Students as Social Entrepreneur Change Agents: Community based research and learning

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Abstract:

This paper describes findings and lessons from our community-based project on urban entrepreneurship that has been ongoing over several years. By using methodological strategies that include observations and in-depth interviews, as well as by drawing on the skills and local expertise of our research team, the investigators seek to understand the local logics that go into business decision-making in a context where rationales are not always obvious to outsiders. At the same time, we highlight some of the specific methodological and pedagogical payoffs for engaging our culturally diverse and multi-lingual research team of undergraduate students that match the neighborhood demographics. This research paper will also describe our institution’s role as a community action researcher through the development and implementation of three unique student consultancy programs in various disciplines, connecting students and local entrepreneurs in mutually beneficial relationships, increasing the collective impact of the university on local economic development, and allowing students to put their knowledge and skills into action in practical, unstructured and creative capacities. Prior research results have shown that such initiatives do not only turn students into change agents for their community, but help them develop skills that can be useful in many areas of their professional and personal lives.

Introduction

There is growing excitement about the concept of revitalizing low-to-moderate income neighborhoods and communities through the “the local economy movement,” which empowers local residents to open and run successful businesses, as promoted in the USA by BALLE-Business Alliance for a Local Living Economy, IGNITE Institute of St. Peter’s University and
Rising Tide Capital. This movement is accompanied by increasing campaigns to “shop local,” source locally, and re-think buying behavior in terms of where consumers spend their money and acquire products and services (Wicks, 2009). Entrepreneurship and local economic development initiatives, particular in urban areas, are increasingly being explored by policy makers, funders and academics, and universities in particular have an important role to play in this process as large anchor institutions with a wealth of knowledge resources in their students and faculty. As Amanda Whittman and Terah Crews (2012) state in their research, due to the constant threat of economic downturns, higher education institutions must now engage in their community effort more urgently than ever, and the best way to do so is by focusing on long-term community partnerships that prioritize education. When these initiatives can enhance student learning in relevant disciplines, it can be a win-win situation with a significant impact.

One rationale for facilitating community-based learning for students in the field of business and entrepreneurship is that it can be difficult to replicate the complex and uncertain environment that real entrepreneurs operate within on a daily basis within the confines of a classroom. Traditional case studies can be very helpful, but often underestimate the true complexity of the business environment. Other approaches include internships and business immersion programs, though there is wide variation in meaning and scope of these options, and they also result in the same narrow slice of one type of organization.

We propose community-based field studies of micro-business and entrepreneurship as a more robust way to provide students with direct access to the realities of the business environment and marketplace. Not only do they observe the nuances and complexities of operating a business firsthand; they also develop primary research skills, professional communication and survey skills, the ability to present academic research in public forums and
research conferences, and at the same time become more immersed in the larger urban community outside of the college.

A community-based research model approach broadens learning in several ways. First, it puts community well-being at the center of the work, thus providing students with an opportunity to have a more direct, positive impact. Second, it allows students to combine established theoretical knowledge and case study insights with research training and a range of first-hand observations, including the experiences conveyed to them by subjects in the study. This moves away from the useful, but narrow range of case studies. This paper describes unique community-engaged student research and experiential learning programs taking place in Jersey City, with Saint Peter’s University in partnership with Rising Tide Capital and a variety of local businesses, entrepreneurs and organizations. Organizing the study and going into the field can also help students hone valuable research skills and perhaps even contribute new knowledge to the discipline from a different perspective. This includes an emphasis on quantitative research skills.

It also seems important to engage researchers that match the demographics of the respondents, or have some other connection to the neighborhood and its residents. These connections helped the team gain access to the community and learn more about sensitive issues, using their insider status to learn more about the impact culture, social networks and overall social-embeddedness on entrepreneurial decision-making. We also examine how asking the team to be reflective about the research lends itself to a spiritual kind of reflection for self-development and a stronger concern for community improvements that can be garnered from the results. These reflections culminate in a proposed business consulting program that expands community engagement into an ongoing collaboration between faculty, business students and business owners.
The Study

Small businesses play an integral role in our economic success, from the global level down to our small towns and municipalities. This is especially true in working class, urban communities where many diverse individuals own and run their own small enterprises, generating necessary employment opportunities and providing goods and services for citizens. The success of these businesses not only affects a community’s economic well-being, but also the social fabric of neighborhoods, so owners and residents alike have a stake in local small business sector survival.

