How Do I Assist in Enterprise Development through Action Research?

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Abstract

Many South Africans are seeking social and economic independence and security by trying to create their own businesses, often due to financial insecurity, unemployment or poverty. In this paper, I describe how I developed my practice to support emerging entrepreneurs. I explain the interventions I designed and report on their implementation. I also provide evidence of the benefits that such an approach has had on my own learning and practice.

Keywords: Self Employment, Entrepreneurship, Action Research, Living Theory Methodology.

Introduction

In this article I describe my use of action research to continually assess my coaching/mentoring work with emerging entrepreneurs. The reason why I have chosen this approach is because through action research I am able to describe the interventions that I have devised, report on their implementation, report on the evolution of new perceptions and understandings that have developed as a result, provide evidence of the educational influence of these interventions, reflect critically on what has been done and achieved, and critically assess the way forward. In this way I have chosen to engage in critical reflective interrogation of my practice as a coach and mentor to emerging entrepreneurs because I believe that critical analysis and reflection is how ideas develop and practice improves (McNiff, 2002). In this paper I will show evidence of the benefits that action research has in and on my work.

Background to the Study

After completing my Diploma in Fashion Design at the Durban University of Technology (then the Durban Institute of Technology) in 1993, I started my own children's clothing range from a room in my home. I borrowed R500 from my mother to purchase three industrial sewing machines and some fabric to produce children's swimwear. I started the business by selling at flea markets. The catalyst for me to produce what has become among the most significantly marketable children's clothing in South Africa was a specific comment I received: "You need to offer your market something different". I immediately began to explore

how I could do this. I decided to create my own fabrics by painting on white textiles and then manufacturing that into children's wear. In no time I had customers knocking on my door to buy my children's wear range. My ability as a textile designer grew with time as did my natural creative ability to produce striking and attractive designs on the textiles.

The business grew very rapidly; I started to employ people and children's wear boutiques around South Africa started to buy from me. I had no training in business administration or finance and this side of the business was very difficult for me. I just wanted to create beautiful clothing for children. The administration of the business was therefore often neglected and it was not a priority for me.

It was at the height of my success as a children's wear company owner that I realised I would prefer to inspire others to become business owners. I had an employee in whom I instinctively recognised a leaning towards entrepreneurship. I decided to teach him how to run his own business by sharing my knowledge with him. I taught him everything including pattern making, painting, sewing and financial management (using the simple methods I had devised for myself). My employee started his own company in 2001. He used everything I had taught him to do this. His company is still a viable concern. He now owns a vehicle and employs staff to paint on fabric and manufacture his children's wear. Chrisman & McMullan (2000) in Storey suggest that it is the "unique attributes" (p. 231) of the entrepreneurs or ventures studied that make them more likely to succeed. I recognised those unique attributes in this person.

I started to reflect deeply about my strong leaning towards wanting social and economic transformation for people who had not had the opportunities that I had had in life. I agree with Johannisson (2002) who says "recognising entrepreneurship as interactive construction of both venture and context means accepting the potency of human willpower, belief and accountability as crucial for social change" (p. 3). I could see myself in this transforming role and this was important to me.

I realised I was very strongly influenced by my father who was a humanitarian and a human rights lawyer in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. His arguments for equality and justice in our home affected my life and the life of my siblings. My own thoughts on social and economic injustice began at a very early age. I could not tolerate the vast gap between the rich and the poor. I agree with Whitehead (2008) who asserts that the importance of improving his practice is "grounded in a passion to see values of freedom, justice, compassion, respects for persons, love and democracy lived as fully as possible"(p.436).

Entrepreneurship: Context, Culture and Self

I have extensive previous small business experience, specifically in the clothing and textiles industry, and in the mentoring and coaching of others in entrepreneurship. Since 2003, I have occupied a managerial position in a university of technology that promotes entrepreneurship in the clothing and textiles industry.

