

TIMS3311 - Reflection

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This reflection will focus on my key learnings and personal growth I have experienced whilst working on my own natural home fragrance start up. I initially assumed that people would love the novel idea of a 100% natural diffuser made from a single eucalyptus tree. However through interviews, rapid iterative testing and applying design and entrepreneurship frameworks my start up and I have experienced change and growth. I will discuss the lessons I have learned, the networks I have created and where I see this venture going in the future.

This experience has taught me that I am more of a physical hands on person. I think this also translates to me ‘doing’ more than just thinking about doing. In the past I have spent months thinking about a start up venture and going into planning or designing websites without taking action. Whereas with Truesap, I do first and think or justify or reflect second. It is worth noting that this mindset shift was influenced by one of my peers - Benoir. Chatting to Benoir and hearing some of his stories left me with the confidence and desire to work at speed. I remember Dr Russel Manfield telling us the basics of the Lean Start up is to “fail cheap, fail fast” which is exactly what Benoir used to succeed. With this in mind, it made the process much easier actually.

One key highlight was securing a partnership with a tree lopping company. After calling up and speaking to the company I was able to solve one of the largest worries I had for scaling the business. This small win gave me a huge confidence boost, now having access to more materials that are sustainable and circular. These networks helped me to understand more about real world entrepreneurship and how collaboration can accelerate growth.

The most difficult problem I had to face was the fact that I had to leave the 100% from one eucalyptus tree dream behind and pivot. Unfortunately, after testing lots of prototypes of eucalyptus wood for the diffuser reeds (whittled branches, uniformly cut sticks, different thicknesses and diameters) they were just not as effective as the industry standard rattan reeds. As I was faced with challenges along this journey, I always approached them with a positive attitude. “Ok, can’t change what has happened, but what can I do now to solve it”. Always looking to the future for a solution.

In hindsight I would start selling these sooner. Go to weekend markets, set up little stores and start selling. There would be lots of conversations that would bring insights, and I would be able to test the product with users, and make sales. Overall these lessons learnt taught me resilience and adaptability which are essential qualities for navigating the uncertainty of entrepreneurship.

Before this experience, my entrepreneurial understanding was largely theoretical. As a design student, a lot of my experience has been thinking about, exploring and developing solutions. When it comes to start ups and this course, testing assumptions and getting feedback from user interviews has been the most valuable part.

I believe that the design thinking frameworks I used, empathy mapping, system mapping and problem interviews with users, were great at framing the problem. It helped with getting a strong platform to stand on for me to see the real problem at hand from many perspectives (IDF, 2025). However the most important and valuable entrepreneurial theory for me was the in person rapid iterative testing and the build-measure-learn approach (Ries, 2011). These in person tests were the most valuable as I was getting the raw responses from users, which helped in the iteration process to make better suited products. In one of my initial tests, I had brought an early prototype to someone in my target market. I was asked a question about the longevity of the product which is something I needed to work on and got me thinking about how. I experimented with tallow, yuki-sagi and raw linseed oil, all natural sealants that play into the brand image. Each test was not perfect, but I learnt more about how to balance sustainability with performance. Something else I learnt from these tests was that the longer I spent talking with someone the deeper the insights got. Provoking questions and allowing people to go on tangents and talk for an unset amount of time reveals things that would not come from a surface level conversation. For example a 2 minute conversation, "Oh i like ocean breeze smells" vs a 15 minute "My cat once jumped up on top of my dresser and started smelling my perfumes". Although this isn't a very insightful example it shows the stark difference in what I could get out of people for just spending more time talking with them.

At this time of the venture I had enough customer feedback and reached the pivot or persevere stage. With the guidance from my course lecturer, it was time to persevere with the target market of middle aged mothers aged 35-45. This was to help refine the attributes of the product like scent, size and price. This process represented the switch from the exploration phase into the refining and validation phase, something the lean start up approach endorses.

I would say that this course has metaphorically opened up doors that I wouldn't have opened without it and also helped me grow in confidence. Through becoming more invested in the entrepreneurial process and start ups, I have gained skills and now have a desire to learn more and educate myself to become a better entrepreneur. This has led me to going to more events hosted by UQ ventures, watch more videos of this kind of thing on youtube and have conversations and reach out to people who have succeeded before. I think I will continue to pursue entrepreneurship and go to these events and be involved in Brisbane's entrepreneurial ecosystem because I believe I can do as these people have done before me and make a difference.

