

Action Learning for Higher Ed Technology: Learning What Supports Graduate Students

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E. Alana James, EdD may be best known for her books for Sage on Action Research and Dissertation Writing. As a mature doctoral student, she was lucky enough to graduate at the apex of the online learning revolution (2005). While working at universities she had the role of committee chair for 50+ students. Analyzing the challenges of those students while mentoring them, lead Alana to cofound the startup that is the center of this article.

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Abstract

Much is made about educational technology startups by the press, but are they sustainable? What organizational decisions are these developing startup companies making and will the products they develop, in the long run, benefit university education? This article takes an in-depth look at the lessons of one such startup whose team employed action learning for the first five years of their development in order to answer those questions.

Included are the practitioner lessons relative to the need for redundancy, personalization, and focus on user experience for any new technology that interfaces with students. Stories are told about the ways in which graduate schools have used the tools and the lessons from those challenges that caused growth. Finally, the author reflects on: 1) whether and to what extent an academic prepares a person to start a business, and 2) whether a learning organization structure is more likely to help the company become sustainable.

Keywords: startup, organizational development, action learning, PhD completion

Background

It's a startup world, or at least this is what the promoters of tech events would have us believe. A dozen years ago at the start of the internet business owners were told: "if you build it they will come" (Mullen, 2017). Then the internet became crowded and everyone had to work hard just to be found. Investors got into the act and quickly it became: "If you get the right training and find the right investment you will succeed ("What corporate incubators and accelerators can mean for your business," 2017). The right training included attending a startup incubator where your ideas would be refined until they fit the mold and your pitch was worthy of being introduced to investors. Today no matter the support systems in place, the startup's path is nonlinear and worthy of study (Davilla, Foster, & Gupta, 2003).

There is no question that educational technology is behind other industries, so much so that investors at first classified ed tech with other companies that had a social agenda. Even though higher education is a multi-hundred-billion-dollar industry, no one trusted companies to be able to sell into universities well. Innovations in education were so underrated that investors didn't begin to see the need for incubators for ed tech until 2011 and in 2018 most new startups are still developing tools for the individual or younger student, rather than trying to bridge into universities. Like healthcare before it, education is a large and conservative market and slow to change (Christensen, Anthony, & Roth, 2004; Christensen, Grossman & Hwang, 2009; James, 2017; Kayyali, 2013).

The following rewritten quotation, substituting education vocabulary for the original references to healthcare, points out just how far behind higher ed is. Two decades ago, faculty at the John Hopkins University School of Nursing (2000) understood the changes they were facing and wrote:

Education delivery is being transformed by advances in e-learning and by the empowered, computer-literate public. Ready to become partners in their own education and to take advantage of online processes, education portals, and faculty web pages and e-mail, this new breed of consumer is slowly redefining the

professor/student/university relationship. Such changes can affect positive results like improved graduate research decision-making, increased efficiency, and strengthened communication. First, however, the professors, graduate schools, and the universities that support them must fully understand their role in the e-learning revolution. Both must advance their awareness of the new student/consumers and their needs and define specific action items that will help them realize the benefits from new innovations (mimicked from Ball, & Lillis, 2000, pg. 1).

These issues are at the forefront of change now on many campuses, certainly of interest to those across the United States.

One vice povost at Texas A&M summed it up as, "The big problem to fix is how to ensure the success of first-generation and underrepresented students who come to us with less social and financial capital, and how to take those solutions to scale" (Benedik, 2017). A growing number of startups are chipping away at the status quo, attempting to address aspects of Benedik's statement.

Of special interest are the companies owned and operated by academics, people who understand the practitioner side of the world they are trying to impact through their innovations, often driven as much by the mission of improving education than profit. Healthcare learned, and universities are learning that a greater interdependence between practitioners and technology providers provides unimagined benefit to their end users (students). In a similar fashion to ways in which clusters of healthcare providers offer holistic or supplemental resources to clients, clusters of departments in universities working together with business can solve issues faced on campus (Baker, Wagner, Singer & Bundorf, 2003; James, 2019).