Since 2005, I have been engaged in project which manages the training of people, many of whom have degrees yet cannot find employment, and who are trying to become self-employed through the Clothing, Textiles, Footwear and Leather Sector Education Training Authority (CTFL SETA) New Venture Creation (NVC) projects. My purpose in my NVC work is aligned with Kunene (2008) who informs us that Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise (SMME) development forms an important element of the South African government's "active strategy to ensure mobility between the first and second economies" (p. 3). The purpose of this strategy is to help alleviate poverty, create profitable opportunities for indigenous entrepreneurs, and create wealth for previously disadvantaged people (p. 3).

Initially I engaged a training provider to facilitate the NVC programme while I managed the project from a distance. On critical reflection I now realise the irony that I delegated the task of mentoring to someone

else because I did not have the confidence to facilitate the NVC programme myself even though I have a proven track record in this field. Johannisson (2002) argues that academics who have come from a background of small business and entrepreneurship "often silence the insight" (p. 2) they have gained through this experience and how they created their knowledge. I now realise that this is exactly what I did. From 2005 until 2010, I silenced my experience, capacity and my passion to help people empower themselves. But, even though I was personally silencing myself, I continued to make sure that other people did the work for me of facilitating entrepreneurship development. I ran four business establishment programmes which trained more than 80 people to run their own businesses. The NVC certificates were awarded on condition of the presentation of a viable business plan.

I had to send reports to the funders on the progress of those who had been through the NVC programme. I soon realised a high percentage of the people identified in the NVC project had been unable to maintain or even begin their own enterprise. This was due to a range of obstacles, such as access to suitable markets, promotion, supply of materials and other logistical issues. On reflection, I came to realise some shortcomings of my initial training programme, for example, that I just trained people in entrepreneurship for a short course, then let them go without any follow-up on their progress. I realised I had inappropriate assumptions about the success of the initial NVC training. My deeply ingrained determination to help others succeed drove me to acquire more funding to take the group a step further. The determination comes from my humanitarian nature. I am acutely aware of the possibility that I could fall prey to a patronising or colonising attitude. I make a point of reflecting on my practice constantly in order to prevent myself falling into the trap of thinking I must fish for people instead of making a space for them to learn to fish for themselves. I only feel that I have succeeded in my endeavours when my mentees are out in their own fishing boats in choppy waters and bringing home a full catch.

Outsider mentoring assistance can lead to the transmission of knowledge that provides a basis for sustainable competitive advantage which, in turn, promotes the survival and good performance of ventures. An American study by Chrisman & McMullan (2004, p. 229) assessed the impact that the American Small Business Development Corporation's coaching and mentoring interventions have had over a period of three to five years. This reveals a large number of new ventures not only surviving but growing well in sales and employment. The same study reports that when the people involved were mentored or coached, the new ventures also produced a significant number of innovations.

During the time that I have been coaching and mentoring, I have observed that pre-venture candidates learn valuable lessons when starting their businesses with a coach or mentor. I have observed them as they have gained a deeper appreciation of strategic planning for competitive advantage and market position and innovation. In South Africa, most people who start small businesses are driven by a need to survive, but lack an appreciation of what it takes to succeed. They generally believe that technical knowledge and hard work are the sole requirements for success (Pretorius & Wlodarczyk, 2007). Davies (2002) highlights the fact that acquiring skills specific to SMMEs is seldom achieved through structured learning, but rather through the process of skills formation. Pretorius & Wlodarczyk (2007) believe that entrepreneurship can be taught. I believe that mentoring coupled with training can enhance business endeavours. Pretorius (2004) hypothesises that if a training process is "improved to be more applicable and practical by becoming a learning process, more entrepreneurs will enter, succeed and contribute to the economic growth so desperately needed" (p. 4).

Pretorius & van Vuuren (2003, p. 514) discuss entrepreneurial orientation (EO) and start-up culture to create economic development. Despite the efforts made in South Africa, the concept of an entrepreneurial culture to improve EO is not addressed. Pretorius & Van Vuuren further hypothesise that emerging entrepreneurs do not have enough courage, motivation, locus of control or enough role models to become successful business owners (p. 526). The key questions to be asked by emerging entrepreneurs, according to them, are how does fear of failure influence the courage and energy to start a small business? How can a

small business start slowly with minimum funding and grow? How does an unknown business find its market in today's competitive environment?

