

The role of partnership in launching PBL approach in cooperation with network of social enterprises – research case of Częstochowa University of Technology

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Abstract

The objective of the paper is to share experiences in building and functioning of partnership between University and network of social enterprises for the purposes of launching project-based learning (PBL) approach. PBL was introduced within elective course titled Creativity management in business that is offered within Design and Project Management degree on Faculty of Management, Czestochowa University of Technology. Both, the PBL approach and partnership with social enterprises was introduced in 2019/2020 academic year. The objective of students projects was to identify the needs of social enterprises and develop business models with the use of creative approach. The scope of the paper is to present experiences of students, teacher and representatives of social enterprises involved, as well as, institutional partner: network agent. The partnership with institutional agent has started in spring 2019 while the student projects has been launched in fall semester 2019/2020. The structure of PBL approach has finally consisted of 6 separate projects groups with single small size social enterprise involved in each group and group of 3 students. The sequence of PBL introduction included the phases of recruiting the enterprises, objective settling, defining the scope of the project and its content, project realization, assessment and summarizing. The PBL use would be considered from the perspective of teaching and learning experience, partnership and eventual specificity of social enterprises sector with PBL approach. The key factors enhancing the partnership in the use of PBL approach and stimulating its benefits are related to the enthusiasm of institutional agent involved, openness of social enterprises, division of responsibilities within project teams and attitude of students and good networking and tutoring performance of the teacher.

Keywords: active learning, PBL, social enterprises, creativity management, social innovation

1 Introduction

The Project or Problem Based Learning (referred to as PBL), is a commonly recognized teaching approach aimed at engaging students in the investigation of real problems. In this model, students seek solutions to non-trivial problems by discussing ideas, making predictions, developing plans and/or experiments, collecting and analyzing data, communicating their conclusions to other students, raising new questions, and creating artifacts (Blumenfeld et al. 1991; Reis et al. 2019). PBL is also considered to stimulate interdisciplinarity (Lima et al. 2017a), combine program specific competences with transversal ones (Mesquita et al. 2015; Lima et al. 2017b) and to provide opportunities for collaborative learning within and outside universities (Mohd-Yusof et al. 2011; Reis et al. 2019). The differences between project- and problem-based learning have been discussed in literature but for the purpose of the paper could be summarized to learning process orientation. Problem-based learning focuses on knowledge acquisition, while project-based learning focuses on the application of knowledge (Perrenet et al. 2000; Hussadintorn Na Ayutthaya and Koomsap 2017). The collaborative approach within PBL is also related to the participation of companies that share its operational, technical and market insights in order to define project objective and possible make the solution coherent with real life conditions (Delgado and Ayala 2019).

While creating new curriculum of Design and project management, the coordination team of that task, realized on the Faculty of Management at Częstochowa University of Technology, has intended to use project- and problem-based learning in its centre in order to gain the abovementioned benefits and characteristics and provide students and graduates with unique but yet viable set of competences and skills. It was not planned from the beginning, but using the support of external partner for application of active learning approaches has

significantly boosted the changes towards achieving these goals. The objective of the paper is to share experiences in building and functioning of partnership between University and network of social enterprises for the purposes of launching project-based learning approach.

2 Set up of pilot testing of PBL approach for Creativity management in business course

2.1 Framework

Faculty of Management (FM) on Czestochowa University of Technology has launched its cooperation with Juristic Centre of Social Economy Support (JOWES) in March 2019. JOWES is a branch of Regional Development Agency in Czestochowa (ARR), a public entity to support local and regional development. JOWES activities are co-financed by European Social Fund within the framework of *Regional Operational Program of Silesia Voivodship for the years 2014-2020* and its sub-action 9.3.1. "Support for social economy sector" (<http://jowes.pl>, accessed: 11.06.2020).

One of the objectives of cooperation between FM and JOWES is to enrich the educational processes with practical issues of social entrepreneurship and to improve the capacity of social enterprises within mutual knowledge exchange and learning, experience and competence sharing. JOWES has become institutional partner and overtook the role of networking agent for cooperation between social enterprises and academics.

