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Fostering students' motivation to be and stay in action

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Abstract:

One major key of success of the Team Academy (TA) pedagogical approach is the engagement of the students into action in order that the learning by doing process can unfold (Kolb,1984). The purpose of this research is to study the pedagogical factors that favour the students' motivation to be and stay in action in such a programme. The selected conceptual framework for motivation is the Self Determination Theory of Ryan & Deci (2017) that was found relevant because it links the individual's autonomous motivation to his social environment. The empirical study is based on the case of the Bachelor Team Entrepreneur of EM Strasbourg Business School (University of Strasbourg), launched in 2011 on the TA model. Qualitative semi-structured interviews representing a diverse audience from alumni and students drove us to two major results. Firstly, becoming autonomous is a difficult learning process where the tension between a student's freedom and the pedagogical frame obligations is central. Sometimes, freedom seems to foster action and sometimes to slow it down. Secondly, being autonomous for the students means taking full responsibility for their choices and the consequences on being or not in action.

Those results lead to three pedagogical challenges for an action learning-based programme. The first challenge directly addresses the essential nature of pedagogical support on both action and reflexivity and highlights the risk that the pedagogical framework focuses on one aspect to the detriment of the other, especially in underestimating the role of action guidance. The second pedagogical challenge is posed by the existence of periods of inaction that should be accepted as a relevant experience in the learning process. Finally, the third challenge raises the question of supporting student autonomy by addressing a dynamic balance to be found between laissez-faire and control/constraint of the pedagogical framework.

Keywords:

Autonomous motivation, Pedagogical design, Action learning

Fostering students' motivation to be and stay in action

The program “Bachelor Team Entrepreneur” (BTE) at Business School of Strasbourg University has its roots in the pedagogical approach of Team Academy (TA). At the BTE, commitment to student action is the cornerstone of the programme, as lack of action implies lack of opportunity to learn and therefore to train. Since the creation of the BTE in 2011, the pedagogical team has noticed that the dynamic of action was irregular. This observation motivates our questioning in order to better understand how to support students' motivation to enter and stay in action so that the learning by doing process can take place (Kolb, 1984).

The subject of human motivation is defined as the set of energies underlying the process by which a person devotes intensity, direction and persistence to a task in order to achieve a goal (Robbins & Judge, 2018). Our research is built on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) of Ryan & Deci (2017), linking motivation to the specificities of the social environment. SDT identifies different types of motivation, grouped into two main categories: controlled motivation and autonomous motivation, also called self-determined motivation. In the case of autonomous motivation, behaviour is associated by the individual with the feeling of free choice, whereas in the case of controlled motivation, behaviour is associated with pressures and demands that the individual perceives to be external. The numerous empirical studies dedicated to SDT show that the development of autonomous motivation will result in an increase in individual well-being and performance. SDT lays down the conditions for the development of autonomous motivation based on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, the need to feel competent and the need to connect with others. The psychological need for autonomy refers to the possibility for the individual to act by exercising his or her will and free choice, or to the desire to organise and decide on his or her behaviour in such a way that his or her actions are in accordance with the 'true self'. The need to feel competent is part of a feeling of efficiency and control over one's environment. The need to connect with others refers to the desire to feel connected to others, especially to those who are important to us. The more the environment tends to satisfy those fundamental needs, the more the individual gets autonomously motivated.

The issue addressed in our research concerns the pedagogical challenges of supporting students of the BTE in the development of their autonomy. As BTE offers a significant amount of freedom to learners this means questioning the balance between the constraints and freedom offered to them by the pedagogical framework.

Precisely, we intended to explore :

- the way in which, in concrete terms, students experience the space of freedom of the BTE,
- the challenges they face, particularly in relation to their action,
- what it means for them to be autonomous.

