic of e-Moderating. Two students from the previous Year 2 group are invited to e-Moderate the discussion forum. Salmon refers to e-Moderating as 'a new way of teaching' and e-Moderators as 'a new generation of teachers who work with learners on line' (Salmon, 2004, p. 9). The decision to include this activity was made in order to:

(i). provide students with the experience of being online for an intense period of time with tutors that they have not met previously.

(ii). provide past students with an opportunity to implement their skills and knowledge as e-Moderators in an authentic setting.

The e-Moderating forum involves two discussion threads entitled:

1. 'What kind of animal are you?'

2. 'E-Moderating' - Is the e-Moderator role critical to the success of the e-Moderating discussion?

The initial ice breaker is an online activity called, 'What kind of an animal are you?' (Adaptation a list of animal types from Salmon's E-tivities (2002)). The e-Moderator poses the question: 'Have you ever wondered what kind of an e-Learning animal you are?' The students are given a list of animal types, taken from Salmon's (2002) 'e-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning', and asked to discuss the type of animal that they most closely resemble as an e-Learner. This icebreaker is meant to be light-hearted and stimulate students to reflect on their own behaviour in the online environment and to begin working together online. After this activity gets started, the second e-Moderator posts a message on the discussion forum called 'e-Moderating' and poses the question, 'Is the e-Moderator role critical to successful online discussion?' The purpose of this thread of discussion is to elicit the students' experience of using online collaborative environments both as an e-Moderator and as a learner.

The findings over the past five years of engaging students in the icebreaker activity demonstrate that all but one student participated in this activity and that particular student posted a response after the discussions ended. Although the e-Moderating activity has evolved over an eight-year period, the following two conditions remain:

(1). A time period of 5 days is allocated for the activity.

(2). The same two questions are posted to the discussion forums each year.

The image on [Qualitative Feedback](#) presents the general themes that have emerged in the discussion posts and the extracts from the discussion postings, in response to the question: 'Is the e-Moderator role critical to the success of the e-Moderating discussion?'

Since 2009, students also participate in a self-directed online course on the topic of e-Moderating, which takes 5-10 hours to complete and includes the following five modules:

● e-Moderating Module - Introduction Resource

● Module 1 - Introduction to Online Learning Resource

● Module 2 - An Introduction to e-Moderating Resource

● Module 3 - e-Moderating Skills Resource

● Module 4 - Managing Online Learners Resource

● Module 5 - An Effective e-Moderator

This online course was designed and developed for teachers across Ireland who are acting as e-Moderators for courses run by the Technology Unit of the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) which was previously called the NCTE - http://www.dcu.ie/news/2010/jun/s0610y.shtml

Using Moodle - from a different perspective

After the students complete the five-day e-Moderating activity they attend a face-to-face class session, which involves a focused discussion around the e-Moderating activities. Prior

to this session, the quantitative data from the logs are collated and presented visually and the qualitative data that was generated through the online discussions is analysed thematically. This data is then presented to students as evidence of their participation and contribution to the online activity.

I begin the class session by inviting people to give their views of the online exercise. I pose the following questions:

● How did you enjoy the session?

● Did you spend more time online than if you attended the normal two-hour class?

● Were the e-Moderators responsive and did they encourage discussion?

● How often did you log online over the 5 days?

Responses to these questions have varied over the years and often contradict the actual quantitative and qualitative data that has been collected and is presented to students. At times people have been disgruntled by the feedback from the exercise, as they would have preferred to know in advance that the data was being collected. I reassure them that the purpose of the exercise is not to judge them but to help them see how they can make use of online discussion forums in their own research inquiry in order to generate evidence. This shift of emphasis from students to researchers helps them to gain a better understanding of the purpose of the activity. I also emphasise that if they knew in advance that the data of their participation in the online activity was being collected then it might influence their online behaviour. I emphasise that the activity is designed to provide an authentic e-Moderating experience and also to help them see how they can gather data in a systematic way and present their findings using the tools within Moodle.