This article considers one academically-driven startup through the lens of action learning, considering lessons learned over five years of organizational development. DoctoralNet Ltd, based in Ireland, has two tools: DoctoralNet (DN) and MastersNet (MN), both white labeled to universities on a subscription basis as a portal/ phone app/webinar series combination. This article covers five years of longitudinal learning

as the organization developed and answers three questions:

1. What was learned during the research and development prototype phase that proved significant?
2. What was learned through interactions with university customers that could be developed into a systematized approach for future customers?
3. What have been the advantages and disadvantages of an academic orientation to founding a company and building products for higher education?

Methodology

DoctoralNet's organizational development process is best discussed through the lens of action learning as described by David Coghlan (2013). He makes four points, the first three concentrate its goals as 1) giving all participants an experience whereby they create their understanding from using the tools and processes involved 2) handling dynamic situations in a practical and useful manner, and, 3) being focused on the problem in the present in order to set the organization up for success in the future. His fourth point 4) covers the actual learning process as working with "language, metaphors and the social constructions of participating members," rather than the collection and analysis of data, through which to "derive lessons to resolve problems as they occur in real-time" (pg. 55).

The team or "set" (Revans, 1998) of people involved live in divergent parts of the world: two in Ireland, one in Panama, and the last in Spain. While so small a team as to preclude many of the issues in a larger virtual organization, some of the challenges outlined by authors about virtual action learning (VAL) still applied (Dickenson, Burgoyne, & Pedler, 2010; Goodman, & Stewart, 2011). These included: clear roles and expectations, designing the process to make the best use of technology, appropriate self-disclosure, etc.

The Action Learning process used by this set was designed by us and morphed as we went along. Our steps included: researching what we don't know, learning from each other and experience, designing, owning, and taking an action (to move ahead or to resolve a problem). We worked to

develop an attitude of questioning and reflection with each other as we kept up with the rapid changes we faced. Being a startup, we all took on many tasks that were new to us; each moved past our comfort zone. All had learning moments and some outright failures. During our meetings we became comfortable in the use of reflection to uncover how our ideas and attitudes affected the success of our tasks.

There are excellent tools on the internet for action learning, but our team appreciated the brevity and clarity of Ruebling (2007). Her suggestions as to the type of questions to ask each other were helpful and broadened our understanding of each other and the process. Throughout the three-years covered in this article we had one team/set member whose activity level was sporadic due to personal issues. Later, when asked for reflection, she commented that communication was key and had been missing. This highlights a need we had not realized, and one we are currently working on. No one likes adding paperwork to a task unless it is clear how it will be used in the future.

The Theoretical Basis for this Action Learning Narrative

Action learning provides the pragmatic conceptual and theoretical foundation for this narrative, and its use in becoming a learning organization (Marquardt, 2000; Senge, 2006). Conceptually it is an iterative system of constructivist learning and exploration into events, with the consistent attention towards improvement (Coghlan, 2013; Marquardt, 2000; Revans, 1998). This is perfect for a discussion of the wild and unpredictable world of the technology startup and the reader will find that iterative process outlined in the narrative about each round of development.

Theoretically, action learning provides balance to what would otherwise be a simple case study in its requirement for reflexive as well as reflective practice, (Cunliffe, & Easterby-Smith, 2004; Rigg, & Trehan, 2004) "Double-loop learning" as originated by Argyris & Schön (1978), holds the practitioner responsible to consider not only the way forward, which is the main concern for a startup founder but also to comment reflexively on the ways in which they impact the outcomes

they experience (Argyris, 2002). The double loop here are the lessons and considerations considered in the last narrative on the ways in which being an academic may both augment and hamper the path to business success. As a narrative of personal efficacy is tangential to the storyline of development considered here, the reader will find it confined on its own as part of the discussion after the lessons learned are discussed.

Purpose

The purpose of the work described here has been to successfully build a company that provides products to universities which lighten time and financial burdens of Graduate Studies offices in providing supplemental training, professional development, academic writing help and wellness support to graduate/postgraduate students. The customer for the portal that provides these services for students is generally the dean of the graduate school or graduate studies office. The end user is the graduate student who attends that university and, to a smaller extent, their committee chairs or supervisors.