The 'BTE': a 10 years little sister within the Team Academy family

Over the period of our study, the case of the BTE of Strasbourg proves to be very interesting because the way the TA approach has been implemented until 2018 has given students a lot of freedom and seems to have satisfied students' need for autonomy. We present herewith the main specificities of the BTE in relation to our problematic:

- The evaluation is annual and aims at validating the competencies of the TA reference system, based on the elements in the student's portfolio. The evaluation of each competence is carried out through a dialogue between the student, two of his or her teammates and the team coach. Mid-year assessments take place in January but do not have an impact on the final grade.
- The explicit requirements on the content of the portfolio are quantitative, with the student having a free choice of sources and themes (no imposed reading list, not predefined reflection papers topics). Each student must produce a certain number of learning contracts, essays, reflection papers, motorola visits, pre-defined by the pedagogical framework. The validation process for portfolio papers is not explicitly and unambiguously determined.
- Students are free to choose which projects they engage in and who with (e.g. working alone). The only restriction is the legal framework. The project does not need to be validated by the student's team. Project reports or monitoring of hours of action are not required.
- The obligation to be present on the premises is limited to participation in Training Sessions by the student's team twice a week.

Methodology of the study

The study is based on 10 semi-structured interviews, lasting an average of one hour, conducted with 3 one-year graduates, 4 third-year students and 3 second-year students.

The interview guide asked the students what it means to them to be "in action", the main motivating factors that impact on action (or inaction), and the elements of the BTE instructional design that have helped or hindered their action. The interviews were transcribed in full and processed according to the principles of thematic content analysis. All coding steps were carried out manually in double coding by two researchers working independently.

Interview results

Asked what autonomy at the BTE means to them, students will look at three different aspects. Firstly, students express how the BTE is a space of freedom for them. Secondly, they report on the

consequences of this freedom for them, especially with regard to their actions. Finally, they make recommendations regarding the pedagogical framework.

The BTE : a space of freedom for students

Students came to the BTE, attracted by the freedom of the setting and the promise of an education without traditional courses *"autonomy is clearly at the heart of the BTE, I came partly for that"*(50.36). This freedom is a freedom to choose, to decide, and this at time schedule, projects and learning level:

"Clearly we can plan any way we want" (50.36)

"They let us do the projects that everyone wants in the first place. As long as it's legal" (21.115)

"No matter what you want to learn, you have the opportunity to learn it" (20.56)

"I am given the choice how I want to learn" (20.56)

Finally, the BTE's concept of freedom is based on action and learning and allows students to choose not only what they wish to achieve or learn (the what) but also how they are going to do it (the how).

The two faces of freedom

The freedom of the framework will have two effects on commitment to action, what some will call the *"double-edged sword"*(36.89) of autonomy.

The power to choose is a driving force to engage in action.

"In the end I do a bit of what I want. I manage as I want to. In fact I've never worked so hard.

I work every weekend, in the evenings when I get home, all the time actually." (6.75)

Students take action either to connect with their aspirations, their dreams and do what makes sense to them, or to escape from the state of unhappiness caused by inaction.

"For me, there is a need for stakes. To take action, there must be either an issue that attracts me or that I see what I don't want to be and I run away from it. I need to feed myself. Or I'm attracted by a dream and I do everything I can for it, but the real motivation is that I can't afford to do nothing". (63.51)

They consciously implement strategies to achieve their goals. These strategies can affect their daily lives and go beyond the purely academic framework.

"The first is daily rituals. (...) Typically for example working at least three hours a day on my project, or getting up before 8am, or (...) Personal things like not smoking (...), doing sports etc. (...) It avoids, for example, getting up at noon and taking a nap at 2pm and watching films all day long". (59.80)

"And here, for example, I'm making a social readjustment. It means that people whom I like a lot I'm going to see less, whereas I like them, but from a factual point of view they are people who have stopped studying (...) I have to make a social (...) so that my entourage are people who are related to my ambition". (34.7)

Being faced with such a vast choice can become problematic.

Students face situations where they do not necessarily know what to do, how to do it or where to start.

"Because at the beginning, autonomy can push you to do nothing, because you just simply don't know what to do either, and so that's quite complicated". (46.102)

"Choose your own goals. Really, I know it's a bit complicated. I personally can't reach my goals (...) or I don't know how to estimate how long it will take me to do it."(10.114).

