



Innovating Entrepreneurship Education through a Structured Five-Sprint Model: Connecting Coaching, Action Learning, and Reflection

Péter Tasi¹, Irina Popova², Anu Manner³

¹Aston University, United Kingdom

²University of Brighton, United Kingdom

³Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, Finland

Abstract

Team Academy programmes emphasise self-directed, team-based, practice-driven entrepreneurship learning. However, highly open-ended learning environments can create challenges in pacing, clarity of expectations, and the visibility of learner progression. Such ambiguity may reduce scaffolding for novice learners and complicate competence-based assessment. To address this, at Aston University's Business Enterprise Development (BED) programmes a structured five-sprint pedagogical model has been introduced across the 2025-26 academic year and implemented it across all year groups of the programme. The model integrates action learning, team coaching and heutagogical principles within a cyclical six-week architecture designed to balance learner autonomy with intentional structure - a core tension within heutagogical approaches. Each sprint targets a key entrepreneurial competence area (Connection, Customer, Marketing, Sustainability, Leadership) and follows a consistent rhythm: coaching and orientation, skill development, applied project work, a challenge-based Action Week, and structured reflection through shared community reflection moments. This paper presents the sprint framework as a design-based educational innovation and reports early findings from an ongoing practice-based case study including coaching observations, student reflections and engagement indicators. Initial evidence across all year groups suggests increased clarity of expectations, stronger team cohesion and more visible developmental trajectories across the academic year. By articulating the pedagogical rationale, implementation process and emerging outcomes, the study offers a transferable, transnationally adaptable model for structuring experiential and entrepreneurship education. The five-sprint approach contributes a replicable framework for educators seeking to combine heutagogy with sufficient scaffolding, thereby extending current practice in science and professional education contexts.

Keywords: *sprint-based learning; heutagogy; team coaching; action learning; experiential learning; entrepreneurship education, design-based research*

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship education rooted in action learning and self-directed team practices has gained increasing traction globally. Team Academy-inspired programmes cultivate learner autonomy, peer-driven inquiry, and real-world experimentation. Yet highly open-ended pedagogical environments come with inherent tensions: the cyclical pace of projects varies widely, the visibility of progression is uneven, and many learners - especially early in programmes - struggle to navigate complex expectations without sufficient structure. Within this context, educators face the dual challenge of maintaining heutagogical freedom while providing pedagogical clarity.

To address these tensions, Aston University introduced a structured sprint-based architecture at the Business Enterprise Development programmes that retains the core principles of Team Academy pedagogy while adding calibrated scaffolding. This model - the Five-Sprint Framework - provides a repeating six-week cycle combining coaching, skills development, applied project work, intensive challenge practice, and structured reflection. The framework was implemented across all undergraduate year groups in 2025-26, enabling a common learning rhythm with competence-sensitive variation per level.

2. Background and Theoretical Foundations



Heutagogy positions learners as the primary agents in determining what and how they learn, emphasising capability, metacognition and adaptability [1]. In practice, autonomy without wayfinding can overwhelm; judicious scaffolding is therefore required to help learners become self-determined without losing momentum. Team-based entrepreneurship education, especially within the Team Academy tradition, foregrounds learning through enterprise creation, dialogue, and coaching rather than transmission [2]. Integrating action learning strengthens this stance by orienting inquiry toward real challenges and reflective questioning (Revens' "programmed knowledge + questioning insight") [3].

Team coaching provides the developmental glue, supporting collective goal-setting, contracting, and reflective practices that surface learning at individual and team levels [4]. Meanwhile, iterative sprint-based structures from design and product development offer time-boxed cycles that concentrate attention, accelerate feedback, and create visible increments of progress [5]. Finally, two pedagogical anchors inform the model: experiential entrepreneurship education (iterative, opportunity-centred, action-orientation) [6], and scaffolding (calibrated support that fades as capability grows) [7]. The paper's research strategy follows design-based research, linking principled design with iterative refinement in authentic settings [8].

3. Problem Definition

Across multiple cohorts and year groups, student feedback and coaching observations revealed three recurrent challenges:

1. Pacing variability: Without clear temporal markers, teams progressed at inconsistent speeds, struggling to maintain momentum across longer projects.
2. Opaque progression: Development was difficult to articulate without structured checkpoints, complicating competence-based assessment and feedback.
3. Ambiguity for novices: Students entering or transitioning between stages expressed uncertainty around expectations, success indicators, and the rhythm of learning.

These issues suggested the need for an approach that retains autonomy while clarifying structure - particularly at transition points (year entry, new competence domains, new teams).

4. Design-Based Approach and the Five-Sprint Model

The five-sprint framework was developed through a design-based process informed by heutagogy, action learning and team coaching, then iteratively refined with coach and learner input. Each sprint focuses on a distinct entrepreneurial competence domain:

- Sprint 1: Connection (relationships, networks, teaming)
- Sprint 2: Customer (discovery, insight, validation)
- Sprint 3: Marketing (story, channels, experiments)
- Sprint 4: Sustainability (responsible innovation, metrics)
- Sprint 5: Leadership (influence, ethics, decision-making)

Each sprint follows the same six-week rhythm:

1. Coaching&Orientation/Setting the scene
2. Skill Workshops and Coaching
3. Applied Team Project Work
4. Action Week (Challenge-based learning)
5. Sprint Reflection with Coaching
6. Shared Community Reflection Moments

This predictable architecture reduces ambiguity while preserving team-driven project selection and inquiry. Competence expectations, artefacts, and assessment criteria scale by year group.