The mission of the company is to help universities improve Masters and Doctoral education through providing a robust and consistent set of services online, 24/7, 365. While lessons have been learned, successful products built, and customer relationships developed, none of these will be more than interesting if the company is not sustained because it is the continued interdependence with university systems that will hone the improvement of services and allow the company to measure the impact of its tools on retention and completion. This article can only address the research and development of the tools and the organization that supports the portal. The company is too young in the marketplace to test the efficacy of its greater mission.

Introducing the Three Narratives

Three interdependent iterations will be discussed; the first two follow the chronological development of the current business. The first thrust of the research and development phase took place in 2014 and 2015 and asked the question “Will it

work?” The second phase in 2016 through to the present asks, “What makes it work best?” This second wave continues today with an ongoing view of sustainable practices.

The second narrative discusses what relationships worked during first pilots undertaken by universities using the products. These lessons also continue today and into the future. This section answers the question what is being learned from working with graduate deans as customers? These pilots began in a small way in 2015 and represent a rapidly growing population of universities.

Finally, I unpack my reflections on the pros and cons or lessons and constraints experienced as a seasoned academic building a business. The reflection section muses on the roles required and whether the simultaneous responsibilities as researcher, author, and coach add to or detract from the speed of business growth? I also begin a larger question into whether I still believe in the efficacy of the learning organization, and since I do, what impact my dual role of academic plays?

The “set” or group of learners

Four people comprise what is known in action learning as “the set” or group that, together, or in pairs or triplets, have driven the lessons learned and outlined here. They are E. Alana James, Ed.D. and Margaret Milenkiewicz, founders of the organization, Maria Sanchez Patino, Ph.D., equity partner and main facilitator, and Sonia Marin, Director of Technology.

Content development and delivery have mostly been the purview of two women with very different academic backgrounds. Dr. Maria Sanchez-Patino is a *professora emerita* from a Venezuelan university where her work included training professors to mentor students. She now works with us from Panama. Maria and I worked together at an online university during the glory days of online proprietary work where students were signing up in droves and educators had not yet learned how difficult it is to consistently replicate quality teaching and learning practices in a digital format.

My background was similar to the students we taught. I earned my Masters degree in non-profit management in my forties and my EdD from Columbia twelve years later, each new degree being

driven by career change. Because of the quality of my education, I was quickly hired in the vibrant world of online proprietary universities and in time was committee chair for 50+ doctoral candidates in either Education or Business.

The organization of the company in the early days consisted of my early web development and management, with Maria partnering with me on content. Students came, we learned, and eventually, we gave up our day jobs with universities to try to build this into the sustainable business that filled the gaps we knew existed. As the web work became too much, I used my own funds and the small income from subscriptions and we began to work with freelance help to pick up the slack.

DoctoralNet is a bootstrapped company, meaning that most of the investment has been in time and money from this author and her partner Margaret Milenkiewicz. Once the company grew to a little over two thousand student users their needs for motivational aids, customer service, and personalized offering of content grew to require a part-time person to help them and Margaret (already a co-founder but one working outside the company to support its funding) became our student services director. Finally, we recruited Sonia Marin who is our technology development guru and who works with our virtual company from Spain.

Of necessity with this small a group the distance between reviewing the past, monitoring the present and planning for the future (Morris, 2011) makes the typical schedule of action learning questions and procedures change. Previous outcomes can be measured, and next iterations started and underway in parts of an hour, if not minutes rather than through multiple discussions over time.

Pearce considers the starting point for action learning to be the tension between whether and to what extent what the demands of the situation matches (or augments) the goals of the company. If they do match and there is a known answer, then action proceeds to follow that path. When current demands and goals don't match, the action learning group looks back on what they are trying to achieve. The key juncture occurs when situation and goals don't match and there is no known answer, then the action learning group needs to muck their way through, using the steps to not only implement the

best possible solutions but to learn and implement differently the next time (2011). This matrix is the life of a startup and this company has been blessed with a great group of people who will be introduced to you later. Every one of them has faced the tension of demands vs long term goals. As a group and because of their efforts the company survives.

