Efficacy of the Guest Speaker-Learner Interface in Entrepreneurship Instruction: A Suggested New Approach
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ABSTRACT
The guest speaker is one of the more ubiquitous elements of entrepreneurship education. Most entrepreneurship instructors have utilized guest speakers in the classroom. Yet there is no evidence that guest speakers result in any significant learning among students. In fact, there is no extant literature on the use of the guest speaker in the classroom. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the guest speaker has little more than entertainment value. This paper addresses that problem, suggesting that the structured interview approach to entrepreneurial guest speakers is potentially a more powerful learning approach. We analyze the potential for this technique by examining two settings in which guest speakers are used to transfer knowledge about entrepreneurship: the classroom and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) counseling session.

Introduction
Entrepreneurship education has become ubiquitous on college campuses over the past three decades (Kuratko 2005). This expansion in the number of institutions that offer entrepreneurship education has seen a corresponding expansion in the pedagogical techniques used to teach the subject (Pittaway and Cope 2007). Unlike many of the more “mature” disciplines in academe, there are as yet no canonical texts or authors that comprise best practices in teaching the subject of entrepreneurship (Katz 2008). To be sure, there are some “stars” among the scholarly community that have drawn more than their fair share of attention, but none have become recognized as required reading.

Despite this diversity of approaches to teaching the subject of entrepreneurship, there is one pedagogical technique that is used frequently: the entrepreneurial guest speaker. Anyone who has taught the subject of entrepreneurship will likely have had the experience of hosting a successful entrepreneur as a guest speaker in the classroom. In fact, some programs deliberately highlight the use of guest speakers as a vital part of their entrepreneurship curricula. The guest speaker is often well-received by students. They typically enjoy the “real world” stories told by guest speakers. However, the pedagogical impact of the guest speaker has not received serious scholarly attention, and may be of dubious quality. A search of the scholarly literature using terms “entrepreneurship,” “education,” and “guest speaker” turns up no citations.

This paper is based on the assumption that the guest speaker, as used in the entrepreneurship classroom, is intended to be part of the pedagogy. That is to say, the intent of bringing guest speakers into the classroom is for actual learning to take place among the students. In the event that this assumption stretches the intent of the guest speaker in the entrepreneurship classroom (some may say it is merely “entertainment” or “diversion”), we also analyze
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another setting where the intent of the guest speaker unambiguously is learning: the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) counseling provided to aspiring entrepreneurs.

We isolate the learning event of the guest speaker by referring to it as the “speaker-learner interface.” This paper examines the guest-speaker learner interface in two distinct settings: the entrepreneurship classroom and the SBDC counseling session. We suggest that there are a number of problems with the speaker-learner interface in both settings that negatively impact the potential for significant learning. This paper then suggests a new approach to the speaker-learner interface—one that uses the structured interview format. In particular, we focus on the potential efficacy of using this format to improve the quality of the speaker-learner interface and its pedagogical impact. The two distinct settings examined in this paper use guest speakers primarily to convey actionable information to students and aspiring entrepreneurs, respectively. Because the speaker-learner interface is compromised in each setting by the unstructured manner in which it is currently deployed as a pedagogical device, there is less actual and less significant learning than could be achieved using the structured interview format. We begin our analysis by examining some of the common problems associated with the speaker-learner interface as currently used in the entrepreneurship classroom setting.

Problems with the Current Speaker-Learner Interface

Entrepreneurship instructors who have used guest speakers in the classroom setting will likely agree that there are many problems associated with the approach. The problem common to all guest speakers is the particular nature of their presentation: they usually talk about the entrepreneurial venture that has been the source of their greatest success. As such, they have no general lessons about entrepreneurship to offer students—most of whom likely are not interested in starting a venture in the speaker’s particular industry.

