TIMS3311 Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Practice– Semester 2, 2025

Assessment 2 | Reflective digital diary entries and critical reflection

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Part 1: Critical Reflection Essay

   1. **Introduction**

Regarding my Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experience, I have a valuable opportunity to work with Sepal, a UQ iLap startup developing an ecosystem that connects organizers, stallholders, and customers on a single platform. The main objective is to change outdated manual booking processes into a real-time system, which helps save time and minimize administrative costs.

My team consisted of Yasmine Nathifa Zahira, Chang Lu (Hannah), and me, and our crucial responsibility is conducting interviews and market research to validate assumptions of stallholders and organizers' needs, which will then form insightful answers for whether organizers are genuinely interested in real-time automated booking.

We primarily adopt Lean Startup and Design Thinking methodologies, with minor Effectuation to complement our validation. This essay demonstrates my reflection on how theory shaped my practice, how lecturers' feedback led me from theory to implementation, and especially, how this experience enhanced my entrepreneurial mindset and career direction.

   2. **Overall WIL Experience**
      a. **Personal lessons**

My first challenge resulted from blasting multiple cold emails to market organizers, but the number of emails responded to was much lower than we expected. This shortage of response made me discouraged at first and revealed my weakness regarding confidence in professional communication.

Through consultation with the lecturer, we adjusted our outreach strategy by widening the scope from Queensland to include markets in Victoria and New South Wales, while still attending markets in Brisbane, trying to speak with organizers and stallholders in person, and asking for introductions to others among their networks. As a result, we could collect more practical insights and enhance the quality of our research.

Through mentorship with Kanish, the CEO of Sepal, I learned a targeted technique to improve stakeholder engagement called warm introductions. He explained that cold emails

work, but warm introductions have 10 times the response rate. We were advised to end each conversation by asking, "Who else should I talk to about this problem?" or "Can you introduce me to another market organizer who faces similar challenges?" This Snowball method would expand our interview sources quickly and deepen our insights into booking efficiencies. Thus, after applying essential adjustments, we successfully had the capacity to reach a total of 27 interviews, including 11 organizer interviews and 16 stallholder interviews.

Therefore, this challenge taught me that adapting the method instead of iterating the same approach is the meaning of persistence in research. By applying warm introductions, iterative questions, and in-person networking, I can learn how to be more confident in communication, build genuine relationships with stakeholders, and strengthen interview skills, which are directly related to Bird-In-Hand and Crazy Quilt principles in Effectuation theory (Effectuation, 2025).

b. Networks established

The project gave me more genuine relationships with market organizers, stallholders, mentors, and my teammates. Conversations with organizers showed pain points such as repetitive paperwork, the need to balance diversity, and inconsistent communication, while Kanish provided us with specific insights into stakeholder segmentations and value perception.

We noticed that there are two categories for stallholders: permanent/regulars and casuals. Regular stallholders mainly struggle with brand visibility and digital promotion, whereas casual ones concentrate on discoverability. Kanish guided us to some similar platforms, such as DoorDash and Uber Eats, where customers can recognize the occurrence of markets and real-time availability of stalls. Thus, these insights fit with the Business Model Canvas (Strategyzer, 2025) method, which requires us to discover various customer segments according to their distinct value proposition. I also reflected on the "Define" stage in Design Thinking that uncovers real users' needs by empathy and synthesis (Liedtka, 2014). Besides, I acknowledged "Crazy Quilt" in Effectuation theory through collaboration via Slack with the Sepal team, Kanish, and Vikram, whose feedback and guidance improved my ability in transforming abstract market concepts into actionable strategies.

3. New Knowledge, Insights, and Skills

a. The past

Before this course, my understanding regarding entrepreneurship was overall theory, considering it as a step-by-step process: discover a problem, develop a product/service, and launch. I was attracted by a statement, "There are no facts inside the building" (Blank, 2013), making me realize that innovation is an iterative, human-centered, and uncertain process.

