

Developing Entrepreneurial Leadership in Students: An Immersive Experiential Learning Retreat

Nouha Hajji

Università di Corsica Pasquale Paoli, France

nouhahjj@gmail.com

Abstract: A challenge for traditional academic methods is found in adequately preparing students for the more practical aspects of the entrepreneur's journey. To develop these skills, experiential learning is essential. To assess its impact on the development of entrepreneurial leadership skills in students, this research developed an entrepreneurial leadership retreat. The entrepreneurial leadership retreat is an intensive, immersive learning experience specifically designed to develop essential entrepreneurial skills. Using a qualitative research approach, this research aims to select a diverse group of graduate students to participate. The research will begin with semi-structured interviews with participants before the retreat to establish baseline data on their leadership competencies and self-perceptions. Post-retreat interviews will then help assess any changes in their leadership abilities and mindset. Additionally, observational data is gathered throughout the retreat to better assess the impact of the program and students' reactions. The learning experience integrates outdoor challenges that test physical and mental resilience, strategic planning workshops that enhance cognitive and decision-making abilities, and business simulations for a more practical result. Thematic analysis of the data allows to identify key patterns and themes related to leadership development and the specific impacts of the retreat's activities. The experiential format aims to allow more engagements for students with the material and a more natural learning experience compared to traditional classroom-based methods. By creating an intense fun learning environment, students learn in an immersive way. By conducting this research, the objective is to contribute valuable insights to entrepreneurship education by demonstrating how experiential learning, and engaging learning are powerful tools for developing entrepreneurial leadership in students. The findings aim to encourage more experiential learning and programs that go beyond the classroom. It also seeks to inform the design of future educational programs and interventions that seek to better prepare students for leadership roles in entrepreneurial and innovation-driven settings.

Keywords: Experiential learning, Entrepreneurship retreats, Entrepreneurial leadership, New ways of learning

1. Introduction

There is a gap between traditional academic learning and the practical skills needed for entrepreneurial success (Fisher et al., 2016). Leadership development and resilience influence entrepreneur's success and there is a clear need for more practical, experiential learning (Fisher et al., 2016). Traditional classrooms can fall short in equipping students with the leadership and decision-making skills. Self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) can tie in how students project themselves in leadership roles and it is essential to give them the right environment to develop the right skills. It is essential to develop leadership skills and a growth mindset, which can be fostered through experiential learning (Cardon et al., 2009).

While there is significant literature on entrepreneurial education, there is still a need for more in-depth analysis on how experiential learning can contribute to leadership development in entrepreneurial contexts. Neck et al, (2021) recent work on entrepreneurship education provides support on the importance of innovative teaching methods including experiential learning. Our research suggests a new way of learning in the form of a leadership retreat that provides an innovative way of learning by creating an intense fun learning environment. Students learn in an engaging environment, outside the classroom and with a focus on creating an enriching experience.

This paper is structured into three key sections. The literature review examines existing studies on entrepreneurial education, focusing on the role of experiential learning in developing leadership skills. The methodology section then outlines the qualitative research design. It details the sampling process, data collection process through semi-structured interviews and observational analysis. This section presents the study objectives as well with a focus on evaluating leadership development and the specific changes in participant's leadership abilities. The finding part will provide an analysis of the results and the impact and learning outcomes of the retreat on students.

2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurial leadership combines traditional leadership skills, and the flexibility and innovative mindset required in entrepreneurship (Leith et al, 2013). Education provides a key support to develop these leadership skills. However, according to Neck (2021), there is a need for a shift toward more action-based entrepreneurial education and more practical learning. In fact, traditional classroom methods need to include more innovative methods to prepare for the complexities of real-world entrepreneurship. Experiential learning is referred to as

learning through direct experience, reflection and application (Motta and Galina, 2023). This approach provides a good opportunity to foster entrepreneurial skills like decision-making, creativity and problem solving. Experiential learning is a critical, interactive method to foster entrepreneurial development (Nabi et al, 2017). This new way of learning allows to develop leadership skills of students and their creativity by immersing them in real-world challenges (Deakins & Freel, 2018). As explained by Fayolle and Gailly (2015), lectures, and case studies in a typical classroom setting may limit the students in their thinking process, and there is a real need for more innovative and experiential approaches.