Another problem with the guest speaker approach is that students are seeing and hearing the end result of the entrepreneurial journey, not the journey itself. While most guest speakers spend some time on their journey, the positivity bias predisposes the speaker to recall mostly the good memories (Skowronski 2011). As a result, students may get an unrealistic idea of the challenges that this—and every other—entrepreneur must overcome to achieve success. On the other hand, the experience of the particular guest speaker may be illustrative of some of the virtues that are required to be successful (e.g., thrift, fortitude, diligence, patience, honesty, integrity). Yet, it is rare that the guest speaker highlights these qualities as essential to his or her ultimate success. It is left to the students to reflect on the virtues alluded to in the talk, and to assess the results of such reflection against future guest speaker encounters. It would be a stretch to assume that most or even some undergraduate students are likely to assimilate lessons on specific virtues in this reflective manner without prompting from the instructor.

Another problem with the guest speaker approach is a lack of control over what they say. Some are better speakers than others and capable of adapting their talk to the audience. Others are less capable and may ramble (in the best case) or be irrelevant to the flow of the class. Of course, talented instructors can guide the speakers by asking questions, but often a wayward speaker will wander back to his or her original topic. Some speakers have told
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a story often, and have embellished it with truth stretching, humorous asides that guarantee a laugh, or other things that could hinder a true learning experience for students.

Finally, the guest speaker can detract from the lessons, tenor, and general pedagogical approach of the instructor. It is likely true of most of us that guest speakers have directly contradicted or outright belied a lesson or two that we have been teaching. A common example of this is downplaying the role and importance of the business plan in venture success. Another is the need to network and bring other talented stakeholders into the venture. The business plan and savvy partners may seem less important to an established entrepreneur who is removed in time and space from the days of being a struggling novice.

Despite these challenges to the integration of the guest speaker into the entrepreneurship curriculum and pedagogy, the practice does have merits that suggest it should be continued in a modified way. We will address this modification below, but first let's look at another instance where the guest speaker is commonly used to convey actionable lessons about entrepreneurship to aspiring entrepreneurs: the Small Business Development Center counseling session.

Problems with the Speaker-Learner Interface in SBDC Counseling

The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) is a business resource for small businesses in the United States. Centers are funded through federal grants from the US Small Business Administration, and are typically also hosted by a Chamber of Commerce or higher education institution. There are over 1,000 centers across the US, including Puerto Rico and Guam.1

SBDCs offer two core services: one-on-one business counseling and low-cost (or free) training workshops. Other services may be offered, but they vary by location and regional need. Potential clients usually learn about the SBDC through word of mouth, referrals from financial institutions, and/or training classes advertised through SBDCs.

Clients of the SBDC fall into two main categories: start-up or existing businesses. Clients from the start-up category may be anywhere between the idea phase to being in business less than one year. Existing business clients are businesses that are legally formed and have had sales for over one year. Each type of client will have different counseling needs, and therefore counselors should be knowledgeable in the needs of each.

SBDCs offer individual counseling to businesses in a vast range of industries, as long as they are legal, and the number of counseling sessions a business can receive is unlimited. SBDCs are not allowed to turn away clients unless there are special circumstances. Because of the wide range of client questions and needs, counselors need to be well-prepared with business knowledge and expertise.

1 For more information about the Small Business Development Center network in the United States, visit the US Small Business Administration website at www.sba.gov or www.asbdc-us.org.
The number and type of staff and counselors vary between SBDC locations. Typical SBDCs have a limited number of staff and counselors, and it is not unusual for people in both positions to offer counseling to clients. Some centers have both paid staff and counselors, while a limited number of centers have volunteer business consultants.

Since SBDC client services are free, the only requirement for a business to receive counseling is a completed registration form. A client can then schedule a meeting with a business counselor. A typical counseling session at the SBDC covers four main areas:

1. General business information, including type of business
2. Business issues and/or questions
3. Counselor recommendations
4. Next steps and follow-up action items

During the first meeting, the session begins with an introduction between the counselor and the client. The counselor will generally ask basic questions of the client such as type of business, if the client is currently in business (start-up or existing), and other questions as needed to obtain a general idea of the current situation. Clients will usually then discuss their questions or issues pertaining to the business. As most of the SBDC clients are novice entrepreneurs, questions about the specific business are usually the primary focus of early counseling sessions. After obtaining a clear understanding of the client's needs and issues, the counselor will then discuss recommendations for the client, and usually schedule follow-up steps, sometimes including a subsequent counseling session.