Initially, I was confused with my interview skills and techniques to uncover real problems. However, the practical chance to apply theoretical frameworks into contextual projects helped me to understand more about how to turn abstract methods into evidence-based knowledge.

b. Key Learnings

1. Design Thinking – Empathy and Human-Centred Problem Solving

The Design Thinking framework deepened my connections with stakeholders through empathy interviews. By applying the Double Diamond methods (Plattner, 2010), such as journey maps and "How might we" questionnaires, I can clarify the real pain points beyond manual booking processes—wasted time, uncertainty, and frustration.

According to Verganti (2018), regarding "design-driven innovation," I noted the difference between stated and latent needs, which connects the reframe meaning with improving functionality. For instance, our team recognized that organizers not only want efficiencies but also diversity and reliability.

Design Thinking plays an important role in improving my interview and empathy skills and teaches me that entrepreneurship is a collaborative route mainly based on human understanding.

2. Lean Startup – From Abstract to Tactical Execution

After spending time researching the Lean Startup method thoroughly from sources of Blank, Ries, and Osterwalder, our team chose this as our main technique in the Sepal project. We'll use it to validate the problem and solution with organizers, run interviews, test assumptions

with the Business Model Canvas, and use Sepal's MVP demo once it's ready. The lecturer's feedback from the project presentation assignment led us from vague validation plans into specific quantification experiments, including interviewing at least 10 organizers and 6 stallholders, shadowing 3-4 market days, mapping the booking workflow (application, approval, and setup), and measuring key metrics such as email counts, confirmation delays, or cancellation rates. As a result, I recognized that actual learnings come from interaction, not just research or presentation polish.

3. Effectuation – Acting with What We Have

Because Sepal is an early-stage startup with limited resources, we acknowledged the importance of an effective mindset and decided to apply The Five Principles of Effectuation throughout our project (Sarasvathy, 2022). First, Bird-in-Hand guided us to take advantage of existing organizer contacts, Riverside data, and Brisbane Open Data instead of external sources. Second, Affordable Loss made sure that we conducted low-cost and small pilots. Third, Crazy Quilt meant building collaborative relationships with enthusiastic organizers in co-design. Fourth, Lemonade taught us how to transform unresponsive organizers into lessons for reframing. Fifth, Pilot-in-Plane required us to concentrate on controllable factors instead of external results. This knowledge helps our team establish a process step by step in uncertainty. For example, when blasting cold emails got a low response, we pivoted to in-person networking at local markets. Therefore, I learned that entrepreneurship is not just about prediction but more about creative and iterative actions with available resources.

c. The Future

The valuable chance of participating in the TIMS3311 course and working with Sepal significantly deepened my entrepreneurial insights and sharpened my future career as an entrepreneur. This opportunity equips me with essential knowledge to work in innovation management, collaborate with early-stage startups, or run my own business in the future.

I will always keep in mind three methods: Design Thinking to discover user needs, Lean Startup to conduct pilots efficiently, and Effectuation to deal with challenges and limited resources in uncertainty. Moreover, I have learned to consider hindrance as data and feedback as opportunity, which is viewed as an entrepreneurial mindset that can be applied in any industry.

d. Course Feedback

I highly appreciate this learning opportunity and value the practical structure of this course, which gives students who have a passion for entrepreneurship a practical chance to synthesize collective knowledge from previous entrepreneurial courses into real projects. This WIL course strengthens confidence, teamwork, analytical thinking, and essential communication skills in collaborating with professionals. Additionally, my biggest weakness is speaking in front of a crowd and interacting with new people that is enhanced a lot. However, I recommend three improvements for the next course occurrence.

- Enhanced mentorship structure: Scheduling more frequent check-ins with mentors or industry partners to provide timely guidance and help teams be aligned with project expectations.
- Mid-semester reflection checkpoint: Providing self-assessment could ensure ongoing depth of reflection and the quality of collaboration.
- Access to previous high-quality submissions: Providing examples helps to gain more hints for structure, analytical depth, and revision.

4. Conclusion

Accomplishing this course with the Sepal project taught me how to transform theoretical frameworks into measurable results, especially the usefulness and importance of taking advantage of feedback. Thus, I recognize that failure and uncertainty are not barriers but are opportunities for success. Furthermore, thanks to the chance to apply Design Thinking, Lean Startup and Effectuation in practice, I have learnt that innovation is a continuous loop of empathy, testing, iteration and adaptation. These meaningful lessons will boost my knowledge and contribute significantly to my future career.