The initiative of including social entrepreneurship practices within the educational process has been introduced on the Bachelor degree program of *Design and Project Management (DPM)* which is held by FM. Second year students of DPM program have faced real life problems from the perspective of social enterprises within the course titled: *Creativity management in business (CMB)*. These active approach to the course has been introduced in autumn semester of 2019/2020 academic year as a pilotage. It is important to notice that DPM program and its CMB course has been approach with problem and project-based learning from the beginning and no other teaching approaches has been tested for this course. For this purpose an author teaching program for CMB course has been prepared by Aneta Pachura, PhD, an instructor for this course and co-author of this paper.

The aforementioned cooperation between JOWES and FM has been formalized into a cooperation task titled: Mutual learning. It's pilot testing has been launched in academic year 2019/2020. The official run of the course has been schedule from October 4th, 2019 till February 26th, 2020.

2.2 Project set up and specificity

The project within the CMB course has been designed as an answer for the need of development intersectoral cooperation, mutual learning and combining the potential of different environments for achieving social benefits. The objective of the PBL introduction has been twofold: 1) enriching the educational process with active approach and practical business issues and 2) capacity building for JOWES and FM cooperation, and, in more general context, strengthening the intersectoral cooperation.

The key content of PBL, namely project of CMB course has been designed to introduce the practical aspects of social entrepreneurship and creativity, which was assumed as significant for DPM program and important for achieving its program learning outcomes. The group of 18 students, divided into smaller project groups, has spent whole autumn semester in 2019/2020 academic year for preparing a project with cooperation with six social enterprises. The main objective of the project was to develop a business model for selected social enterprise. Students has been engaged into identification of real-life social enterprises problems and has been engaged into developing and proposing solutions.

2.3 Project objectives

As mentioned before the objective of the project was to develop a business model for selected social enterprise. The educational objective of PBL approach was to introduce practical issues of social enterprises functioning into educational process. The detailed objective of the PBL approach used were:

- Students engagement into initiatives of social entrepreneurship,
- Students engagement into practical problem solving, especially from the perspective of social enterprises,
- Elaborate on students competences on identification and analysis of external and internal factors influencing social enterprises,
- Elaborate on students abilities on creative thinking and testing potential business models,
- Elaborate on students competences on team working and decision making, cooperation and communication.

2.4 Project tasks

Before official starting of the project, the project set-up has been prepared between FM and JOWES. After defining the general objective and scope of the project the survey on PBL participation was distributed among social enterprises that are supervised by JOWES. After preliminary elimination of enterprises that was based on the survey results, the group of six social enterprises has been defined to participate in PBL. The selection process has been finalized around July 2019. The following months has been used to define the The schedule of the project with the tasks breakdown is presented in the Table .

Table 1. The schedule of the PBL approach and tasks breakdown

Tasks and its purposes	Time framework
Informative meeting with students – preparation of students for project work and division for project groups	04.10.2020
Meeting with social enterprises representatives – presentation of social enterprises and its business activities and potential scopes of the projects / finalization of project group division by assigning the groups to specific enterprises	25.10.2019
Study visits in social enterprises – project group presentations of actual location and activities of social enterprises	28.10.2019 r.-14.12.2019
Project work - realization of specific project tasks according to the project tasks forms within the project groups	04.10.2019 r.-29.01.2020
Evaluation of project results by the teacher	29.01.2020 r.-26.02.2020
Forwarding of the developed business models to the representatives of social enterprises	19.02.2020
Disseminating event for project results within the 3 rd CSR Seminar – public presentation of developed business models by students, handing over the certificates for participation in JOWES-FM cooperation project by the president of Czestochowa municipality	26.02.2020

2.5 The results of applying PBL approach

The results of the project and PBL results should be considered from the perspectives of the students, academic teachers, social enterprises and institutional agent (JOWES). The general results are as follows:

- Original and innovative business models, developed for social enterprises engaged in the project,
- Enriching learning process with elements of practical issues of social entrepreneurship,
- Improvement of teaching workshop,
- Strengthening the development potential of social enterprises,
- Strengthening the project related competences,
- Development of cooperation and decision making competences,
- Increasing the competences of knowledge, skills and experiences sharing,
- Increasing of social economy awareness in academic environment,
- Development and strengthening the social interrelations.