I have definitely benefited from going to the events hosted by UQ Ventures and would recommend that these events are exposed to all students doing this course. I would also recommend more peer led sessions for feedback. The class we had where everyone had a chance to share was massively helpful and we can learn a lot from our peers just through conversation. Finally I would recommend more encouragement for guidance early in the semester. I feel as though a compulsory check in the first week after we were given the assignment would help everyone stay on track and ensure we are heading in the right direction.

References

Ries, E. (2011). *The Lean Startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses*. Crown Business.

Interaction Design Foundation. (2025). *What is Design Thinking?* Retrieved October 19, 2025, from <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/design-thinking>

Diary entries

I did my first interviews today, 8th september. I made sure to keep the questions open ended like the suggestions I got in feedback for assignment 1. However because I had been so deep in the research and design thinking realm, I just had the straight questions. This also is a learning experience for how to conduct interviews, but I realised after these first interviews I needed to introduce the topic before asking them questions about it. To establish a bit of context and a common agreement on the topic so that the answers would be of high quality and more directly relevant.

I was conducting another interview today with a very eco conscious mother, and she asked a question focused around longevity of home fragrance products. And this got my thinking about my initial concept of the 100% eucalyptus reed diffuser idea. I had already started prototyping and to ensure longevity there would need to be some changes. My design thinking brain went to work on the different types of wood sealants, how i could ensure the sticks dont go mouldy, and all the little details. Upon reflecting I can see that in order to make a fully natural, sustainable and ecofriendly product there would be a lot of work to do. Now i see why some larger companies cut corners and end up greenwashing, because it is the easier option. I want to stay true to the brand identity and cut no corners. Trust between a business and its customers is more important than pumping out more products. I feel as though the brand identity of a niche business like this is also extremely important especially when it will come to scaling the brand in the future.

After that last entry and more interviews I experimented with different techniques of sealing the timber. The reason why you seal the timber is so that it will last much longer. So after a bit of research I tested my first method. Staying true to the 100% natural idea, beef tallow was used. I thought since it's used for lots of other natural methods, has some absorbing properties and repels water it could work well. I melted it down and applied a couple layers. And after testing this prototype with a sample group I realised I couldn't continue to use tallow in the future for a couple reasons. 1 it has a lingering smell that interferes with the eucalyptus and 2. It doesn't fully repel the water in the oil pocket so some is lost and seeps into the base, and 3 it transfers onto the reed sticks making them absorb less. I also tried another Japanese method of Yaki Sugi, which chars the exterior layer of the timber to repel moisture, pests and rotting. This was quite difficult though and the carbon char is hard to control. Thus, another option, linseed oil is being tested on the prototypes. When I was at bunnings there were two types of linseed oil - boiled

and raw. Now, boiled linseed oil is quite popular for sealing timber, however I did some research in the store to compare the two and found that although boiled linseed oil takes far less time to cure, it does contain chemicals and VOC's. Obviously I went with the raw oil, but now I have to wait a couple of weeks to see if it is effective. My next option will be to just coat the inside of the oil hole with bio epoxy resin. Yet again the importance of choosing the harder but right option over the easy wrong option shows itself, much like the last entry.

I recently revisited my feedback notes for the first assignment and leaned into my effectuation approach more. I started with mapping my unique advantages, and something that came from this was the fact that I like to create and I feel more pride in something i've created myself vs bought. Now paring this information with a push for more broader solution testing, with the eucalyptus diffuser only being one of many tested MVP's, I came up with some more possible MVP's to test. When you strip a diffuser back to the basics, it's just a carrier (something to put the fragrance in), the fragrance, and some way to spread the fragrance. What if people could create their own diffusers with a kit. What if my company supplied the oil and rattan reed sticks, and there was a push for the customer to create their own carrier. Upcycle some glass jar or bottle, or make your own. This is definitely something that will need to be tested with customers.

Today marks the day I have to give up the "made from a single tree" story. Unfortunately with the majority of the people i have tested my prototypes with they say that the eucalyptus wood reed sticks are just not effective. This marks a pivot. It is not a major pivot as the industry standard rattan reed sticks are still 100% natural so that is still fine, but I feel as though a little piece of the dream has faded. In hindsight this is actually a great discovery. Would I rather produce a less effective product or a more effective product? In the lean start up methodology iterating based off of user feedback is a major touchpoint and this kind of change should be celebrated.