5. Implementation Across the Academic Year



In 2025-26 the framework was implemented across all year groups on the programme. Induction activities introduced the sprint logic and how competence areas map onto applied entrepreneurial work at each level. Coaching teams held cadence-alignment sessions to ensure synchronous milestones across cohorts while allowing discipline-specific variation. Skill workshops were co-designed with practitioners to ensure currency, and the “Houston’s Calling” review provided structured developmental checkpoints using reflective narratives, qualitative indicators, and evidence of artefact progression. Year-specific rubrics operationalised competence expectations while preserving room for learner-determined pathways.

6. Methods and Data Sources

The study adopts a practice-based case study within a design-based research (DBR) framework [8], enabling iterative refinement of the Five-Sprint Model in an authentic higher education setting. The framework was implemented across the entire Business Enterprise Development (BSc) programme at Aston University (Year 1: n=20; Year 2: n=19; Year 3: n=15) and within the Master’s in Design, Entrepreneurship and Innovation (MSc) programme (n=6), totalling 60 participants across undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Data collection began in October 2025 and remains ongoing. Multiple qualitative data sources were gathered across all cohorts to capture patterns of pacing, clarity, progression and team dynamics. These include:

- Coaching observations recorded throughout each sprint cycle
- Student reflective journals submitted at the end of each six-week sprint
- Engagement indicators (workshop attendance, participation in Action Weeks)
- Qualitative feedback captured during structured “Houston’s Calling” progress reviews

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach. Coding focused on recurring themes related to learner clarity, cognitive load, team cohesion, developmental visibility and competence articulation. As feedback was primarily generated within coaching sessions and reflective artefacts, data were anonymised prior to analysis. This allowed triangulation across reflective, observational, and behavioural indicators.

The design-based research stance positions the Five-Sprint Model as both intervention and object of inquiry, linking theoretical principles with iterative pedagogical refinement.

7. Early Findings

Preliminary thematic analysis across cohorts indicates three dominant patterns.

7.1. Increased Clarity and Reduced Cognitive Overload

Students consistently reported that the sprint architecture clarified expectations and weekly focus. One participant noted that “having a clear weekly focus reduced anxiety about what counted as progress.” Time-boxed cycles appear to support task prioritisation and reduce ambiguity, particularly for first-year students transitioning into self-directed learning environments.

7.2. Deepened Thematic Understanding

The intensive competence-based thematic focus of each sprint was frequently described as beneficial for knowledge acquisition. Several students reflected that concentrating on one domain (e.g., Customer or Marketing) for six weeks enabled deeper understanding and more intentional application within their ventures. This suggests that temporal concentration of thematic inquiry may enhance knowledge integration within experiential contexts.

7.3. Enhanced Visibility of Developmental Progression

Structured sprint reviews and artefact documentation strengthened learners’ ability to articulate competence growth. Coaches observed more explicit references to developmental milestones during shared community reflection moments, supporting competence-based assessment conversations and feedback literacy.

Collectively, these patterns suggest that intentional structure can enhance clarity and progression without undermining learners’ heutagogical autonomy.



8. Discussion

The Five-Sprint Model contributes to an ongoing debate within heutagogical and experiential learning literature: how to preserve learner autonomy while preventing disorientation in complex, open-ended environments. While heutagogy emphasises self-determined learning, less attention has been paid to the temporal architecture within which autonomy unfolds. This study suggests that time-boxed sprint cycles may represent a missing structural layer in self-determined learning design.

Emerging developments within the wider Team Academy network further reinforce the relevance of temporal architecture in autonomy-based learning environments. At Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, the renewed Tiimiakatemia “Snowflake” (Lumihietale) model has recently introduced two-week learning cycles, with early results similarly indicating improved focus and rhythm. Although differing in duration, this parallel shift toward shorter, clearly bounded cycles suggests that temporal structuring is becoming an important design principle within self-directed team-based education internationally. The convergence of these independently evolving models strengthens the argument that temporal scaffolding may represent a broader pedagogical need rather than a context-specific intervention.

Rather than constraining autonomy, structured sprint cycles appear to function as scaffolding that organises attention, accelerates feedback loops and makes learning increments visible. In this sense, time becomes a pedagogical tool. The predictable rhythm supports metacognitive regulation while preserving learner agency in project selection, inquiry direction and artefact creation.

From a design-based perspective, the model demonstrates how agile-inspired cycles can be pedagogically repurposed beyond product development into higher education competence design. It reframes sprint logic not as productivity acceleration, but as developmental pacing.

Importantly, the model’s architecture is transferable beyond entrepreneurship education. In science and professional education contexts, laboratory modules, engineering design projects, clinical simulations and other project-based STEM contexts or fieldwork blocks could adopt similar six-week competence-focused cycles. Repeated time-boxed experimentation, structured reflection and milestone reviews align closely with scientific inquiry processes, where hypothesis testing, iteration and reflective evaluation are central.

The emergence of varied but structured temporal cycles (e.g., two-week and six-week models) across contexts suggests that time-bound iteration may constitute a transferable design principle within self-determined learning environments.

9. Conclusion

The Five-Sprint Framework provides a structured yet flexible model for supporting heutagogical learning across all year groups in entrepreneurship education. Early findings show promising effects on clarity, cohesion and developmental visibility. Ongoing analysis will examine longitudinal capability development and outcomes across cohorts.

As higher education seeks to blend autonomy with structure, the five-sprint approach offers a scalable, transnationally adaptable temporal design framework with potential applications across laboratory-based science education, entrepreneurship and professional education.

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