First Narrative: The Research and Development Phase

The mission of the company is to aid graduate schools by using research and technology to help both graduate deans and the students they support. We have developed and provide on-demand support through webinars, websites, and apps to guide graduate (postgraduate) students in their work and feeding results back to the deans to augment a university's professional development practices. Graduate school offices are frequently decentralized, overburdened with administrative tasks. The challenges of modern education make a clear focus on student outcomes difficult to maintain. DoctoralNet goals are driven by the question, "Why can't technology help?"

During 2014 and 2015, preliminary research and development started. At first, technology development addressed known problems within the doctoral research and writing processes:

1. Doctoral students tend to stall or get confused at one of four places: a) research design, b) academic writing, c) building a coherent end argument, and d) getting published. Later development added e) understanding the graduate skills that transfer to non-academic jobs.
2. Supervisors, committee chairs, or mentors (which will be called committee chairs from here on but may be titled any of these, depending on the university) are sometime unsuccessful in helping a student complete their work. This may be for several reasons: a) they are new at advising and they don't fully know themselves what becomes critical later, b) they don't want to discourage a student by telling them everything that can be said to be wrong with their work, so they focus only on the most egregious complaints, slowing down the process, or

c) they don't want to spend the time at that moment explaining or mentoring so they keep feedback terse.

3. Academic writing is largely learned by experience, and the subtleties that drive what is considered good writing in this context may never have been formally taught to the students who are now judged on their competency.
4. The growth populations for universities are students enrolled in masters and doctoral education who are frequently older, working full time, at a distance from their university and attending at what would have been a part-time basis. Therefore, time management, work-life balance, and wellness also need to be addressed (James, 2019).

Research and development for the first two years of the company focused on producing webinars while building written content, maps, milestones, and self-assessments to address those four issues. As would be expected, students who needed them and who were guided to use them by their committee chairs, found them very useful.

When the portal attracted a wider range of students, without specific guidance for its use, it became clear that the content was useful but fewer than 10% used the pedagogically oriented guidance tools. Qualitative data continued to be full of praise for the ideas, the format, etc., but quantitative evidence showed that the general content was used to a much larger degree—identified mostly through search. The overall outcome for the business was that the premise worked, was appreciated, and could scale—however students required redundant materials and marketing techniques to help them find the tools they needed. These redundant tools need to be personalized as well so that students felt helped rather than pestered by notifications.

Lessons

Three lessons emerged that guide the company during current and future R&D: 1) redundancy and personalization are both necessary if technology is going to help the student user discover what they don't know (James, 2015), 2) user experience is always the top issue and their engagement is the key performance indicator (KPI),

and 3) development processes must be agile to avoid too much time and energy being lost on an idea that is not picked up.

Redundancy and personalization are critical

In a classroom, we can set up a scaffold ladder of experience to guide the student through known teaching and learning options, each presented in their own time and required for class completion. This is enviable control when compared to on-demand! In web offerings, much as with professional development services on campus, students come when they know they need what is offered IF they remember that the resource exists when they need it. The first lesson then was that in our environment, even though all the tools are built on a strong pedagogical base, students don't know what they don't know. They drop in and may access content in any number of ways, having only a vague idea how to find documentation about the core issues they face. Redundancy and personalization turned this situation around.

Redundant posting and reposting of the basic ideas, restructured in a variety of ways, greatly increase the likelihood someone will find the advice they need. For instance, discussions on approaches and writing of a review of literature might be found in a step-by-step map through the dissertation process, or as articles in a menu or through a search or as a webinar, or part of a boxed set of resources of all types, bundled together that focus on *one* topic. The relevant information may be stumbled across while the student is participating in the 30-day writing challenge.

Personalization increases the likelihood that hints sent out by email will be opened, thus increasing the chances that students will use tools when they need them. Everyone received more mail than they open, so the sender needs to ensure the receiver can make a clear judgement. For example, if you were the student who needed the literature review topic area, would you be more likely to find it if the email was a newsletter *or would* you need literature in the subject line to open and consider the offering?