I believe the general mindset should change from one of needing to find employment to one of being self-employed. I have seen first-hand poverty and unemployment in Durban, where I live and work. If there is no employment, there is no alternative but to create self-employment. This observation drives me to take the work I do very seriously.

The Social and Economic Transformative Aspects of the Study

In respect of social and economic transformation, the Global Entrepreneur Monitor (GEM) report (De Wett & Freemantle, p. 246) also found that South Africa's potential entrepreneurs lack the mindset and skills to become truly entrepreneurial and only 5% are involved in starting a new business. The work I do with emerging entrepreneurs supports this observation. The members of my groups lack confidence and struggle. The lack of confidence, I think, comes from not having a natural entrepreneurial mindset, having no or limited computer skills or financial administration skills, and from a sense of urgency to make enough money to live on. The group members are aware that the employment opportunities are rare.

I agree with Johannisson (2002) who says "recognising entrepreneurship as interactive construction of both venture and context means accepting the potency of human willpower, belief and accountability as crucial for social change" (p. 3). The members of the group who keep coming back to the workshops and have a hunger for learning more to establish and sustain their businesses are the ones who have this willpower and belief. They recognise how crucial it is to succeed and become self-employed.

I believe that the development of entrepreneurs needs to be treated with a sense of urgency in order to speed up the rate of social and economic transformation and address unemployment and the high rate of poverty, particularly in my home city. For this reason I set up weekly coaching workshops for entrepreneurs in order to create an environment for personal and business growth, recognising that the emerging entrepreneurs need a space for exploring their strengths and weaknesses in order to improve their potential to become successful entrepreneurs.

This is why I take the training, coaching and mentoring that I do in my weekly workshops very seriously. This is also why I make myself available to anyone in the group at any time in order to support and advise if they ask for it. This is also why I recognise that my previous business experience is invaluable and that includes the failures and mistakes I made while running my business. The instances when I also lack confidence and feel powerless are important to acknowledge, because I feel empathy when others experience the same sort of feelings while trying to take control of their own social and economic upliftment.

The coaching and mentoring I do is informed by the needs of each individual. Even though I plan each workshop and cover all aspects of managing a small business, I also arrive at the workshop with an open mind to the needs of the group. They arrive at the workshop with concerns and problems about managing their businesses and I use those as an opportunity for mentoring, training and coaching. I remain conscious and critically reflective about managing my potentially patronising or colonising attitude. I was accused of colonising when I offered funded NVC training to another group in Durban. When I expressed my concern about this to a Zulu colleague, he assured me that because he is highly qualified, there are times when he is accused of being patronising. I want to put the message across to the people I mentor and coach that my transformation and liberation is indeed tied up with theirs (cf. Stringer, 2007). My aim is to coach entrepreneurs to develop appropriate business philosophy, skills, tools and knowledge to run the business. The purpose of this project is to provide the type of support described earlier.

The Need for Practical Business Skills Training

The learner-entrepreneurs have had the theory and limited practice of running a small business under the guidance of the NVC programme. The challenges for independent entrepreneurs of establishing real-world enterprises on completion of the NVC programme are considerable, and ongoing management, support, coaching, training and mentorship are required to ensure success. In order to succeed, learner-entrepreneurs require intensive support and training in the rigorous requirements of quality and supply chain management, computer skills and marketing. The development of these technical skills has been identified as critical to ensuring that the new ventures succeed.

The NVC Management Programme was implemented in 2009 and focuses on business coaching. All the previous NVC programme participants were invited to the business coaching workshops. I engaged the services of a business coach from Action Coach. The decision to use a business coach was a good one and I was able to maintain my distance as the project manager. The learner-entrepreneurs working with the business coach had some positive results. Evaluation forms which were handed out at the end of each coaching workshop. Some answers to the evaluation question, "What did I learn from the coaching session?" included

- Ways of approaching customers. Questions one can ask to benefit sales and marketing.