2.6 Limitations of applying PBL approach

Despite the occurrence of clear benefits for all the actors involved within PBL application some limitations has been spotted and should be considered before launching next edition in 2020/2021 academic year and further developing PBL including courses in DPM curriculum. It is not possible to avoid all of them or to mitigate them to significant extent. The list of the identified limitations includes:

- Limited time framework for application of PBL – autumn semester lasts for 4 months and a course of CMB has 30 contact hours only,
- Excessive working time for social enterprises representatives over routine activities – it has impacted their engagement level into project consultation and discussion,
- Excessive project-related workload for students among different courses in the curriculum – it has impacted their engagement level into project work,
- Generational differences between project group members – it has impacted the efficiency of communication between the students and social enterprise representatives,
- Lack of external or internal financing – it has impacted the frequency, number and length of studying visits and potential preparation of prototype business and product solutions.

Since the application of PBL is considered from the perspective of one course only, the interpretation and possible actions towards decreasing the negative impact of these limitations should be mindful and should take into account the possible consequences for whole curriculum. Such actions as reconsidering the accounting the share of project work as contact hours, using internal financing for some cost bearing activities or changing the hourly structure of curriculum to give more hours for project-related work.

Some of the limitations are heavily influenced by interpersonal relations and personal characteristics of students and entrepreneurs involved. Through the course of the projects it seems that some issues has not been clearly disputed by academic teachers, JOWES and social enterprises representatives and it has led to some misunderstandings and mismatching the project work with the expectation of selected enterprises. Finally, the problem has not significantly impacted the outcomes of PBL application. As an example of such a problematic issue we can point out the expectations of some social enterprises to get marketing plan at the end of the projects. Since it was not the key outcome of the projects, students and teachers has stuck to the objective of developing a business model. Finally, the intervention of JOWES representative has helped to get the understanding of agreed project work. This example shows also the difference between the direct project-related cooperation between university and company and cooperation with additional engagement of institutional and networking agent, such as JOWES in the relation to supervised social enterprises.

The role of JOWES has been crucial with regard to overcoming some of the abovementioned limitations. From the perspective of social enterprises JOWES has many different roles that are quite important for its activities and possible external financing, competence development or networking and marketing events and efforts. In fact, JOWES supports social enterprises in many fields to help them to overcome the possible drawbacks towards regular enterprises and its competitiveness.

2.7 Management of PBL and project teams

The management of PBL application has been co-handled by all the actors directly involved into the process. Project teams, social enterprises, university and JOWES as an institutional partner has shared the competences of managing it. Projects has been realized by 6 interdisciplinary teams that included three students and at least one representative of social enterprise. Additionally, each project team has a contact person in JOWES that enabled the ongoing contact between the enterprise and students and teacher.

The work of project teams has been supervised by academic teacher, who participated in teamworking on the basis of consulting and mentoring. Additionally, teacher had the responsibility of monitoring the progress of projects and evaluated its outcomes. The role of the teacher has been related also to problem solving activities that lied beyond the competences of project team. As mentioned above, the teacher has been in ongoing contact with JOWES contact persons and its supervising board.

JOWES as an institutional partner has a role of communication enabler, supervisor of social enterprises engagement and problem solving agent, when the enterprise related issues were concerned. Social enterprises has settled the background for business model development by presenting its current activities and operating markets, as well as, showing its possible growth directions. Enterprises have provided the data and facilities for studying visits, analyses and development proposals.

The schedule of the project work has been prepared by the teachers, but project teams has performed its own time management schemes and selected individually the forms and intensity of project meetings. The main topic of the project has been settled by project teams. Each team has selected one of the students as its project manager who took the responsibility of maintaining contact with social enterprises representative, providing materials for academic teachers to document the progression of the project, communicating internally with all the project team members and organizing project work and meetings. Additional role of project manager was to handle possible interpersonal or thematic conflicts and communication problems, but it was done with the support of academic teach or JOWES representative if the problem occurred on the line between the students and social enterprise.

