

**FOSTERING DEEP LEARNING AMONGST ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
STUDENTS IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY: PLANNING PHASE****Umaru Zubairu****ABSTRACT**

In light of the growing problem of unemployment amongst young graduates in Nigeria, entrepreneurship has been heralded by the Nigerian government as a viable solution. Nigerian universities have thus been mandated to provide students with entrepreneurial skills, which will enable them to establish viable businesses upon graduation. An important prerequisite for this important objective to be achieved is that lecturers ensure that students adopt a deep learning approach towards entrepreneurship courses been taught, as this will enable them to truly understand key entrepreneurial concepts and strategies and how they can be implemented in the real world. It is against this backdrop that the lecturers of the Entrepreneurship and Business Studies Department at the Federal University of Technology, Minna decided to develop and implement a holistic educational intervention with the ultimate objective being to foster deep learning amongst entrepreneurship students. This paper presents the planning phase of this plan and presents a comprehensive review of entrepreneurship-related deep learning scholarship in order to identify various strategies that have been found to be effective in promoting deep learning amongst students. The review revealed three categories of strategies: 1) Course content strategies (case studies and writing tasks), 2) Course delivery strategies (Student-centered learning, Group work, Case Challenges and in-class simulations) and 3) Course assessment strategies (formative assessment, applied questions, oral presentations and written reports). These strategies were then combined into an effective toolkit, and a holistic educational intervention was then developed that will be implemented in the near future to foster deep learning amongst the entrepreneurship students enrolled at the Department.

**Keywords:** Deep learning, Entrepreneurship, University students, Youth unemployment, Nigerian society

**INTRODUCTION**

Unemployment is a huge issue in Nigeria, particularly among new university graduates, with about 19% of young graduates sitting idly with nothing to do (Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, 2016). As can be imagined this leads to a lot of crime and social instability, because as the saying goes, “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop”. In order to combat this worrying trend, the Nigerian government mandated that all universities provide entrepreneurship education to all students with the hope being that this training would result in young graduates establishing businesses instead of hoping to secure a job in an organization. This would lead graduates to become providers of jobs rather than seekers of jobs, thus creating value to the society and reducing the rate of unemployment. In 2009, the Federal University of Technology, Minna established one of the country’s first faculties dedicated to providing entrepreneurship and business education; the faculty is currently called the “School of Entrepreneurship and Management Technology” (SEMT), and has as its mission the production of “competent, enterprising, and

innovative graduates, equipped to fill high level manpower positions, create wealth and job opportunities and move the country from a developing nation status to that of a developed nation”. SEMT houses four departments, with the Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Studies (EBS) the focus of this study (“School of Entrepreneurship and Management Technology”, 2014).

In order for EBS to fulfill the faculty’s stated mission, it is absolutely critical that students enrolled in the department are able to understand the key concepts of entrepreneurship and business that are contained in the curriculum, and that they are able to translate this understanding into practical applications in the real world. In other words, it is essential that these students adopt a deep learning approach to their entrepreneurship education if the department and country’s hope for a new breed of entrepreneurial graduates is to become a reality. A surface approach to learning where concepts are memorized solely for the purpose of passing tests, and then immediately forgotten will lead to entrepreneurship graduates without any real entrepreneurial skills, and thus the status quo of teeming number of graduates competing for a limited number of jobs will continue.

This paper presents the planning phase of a comprehensive and collaborative effort by five lecturers at EBS to ensure that students of the department are adopting a deep approach to learning so that when they graduate they become productive entrepreneurs who provide true value to the Nigerian society. This planning phase involved a comprehensive review of deep learning scholarship in order to identify various methods that have been empirically proven to foster deep learning approaches amongst students in entrepreneurship and business-related disciplines (Accounting, Business, Economics, Entrepreneurship, Marketing and Management). After identifying these methods, these methods were organized into an effective toolkit that will be uniformly utilized amongst all five levels of students (first-years to fifth-years) in order to objectively assess the efficacy of these methods in fostering deep learning approaches amongst these students.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First, a comprehensive review of the deep learning literature is provided and effective methods to foster deep learning are identified. Second, the method of future implementation of these methods is described, and third, a conclusion is presented.