- Where do you fish? This talks about the target market.

- How to find prospective clients, advice was invaluable.

- How to deal with clients, when to ask questions.

- Selling and making things aren't going to do happen by themselves, it takes the person to stand up and do it.

- The importance of goal setting and self reflection. Importance of listening.

- How to deal with clients, selling methods, different types of clients. Spending time wisely with correct clients.

Some of the group also acquired motor vehicle licences and one participant bought herself a car to use in her business. Two participants rented premises to work from instead of working from home because, in their words, "After the coaching training we want to become more professional".

In action coaching terms we understand that people venturing into small business development operate above or below "the line" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Action Coaching

Ownership, Accountability, Responsibility   **ABOVE THE LINE**
BELOW THE LINE   **Blame, Excuses, Denial**

The point of the mentoring intervention was to get the participants to operate above the line. One of the interventions was to introduce the group members to the effects of reflecting on their actions, enabling them to operate above the line.

The NVC management group, the coach and I developed the following goals for the group. As a result of our new perceptions and understandings we agreed to develop a set of attainable goals and worked on them together:

- To reach a turnover of R240,000 per annum within the first two years of business;

- To reach a profitability of 25% year on year from year 2;

- To contain money in the business (i.e. not to waste money);

- To acquire a driver's licence and a vehicle within one year of business starting;

- To work from premises which are rented or bought;

- To use "best practice" in business;

- To sustain the business for five years, thereafter seek ways to grow the business;

- To create employment;

- To assist new entrepreneurs coming into the NVC Best Practice Programme; and

- To set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results, Timeframes (SMART) goals.

Methodology

My Living Theory generated out of my action research

By following Whitehead's (2008) formula and asking the question "How do I improve my practice as the facilitator of the NVC programmes?", I needed a method in which my internal decision making in this context would be valid, scholarly and systematic. I approached my new role as coach and mentor from the perspective of my current and past experiences. My enquiry is grounded in values which inform my practice and which are used to validate my emerging theory (Whitehead, 2008). Whitehead encourages the autobiography of learning where one's present practice is explained and evaluated by past practices. This is done with the intention of creating a "better future" which is not yet in existence (p. 4).

Whitehead also emphasises the importance of uniqueness of each individual's inventiveness in asking, researching and answering the question, "how do I improve my practice?" I hoped to improve my practice of assisting the emerging entrepreneurs to embrace self-interrogation which will encourage "above the line" thinking as a matter of course which will result in successful self-employment and creating employment for others. I endeavoured to "inculcate entrepreneurial mindsets, provide necessary skills and assist with creating the right conditions for their enterprises to grow" (CSI Handbook, n.d., p. 247).The reason for wanting to improve my practice as a coach to emerging entrepreneurs is grounded in my desire to inspire, facilitate and encourage entrepreneurs to be successful. I value empowerment of myself and others and put my values into practice through the workshops for entrepreneurs to create social and economic independence.

In other words, I wish to facilitate the self-empowerment of people who are often forced to become self-employed because of the current lack of formal employment in South Africa.

My Lived Experience as a Coach, Mentor and Trainer

I had no choice but to do the coaching myself when there was no more funding to pay for the business coach. When this happened, I was motivated by not wanting my efforts to come to naught. I believe my wealth of experience is now being used while I attempt to assist emerging entrepreneurs in the clothing sector of Durban. As a result of my desire to improve what I am doing, I have been devising interventions intended to address the perceived gaps in my original training plan. In the process, I have gained further insights into a field of business that I thought I knew thoroughly, and have learned much about the people I train, their capacities and needs, and their life circumstances.

The group met with me every Wednesday and I used the model of the action reflection cycle in the coaching workshops for myself and taught the group about it as well, aiming to develop their own "living theories" (Whitehead, 2008, p. 1). I encouraged them to ask themselves the question, "How do I improve my practice as an emerging entrepreneur and business owner?"