The counseling sessions for existing businesses typically require technical knowledge of business applications in areas such as hiring/firing employees, budgeting and financial knowledge, acquiring capital, and marketing assistance. These types of issues require a counselor with knowledge about general business principles and best practices.

Counseling sessions for pre-venture or start-up businesses require additional expertise and experience, on top of the general business knowledge, in order to assist a business. Typical pre-venture clients who seek assistance for business planning have only a rudimentary understanding of small business. Most first-time clients with startup concepts are in the idea phase and tend to be excited about the possibilities of owning their own business. It is not unusual for a pre-venture client to contemplate owning a business in a field in which they have limited or no experience. Clients have various reasons for wanting to own a particular business. They may have a positive experience while eating in a restaurant, and decide to own one themselves. A client may enjoy visiting a coffee shop and plan to open one. Another client may have been laid off from their workplace and decide to open their company within the same field.

For a counselor, offering business assistance to a pre-venture client that has no prior knowledge and experience in a particular field can be challenging. A typical SBDC counselor has a strong understanding of business principles
and best practices. However, SBDC counselors, taken as a group, do not have expertise across the spectrum of industries that clients wish to explore.

The typical counseling session with a pre-venture client is limited in the information and issues discussed. A client with limited or no prior knowledge of a specific industry will generally ask some basic business questions, and the counselor will be able to assist with general knowledge about starting a business, the types of legal entity formations, and general business planning assistance. However, most clients don't know what they don't know. In other words, most clients know what to ask during a session if they don't know the specifics of their industry. Although the counselor will be a strong resource for general start-up questions, the counselor is also limited on knowledge and expertise of an industry, except for the industry in which he or she has been successful. The chances, though, of a client meeting with a counselor with the same industry expertise is slim.

A case example of an SBDC counseling session with a pre-venture client took place at the Colorado Springs SBDC in 2011. An SBDC staff member who also served as a counselor met with a female client in her early 50s who had previously been a stay-at-home mother with limited business experience. In the beginning of the session, the client shared her idea of opening a café and ice cream shop in Colorado Springs. She had a location in mind for the shop that was located near a school. The potential clientele would be parents picking children up from school, as well as the school staff who would be nearby. The client stated that the location did not have competing businesses located near the building. The client expressed excitement about her business idea, but also appeared a little nervous and unsure of what to say or ask. As the session progressed, the counselor asked the client some general questions about her business idea including her general business plan, start-up capital, and her experience in the restaurant industry. The client's responses were very general and hesitant. The largest concern of the client was the need for equipment for the business. Her questions revolved around the need for machinery and equipment: an ice cream machine, coffee and espresso machine, and furnishings for the café. The client had a clearly planned vision of how the café would look, what machinery would be needed, and the overall “look and feel” of the location. However, it became apparent that she had limited knowledge of how that type of business would operate, what she needed to start, and how the business would be funded. The counselor used the remainder of the counseling session to discuss general business planning principles and also recommended that the client speak with someone in the restaurant or small café industry.

The client was relying on the counselor to assist her with developing a start-up plan, but both parties were limited by the fact that neither the client nor the counselor had industry experience or knowledge in the restaurant industry. The client was very focused on the business equipment and location needs of her potential venture, but failed to ask critical questions about funding, inventory, employees, zoning, financial statements, and other areas critical to the restaurant industry. The counselor also did not bring up such areas for discussion, as the counselor had no knowledge of industry norms and best practices to share. The counselor had recommended that the client speak with someone in the industry. However, if the client doesn't know what to ask, a conversation with someone in the industry could also be very limited.
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For example, inventory levels in a café may be very specific within industry standards. However, if the client does not understand how inventory works, or to even ask about inventory, this piece of information is still unknown to the business owner. So, simply referring a client to someone within a particular industry may not be conducive to starting a business if the right questions are not asked.