Each project team has a social enterprise as a provider of leading topic and its representative as a member. These representatives has not participated in project work as a whole but has provided the data on enterprise functioning, the scope of its current market undertakings and activities, the possible development and growth directions and has verified and accepted the assumptions of proposed business models and creative solutions concerning products, processes or organization.

2.8 Experiences of PBL actors

There has been four group of actors involved in the process of PBL application: students, teachers, social entrepreneurs and its employees and JOWES as an institutional and networking agent. Each one of the groups has its own perspective while experiences from PBL application are concerned. The list of experiences in relation to specific group of actors is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Experiences of PBL actors

Students	Social enterprises
Contact with business practice	Contact with academic environment
Contact with social entrepreneurship	Contact with new ideas and proposals
Practice of designing business solutions	Social and inter-generational relation building
Cooperation within interdisciplinary project teams	Knowledge and competence sharing
Personal capacity building and using own potential	
Academic teachers	Institutional agent
Intersectoral cooperation	Contact with academic environment and its potential
Creating interinstitutional networks and relations	Intersectoral cooperation
Engaging students in out of the class activities	Engaging students into activities of social enterprises
Personal capacity building and using own potential	
Leadership and mentoring	

Additionally, to cover the experiences of social enterprises involved, their feedback was collected during the summarizing meeting on February 19th 2020. The meeting was held by JOWES and its main purpose was to discuss the business models as an outcome of the project, taking into account the perspective of social enterprises. Feedback was collected during personal meetings between the teacher and representatives of social enterprises. Received feedback was categorized within three areas: 1) usefulness and implementation possibilities of developed business models, 2) development potential of social enterprises and 3) evaluation of partnership within the PBL and cooperation with students.

As for the usefulness of the models developed, the representatives of companies have appreciated its reference to their actual needs. Implementation of business models proposed could contribute to the strengthening its market position and its further development. The models were assessed as complex and expressing the holistic

approach towards social enterprises. Since the project teams worked closely with social enterprises, the models are suiting their current technical and organizational conditions and refer to actual market conditions. The problems spotted here are related to the additional resources that are required to comprehensively introduce the models and some internal (lack of resources and competences) and external risks (facing new competitors). Due to SARS-CoV-2 pandemic most of the implementation steps were cancelled or held back but it is expected that in the second half of the year some of the enterprises will start the implementation and prototyping.

As for the development potential, the representatives agreed that the cooperation within PBL with students' team have enabled the development process of their knowledge and competences. Additionally, the clash of pragmatic and innovative perspectives has been inspiring for them and their overview of their businesses. The key factor here is related to the openness for different perspectives and intersectoral cooperation that could be impactful concerning the strengthening of business and quality improvement.

The cooperation with students' project teams was a challenging task for representatives of social enterprises. It was mainly due to intergenerational composition of the teams and the differences in communication schemes and preferences. Overall assessment of this issue, from the perspective of social enterprises is positive and indicates the strengthening of its social competences. Its most visible outcome is the ability of creating, maintaining and using network social relationship.

3 Building partnership between university and social enterprises – key impact factors

Basing on the example presented above we could identify some key factors impacting the partnership building process between university and social enterprises.

3.1 Institutional agent

The purpose of settling the cooperation between FM and JOWES has not been originating from the potential of PBL application. In fact, the cooperation agreement, as negotiated between the partners has not referred directly to potential of PBL use in the social enterprises. But the potential of PBL application has been raised during the agreement negotiations and since then has become one of the key cooperation areas between the two institutions. In our opinion, it was due to openness of JOWES as a partner, and its sense of responsibility for supervised social enterprises. Cooperation on PBL has been perceived by JOWES as a chance for social enterprises, if not to get market ready business models, to get critical and external view on its activities and significant outlook on possible directions of its development. The enthusiasm of JOWES staff over PBL application has impacted the social companies that had a chance to participate in it. Assessing it from the time perspective, it is obvious that without JOWES engagement it would not be possible to establish the framework and gather business partners so quickly and in such a disciplined manner.