Masters Dissertation Journey: Ensuring Scholarship and Quality

As a supervisor of Masters dissertations, I know the steps that students need to take in order to complete the destination. I know that despite the initial groundwork that takes place over the course of the programme, students are never fully prepared for the dissertation journey. My experience in carrying out my own Masters dissertation and in supervising students, over the past eight years, has convinced me of the need to put a timeline in place so that students are clear about what is required of them at different steps along the way. The clear guidelines help students to feel comfortable with the research process.

Clear signposts

The students begin work on their research proposal for their dissertation at the start of Semester 1, Year 2 of the programme (September) and submit their research proposal at the end of the semester (December). In December, I post a Dissertation Timeline for the dissertation practicum to the Digital Creativity in the Workplace module on Moodle so that students are aware of the stages of the dissertation journey and feel secure that there are support structures in place during the dissertation process.

The students begin the dissertation research in January and submit the first draft chapter of the dissertation at the beginning of February. My view is that taking too long a break after Christmas and before the official start of Semester 2 could interrupt the flow of their thoughts and writing and also the video production process. In a group conversation Sinead Murphy, a previous student on the programme, talked about the value of the timeline and

the support structure that was in place for the dissertation practicum. She also followed this up with a personal communication to me.

Submitting our first draft chapter of our dissertation at the beginning of February to correspond with the start of semester two, initially seemed unrealistic. I found it a bit of a struggle and my initial draft was poorly written and hence I received feedback reflecting that. My initial response was to feel disheartened. However I began to see the value in this process as it very quickly focused my mind and made me realise the volume of work required at Masters level. By realising how far off the mark I was, I realised that in order to reach the *June deadline I needed to begin the process of writing, and more importantly understanding my research so that I could stand over my eventual claim to knowledge. On reflection adhering to the deadlines and starting the writing process so early in the academic year proved invaluable in allowing myself time towards the end to be able to stand back and review my work and make the changes I needed knowing that I had the time to do so.*
(Sinead Murphy, personal communication, June 20, 2012)

Video 2. My Claim Valid or Not? (Crotty, 2012)

https://vimeo.com/32486211

Over the course of the dissertation process, I organise group validation meetings with students and employ Habermas' (1976) criteria of social validity to ensure that the research is tested for comprehensibility, truthfulness, authenticity and appropriateness.

The video 'My Claim Valid or Not?' demonstrates the use of a video camera to record one of the validation meetings. The video captures the discussions that took place at the validation group meeting, however it fails to capture close ups of the students' faces and their expressions during the validation meeting. The validation meetings with the MEME group have undergone some changes since 2007. In the beginning, I found it difficult to record the class sessions as I felt it would impact on the group dynamic. However, the introduction of the Digital Creativity in the Workplace module and the more 'hands-on' video work has helped alleviate my concern. Students have become very familiar with the use of video and the ethical issues of video recording. They have a deeper understanding of the rationale for asking permission to video record the teaching and learning interactions and to use these recordings as part of a research inquiry. The availability of past students who are skilled in the use of a video camera and video production has helped the recording of more recent validation meetings and also allowed me to facilitate the validation meeting without concerning myself with the technicalities of video recording. It also gives the current student cohort a chance to meet the previous Masters students and to learn from their experience of carrying out a dissertation practicum.

Photo 1. Gemma Clarke & Deirdre Flood, MEME Graduates 2011

My approach to facilitating a validation meeting has also changed over the past eight years.

I no longer presume that students understand the purpose of a validation meeting. While

they may be familiar with the language of social validation and Habermas' criteria of social

validity, my experience shows that it is important in the first validation meeting to challenge

students about the purpose of the validation meeting and Habermas' four criteria of social

validity. In the first validation meeting, I now ask the following questions of the students:

'why are we here?'. In listening to their replies I pose further questions, using an inquiry-

based approach that endeavours to elicit from them a better understanding of the research

process. I commend students by reiterating what they have said, in an effort to inform those

who may not know the purpose of a validation meeting.

During the validation meetings each student presents an explanation of their learning, in

addition to showing the video that they have created for their dissertation. The group offers

feedback on each of the presentations to ensure that the research is comprehensible, that

there is enough evidence to justify any claims, that the background of the accounts are made explicit and that the accounts are authentic.