## **FOSTERING DEEP LEARNING AMONGST STUDENTS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND BUSINESS RELATED DISCIPLINES: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

The review of extant scholarship that focused on fostering deep learning amongst students in entrepreneurship-related disciplines revealed that the suggested methods fell into one of three categories: 1) Course content, 2) Course delivery and 3) Course assessment. Each of these categories and the studies reviewed under them are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

### Course Content

Studies reviewed in this subsection recommended various modifications that need to be made to the course curriculum that will encourage students to engage in a deep approach to learning.

The inclusion of *case studies* in the curriculum is the first recommendation identified in this review (Boyce, Williams, Kelly & Yee, 2001; Hall, Ramsay & Raven, 2004; Yong & Lew, 2005; Dupernex, Curtis & Moon, 2013; Adapa, 2015). Boyce et al. (2001) justified the potency of case studies in promoting deep learning amongst accounting students by arguing that they meet the four elements that need to be in place for deep learning to occur as identified by Biggs (1989): 1) Motivational context: the content being taught should engage the students in what is to be learnt and how it should be learnt; case studies satisfy this element in that they utilize real-life scenarios which enable students to connect with the real world, and often increases their enthusiasm to learn. 2) Learner activity: Students should be active participants in the learning process, as opposed to passive recipients of information; case studies require students to provide solutions to real world business dilemmas which engages their creativity and promotes deep learning. 3) Interaction with others: students learn better when they collaborate with others; “two good heads are better than one”; case studies encourages the students to discuss and debate about the issues in the case and how to resolve them. 4) A well-structured knowledge base; case studies presents students an opportunity to practically implement the foundational concepts they have been taught in class. This makes them appreciate the real-world applications of these concepts and increases their willingness to learn and understand these concepts. Hall et al.’s (2004) longitudinal study of first-year accounting students in Australia provided empirical support for the Boyce et al.’s (2001) arguments about the ability of case studies to encourage students to adopt a deeper approach to learning.

The second recommendation identified in this review is to structure the curriculum in such a way that it improves students’ *written communication skills* (English, Lockett & Mladenovic, 2004; Yong & Lew, 2005). English et al. (2004) developed an intervention designed to foster deep learning amongst students of an introductory accounting course in an Australian University by improving their writing skills. The intervention was based on the concept of “Functional Linguistics” developed by Michael Halliday. Functional Linguistics is based on the notion that a student “accesses subject matter through language, and becomes familiar with a subject by mastering the language of the discipline. In using language to know, understand and in turn explain a subject, the [student] develops the skills of consciously reflecting on learning that subject. [This facilitates deep learning]” (English et al., 2004, p465). The intervention involved altering the content of the accounting course so that it required students to engage in various writing assignments using accounting-specific language. Additionally, the objectives and expected style of these assignments were made explicit to the students, and manuals were provided to the tutors on how to assess these assignments to ensure uniformity. At the conclusion of the school session, the students’ approaches to learning were determined using Biggs’ (1987) Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ). Additionally, the SPQ was also used to determine the learning approaches of

students of a similar accounting course in another University where the course was taught using the traditional method that emphasized learning the basic accounting concepts. A comparison of the learning approaches of the two groups of students revealed that the first group (354 students) that had received the intervention adopted a deeper approach to learning than the latter group (706 students); this proved the efficacy of improving students' written communication skills for promoting deep learning.

### **Course Delivery**

Studies reviewed in this subsection advocated various teaching strategies, which entrepreneurship educators can adopt in order to promote deep learning amongst entrepreneurship students.

Boyce et al. (2001) who were mentioned in the “course content” subsection as advocates of the inclusion of case studies in order to facilitate deep learning amongst students argued that for these case studies to be effective, educators must adopt a variety of teaching strategies. They posited that educators must play the role of *facilitator* wherein students are allowed to drive the learning process. The educator makes clear to the students the general objectives and learning outcomes of the case study, and assists them as they pursue various avenues to achieve the stated outcomes. Sayles (2006) agreed that educators must adopt strategies that make students drive the learning process, thus becoming active learners; learning thus becomes a discovery process for the students. An example of such a strategy is getting the students to keep *learning journals*, *which* have been empirically proven to enable students to engage in deeper approaches to learning.