This introduces the challenge of how many are too many emails? There is no perfect answer for notifications, however, we have learned that few will unsubscribe when the mail they receive is

clear how it is meant to help students. Managing expectations from the beginning is also a key issue; orientation (onboarding) needs to include *messages telling students*:

- Our emails target important issues you may need.
- You will receive an average of one a week, highlighting opportunities and helping you understand how you might use them.
- Ignore the ones you don't need but understand that there will come a time when you do need something on one of the topics we cover, so you might want to set up a folder to keep them.
- The more you tell us about your interests the more likely they will be personalized as you need them to be.

User experience is important

People have higher expectations all the time for their web-based tools. What do they look like? How fast do they load? Is there an app? How well does it work on mobile? Once they get online on the platform, can they find what they need with a quick in and out? Do they need to stay on the site or are tools easily accessed in other ways? What they really want is just the right solution dropped in on them just when they needed it, with no fuss or bother. This requires constant upgrading on what students need at each time of year and timed to their university calendars.

Comparing our pedagogical teaching and learning practices to that of a classroom is similar to comparing traffic on the sidewalk around the corner of a park, one where a footpath cuts across the corner because so many users refused to go the full distance around. Teachers can force students to stay on the sidewalk. The company is forced to follow the user experience, seen in this analogy as the footpath. Online development requires the team to figure out where students are cutting across and give them the way markers they need to find the right tools as they do so.

Development must be agile

The only key performance indicator of importance is the percentage of students who use each tool. Students only use what they find helpful. Someday we hope to have more evidence of the tie

of usage to completion, but for now, we hear by testimonial that students feel well supported. In order to create more usage, we work diligently on continuing to grow just the right tools.

Because web innovation is rapid, each tool must be developed to a usable state as quickly as possible to test its perceived desirability by students. A small bootstrapped company cannot spend a year and thousands of dollars developing a tool that customers won't use. On average, new tools take 45-60 days from idea to development at a first test level. If results are favorable, then six months later an updated version will be planned with a few more options. Everything is rolled out to students at a beta test level – asking for feedback. The more that breaks during the first round of student tests, the better our final version will be.

Agile development also allows the company to offer deeper levels of partnership with the university. It is perceived as a gift to personnel in the relative slow-moving university to broach an idea, work with our company, work with us for a short time on its design, and have it in place for their student population within six months.

A key to continued development is communication between the parties, something that has on a few occasions broken down. Online tools keep all who are interested in the loop and regular group meetings to catch up the step by step processes and commitments needed

The only time DoctoralNet has broken the “be agile” rule was in the development of phone apps for iOS and Android, as it seems clear that the time is right for those services to be available; however, this has been recent, and it is not yet clear how much apps will be picked up for use. So far, the jury is out as only 2% of users have downloaded it, although those that have appreciated the services that are there.

The action learning cycles that developed these lessons

Anyone not familiar with action learning or action research might read these conclusions and think that the process is easy and linear when in fact it is full of messy learnings (Sanyal, 2017). For example, to conclude that the user experience was a key indicator, and that theoretically it replaces socialization in importance for study, was the result

of many mini-discussions into what users were accessing, signing up for, and how those correlated to the notifications students were receiving. At the heart of what makes this business model work, the lessons developed from our action learning felt more along the lines of spiraling in after iterative and redundant experiences drove us that way.

Second Narrative: The Relationship between the Organization and University Customers

By early 2015, the differences in attitude between student users connected to the universities, where the company's personnel were known as professors, and those who stumbled on the site as individuals became apparent. We found that students put their trust in the university they attend and approach outside sources with hesitancy. This was an impediment not only to growth but to the company mission of helping graduate education at scale, so a decision was made to change to a different business model.

Startup and entrepreneurial literature are filled with stories of companies that “pivoted” to create their final market (Blank & Dorf, 2012; Terho, Suonsyrjä, Karisalo, & Mikkonen, 2015). Selling a portal with the tools to the university, and white labeling it for students as powered by DN or MN, provided the opportunities we were looking for. Yet every pivot carries with it unintended consequences and in this case, organizational leadership now had to develop two streams: one that was a student, end-user facing and one that was university facing. Research and development continue to invent new ways to reach students, but a new organizational focus became developing interdependent relationships with the university.