Video 3. Validation Meetings' video

https://vimeo.com/47872585

Video 3. shows the format of the validation meetings with the Masters students that ranged from three students in 2007 to ten students in 2014. I have worked closely with these students over the course of the Digital Creativity in the Workplace module and I am reluctant to assign them to another supervisor who does not know the students or the nature of the research that they are undertaking. For these reasons, I continue to supervise these students into the dissertation stage. I also include a third person at the final stage of the dissertation practicum to provide further comments on the final draft of the dissertation.

Over the past eight years of supervising Masters degree dissertations, the validation meetings have been a real support for students and a strong bond develops among the group members. This helps to sustain them through the research process. The following journal documents my thoughts on one of the validation meetings:

I was delighted with Saturday's Session. I felt that at this stage of the year, already there is an improvement in the students work. The storyboards have really helped with the process and I feel that the quality of their work is very good. They have taken on board about continuity and shots /angles etc. The group dynamic at the validation meeting was excellent and it was validated by two unexpected emails I received after. (YC Journal, March 5, 2009)

The strong bond that develops among the validation group is particularly evident during the final presentations. There is evidence of a sense of loyalty to each other, coupled with a great sense of pride in each other's accomplishments. At the final platform presentation in May 20th, 2012, Sinead Murphy was speaking on behalf of the group when she said: 'there was something really special about today, seeing all your classmates presenting their work and feeling very proud of their achievements too'.

Write up - to the final presentation!

The timeline for draft submissions of the dissertation work ensures that students stay focused and are ready to present their research at the final platform presentation, which is scheduled in May.

The platform presentation consolidates the whole research process for the students as it is often in the course of presenting their research and getting feedback from a larger group that they really grasp the significance of their research; it also helps them clarify their core values and recognise their own motivation for carrying out the research. At the platform event, I set up two cameras in the classroom and the Year 2 group works in teams of two, taking turns to video record the presentations. In previous years, I recorded the

presentations and edited each one so that I could show the research presentations to the next cohort of students. Video 4 was taken at Laura Sloyan's platform presentation in 2010 which was attended by the external examiner at the time, Professor Martin Oliver from the Knowledge Media Lab, Institute of Education, London. The video is a resource that can help other students to get a practical insight into the research process.

Video 4. Laura Sloyan Dissertation Video

https://vimeo.com/12602543

I now ask the students to edit their own video footage as it gives them a final c hance to reflect on their presentation which helps to strengthen their research claims. They also include relevant feedback from the invited guests. My observations over the years have shown that this final step in the dissertation journey really helps students to clarify their research findings and the significance of their research.

The regular deadline dates throughout the dissertation period safeguards against any procrastination on the part of the student. The quick succession of deadline dates means that if a student cannot submit work for the first deadline date then there is still an

opportunity to catch up with the next deadline. My rationale for requiring an earlier

submission date for the draft dissertation is to ensure that students have enough time to re-

craft their work and reach a high standard. This six-week period ensures that they can