Turner (2011) utilized a combination of course delivery and assessment interventions to successfully promote deep learning amongst 81 third-year accounting students in a New Zealand University. The first intervention involved the educator acting as a facilitator to encourage the students to drive the learning process, and reach important conclusions about the real world implications of accounting concepts learnt in class. Interviews of these students and a content analysis of their learning journals revealed the effectiveness of the interventions in fostering deep learning. The second intervention involved group work, and the third intervention was an assessment intervention, which is discussed in the next section.

The use of *group work* as a means of fostering deep learning was a second, and arguably the most popular, teaching strategy identified in the review of deep learning scholarship (Boyce et al., 2001; Kates, 2002; Hall et al., 2004; Yong & Lew, 2005; Sayles, 2006; Borredon, Deffayet, Baker & Kolb, 2011; Turner, 2011; Schonell & Hanson, 2013). Kates (2002) sought to assess the impact of student marketing teams on improving deep learning amongst these students. She adopted a qualitative approach by interviewing six students that were members of different marketing teams; students were each interviewed for one hour. The interviews revealed that there are two obstacles that might limit the ability of students to engage in deep learning whilst in a group: 1) there was a struggle for control amongst members of the group, with some members dominating discussions and determining the direction the group should follow. This led other group members to feel uninvolved, and this feeling discouraged them from really seeking to understand the concepts in the course; 2) there was a free-rider problem whereby some group members contributed little value to the group, content with allowing others to do the bulk of the

work. The hardworking members of the group found it difficult to confront these free riders about their attitude. The free riders did not engage in deep learning, whilst the other group members felt taken advantage of. Kates (2002) recommended that educators could mitigate these problems of group work by educating the students about how to resolve conflicts in group situations at the very start of the course session. Additionally, educators can use humorous “ice-breaking” and “bonding” sessions at the start of the semester so that feelings of rapport can be developed among group members which will help facilitate a more harmonious working relationship which in turn will lead to students adopting a deep approach to learning. Yong and Lew (2005) also advocated the use of group activities to facilitate deep learning amongst marketing students; specifically, regarding Malaysian students.

Hall et al. (2004) validated the efficacy of group work in fostering deep learning amongst accounting students in a longitudinal study of 292 first-year accounting students in an Australian university. The students’ approaches to learning were measured using the SPQ before the start of the course. During the semester, a predominantly group approach was adopted by the authors in delivering the course content, and at the end of the semester, the SPQ was again used to measure the students’ approaches to learning. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores revealed that there was a small but significant increase in deep learning amongst the students, and a small but significant decrease in surface learning.

Borredon et al. (2011) presented a case study of a French Business School where group work was utilized to engender deep learning amongst the students. Every student was required to joining a “learning team” made up of twelve students upon enrollment, and this team worked together until they graduated. Each team was facilitated and managed by a lecturer called the “learning manager”. Similar to Sayles’ (2006) New Zealand study, students in the learning team were required to record their experiences of working together in learning journals. The learning manager encouraged the learning team to engage in constructive debates and discussion about their management paradigms, skills and decision-making processes. A content analysis of some of these learning journals, as well as interviews with some learning team members led the authors to conclude that the use of learning teams provided the students the opportunity to truly engage with the course material and to connect them with their day-to-day experiences; in other words, learning teams fosters deep learning amongst management students.

Dupernex et al. (2013) sought to ascertain the efficacy of a group-based case study workshop approach on fostering deep learning amongst UK first-year entrepreneurship students as compared to a traditional lecture approach. A revised version of the SPQ (Biggs et al., 2001) was used to determine the learning approaches of two groups of these students before the start of the intervention. Afterwards the experimental group went through a semester whereby the case study workshop approach was implemented, whilst the second group was taught using a lecture approach. At the end of the semester, the SPQ was used to measure their approaches to learning. A comparison of pre-intervention and post-intervention deep learning scores showed that those students in the group case study workshop had increased their deep learning scores significantly more than those students who received the traditional lecture.