Improving the Speaker-Learner Interface

The problems with the typical guest speaker in the entrepreneurship classroom were discussed above. It was also pointed out that the guest speaker, as used routinely in Small Business Development Center counseling sessions, also has some deficiencies. In this section, we argue for an approach that addresses both of these examples. We refer to this nexus as the “speaker-learner interface.” This handy term refers to the full range of dynamics that are occurring between the speaker and the learner in the classroom or SBDC counseling setting. We intend only to focus on the potential for actual learning to take place, and to ignore the myriad other ways in which the interface could be evaluated.

The approach we advocate to enhance the speaker-learner interface as part of entrepreneurship instruction is the structured interview format. The structured interview addresses many of the problems cited above regarding the guest speaker in the classroom. For example, the problem of lack of control over what is said is clearly obviated in the structured interview process. The instructor can serve as the “interviewer,” or can select someone qualified to interview the guest speaker. In either case, the instructor will have control over the direction of the conversation and will be able to focus on topics relevant to the students and to the flow of the learning materials otherwise presented to the class.

The structured interview format has received extensive review in the scholarly literature (Wright, Lichtenfels, and Pursell 1989). It has the benefit of providing a “framework” for the conversation without stifling the spontaneity of the guest speaker. The structured interview frames the conversation without dictating what is discussed, enabling the guest speaker to tell their story in a manner germane to the learners (Ralston, Kirkwood, and Burant 2003).

Most of the relevant scholarly literature regarding the structured interview pertains to its application in the job interview process (Macan 2009). In this process, the goal of the interview is to elicit information from the “speaker” that enables the “learners” to make hiring decisions. We suggest here that the structured interview approach has similar relevance in the entrepreneurship learning environment. Consider the parallels:

• In the job interview, the interviewer is attempting to learn something about the person being interviewed. The same is true of the guest speaker in entrepreneurship instruction. Learners want to know about the speakers, their educational background, character, and passions. In the SBDC counseling setting, it is undoubtedly true that the aspiring entrepreneur will want some background information on the person they are speaking with about starting a new venture.
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In the job interview, the interviewer is attempting to learn something about the competence of the person being interviewed. When we interview the guest speaker as part of entrepreneurship instruction, we want to know something about their competence and how they attained it. Did they learn on the job? Did they take specialized courses? Did they have mentors and partners? In the entrepreneurship classroom, ideally, the intent of the guest speaker is to convey actionable learning that students may be able to apply either in current or future ventures. The intent of the guest speaker in the SBDC counseling session is to provide directly useful information that the client can use to launch and grow a venture, or to determine that the industry is not right for them.

In the job interview, the interviewer is attempting to learn how the person being interviewed solved work-related problems. When we interview the guest speaker as part of entrepreneurship instruction, we want to know how that person solved the problems associated with starting, operating, and growing their venture.

The analogies between the two situations suggest that the structured interview can be an effective approach to the guest speaker in the classroom. Still, many instructors likely are not familiar with the format or are uncomfortable in performing the “interviewer” role. They may be more comfortable utilizing a pre-recorded structured interview with guest speakers from a wide range of industries.

The Startup Experience series is a set of structured interviews with entrepreneurs from industries ranging from restaurants and self-storage, to Internet marketing and land appraisal. Each structured interview is a case study of a particular entrepreneur and his or her business. The case studies are divided into two sections: The Entrepreneur’s Journey and The Entrepreneur’s Advice.

The “Journey” section of the interview is designed to reveal some personal background information about the entrepreneur. This can be useful to the learner, in that there may be something unique that helped the entrepreneur become successful. For example, many thriving entrepreneurs worked for some time in the industry in which they eventually became successful. This prior experience, in many instances, was critical to their eventual success as an entrepreneur in that industry. This is something that is important for learners to understand, as lack of such prior experience may be an impediment.

The “Advice” section of the interview digs deeply into the obstacles, challenges, sorrows, and joys of starting a business in that particular industry. It can be extremely important for novice entrepreneurs to have prior knowledge of the challenges that await them if they launch a new venture in a particular industry. It can also be very helpful to hear from someone who’s succeeded in that industry about some strategies that proved useful in overcoming the standard obstacles.