continue to perfect their research without feeling the pressure of a looming deadline.
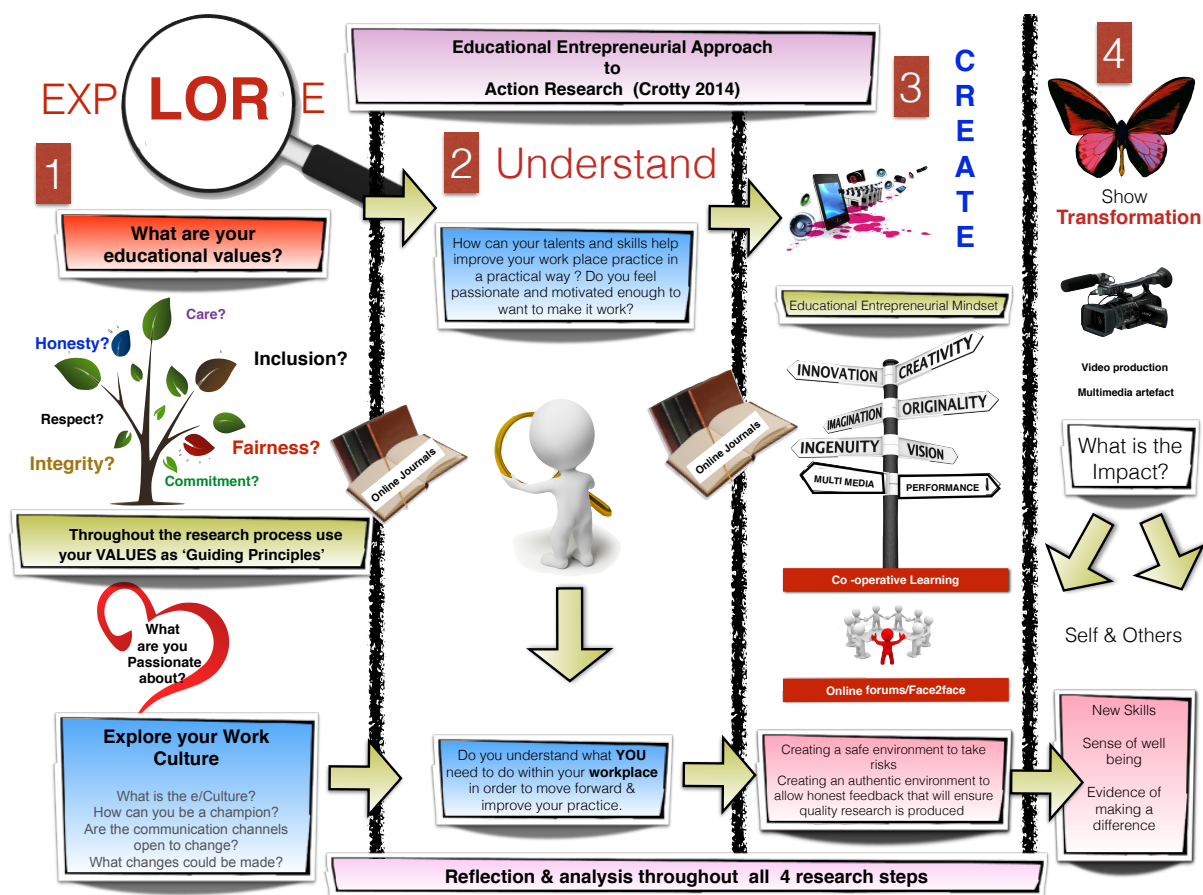

Figure 1. Educational Entrepreneurial Approach to Action Research

The genesis of the Educational Entrepreneurial Action Research approach came about as

result of supervising over 60 Masters students who struggled to find a research approach

that mirrored the journey that they experienced during their time on the MEME

programme. This approach follows four key stages: Exploration, Understanding, Creating, Transforming (Figure 1). The action reflection cycles of plan, act, observe and reflect are still integral to this research approach, however there are three key characteristics that define the Educational Entrepreneurial Approach:

- Firstly, it is about engaging the imagination in the possibilities opened up by new forms of multimodal communication and building the capacity of practitioners to design and create a multimedia artefact for use in their own work context. The multimedia artefact is designed to bring about a change in workplace practices or to improve a situation.
- Secondly, the values of passion, creativity and excellence underpin the Educational Entrepreneurial Approach. The practitioners also articulate their own educational values as they develop their pedagogy of the unique (Farren, 2006). This approach demonstrates the individual's ability to turn ideas into action, show initiative and take risks.
- Finally, the knowledge created is a cooperative process involving the practitioner and the university and also linking to the wider social context.

Conclusion

Shulman suggests that in order to make sure that teaching is valued we need to change the status of teaching from private to community property (2004, p.141) as scholarship entails 'some form of community property that can be shared, discussed, critiqued, exchanged, built upon' (ibid, p.142).

In this article, I hope the reader can see my educational entrepreneurial approach in action as I bring the values of passion and care, safety, creativity and excellence to life within my

practice. This explanation includes a responsibility for students and an acknowledgement of safety, care, creativity, enjoyment and excellence. In my research, I draw on both academic knowledge and my own experience, taking on board Dewey's (1929) idea of the artistry of practice and what it would mean 'if not knowledge but art is the final flowering of experience, the crown and consummation of nature, and knowledge is only the means by which art, which includes all practice, is enabled to attain its richest development?' (1929, p. 4).

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