Our research takes place on the main strip of an urban neighborhood in Northern New Jersey. Indeed, the strip of about 200 very small businesses is an important element of the neighborhood’s economic and social well-being for owners, employees, consumers and residents. Local residents and visitors can find an array of services from real estate to tax preparation to pest control and products that range from exotic pets and hardware to food and bicycles. While there are some high quality and higher-priced options in some sectors, many of the businesses offer low cost and bargain items.

On an average day, there is a feel of hustle and bustle on the Avenue, with pedestrians strolling along the sidewalk, buses picking up passengers and trucks dropping off supplies. In this setting, the logics and strategies of owners are not always obvious to outsiders, and they do not seem to follow a standard set of decision-making processes that one would expect follow when going into business. The area consists of many businesses selling similar products and services in close proximity. Many of the businesses have a high turnover rate, and a large number of them also seem to rely on very low profit margins for the majority of goods sold. The categories of businesses included in this study include a number of ethnic grocery stores, dollar
stores (and below, such as $.79), hair and nail salons, small restaurants, jewelry stores and a variety or other service providers.

Upon encountering these issues, the researchers sought to better understand the decision-making that goes into establishing and running a business on the main strip. They wondered why owners chose their particular businesses and this particular neighborhood. They wondered how some businesses ran their shops and why some outlasted others, and as we began to see just how ethnically and economically diverse the neighborhood was, they began to wonder how everyone got along and whether these issues were related to business decision-making, operational strategies and long-term survival.

Along the way, we discovered that this population would be difficult to access, but also that the relationship we and the students had to the community would become a resource in addressing these challenges. We used our familiarity with certain owners as a starting point to get initial interviews and provide students with examples and training. As they became more comfortable on their own, students began targeting stores by culture and language matching themselves to the demographics of the owners. They determined what languages they would translate the interviews into. With success, they became more eager to make unique contributions, and as they grew even more confident, their thoughts on what to do with this research became more nuanced and sophisticated.

This project presents opportunities for us to learn about business practices in a way that is more holistic and engaging with the community, as well as mutually beneficial to all parties. Further, since many of the 28 Jesuit universities in the United States are located in urban areas, we think it presents a working model for others to build partnerships and mutually beneficial relationships with the local small business community, helping to differentiate Jesuit business
education from other programs. For this reason, and as local municipalities and states are looking to small businesses to help stimulate the economic recovery and help alleviate the employment situation, the nature of these small ventures is an important area of research. Examining elements of race, ethnicity, language, gender, family and social relations in small firms in addition to business elements such as planning, financing and other factors, can provide a more holistic view of the interacting internal and external forces affecting the business. The array of businesses interviewed includes many immigrant-owned businesses, representing countries such as India, Mexico, El Salvador, China, Italy, Turkey and others. A number of other businesses are owned by US-born Hispanics and also US-born Caucasians of European ancestry. These variables also help to provide a deeper insight into the reality of the decision-making processes involved in starting, running, growing or exiting a small business venture.

Prior Research – Best Practices in Community-engaged research

Another general theme in entrepreneurial research focuses on country of origin of owners and cultural influence. One study identifies significant differences in motivation of immigrant business owners versus U.S. born owners from the same ethnic background. A study using data from the 2005 National Minority Business Owner Survey and consisting of 156 Mexican American entrepreneurs, 55 immigrants and 101 US-born, (Shinnar et al., 2009), identified differences in motivation for start-up, reliance on ethnic enclaves and business management practices. The study found that US-born Mexican entrepreneurs are more motivated by the individualistic financial benefits of being an entrepreneur, while Mexican immigrant entrepreneurs are more motivated by serving society and their co-ethnic community. This

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2 As described in “A Leadership Education Model for Jesuit Business Schools” by Facca, Schmidt & Soper, JJBE Summer 13
difference reflects Hofstede’s (2005) cultural dimensions, with the Mexican immigrant-owned businesses displaying more collectivist and risk-averse elements and American-born owners more likely to subscribe to individualism and low uncertainty avoidance in decision-making and management.