Schonell and Hanson (2013) advocated the use of “*break-out*” rooms and a large white board as a means of maximizing the impact of group-work amongst management students in order to engender deep learning. Break-out rooms are simply large classrooms that allow students to form into groups and still maintain a “good social distance” (Schonell & Hanson, 2013, p2). Four groups were formed and assigned a management strategy case study to understand and resolve. Some interesting findings were identified at the end of the program: 1) The group that used the white board performed the best in resolving the case study. Although it is a simple tool, it allowed them to actively put down different ideas and to discuss these ideas. 2) The space of the room matters: when groups have enough space, it enables them to feel free to animatedly discuss issues amongst themselves without fear of disrupting the work of other groups. These discussions encourage the students to develop deeper understanding of the concepts and how they can be applied to resolve real-world problems.

A third course delivery strategy identified in this review to foster deep learning is the **Case Challenge** strategy (Jayashree & Mitra, 2012). This strategy pits two groups of students in a head-to-head competition to resolve a case. Jayashree and Mitra (2012) utilized this method amongst management students at the Dubai campus of an Australian university. Structured interviews of the students revealed that the Case Challenge strategy encouraged them to increase their level of preparation and understanding of the key concepts needed to resolve the case due to the competitive nature of the Case Challenge. The use of *in-class simulations* was a fourth deep-learning promoting teaching strategy identified in this review (Phillips & Graeff, 2014). Phillips and Graeff (2014) revealed that years of teaching experience had shown that students tended to find their first accounting class difficult to understand due to the new accounting terms and language they had to learn. To address this difficulty and foster deep learning of these concepts amongst these first-year students, the authors utilized an in-class simulation exercise whereby the students were involved in buying and selling of different merchandise and recording these transactions using the concepts learnt in class. By utilizing these abstract concepts in real-world transactions, it enabled the students to understand and experience the practical benefits of these concepts which thus helped build their confidence, improve their attitude towards accounting, and enabled them to adopt a deeper approach to learning accounting principles.

### **Course Assessment**

Studies reviewed in this subsection prescribed a variety of assessment strategies that will motivate entrepreneurship students to engage in a deep learning approach to learning. Du Pleiss (2007) pinpoints course assessment as the most important determinant of the extent which students adopt a deep learning approach to learning; if the assessment strategy promotes deep learning, then students will adopt a predominantly deep learning approach. This argument makes intuitive sense.

Boyce et al. (2001) make another appearance in this review, this time advocating for the use of *written reports* and *oral presentations* by students in order for case studies to effectively achieve their objective of promoting deep learning amongst students. In particular oral presentations enables the students to showcase the depth of their understanding on how accounting and business concepts taught in class can be used to resolve real-life problems. Yong and Lew (2005) also advocated the use of written

reports as assessment tools as they require students to relate concepts learnt in class to real-life situations thus facilitating deep learning.

Another course assessment strategy recommended by scholars to foster deep learning is the use of *applied questions* which require students to utilize concepts taught in class to solve simulated real-world problems (Du Pleiss, 2007; Adapa, 2015). In a qualitative study that involved interviewing accounting educators and students in South Africa regarding their experiences of various assessment strategies and how it affected their approach to learning, Du Pleiss (2007) came to the conclusion that for deep learning to be fostered amongst accounting students, assessments must encourage students to display their understanding of how key accounting concepts can be used to resolve accounting problems faced in the everyday life. Adapa (2015) agreed with this summation in his description of interventions adopted by marketing educators in a distance learning programme at the University of New England in order to foster deep learning.