There are some clear limitations on entrepreneurship education methods and a need for an experiential approach that better equip students with the practical skills required for entrepreneurial leadership (Ratten & Jones, 2021). Experiential learning goes beyond just providing knowledge, it facilitates the application of skills in a practical context (Deakins & Feel, 2018). Engaging in experiential learning allows for more practices such as business simulation, in a controlled yet dynamic and creative environment. Hagg and Gabriellsson (2020), argue that immersion into real-life situations allow students to experience the complexities of leadership first-hand. Such immersive settings make them not only learn about the right skills but put them in a situation where they are forced to be good leaders in situations where they can see the impact of their decisions.

Experiential and immersive learning experiences have a lasting impact as they foster active learning (Hagg and Gabriellsson, 2020). Emotional and psychological benefits are essential for this active learning. Jones and Underwood (2017) emphasize that engaging in entrepreneurship education can evoke a range of emotional reactions, such as fear, excitement and uncertainty. These emotions, when they are managed in the right way, can develop self-efficacy and confidence while navigating complex entrepreneurship tasks (Jones and Underwood, 2017). In that sense, it is essential to practice a more experiential learning approach to foster emotional resilience particularly in a high-pressure environment like the one of entrepreneurship. As developed by Priest and Gass (2017), outdoor education can build resilience and ability to cope with uncertainty.

Entrepreneurial success depends on more than just business knowledge according to the literature. It consists of a set of personal competencies that allow leaders to navigate complex environments and uncertainty. Among these skills, confidence is a foundation for entrepreneurial resilience, and it equips individuals to face risks and make decisive moves. According to Motta and Galina (2023), experiential learning increases self-efficacy in entrepreneurship by providing the right environment to build confidence. Another interesting fuel for innovation according to the literature is creativity. It is crucial today as it helps approach problems from unique perspectives. Creativity is seen as a necessary skill and experiential learning nurtures it through a practice-based approach (Neck et al, 2021). Entrepreneurs must also often navigate complex emotional landscapes, emotional intelligence is made of empathy, resilience, and relationship management, a set of skills that are essential for sustainable leadership (Jones and Underwood, 2017). According to this study, handling emotional reactions is central to learning and developing emotional intelligence with experiential learning can help entrepreneurs regulate their emotions and remain motivated through their journey.

The existing literature highlights the significant impact of experiential learning for students in developing leadership traits and essential entrepreneurial skills like emotional intelligence and resilience. Despite the many studies, there is a need to further develop this, particularly in the context of experiential learning retreats. Continuing to explore research in this area is key to optimize educational interventions. To do so and according to the literature, in this study, we focus on confidence, creativity and emotional intelligence as primary competencies that experiential learning can enhance for students.

3. Methodology

The following study will use a qualitative research approach to explore the impact of the entrepreneurial leadership retreats on the leadership skills of graduate students. For this, semi-structured interviews will be used. Observational data during the retreat will also be key in exploring the impact of the experience. Qualitative analysis will be used for a rich exploration of participant's experiences and perceptions, it is interesting to use it to explore complex personal development processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The data set will be made of a selected set of 25 graduate students from different schools and majors to represent various range of industry focus and entrepreneurial experiences. The retreat experience will be 3 days long to allow for a multitude of learning experiences, both thanks to small focus groups and fun gathering between participants. The focus of this approach is to allow for a unique personalized experience and to create an enriching program. The aim of this learning experiment is for them to learn new skills, and to connect with each other, making them socialize and develop their emotional intelligence. For this reason, the entrepreneurship leadership retreat will consist of three main activities: outdoor challenges, strategic planning workshops and business simulations.

To collect data, there will be three different phases for this study. First, a pre-retreat interview, to gather baseline data on their leadership competencies and self-perceptions. This first step is essential as it aims to understand student's leadership styles, and their current view of entrepreneurship. The second phase is during the learning experience and consists of observing students, their interaction and how they react to the experience. It is also interesting in this phase to capture nonverbal cues, group dynamics and real-time problem solving. Interactions will be analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the data. The third and last phase of the study consists of post-retreats interviews to assess the changes in leadership abilities, mindset and overall student's personal growth. All data collection processes and experiments will be validated by an academic institution to approve this approach and further detail it for more relevant results.

4. Research Objectives

The study aims to track improvements in the leadership ability following the experiment by measuring three important areas previously identified: Confidence, Creativity and Emotional Intelligence.