Being lost, they are unable to engage in action and fall into a period of varying degrees of inaction. Moments of inaction are generally badly experienced by students who characterise them as moments of anxiety, lack of joy, rumination or waste of time.

"Inaction upon inaction, I was in a vicious circle in this project, I was simply starting to panic when I was doing nothing at all" (E2M 241).

When the period of inaction comes to an end, the students experience the influence of a "trigger" which can be the student's awareness of the situation and the activation of his or her will, or the perception of an external threat strong enough to push for action.

"So, to go from 'no action' to 'action'... In fact, there was a trigger, but it came from me. It came out of nowhere else." (8.70)

"In fact, repeating a year would have been a huge failure that I would have experienced badly and I think it would have been even more catastrophic if I had repeated a year. So, yes, I had no choice in fact. (...) Actually, I was really telling myself it's not on. You have to make it work" (25.137).

What does it mean to be autonomous?

Being autonomous means taking responsibility for one's choices, whether in action or inaction.

"You can choose not to be in action.(...) Technically spending a year doing nothing. You don't go into second year, but you can. It's up to you. On the other hand, when you make the choice to do nothing, in fact, it influences your personal life (...) And above all, it influences the team." (51.72)

On the other hand, when the period of inaction is perceived as too long for the student, and the associated state of unease becomes too much to bear, there is a risk of dropping out.

"... what is interesting and at the same time cruel is that there is this side «we know that there will be losses. » (...) That is to say that those who cannot bear this autonomy will leave." (24.71).

As far as action is concerned, it is not enough to be committed to action, but it is a matter of being committed to action in such a way as to be responsible for it by taking responsibility for the consequences of one's choices and actions on oneself and on others.

"And in fact, there are no excuses anymore either, if I'm not in action it's my fault, full stop. It's not the team's fault." (32.74).

For some students, the responsibility they take on will go beyond the academic framework of the course to include responsibility for their lives in the broadest sense. The training can therefore be seen as a preparation for an independent life, with its share of existential anguish.

"But I've never been as anxious as I have been since I've started the Bachelor because I realised that my life could have a meaning and that for the moment I wasn't really doing anything with it yet. And that's what scares me." (67.136)

Students' suggestions

The students are going to propose 3 main avenues relating to the framework that they feel is relevant to encourage the development of their autonomy: the progression of the framework over the 3 years of the course, the compulsory nature of a framework that encourages action and the need to think about sanctions in the event of non-compliance with the framework.

progression of the framework

Graduates or students at the end of their third year of study criticise the pedagogy by saying that it offers too much freedom at the beginning of the course. This freedom is sometimes perceived as "violent" by young people who have left mainstream education. They suggest a framework that offers a space of progressive freedom from one year to the next.

"In the beginning it was far too much for what I wanted. Clearly. (...) Since you are actually not yet able to handle such autonomy in your life (...) In this sense, it's super violent for some people. People who live in a family setting don't even know the price of pasta." (11.3.)

"In my case, what would have helped me a lot more is to have part of my autonomy taken away in the first year. (...) You can go back to the "classic system" and gradually remove this kind of thing where in the third year you have complete autonomy. I think that we could be 25% autonomous in the first year, 50% in the second year and 100% in the third year. (26.17)

A pedagogical design that encourages but also constrains action

The main message from students is the importance of a framework that guide their action (what to do and how to do it) and constrains action to the point of forcing them out of their comfort zone.

"It's true that sometimes we lack the autonomy to do things we don't want to do, for example, sometimes in a project we have to go and see people, but if they don't tell us to do it, we'll try to push it as far as possible if it's something we don't necessarily like to do. (21.115)

Sanctioning non-compliance with the framework

Students express the need for sanctions for non-compliance with the framework.

"When you have a company in which your boss tells you what to do or you're fired. This is when you understand what it is like to have constraints and to be responsible. However, in the Bachelor you have a lot of freedom but almost no sanctions. You can always get away with whatever you do." (2.64)

And so, what are the impacts on the pedagogical design?