Sriram, Mersa & Heron (2007) propose that specific variables may work differently for different subcultures in an urban entrepreneurial environment. In this study, which focused mainly on African-American business owners in Baltimore, the authors note the importance of a vibrant urban small business community to the alleviation of poverty and sustainable economic development, which could then have a positive impact on crime reduction and other social ills and even engender a sense of optimism. They also explore the advantages of social and cultural-embeddedness of many entrepreneurs but caution that an over-reliance on this can hurt these businesses as well. There is some disagreement on whether governments should promote the relocation of businesses to urban areas, thus creating jobs or if outside efforts should be focused on inner city residents themselves as the drivers and owners of the businesses. Regardless of whether these businesses are relocated or not, it is very important that they have access to initiatives or programs that can provide assistance to them (ICIC, 2014). Through the Ignite Institute, our school has established a partnership with Rising Tide Capital, and is helping provide direct educational services such as workshops, panels, and training aimed at local entrepreneurs. Through similar initiatives, local schools can drive improvement both to small business, and to the students who they engage. A model that could be followed is that of Cape Breton University, Canada. Greg MacLeod (2014) specifies that the school was able to create an investment cooperative that focused on the restoration of failing businesses in the community. They rescued a local food plant, two small hotels, and also managed to build the first condo in
Cape Breton, a city whose history can be easily compared with that of the USA’s rust belt. It all began as an initiative that helped to transform a community. In addition, Maurasse (2001) provides a number of models for creating impactful university-community partnerships.

**Social Networks**

In addition to ethnic and culturally grounded constraints and logics that shape entrepreneurial behavior, another strand of embeddedness scholars emphasize social networks, or the kinds of concrete connections we have to others (Granovetter 1985). Part of the focus on *social network analysis* is to specify how relationships create structure, trust and order in the economy and among economic actors. By examining relationships, we can see how the logics within cultural embeddedness function: “The embeddedness argument stresses the role of concrete personal relations and structures of such relations in generating trust and discouraging malfeasance” (Granovetter, 1985). This idea helps to show how embeddedness, when generating trust and in conjunction with ethical business practices, can be a source of competitive advantage for a small firm and help to maintain loyal relationships. But it also shows how the absence of connections can limit opportunities by leaving the marketplace more unpredictable, or limiting the transfer of important information.

**Methodology**

In an effort to provide additional evidence that decision-making by entrepreneurs in much more nuanced, complex and collective than rational choice theory posits, this study utilized a multi-method approach to learning about decision-making.
Phase one began with ethnographic observations as a means to gaining familiarity and
entre into the neighborhood. Beginning in summer of 2011, a small team of ethnographers
funded by our Title V grant, conducted observations in the neighborhood to develop an
awareness of daily life in the business district of Central Avenue in Jersey City Heights. The
process was enhanced by the researchers becoming somewhat normalized figures in the
neighborhood. Most of the student research team was already familiar with the area and matched
many of the owner-respondents in terms of race, ethnicity and language. Early observations led
the authors to question how owners go about selecting their particular type of business, the
strategies they use to remain open, attract, and retain customers, especially during difficult
economic times, and how social networks shape the process.

The observations which suggested that many businesses and owners did not seem to be
bound by rational decision-making processes brought us to Phase 2 and the development of a
quantitative survey was initially designed to elucidate some basic questions on how owners came
to the business, what kinds of support they had and how they were doing financially. The team
conducted approximately twenty such interviews, but quickly realized that the respondents
wanted to tell deeper stories about their experiences.