Table 1: Key research questions

Themes	Key questions
Confidence	How does leadership retreat impact participant's self-perception of their leadership abilities? In what ways does overcoming challenges during the retreat influence participants' self-assurance in taking leadership roles?
Creativity	In what ways does the immersive environment foster creative thinking in decision-making processes? How do participants apply creative problem-solving skills in team-based activities?
Emotional intelligence	In what ways do participants interact with other students? How does the leadership retreat enhance participant's emotional awareness?

5. Conclusions

This study will aim to explore how experiential learning, specifically through the entrepreneurship leadership retreats method, contributes to the development of leadership and entrepreneurial skills for participating students. The study will seek to complete the existing research knowledge on bridging the gap between traditional academic methods and more immersive, innovative methods. As entrepreneurship education is evolving, it is essential to provide a dynamic environment to develop not only soft skills but an essential growth mindset to face entrepreneurship challenges.

Experiential learning methods will enable participants to apply theoretical knowledge into real-world settings allowing them to develop their ability to develop their emotional skills and leadership ability (Kohn, 2024). The literature allowed to highlight the effectiveness of these innovative new ways of learning, but more research is required to determine the impact and importance of immersive experiences for student's mindset and development. The aim of this research is to provide an answer to that and to assess the impact of experiential learning through leadership retreats on the development of students' competencies and soft skills.

The next step of this study is to implement the entrepreneurial leadership retreat and collect relevant data to measure the impact of this experience on student's learning. This study aims to contribute to both entrepreneurship education and leadership development by providing empirical evidence on the value of experiential learning programs. This research also seeks to inform future research on the subject particularly on the design of new ways of learning and immersive experiences for students taking leadership and entrepreneurship classes.

References

Cardon, M. S., Wincent, J., Singh, J., & Drnovsek, M. (2009). "The nature and experience of entrepreneurial passion". *Academy of Management Review*, 34(3), pp. 511-532.

Brzozowski, M. J., Sandholm, T., & Hogg, T. (2009). "Effects of Feedback and Peer Pressure on Contributions to Enterprise Social Media". *Proceedings of the ACM 2009 International Conference on Supporting Group Work*, pp. 61-70.

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Deakins, D., & Freel, M. (2018). "Entrepreneurial learning and the growth process in SMEs". *Learning Organization*, 25(3), pp. 190-202.
- Fayolle, A., & Gailly, B. (2015). "The impact of entrepreneurship education on entrepreneurial attitudes and intention: Hysteresis and persistence". *Journal of Small Business Management*, 53(1), pp. 75-93.
- Figueiredo Motta, V., & Vasconcelos Ribeiro Galina, S. (2023). *Experiential learning in entrepreneurship education: A systematic literature review*. *Education + Training*, 65(3), 367–391.
- Fisher, R., Maritz, A., & Lobo, A. (2016). "Does individual resilience influence entrepreneurial success?". *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 22(2), pp. 39-53.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.
- Hägg, G., & Gabrielsson, J. (2020). "A systematic literature review of the evolution of pedagogy in entrepreneurial education research". *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, Vol. 26 No. 5, pp. 829-861.
- Jones, S., & Underwood, S. (2017). "Understanding students' emotional reactions to entrepreneurship education: A conceptual framework". *Education + Training*, Vol. 59 No. 7/8, pp. 657-671.
- Kohn, P. (2024). "Experiential Learning: Immersive Approaches to Leadership Development". *Elevating Leadership*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 15-26.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *A Realist Approach for Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications.
- Motta, V. F., & Galina, S. V. R. (2023). "Experiential learning in entrepreneurship education: A systematic literature review". *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 123, 103993.
- Nabi, G., Liñán, F., Fayolle, A., Krueger, N., & Walmsley, A. (2017). "The impact of entrepreneurship education in higher education: A systematic review and research agenda". *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 16(2), pp. 277-299.
- Neck, H. M., Greene, P. G., & Brush, C. G. (2021). *Teaching Entrepreneurship: A Practice-Based Approach* (2nd ed.) Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (2017). *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming*. Human Kinetics.
- Ratten, V., & Jones, P. (2021). "Entrepreneurship education: Time for a change in research direction?". *The International Journal of Management Education*, 19(1), 100367.