Learning-by-doing or action learning pedagogies assume that the student is in action to learn. Thus, being in action is the central pillar of training. However, observation of student activity over ten years of the programme leads us to observe the systematic existence of periods of more or less long periods of inaction. This observation leads us, in our pedagogical practice, to question the conditions that ensure that periods of action, but also of inaction, are at the service of the development of students' autonomous motivation.

We present herewith our reflection and feedback on the identification of three pedagogical challenges for action learning-based training of the TA type. The first challenge directly addresses the student's involvement in the action. The second issue questions the challenge posed by the existence of periods of inaction. Finally, the third issue raises the question of supporting student autonomy by addressing the right balance to be found between laissez-faire and control/constraint in the chosen pedagogical system.

Supporting action and creating the conditions for learning

How to ensure regularity of action on the part of the student? How to promote a pedagogical design that encourages action and makes it visible? We suggest that the primary mission of the pedagogical framework is to push the student to DO and to SHOW what he/she has DONE, so that he/she can develop his/her learning.

In the case of the BTE, the pedagogical team seems to have taken up the challenge of developing students' reflective skills. This is confirmed by the quality of the portfolio writings as well as the richness and depth of the reflective feedback provided by students in the interviews we conducted with them for this study. The hypothesis that we formulate to explain students' reflexivity is to have explained the requirements of the framework for students' reflexive productions (number of obligatory writings, validation of writings by coaches and peers...). On the other hand, the setting leaves students a great deal of freedom for all that concerns the action. This means that action is in reality not or only very little

supervised. Thus, over the period of this study, indicators to measure commitment to action are non-existent at the BTE. It should be noted here that for BTE students, "being in action" is not systematically linked to entrepreneurial action in the context of a project, and is sometimes not even linked to training, but refers to the structuring of the student's time in his/her daily life, or even his/her personal life path (Bourachnikova & Merdinger-Rumpler, 2019).

As a result of the processing of these interviews and the results, we have modified the pedagogical framework. We have moved from an annual evaluation to a six-month evaluation mode. The underlying idea is to push the student into action by validating 2 semesters, based on the hypothesis that it would be more difficult for him/her to be inactive. At the same time, we have set up a pedagogical framework for the action with the integration of tools for monitoring the action, such as a project follow-up or a weekly hourly investment sheet. We also told the students that we expect them to respect a Fifty-action/Fifty-learning time-sharing system. Thus, the student must show that around twenty hours per week are devoted to action.

Accepting inaction as a learning experience

If the student is in action, the reflective tools enable him/her to develop skills, make his/her own choices and ultimately contribute to the development of his/her autonomy. What happens when the student is not in action? This period is described by students as uncomfortable, even provoking anxiety and unbearable over a longer period of time. Students feel "lost". Some of them then experience a trigger that allows them to get out of inaction. Although we have not explored the origin of this trigger, we can notice that when the inaction phase has been particularly difficult to live through, it sometimes serves as a "never again" experience for the student who has overcome it. The students' comments also lead us to realise that it seems that the period of inaction is related to the pedagogy of learning by doing and constitutes a key stage in the development of student autonomy.

The challenge is then to allow this stage to exist in the educational system so that the student can experience the "emptiness", the "feeling of being lost", from which he will be able to build himself, experience a trigger and decide to commit himself. We can then speak of a "creative void". Autonomy is then achieved through the existence of action-inaction loops that are experienced and overcome by the student throughout the training process. It is therefore not a question of preventing or denying these periods of inaction at all costs, but of making them part of the process of learning. The pedagogical framework must then support the student in becoming aware of his or her state with regard to ACTION by systematically asking the question of: Where do I stand? (am I or am I not in action?) What is happening inside me-for me? What are my needs?