The founder who is responsible for the university face is responsible for digging deeper into local markets, understanding the constraints of the customer, and attending meetings where the company interfaces with deans. EdTech to meet the needs of academia is interesting in this way: to be believable, we must also be academic, constantly researching what we do and able to discuss data in a comprehensive manner. On the other hand, the constraints in a long sales cycle, the slow way universities make decisions etc., hamper consistency.

With each iteration discussed in this article, there have been surprises and unintended learning. When DoctoralNet started to sell to universities costs were on a per-student basis, relevant to the amount of support a student would find on the portal and app. When sold on that basis, the response from buyers was to pilot the solution with a few users. Dublin City University became our flagship with a three-year pilot for 100 students. What was learned was a surprise to them.

Tool use

Being a decentralized postgraduate studies office, DCU had to reach out to their program heads to find the funding required. The conversation focused on the fact that part-time students at a distance from campus do not attend seminars or other forms of professional development. Needing to reach those students as well, three schools agreed to send students.

Staff moves on, as did the dean of one of the programs and the others picked up the slack by enrolling equal numbers of on campus full time and part time (at a distance) Ph.D. students. First statistics that 28% were so unmotivated towards finishing their thesis that they worked on their research less than once or twice a month. Lack of motivation and not feeling they had time to invest in the tools were the two strongest reasons they did not use the site, with the feeling they had enough support coming in third. 48% found the tools useful or very useful.

Attending webinars attracted 33% of the students (a figure that would increase to 56% in later years). Webinars as a point of entry was a surprise to our team, who had always considered the platform as the main tool. This resulted in webinars being used to market the rest of the help students have available. Usage of other tools went up as a result.

The unintended consequence of this sequence was the ability to disaggregate usage data across which students were full time on campus and which were neither. The surprise for DCU was that there was little or no difference between the groups. Subsequent tests at other universities that have online students bear this out—online, on campus, full time, part time, the reasons students choose to use the digitized tools is personal to them,

not correlated to their status with the university in any way.

Overcoming challenges in the graduate office

Interactions with the deans' offices are sporadic, probably amounting to three or four conversations a year. Taken together however, patterns begin to emerge. Action learning helps in this regard as the rest of the team/set ask questions during meetings about each such interaction. As conclusions emerge, I would go back to the Deans, usually by email, to confirm our ideas.

Over the last three years the team has learned a great deal about the challenges of managing a decentralized graduate office or school. For example, there may be few or no direct funds for services. Time is frequently an issue as much as the administration falls to this office to manage: overall enrollment, fee payments, attendance, leaves, schedules for student defense, managing ongoing reports on progress, just to mention those that are common. Purchasing a set of tools that help students is (as one org guru puts it) a "want to have." Helping the deans free up time and reduce student challenges moved our tools to the "need to have" status (Ross & Lenkin, 2016).

The following six instances, sorted for ease in telling the story rather than chronologically, helped DoctoralNet understand the power in, and the need for, interdependence between our office and the Dean's office to build the best tools and accomplish our mission.

1. One university completed its pilot study and worked with us to research student perceptions on the need for the tools as they transition to more online delivery. The case study was positive, and they were able to use it to go back to the programs for more funding.
2. One university suffered many professors changing positions, leaving 40% of their Ph.D. students without a committee chair over a summer break when they would expect a large quantity of work to be done. They were able to work with us to post a letter to students about all the support they had while they were waiting for new faculty and new committee chairs.
3. Deans were worried that students

complained about the number of emails they were receiving (not from us but from them). We were able to tell them: a) about our excellent open rates of 25-40% and that if needed by the students they could unsubscribe from email and still receive notifications through the apps.