With this in mind, the team developed Phase 3, which has become the core of the
research thus far. The initial survey design was a quantitative survey with mostly close-ended
questions. The researchers found the closed-ended questions to constrain the responses by
owners and also that often a simple yes or no or even choice of five different options was not
sufficient to capture the complexity and nuances related to the decision-making process. As a
result, a qualitative survey was developed in 2012, (see Appendix A) which allows the owners to
elaborate on answers, providing much richer information. For example, when asked “What has
been one of your biggest challenges of running your business?” most owners explicitly say the economy. But in longer responses to other questions, many owners touch upon more personal challenges that they have overcome, including fear of failure, lack of social capital, problems with landlords and other issues. The conversational nature of the qualitative survey helped to establish more rapport between the interviewer and owner, which also elicited more thoughtful responses. Phase 3 includes in-depth, face-to-face, qualitative interviews that ask many of the same questions on the quantitative interview, and allow respondents to elaborate on their answers on motivation for starting the business, assistance and social support, challenges and needs, and perceptions of social relations among diverse groups in the area. As with the respondents, the researchers were from varied backgrounds that mainly matched the neighborhood and business owners. The authors and student researchers are all bi-lingual and administered many interviews in Spanish and one in Mandarin, which allowed for further growth of our rapport with owners while eliciting more detailed answers. Thus far, the survey has been administered to 45 owners.

Additional data that will be used in the analyses include secondary data, such as census data available about the Heights area of Jersey City. Some demographics on the neighborhood include that there are 27,877 people per square mile, there are more women than men populating the neighborhood, and there are an average of 3.4 members in each household. 40 percent of the people in the Jersey City Heights neighborhood were born outside the U.S. while 14.3 percent did not have much knowledge on the English language (City Data, […], n.d.). Later in the study, when we increase our sample of businesses by an additional 25-40 interviews that have been conducted, transcribed and coded, the authors will test various hypotheses in the area of urban and ethnic entrepreneurship using a more quantitative and data-driven approach.
Analysis - The Case for Embeddedness in Choosing Business and Location

Part of this study examined decision-making data on why owners choose their specific businesses and in this particular neighborhood. The explanations respondents shared suggest that when making major decisions about business type and location, many owners are driven by criteria that is more socially influenced than a rational choice model would imply. In some cases, it is blatantly obvious that ties to the community are paramount to the decision-making. The most overt example of embeddedness is reflected in how owners come to own their businesses.

In all but a few interviews, owners had some pre-existing connection to the neighborhood. These ranged from growing up or currently living there, to knowing friends and family, or having some pre-existing business connection, such as a business acquaintance or actually working for the shop before becoming the owner. Habit and familiarity play a significant role, with many owners stating that they decided to open the business because they grew up in the neighborhood, or have lived there for many years and therefore feel comfortable in the setting and that they understand local needs. Still further, for others, business owner logics are constrained by economic resources, demoralization, or lack of awareness from being isolated in the neighborhood for an extended period. A forthcoming paper (Trillo and Naatus, n.d.) provides a detailed interpretation of the impact of over or under-embeddedness on business longevity.

Methodological and Learning Impact of Insider Engagement and Exposure

In addition to the research results, this project has yielded some important methodological and pedagogical lessons for us to consider - for the research, for the students and for the overall project of engaging with the community and making our results contribute in
ways that are accessible and appropriate for the community. This includes drawing on student skills and expertise, creating a stronger sense of connection and belonging to the scene, and asking students to analyze their processes and reflect on how to do their work with a strong concern for the benefit of the respondents. This is where they can be turned into action researchers and eventually develop models that can be followed because of their impact. In a community-based research initiative in the field environmental studies, Cheryl Keen and Elizabeth Baldwin (2004) highlight the importance of asking community partners about the ways in which they benefit from working with students. All but one of the 13 partners who provided their opinion about the initiative admitted that working with students granted access to helpful information that would otherwise be unavailable to them. 75 percent of the students affirmed that their work allowed them to feel more confident about their ability to change the community, and upon graduation, at least 53 percent of the students who participated in the initiative decided to work in environment-related fields. In the same way, we believe that by engaging business students in community-based research, colleges and universities can help local entrepreneurs become more competitive by finding stronger bases for their decisions. We also believe that our students can gain confidence in their ability to drive change, and that they can remain loyal to the idea of sustainable development as they progress through their lives.

_Becoming Insiders_

In discovering some of the local logics that inform business owners on the strip, one of things that has become apparent is the benefit of a methodology that employs faculty and student researchers that have some grounding in the neighborhood and at least somewhat understand the neighborhood dynamics. In the beginning, we struggled with making contacts, arranging
interviews and getting respondents to open up to us. This, of course, is common, especially among some populations. But over time, we also gleaned that some of the overlooked skills of our student researchers could be useful in getting access. This helped with some of the barriers that were initially overwhelming, given the intense diversity on the strip.