The interventions focussed on the following aspects:

Developing a Personal Brand

I tentatively began working with the group by assisting them to develop a personal brand in order to enhance their business brand. Working on their personal brand took four weeks. It was instinctual for me to start the group with something personal to build a foundation for a business brand. I discovered that by observing entrepreneurs like Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin, and the Durban designer Karen Monk Klinjstra, who has created a personal brand by wearing her own unusual designs. Richard Branson uses high-profile, attention-seeking escapades to enhance his personal brand and this in turn reminds the public of the Virgin brand.

During the workshop process, I became consciously aware of the fact that I have the ability to ignite and inspire passion and determination in others. I also realised I was more interested in developing and empowering others than being a successful entrepreneur myself. Ben Zander (2002), conductor of the Boston Philharmonic orchestra, teacher and communicator, says that a conductor's work is to make people powerful. His philosophy resonates with my own. "Power" here is not meant in the negative sense of control. It is positive in the sense that I have observed in myself and in the NVC group the times when we feel powerless because of the hardship we face in enterprise development and creating self-employment. The notion can be daunting and almost debilitating until someone inspires confidence and says "you *can* do it". It is the positive power of mutual encouragement and belief.

Developing Values and Principles

I wanted the group members to understand their own personal values and principles and operate their businesses with those in mind to improve their practice as a new business owner. To achieve this, I required them to respond to Brown's (1994) seven key questions:

- What are my values?

- Where do they come from?

- What did I do?

- Why did I do it?

- What happened?

- What does this tell me about my personal brand?

- What remains unresolved?

- What does this tell me about where my personal brand comes from?

To achieve this, I required them to respond to Brown's (1994) eight questions to their context.

As I personally battled with discovering my own values and principles, it became clear to me that more insight was needed to grasp the idea of values and principles and to better integrate them into the foundation of our business and personal lives. Together, we thought of words that relate to values and principles, including justice, fairness, love and equal opportunity. I say "together" because even though I coach and facilitate the workshops, I do the work myself as well and continue to learn and improve my practice by being involved in this way.

I took a canvas, brushes and paints to the next workshop. We painted the roots of a tree and each person wrote their own values and principles within the roots. I explained that this was symbolic of creating a strong foundation for our personal and business lives. As we develop our brands, business plans and actual businesses, the symbolic tree will grow. During some of the workshops we continued to paint the rest of the tree with more words and symbols.

The Need to Reflect Continuously

After a few weeks, and with critical reflection, assessment and continuous evaluation as described by McNiff (2002), I realised that I needed to get the group to personify their business plans to make them part of their lived experience (Whitehead, 2008). By doing this, a business plan becomes reachable, and a part of their lives and mine.

I reiterated the point that because they are personifying and taking ownership and responsibility of their businesses, they need to continuously use the action research cycle (McNiff, 2002) of looking, thinking and acting which implies that the strategy will change with seeing what works and what does not work. I explained that their business plans are documents that have to grow and change all the time. I personally believe that a business plan is never complete, just like the business; it has energy and daily action. That is why using the action reflection cycle should work well in the ongoing process of running a business and keeping the business plan current. I have not yet tested this theory.

Developing a Marketing Letter

I decided to begin the business plan with an action that would immediately benefit participants' businesses. My own experience shows that the most important part of starting a business is the marketing and finding at least one customer. For this reason a marketing letter must be created; this would meet my goal that participants leave the workshop each week with something tangible. Personally, I needed to develop a marketing letter to attract more funders to grow the NVC coaching programme.

Once we had completed our marketing letters, I made copies for each person to take with them. They had their first tool with which to approach potential customers. Stringer (2007) writes of an aboriginal social worker who spoke to a group of non-aboriginal social workers and said, "If you've come to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work

together" (p. 194). Stringer writes that the researcher becomes the facilitator who "acts as a catalyst" (p. 24) to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and then to support them to implement them. While we were working on our marketing letters individually and together (when we needed to bounce ideas off each other), I liked the fact that I was writing my own marketing letter while the group was writing theirs. I am always conscious of coming across as being patronising, colonial and from an advantaged background. I believe that my personal growth and development, improving my practice and my liberation is bound up with those with whom I work in the mentoring and coaching programmes.