Turner's (2011) study of third-year accounting students has been mentioned in the course delivery section. The assessment component of his intervention to encourage deep learning was the use of *formative assessment*. "The goal of formative assessment is to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning" ("whys and hows of assessment", 2015). Specifically, Turner (2011) utilized five reflective assignments which required students to study before class and to record their reflections on key concepts and ideas in a learning journal which they submitted in class. Students were then given feedback for each assignment (Each assignment was worth 5% of the total grade). The feedback was delivered in three forms: 1) Individual feedback from the lecturer and tutors, 2) General feedback to the entire class and 3) Showcasing of the analysis of the best students to serve as good examples for others. The remaining 75% of the grade was assessed through the use of case studies where each student was given a different case about an Australian or New Zealand company and required to apply concepts learnt in class to resolve various issues faced by the company.

O'Keefe (2012) also adopted a formative assessment approach in a bid to foster deep learning amongst first-year Irish accounting students. Each student was given a personal response system (clicker) with which to respond to multiple choice questions during class sessions. These questions were designed to test students' understanding of key accounting concepts and how to use them to resolve complex accounting issues. The use of clickers enabled the educator to immediately ascertain the level of understanding of the class as a whole of the concepts being taught, and to address any identified weaknesses in understanding. Students were also able to determine whether or not they truly understood the concepts depending on whether or not they were able to correctly answer the questions.

### **Observations and Lessons learnt from the Review**

Several observations and lessons have been gleaned from the review of the scholarship on fostering deep learning amongst students of entrepreneurship-related disciplines. These observations are discussed below:

1. The various interventions that have been found to be effective in promoting deep learning amongst these students can be categorized into three groups: a) course content [inclusion of case studies and tasks to emphasize students' writing skills] b) course delivery [student-centered approach, group work, Case Challenge strategy and in-class simulations] and c) course assessment [written reports, oral presentations, applied questions and formative assessment strategies].
2. To get the best results, a holistic approach has to be adopted whereby all three categories are in sync to foster deep learning (DuPleiss, 2007; Borredon et al., 2011).
3. The extent of the students' adoption of a deep approach to learning was determined in one of two ways: a) the use of Biggs' (1987) Study Process Questionnaire or its revised version [Biggs et al., 2001] (E.g. English et al., 2004; Dupernex et al., 2013) or b) the use of interviews (E.g. Kates, 2002; Jayashree & Mitra, 2012).
4. Only one study (Dupernex et al., 2013) dealt specifically with entrepreneurship students. This study thus helps fill this gap in the deep learning scholarship.

### **DEVELOPING AN IMPLEMENTATION PLAN TO FOSTER DEEP LEARNING AMONGST ENTREPRENEURSHIP STUDENTS**

Based on the observations and lessons learnt from the review of entrepreneurship-related deep learning scholarship, we were able to develop a holistic intervention plan to promote deep learning amongst current EBS students. The plan of action is described in detail below:

1. The first step is to develop the intervention plan based on the lessons learnt from the review of deep learning scholarship. The intervention plan will be holistic in nature covering the three categories of course content, course delivery and course assessment. Regarding course content, it is very fortunate that we were involved in developing the curriculum utilized by EBS. As a group, we were already proponents of deep learning, and thus the curriculum already includes case studies as well as tasks that emphasize the students' writing abilities as suggested by previous scholarship. Additionally, the course content was produced with the Nigerian context in mind, and addresses real-world concerns that the future Nigerian entrepreneur has to deal with.
2. As for course delivery strategies, all five lecturers are trained in experiential learning techniques whereby the teaching style is student-centered and the lecturer serves as a facilitator to the learning process, rather than the traditional "lecturer-gives, student-receives" method that is the norm in Nigerian universities. This training was obtained in a train-the-trainers course of an experiential teaching

technique called “Competency-based Economies through Formation of Enterprise” (CEFE). CEFE is an entrepreneurship training concept for small and medium scale enterprise promotion. Its primary goal is promoting new business start-up; expansion, diversification or improvement of existing businesses through experiential exercises. Experiential learning can be referred to as “learning activities that engage the learner directly in the phenomena being studied (Moore, 2013, p. 44). This approach is a combination of learning and experience in an environment where the educator becomes a facilitator of learning rather than merely a transmitter of knowledge (Ramsey, Mendoza and Weil, 2014). Experiential learning has been found to improve students’ abilities to reflect, think critically and to apply what they have learnt in everyday life particularly in their chosen fields of study. (Kolb, 2014).