Familiarity with the neighborhood was especially important in this regard. In our initial phases of the project, we learned that some students were hesitant to enter stores and interact with the owners. Part of this was a tendency to be reserved, but, as time went on, it became apparent that they were generally uncomfortable moving through the streets, having challenges with parking and even completing interviews. The initial team was not from the area, and most were from the suburbs or upscale parts of town.

In the second round, we included more students who either belonged to the neighborhood or were at least familiar with it. We were fortunate enough to have one particular student who not only grew up there, but also knew many of the owners. This helped other students feel more comfortable and aware.

We also sought students who were bilingual in Spanish and Hindi. These language capabilities also became an important factor both in communicating, and in creating more comfort between researchers and respondents. For a short period, the team was able to have a student who could speak Mandarin. This led to one extensive interview with one restaurant owner and an informal conversation with another. In another interview, the researcher occasionally moved between English and Spanish, using the latter to restate any questions that were not clear to the respondent. It might have seemed easier to do the interview in Spanish; however, and despite it obviously being her second language, the respondent insisted on English, while comfortably accepting the Spanish re-statements. [This type of openness from the
respondents is parallel to the results of another survey we performed later in an Arts & Culture festival. We reached out to the business owners who were present, and those who belonged to minorities or foreign countries expressed that they would be more open to give answers in an interview that is conducted by a researcher who shares their ethnic background or language.

We provided students with a more elaborate plan for spending time, hanging out, and becoming part of the scene so that store owners could feel more comfortable with them and vice-versa. We encouraged students to eat in restaurants, engage with the staff, shop in convenience stores and even engage in conversations with the police. This further created a sense of comfort and belonging for students, and a bit more openness from the owners. Eventually, between hanging out and spending time with the researchers who were also natives, the team began to take on more of an insider status.

*Analysis and Reflection*

We also learned that we could enhance student engagement and connections to the community by asking the team to periodically analyze their findings and reflect on their experiences while carrying out the research – both the process and the meaning. Here we describe what happens in terms of constructing a tone of doing better research not only for the purpose of improving data collection and analysis skills, but also for self-development and the creation of a stronger commitment to the community.

Upon completion of the summer research, students are asked to present their findings at an annual research festival. This enhances the experience by encouraging students to exercise their analysis and presentation skills, feel a sense of accomplishment about their work, and share best practices and lessons with other groups of faculty and student research teams. In
preparation for the presentation, about two-thirds of the way through summer, we asked student researchers to document what they believed to be their most interesting observations. As they explained, we encouraged them to link their observations to one or a few theoretical topic areas we covered earlier in the project. This compelled students to make the kinds of connections that are important for the development of analytic skills and critical thinking. It also prompted them to think more carefully about their observations and subjects when moving from over-simplistic explanations to more nuanced interpretations.

As these conversations unfolded, students were able to spend more time empathizing with respondents, rather than imputing their own perspectives. One marketing major observed that he never quite understood the nature of the challenges facing these entrepreneurs, even though he studied it in class and read about it in his textbooks and other materials. He admitted that his role in conducting these personal interviews was a real eye-opener for him. He also said he was surprised at how nice many of the businesses were once inside but that generally the stores were not very inviting on the outside. The students have also commented that it has helped them to get to know themselves better and visualize themselves as business owners and leaders. They also gleaned that real research takes a lot of time. They concluded that many of life’s projects will require this same kind of diligence and attention to detail and that it is ok to be satisfied with small bits of progress.