3.2 Social enterprises

Social enterprises are a challenging ground for implementing PBL but they are also different from regular enterprises. These difference could obviously work for the benefit of PBL application. First of all, social enterprises are not bound by the revenue objective only and have some other purposes for its activities. It could be a good opportunity to set PBL approach in a real, market-based context. Secondly, social enterprises are short on resources, not only financial but also human force, and could benefit from PBL application by setting its goals around its growth and development directions. Through PBL application they could achieve some of its long-term strategic goals without sparing on it its human resources that are needed for everyday challenges. Last but not least, social enterprises are often run not by economic drivers but for some higher purposes. In such a case, building partnership with university and its students is perceived as such a long-term investment and is good occasion to share its view and disseminate its activities.

3.3 PBL scheme

The cooperation between different actors in order to achieve program and course learning outcomes is always a challenging task. PBL scheme proposes the diversified toolbox for this purposes and is flexible enough to

develop a clear path towards these objectives. The main advantage of PBL approach is related to the opportunity to share the responsibility between different actors and empower students in leading the process towards them. Such an advantage should not only be considered from the perspective of single course but also from the perspective of whole curriculum. As some evidence show (Arana-Arexolaleiba and Zubizarreta 2017; Lima et al. 2017b), system approach to introduce PBL could lead to build up a set of interdisciplinary benefits for academic actors and its business environment.

3.4 Students and teachers

Finally, the role of students should be mentioned, in order to give more personal factor on partnership building from the side of the University. Students participating in PBL application have been relatively unexperienced (2nd year of bachelor degree studies) but have managed to turn their potential weakness into the advantage in the process of partnership building. In contacts with representatives of social enterprises they naturally took over the role of the ones to be taught the “mysterious paths” of social enterprises but yet, they have managed to be leading the task, be critical and surprisingly creative towards their partner enterprises. Such circumstances led to building strong and fruitful relationship within most of the teams. Leading teacher of the course has also been engaged in some other networking and knowledge sharing activities with JOWES and social enterprises and its role has been much more different from PBL coordinator only. It could be the turning point in switching the relationship to more stable and mutual conditions.

4 Conclusion

Social enterprises are not large economic organisations, operate on a rather small scale and cooperate with a small number of economic partners. In such a situation, the potential for creating new ideas and initiatives is quite limited. At the same time, these entities did not have experience in adapting business solutions from outside. However, the experience of the academy (FM) in cooperation with external organisations was also quite limited. Similarly, the practice of JOWES in cooperation with the academy was negligible. So all the actors were learning this cooperation. The basic conclusions of this case study may oscillate around the following points:

- The basis for building effective local partnerships is system thinking,
- The development of cooperation between the academic community and social entrepreneurship fosters the improvement of the academic education “outside the university” and enriches the potential of social enterprises,
- Combining theory and practice through the introduction of factors from the practice of social entrepreneurship into the didactic process is a necessary direction for improving the processes of academic education based on project-based learning and promoting the idea of social economy,
- Mutual learning, flow of knowledge, experience and skills is an important result of cooperation,
- Without significant involvement of universities, social enterprises and institutional partner, the actions will be ineffective,
- Cooperation between academia and the social economy sector is a good laboratory for learning local cooperation and implementation of project-based learning approaches.

Thanks to participation in the project, social enterprises have encountered different views and approaches to running a business. This allowed them to see and experience how to solve problems thinking “outside the box”. It seems that the experiences of all participants in the project were not only positive, but even enthusiastic. We managed to effectively implement the field of “win-win” game. It can be assumed that the described initiative was a kind of a living laboratory where solutions for project-based learning and local partnership building were tested. It seems that further development of such initiatives will also contribute to the implementation of the broadly defined “common good”. One step forward, and such an approach with cooperation and partnership involved, could have become significant social innovation that would provide intellectual support for social enterprises. Certainly, this would require more comprehensive framework and better understanding of social enterprises sector and its needs.

5 References

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