The feedback attained from students on the evaluation forms collected after each coaching workshop, indicate that they found this exercise to be empowering. I have not altered the grammar or spelling used by the participants.

> "I would like to thank you for teaching me how to draft the broucher and also do the attachment and its very exciting. thank you again"

> "Today I learnt how to design a flyer and market my company. It was exciting and used my creative side. I am actually hopeful, the steps we are making are just enough and not overwhelming. You make business easy. I am sometimes not sure how to begin this is helping. Thank you"

The above quotes confirm for me that through my interventions the group members are beginning to think like entrepreneurs and are becoming conscious of being professional businesspeople when sending emails or letters. I wanted an outcome that would equip the group with tools for running a business, such as brochures, marketing letters and letterheads. The participants produced these documents and are using them. That is a sign of success and empowerment for me.

Getting Connected

The reflexive cycle (McNiff, 2002) continued and I had to plan the workshop for the following week. At the next workshop I made sure that each person had a free webmail address. I believe that having an email address is an important tool to communicate with potential customers. I observed a sense of pride and achievement among those participants who successfully acquired their first email addresses. I helped some, and those who were competent on the computer helped others until everyone had an email address. Each week we sent out marketing letters and built up a database of contacts. I asked the group to measure the success of these by noting the change in turnover and profit after the first stage of marketing was implemented. Ben Zander (2010) talks of people having shining eyes when they achieve, learn and gain confidence. I saw the shining eyes in my group, I sensed their enthusiasm and confidence growing and I hope to see their bank balances growing too. This is an aspect of empowerment: economic transformation that takes place with the success of their businesses.

After the first week of using professional marketing letters with logos, three members had success stories to report on. One of them had obtained a big contract in a group of private hospitals in Durban. He said he had been trying to obtain this contract for months and explained that the marketing letter with a logo and his contact details gave him more credibility. These successes of the group inspired me to improve my practice, and by using the action research cycle I was able to use my creativity to develop more tools to share with the group to improve their business practice.

Honing Computer Skills

On reflection, I noted that many in the group had very weak computer skills and saw this as another opportunity to develop skills. Those with very poor computer skills worked at their own pace, while the more skilled members of the group spontaneously helped the less adept ones. When observing this, I realised that as much as I may plan the workshops for each week, the workshops will also develop a life of their own, making me realise that I needed to be flexible and allow the process to unfold. One of the participants commented:

> "I have learnt that if I am sending an email to a professional person I must not say Hi!"

Developing Policies and Procedures

We continued working with the marketing strategy of the business plan in tandem with other aspects of their business that require input. Participants brought their business concerns and problems to the workshops and we dealt with them. For example, two members who had made samples of clothing for a customer had many issues and problems with that customer. We started the workshop by discussing the issue and agreed to develop rules of engagement for their customers before the end of the workshop. A document of policies and procedures was developed for their business including, for example, the payment of a deposit before any samples or orders were accepted, an invoice with descriptions and signatures, and so on. All these documents include the participants' letterheads and contact details. This ensures that their brand has cohesion and is recognised.

Conclusion

Chrisman & McMullan (2004, p. 240) argue that outsider assistance can lead to the creation of knowledge that provides the basis for sustainable competitive advantage which will, in turn, influence venture survival and performance. The reality, however, is that many emerging entrepreneurs have several obstacles to face before their business can become sustainable, even with outsider assistance. These obstacles include, for example, accessing finance, finding a suitable market, and finding suitable premises. This requires determination, tenacity and hope, traits I identified in this NVC group. I as the "outsider" assisting the group have a very big responsibility: to create the space for entrepreneur development by continually following the action reflection cycle in order to improve my practice as a business coach, mentor and trainer. Questions that remain unresolved for now are, what else must I introduce? How much of me is in this process? Should I attempt to start my own business again so that I experience the same process as my group? Am I going about transformation to self-employment in the right way?

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