*Community Action Response: New Program Development*

Perhaps the most impactful element of this research project is that this study informed and helped spur the creation of several new experiential learning programs that partner students with community micro-business partners in relevant projects. These projects were piloted in
Spring 2015 and then received grant funding from the Provident Bank Foundation in October 2015, which has helped grow and augment the programs with trainings and community building sessions to build rapport and the social connections among participants. In an effort to “jump start” our direct service goals by Ignite and also in response to the qualitative survey responses regarding entrepreneurs’ need for help with marketing, business planning and social media, Ignite launched the Micro-Business Consulting program. Building on the proven and effective Jesuit service learning model which focuses on community service or academic partnerships with nonprofit organizations in the context of a class (Maurrasse, 2001), this program partnered micro-businesses and entrepreneurs, mostly women and minority-owned businesses in underserved areas of the city, with student teams in semester-long classes. The program was piloted in Spring, 2015 and twelve micro-entrepreneurs were selected from the applicants, based on specific type of requests and availability of student expertise and academic content of courses. The type of businesses include a music studio, a maker of natural body products, contractor, marketing firm, makers of jewelry, clothing and multicultural dolls, and a green printing business. Two of the partner entrepreneurs were participants in the qualitative study described above. The partner classes in the pilot round of the project included the subjects of marketing, international marketing, entrepreneurship and Africana Studies.

The principal reasons for selecting these types of project were to facilitate real world skills development and applications of academic work for students and also provide some much needed assistance to local entrepreneurs, who are making a difference in their communities but often so focused on running the operations of the business that they don’t have the time to assess the business and marketing plans. In the first round of the project, several benefits were realized, but problems and areas for improvement were also identified.

Jumping into the partnership project quickly helped accelerate new partnerships and awareness of the Ignite Institute and also immerse students more in the community. Partnering with so many community-based businesses allowed a higher level of engagement and more practical projects with
actual real-world implications to be launched right away. However, by not fully vetting the partners and managing expectations in a very standardized and specific manner, there were some misunderstandings in terms of scope and impact. Similar to a service learning partnership, partners should understand limitations of the partnership, in terms of time constraints and the fact that students are taking up to 6 classes, and that this project is only one component of one class. Students also need a more extensive coaching and training experience to precede the partnership program. Learning how to interact professionally and properly communicate business feedback and suggestions, without creating negative perceptions is very important. Finally, at the time of implementation there was no funding to provide compensation or a stipend for faculty members facilitating the program, which was a barrier to success since this local learning economy requires so extremely intensive strategic, operational and logistical work in order to effectively implement it. Lessons learned? In the future, the number of businesses per year will be reduced to a more optimal level, the qualifying interview process will be more intense to better assess needs and match viable partners and clarify roles, duties and expectations, and more preparation, implementation and close-out training will be designed and provided for local entrepreneur partners, and our students and faculty.

Our Innovation Fellows program, which covers a student stipend to serve as a volunteer intern with a local micro-business, is being piloted this upcoming spring, but aims to provide more in-depth development for the business, since the student will spend approximately 3-6 hours per week working on projects of need. The Innovation Fellows will be supervised by a faculty member, similar to a cooperative education experience, and funding will come from the Provident Foundation grant for the first year of the program.

Finally our Town and Gown Senior Business Consulting Program is going into its third year and is a joint venture between the Department of Business Administration at the University and the local county chamber of commerce. This senior consulting class experience partners
student teams with chamber small business members, who work together on a semester-long consulting project, supervised by the faculty member teaching the course, and culminating in a reception and final presentation competition among all of the teams. Town and Gown has been a great experience for the students and business owners, and we have plans to continue and grow the initiative with support from the Ignite Institute and grant funding.

**Conclusion**

All of these initiatives have been informed and influenced by the ongoing research process which the students were engaged in, and which included identifying potential interviewees, conducting and recording interviews, transcribing interviews, and organizing and analyzing data, inherently requires a deeper reflection on their behalf. We organized many face to face sessions during the weeks when the bulk of research was being conducted in order to share stories, the ups and downs, questions and concerns and other issues. The long term commitment to the research process and analysis allowed for critical reflection and helped develop a new sense of inquisitiveness in students and the faculty members, in terms of learning to ask different kinds of questions, seeking answers to those questions from the community, and building new collaborations and partnerships in the process. We believe that this type of community based project inherently leads to a deeper type of inquiry, which in the words of Kolvenbach (1989) “can lead to an appreciation of more comprehensive truth,” and can endure well after project completion and the college experience. We believe that school engagement in local research can really provide an insight into the state of the community; however, this should be seen as just the start, and higher education institutions should do something about the results that appear.
References