Each section of the structured interviews with successful entrepreneurs relies for relevance on the pertinence of the questions asked. Only someone with in-depth, yet also broad knowledge of the challenges of entrepreneurship will

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For more information about the Startup Experience series, see: http://films.com/id/23695/The_StartUp_Experience.htm.
be able to ask questions that will reveal vital, actionable information. In the case of the Startup Experience case studies, the interviewer is a successful entrepreneur as well as a professor and scholar of entrepreneurship. This combination of expertise enables a comprehensive interview that seeks to reveal insights about what is actually required—personally, physically, emotionally, financially—to start and grow a business in a particular industry.

We contend that this application of the structured interview format leads to an enhanced learning experience both in the entrepreneurship classroom and in the SBDC counseling session. Each of these situations has unique characteristics, to be sure, but each is focused on helping a novice entrepreneur better understand the true implications of starting a venture in a particular industry. We contend that the structured interview eliminates the typical problems with the guest speaker/counselor format highlighted above. Further research is required to better understand the application of the structured interview in entrepreneurship education and in SBDC counseling, but this paper should provide significant motivation—especially among those who are concerned that their interventions on behalf of entrepreneurship education are effective—to further explore uses for the structured interview in entrepreneurship pedagogy.

Conclusion

This paper is designed to provoke thought about the pedagogical utility of the guest speaker approach in both the entrepreneurship classroom and in SBDC counseling. We have attempted to make the case that there are deficiencies in using this approach by examining the speaker-learner interface in both the typical classroom setting and in the SBDC counseling session. Arguably, these are similar speaker-learner interface environments, where the intent is to impart actionable learning that is both general to entrepreneurship and specific to a particular industry.

The paper also highlighted several problems that exist with the current unstructured approach to the speaker-learner interface in both the classroom and in the standard SBDC counseling session. Among these are the positivity bias, in which speakers are more likely to recall positive memories in autobiographical storytelling. This bias will likely paint an unrealistic picture of the entrepreneur/speaker’s journey to success.

In the SBDC counseling session, it was indicated that the client seeking advice will often desire to start a business in a particular industry. It would only be coincidental if the SBDC volunteer counselor had direct experience in the industry in which the client would like to start a venture. To provide more industry-specific information to the client, counselors will often recommend they visit with someone (perhaps by referral) who has been successful in that industry. While this is a logical suggestion, the actual discussion between the client and a successful entrepreneur may not be as helpful as it could be. The most common reason is the existence of unknown unknowns. Novice entrepreneurs face a vast range of unknown unknowns (unk unks) as they prepare to launch startup ventures (Mullins 2007). As such, placing clients in charge of an interview with a successful entrepreneur will likely result in them missing a large amount of useful information and feedback.
We assert that the structured interview format is a useful technique to overcome the problems with the speaker-learner interface articulated in this paper. The structured interview is in wide use in major corporations as part of employee selection and advancement. Structured interviews in those applications are used to gather deep insights about the individual's character, understanding of their own efficacy, and how they may respond to future challenges. These particular goals of the structured interview are aligned with the goals of the speaker-learner interface both in the entrepreneurship classroom setting and in the SBDC counseling setting. We suggest that the Startup Experience series of structured interviews provides a way for entrepreneurship instructors as well as SBDC counselors to test the efficacy of the structured interview to enhance the speaker-learner interface in their respective settings.

In the absence of any extant research into the efficacy of the current speaker-learner interface format in both settings, it is difficult to make an empirical case for the structured interview as a superior approach. As such, this paper is anecdotal in character, but likely compelling to anyone who has used the guest speaker approach to enhance learning of entrepreneurship among novices. We suggest that research into the efficacy of the structured interview in the employee selection and advancement setting, and alignment of the goals of the “learners” in the corporate setting and in the entrepreneurial teaching setting, provides sufficient rationale at the moment to apply the structured interview in this new setting.

References