4. When we reported the number of students using tools one Dean was quietly shocked, not knowing how to interpret his response we asked about it and he said, "Well it's more than three"—indicating how likely it was that small results were sometimes the norm on campus. Better his 3, 10 or 30 students attend a webinar he did not have to schedule and one where our economy of scale makes it simple to put on over 100 a year.
5. Some programs on campus have multiple graduations during the year. Just prior to graduation there is a cluster of time given to all the final defenses. Some students had good work, but faculty would have liked a better presentation or final document—these regular workshops to produce those results are time-consuming and some semesters were impossible to schedule. Our top 10 webinars have been recorded at a professional level and can be run as "on demand" directly on their uni.doctoralnet.com portal. We can schedule the email reminders to their students, disaggregated as they desire when they need to match their schedule.
6. Some universities put their orientation for students online, asking us for short videos for those web pages. This turned out to be a great idea in many instances, for onboarding emails, as a link we can send students when they ask for resources, etc. The following step was to create a faculty orientation, a project that should launch in fall 2018.

There is some indication that reduced finances may create the needed pressure for deans to secure services before they lose options for that support. Whatever the reasons for purchasing, the unintended consequences of these stories were that the company moved towards an interdependent business relationship with the graduate office.

The more the university collaborates to solve their issues, the more the agile business model pays off with a quick turn around and new business options, and the greater the likelihood of long-term relationships.

Reflexive Thought

This section pursues two levels of reflective and reflexive double loop learning. First, I consider the dichotomy of the business owner/academic and consider whether and how the two roles have helped or impeded the growth of the business. Second, I employ a quick double loop considering “the good company” model as discussed by Morris (2011).

About the Suitability of the Academic Mindset in this Business

Running a business, at first, seemed a lot like writing a dissertation or thesis. On the one hand, you are on your own, with only the pattern or design of what you want to build in your head. On the other, you have mentors and guides along the way who will exert influence, sometimes a positive but also which could be a negative force over the long haul. Investment and investors are significant in this regard as they have the potential to elevate you closer to your dreams. They also have their own agendas and every time your business comes under scrutiny from an outside force, you learn more about your overall standing as a company.

There are advantages and disadvantages to this action learning project taking place in a company selling into higher education, which has, inherent in its nature a very slow-moving pace to development. The advantage was that we could mature as a company at a slow pace as well. For example an 18-month sales cycle is normal, putting pressure on a young company because of the cash flow challenges which result. Yet we were mature adults without the need for large salaries and could slowly build just what we needed using open source tools.

Also, in the “prove it to us” culture of the university, where decisions are routinely dependent on research-based information, the three years it takes to pilot and then write up findings only added to the snail’s pace of development. Yet this allowed

for us to find the right groups to be part of to advance sales in the United States. As another academic in this arena recently told me, “In ten years we’ll be a huge overnight success” (Murphy, 2018).

The discussion of “need to have” vs “want to have” (Ross & Lenkin, 2016) was significant for us in a couple of ways. Pragmatically, of course, it is important as people tend not to buy their “want to have’s.” That meant that we had to keep digging deeper, understanding the status quo in the deans office to position our business strategy to do the most good.

Being mission-driven has become a keystone for us and we are committed to working with Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Especially “starting with the end in mind” which means for us, starting each relationship with a university with a collaborative edge. Also keeping our focus on the non-urgent but important tasks, which is ongoing research, writing and presenting to hone our ideas and have them tested by the general academy.

Personally, I have known that in fact, we were a “need to have” as these were the tools and ideas that I needed as a professor. Not to have tools like these easily available decreases the efficiency of postgraduate education because it denies the professors AND the students the support they need. It has been belief in this that has kept us moving forward. These tools provide the safety net required by the growing diversity of backgrounds reflected. On-demand 24/7 365 digitized tools will only continue to play a larger part in the mix of change that is ongoing on university campuses.

I have learned that when I remain open and listen carefully to needs, my intuition is accurate and the next form of development becomes obvious. Collaboration between the university and the business is a cornerstone of what will make us successful and that invites me to be open and continually listening.

Helpful to be an academic myself?

Being an academic has had its pros and cons in organizational development. The greatest pro is that we know what we are talking about, have worked with students and can empathize with our customers in ways others could not. The greatest handicap has been my ease within slow-moving

organizations and I frequently wonder if I had more business experience could I have advanced this company faster? Certainly, most investors think we have been very slow to find the traction we now have.