In the case of the BTE, after observation of regular periods of inaction that were potentially destructive for the students, the first reaction of the teaching team was to impose a framework prohibiting inaction, opting for a shift to close control. We very quickly became aware of the discomfort

that this engendered in some students, who neither experienced the trigger of salvation from inaction, nor the development of autonomy. We have therefore suggested to fully accept the period of inaction and make it an integral part of the learning process in the BTE. In order to do this, we developed a tool that we called "the Phoenix project". When the student becomes aware of his or her state of inaction, he or she is asked to engage in a Phoenix project which aims to accompany him or her during this period of inaction in order to maximise the probability that it will turn into a "fertile or creative void" and lead to the "trigger". The student is then coached individually in a weekly appointment, with missions that are suggested so that he or she can accomplish a minimum of "active" hours per week. As this initiative has started recently, we do not yet have the necessary hindsight to analyse its effects, but it seems to move towards the right direction.

Finding the right balance between laissez-faire and constraints

The third pedagogical challenge questions the notion of the right balance between constraining-controlling and laissez-faire. What to impose and when to emancipate? How much freedom to do what exactly? At what points in the training programme?

If the student develops an awareness of his or her responsibility (in relation to himself or herself, to others - in particular his or her team -) and fully accepts the consequences of his or her action and inaction, this leads to the development of autonomy. In the case of a TA-type model, autonomy develops in the action-inaction loop allowed by the degree of freedom of the framework, combined with a reflection period allowing the student to develop his or her knowledge and skills. Let us observe two extreme cases.

The first situation is that of a student whose motivation is autonomous in the sense of Ryan & Deci (2017), which induces him/her to take responsibility for his/her action/inaction and the consequences in relation to his/her pedagogical environment. The freedom offered by the framework is a space that he or she will learn to manage and be devoted to in order to gain experiences and learn from them in a way that is constructive for him or her and his or her future.

In the second situation, the student has not developed sufficient autonomous motivation to put himself or herself into action. In this case, he or she does not do it because he or she does not feel sufficiently competent, whether this feeling is based on an objective assessment of his or her actual competence or not, because he or she is afraid to engage in the action because of a lack of self-confidence or because he or she does not feel like it, whether it is because he or she has not yet developed sufficient self-awareness to know what he or she likes to do or for some other reason. Here, the educational framework must accompany and support the student, pushing him or her to take action and develop skills and self-confidence. The pedagogical design must then be based on more control, with constraints and requirements accompanied by sanctions in order to hook the student's extrinsic motivation. Many aspects are at stake in this situation, including questions such as: are the sanctions

consistent with the intention of this type of emancipatory pedagogy? are they perceived as trustworthy by the student? are they supported by the entire teaching team in order to ensure the cohesion of the framework? How can the adaptation of the framework be cohesively accommodated to the individual and the group alike?

During the BTE training, students experience both described extreme situations. Even if the trend observed throughout the course is towards the development of autonomous motivation, the motivational process is far from being linear and identical for each student. In this way, it is possible for the student to review motivational phases based on more or less autonomous logic. Furthermore, the student may experience differentiated motivations according to the stages or activities linked to his or her action in the same project or in different projects by being motivated by internal dynamics for some (autonomous motivation) and by external pressures for others (controlled motivation). It seems to us, therefore, that one of the main keys to the success of the pedagogical design of an TA-type training course rests on two pillars. On the one hand, the adaptation of the framework to the motivational state of the student in order to avoid that it is deployed in an overly controlling way with students who have already developed sufficient autonomous motivation. On the other hand, the existence of a permanent dialogue with the student (and his or her team) and the establishment of full transparency both on the rules constituting the pedagogical framework and on the way in which they are implemented and decisions are taken.

Following the interviews we conducted, we have modified the pedagogical framework of the BTE by integrating a graduation of the space of freedom for both action and reflective activities. Thus, in the first year, the framework is controlled through projects imposed by the coaches and to be carried out in teams as well as through the explicit formalisation of the number of pieces of each category of expected productions in the student's portfolio. In the second year, the framework offers more freedom of action, in that the missions are no longer imposed but proposed while maintaining requirements for reflexive work. In the third year, autonomy is very high: projects are free of choice and portfolio objectives are allocated to each student within his or her team.

In conclusion, our study shows that in order to sustain the students' learning in an action-learning cycle, the pedagogical framework has to guide action, to accept and support inaction as a relevant learning experience and finally to find a dynamic balance between laissez-faire and constraints.

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