Additionally, CEFE also includes a number of in-class simulations which Phillip and Graeff (2014) found to be effective in improving deep learning amongst accounting students. Furthermore, CEFE includes extensive use of group-based exercises, as well as a variation of the Case Challenge method (Jayashree & Mitra, 2012) whereby groups compete against each other to solve business tasks and problems thus getting the students’ competitive juices flowing, increasing their engagement in the subject matter, and enabling them to link entrepreneurship concepts to real-world situations: all ingredients for deep learning.

Finally, regarding assessment strategies, students will be required to make oral presentations in groups regarding various business issues trending in Nigeria specifically and the world generally, as well as resolving business cases as well. Going hand-in-hand with these oral presentations will be written reports presenting detailed analyses of business problems and suggested solutions by the students. These presentations and reports will be submitted piece-meal over several class sessions, so that students can receive continuous feedback regarding their academic progress throughout the semester. Finally, at the end of the semester, final examinations will require the students to resolve applied questions and business scenarios that will measure their understanding of key concepts taught in the course and how these concepts apply in a real-world entrepreneurship and business contexts.

3. The second step is to make sure that all EBS students would be part of the comprehensive intervention plan described above. This will be achieved by ensuring that each lecturer takes a compulsory course for each year of study. As EBS has five levels, one lecturer takes a compulsory course for first-years, another takes a compulsory course for second-years and so on. As there are five lecturers involved in this research, all five years of EBS will be covered. The

choice of compulsory courses as opposed to electives is to ensure that all EBS students are involved in the intervention plan.

4. In the first class of the semester, the revised version of Biggs' Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) will be used to measure the extent to which the students engage in deep learning prior to going through the educational intervention. The revised version of the SPQ will be adopted because since the development of the first version of the SPQ in 1987 by Biggs, "the nature of the tertiary sector has changed dramatically, with respect to such factors as the heterogeneity of the student population, the structure and administration of institutions, the range and depth of curricula, methods of delivery and assessment, and so on" (Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001, pg. 135) This measurement will represent the students' pre-intervention deep learning scores.
5. At the end of the semester, the students learning approach will again be measured to determine the post-intervention deep learning scores.
6. The pre-intervention and post-intervention learning scores of the students will then be compared to determine the success of the intervention.
7. Selected students will also be interviewed from each of the five years so as to gain additional insight as to the effectiveness of the intervention in promoting deep learning amongst EBS students.
8. An article capturing the results of this implementation plan will then be produced and published as a valuable addition to the deep learning literature.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nigeria's young graduates usually have great difficulty finding jobs after graduation. There is, unfortunately, a culture of nepotism that has pervaded the society whereby the few government jobs that are available go to those who have a relative or friend in a position of authority, rather than those who are most qualified. More importantly, there just aren't enough jobs for the teeming number of graduates that Nigerian Universities produce every year. For this reason, unemployment amongst these graduates continues to grow year-by-year with seemingly no solution in sight. This has led to an increase in social corruption as people are driven to engage in illegal activities just to earn a living. Entrepreneurship has been heralded as a solution to this grave problem, and universities have been charged with the crucial duty of equipping students with the necessary entrepreneurial skills to be able to start viable businesses upon graduation instead of fighting over few jobs. A recent example where over 20,000 graduates competed for less than 1000 jobs, and a stampede occurred leading to seven deaths is a case in point (Isine, 2014).

An important prerequisite for the government mandate that universities produce graduates imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit is that entrepreneurship educators ensure

that these students adopt a deep learning approach in entrepreneurship courses. This is because it is vital that they understand entrepreneurship concepts and can relate them to their daily lives, and clearly see how the knowledge gained can translate into actually establishing a viable business upon graduation. This is the objective of this paper which presents the planning phase of the development and implementation of a holistic educational intervention that has the objective of fostering deep learning amongst students enrolled in the Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Studies at the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Nigeria. It is hoped that other Nigerian and developing world universities can also develop and implement similar interventions in a quest to improve the quality of life of future graduates through vibrant entrepreneurship.

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