On the other hand, education is conservative and maybe my comfort with its slowness is the only reason we are still alive and poised to make a difference. Others might have cashed in their chips by now and moved on to other projects. I do know that being an academic helps me justify the time it takes to research, be reflective and reflexive, etc. This article is an example of setting aside 20+ hours, not for the gain of the company or our customers but because I believe in the value to the field in publications about these topics.

Being an academic also gives me the ethic of doing the work for the work, not the money. As a bootstrapped company this is the only way we are still in business as we take only minimum funds out and our personal savings are all invested. Would other fields be so likely to work in this manner? I have no idea. Is it smart? I have no idea about that either although I certainly have debated both sides of the argument.

Being an academic who is also in business has alerted me to the waste of resources in some of our universities, as it pertains to support structures for students. It is no secret that some are still well financed, but fewer each year. Gone are the days when an indiscriminate amount of resources can be spent on seminars for students and other forms of professional development now that universities have seen student attendance drop.

Our little company with a bold idea has collected valued colleagues, new friends, and supporters over the years. We are blessed with people throughout the academy who “get it” and wish us well. Will we be an apparent overnight success in 10 years? We see signs of improvement and growth that indicate we will.

Action learning, leadership and building a “good company.”

There is no question in my mind that we have become a better learning organization because of our use of action learning. How could we not be, driven as we are by the literature of our field and steeped in a career of practice as to how to be

a learning organization and the importance of it (Senge, 2006)? The next question is a relationship between learning and leadership (Marquardt, 2000) and its general efficacy in building a sustainable company. This is something I have yet to work out completely although I believe in both and the potential of them in our company.

I reflect therefore on a diagram from Morris (2011) where we establish leadership with the purpose of enhancing good practice (and I would add making money and creating a sustainable environment for everyone) where leadership reviews the past, monitors the present and plans for the future. He puts conscious learning under and in relation to reviewing the past, but from my experience conscious learning is needed for monitoring the present or it leaves the team in the planning for the future step with gaps in understanding that degrade the results.

Morris points out, “As change disrupts old structures of power, and offers new and unexpected opportunities, the old phrase (minding our Ps and Qs) now sings with new meanings. If we mind our Ps and Qs skillfully and wholeheartedly enough, in good company, engaged in good practice, we will really be learning to good purpose.” (pg. 42). He is undoubtedly not speaking of a startup sized business environment. I reflect on our first five years and ask, “Shouldn’t learning, leadership, and building a “good” company not be tied together from the very beginning?”

I believe it should. Upon reflection, I think this has been the single biggest strength of my leadership as an academic in this organization. The rigors of research teach us that all is not lost, no matter the result, as long as we are learning. That has been an anchor to our ship as our truly tiny boat has maneuvered through very big issues and environments. We continue to stay afloat, as much because of my undaunting belief in the efficacy of our founding ideas, our timing in the marketplace and our mission as for any other reason.

Conclusions and Significance

We believe action learning is the right methodology through which to consider organizational work and is as true for startups as for enterprise. By considering at each step, what we

want to do, how we plan it and whenever possible how we can measure it, our reflections and reflection move the company forward. As I said, maybe not as fast as we would like but still alive and moving. We've seen a 400% increase in the number of end users in the last 6 months.

Looking back, this makes our story significant, at least to other academics that have also identified a part of the world of higher education that can be helped through digitizing the work. We hope the article is also significant to those who have administrative capacity over graduate/postgraduate programs. The lessons we have learned about our company's ability to develop agilely allows pedagogical ideas to develop much more quickly and at much lower cost than trying to develop in-house. If we are going to push back on the low retention completion and throughput ratios of postgraduate education, we need to develop more tools for less cost.

Looking forward to our growth to a mid-sized company the path seems mysterious. Known challenges ahead include taking on staff, exporting to new parts of the world, and continuing to build connections and community. Our investors have us shooting for \$1 million in revenue which is a goal we both embrace and cannot yet imagine. What organizational requirements will we face? That, I suppose, will be another action learning installment.



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