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Part 2: Reflective Diary Entries

Diary Entry 1 – Why I Chose Sepal

11th Aug 2025

Initially, our class was introduced to various UQ iLab and Ventures startups, such as Aloe Vita, Q Factorial, PillFlow, and the Lili Grace Foundation. Sepal was the final one to appear but totally caught our team's attention. I chose to be a part of Sepal because Kanish, CEO of Sepal, highlighted that they will focus on solving "cold start" challenges for organizers and stallholders' needs, which means I could experience real stakeholder interaction and conduct market research.

I thought that working with Sepal led me to the practical side of entrepreneurship from the first step in this project. Instead of starting with analysis or desk research like other projects, which makes me less excited and enthusiastic, Sepal allowed me to understand Design Thinking and Lean Startup through discovering users' pain points and conducting several interviews in local markets.

Sepal is a typical example of an early-stage startup that required me to work in a fast-paced and problem-solving environment. I believe that this uncertainty opportunity would help me be well-prepared for my future entrepreneurship career, which requires me to prioritize human insights and iteration in my plans.

Diary Entry 2 – The Cold Email Challenge

10th Sep 2025

After having meetings and discussions with my teammates to lock in tasks and timelines, we decided to send around 25 cold emails to popular local markets in Brisbane, but unfortunately, we only received a few responses. The shortage of engagement and attention of organizers made me confused about my communication skills as well as the potential success of our project.

Through consultation with Jack (our lecturer), I learned that our team should choose to pivot. We decided to change our outreach strategy and broadened it to New South Wales and Victoria and attended local markets to conduct in-person interviews. Following that, we had a

catch-up meeting with Kanish (CEO of Sepal) through the Zoom platform, and he briefly introduced us to a warm introductions technique, where new contacts are derived from existing ones. This approach helped us successfully gain 27 interviews, which was a number we had never imagined before.

This practice expresses the Bird-In-Hand technique in Effectuation, which encourages startups to work with available resources. The most helpful lesson that I gained from this experience is that effective research is not about the number but the method. Additionally, it cannot be denied that adaptability and networking improved my confidence and communication skills with stakeholders.

Diary Entry 3 – Meeting with Kanish and Jack

15th - 17th Sep 2025

In the middle of the journey of our project, our team had an opportunity to meet Jack for a quick update and ask for some guidance. He advised us to try to expand the scope of blasting cold emails to beyond Queensland so that we could get more interviewees. Moreover, he also suggested a new strategy that made us directly go to markets. A tip was to ensure when speaking to the ones that have agreed to speak with us, ask for introductions to more people. After that, we also had a meeting with Kanish, who gave us an overall category and desire of target users: regular stallholders seeking visibility while casual ones seeking discovery.

These meetings helped me understand more about the connection between theory and practice. While Jack highlighted the strategy for measurable validation according to Lean Startup, Kanish emphasized the importance of real-need market understanding via Design Thinking empathy map.

In conclusion, I can learn the valuable roles of mentors in helping me apply theoretical frameworks to real-world practice. It also enhanced me in various aspects such as listening, pivoting, and managing challenges, which are essential skills for my career in the innovation industry.

Diary Entry 4 – Local Market Research Interviews

20th - 28th Sep 2025

Our team attended 3 markets together, including Jan Powers Brisbane Powerhouse, The Collective Markets (South Bank), and West End Markets. I conducted five in-person interviews with stallholders: Fez & Pistachio (handmade Belgian chocolates), Knittinggarden (handmade gifts), Painting (art stall), Elizabeth Brain Homewares (illustrated decor), and Dizzy & Dilbert (book-inspired crafts). Each conversation gave me different perspectives on market operations. Fez & Pistachio and Knittinggarden relied mainly on Instagram for promotion, whereas Painting and Homewares preferred consistent locations and easier application systems. Most agreed that weather, unpredictable crowds, and organizer communication were their biggest frustrations.

My favorite interview was with Knittinggarden because she had over 50,000 followers on Instagram through creative content. She demonstrated how social media can cover for the lack of market promotion, which reflected on Design Thinking's empathy and Define stages. These interviews also highlighted that Lean Startup validation is based on direct user evidence rather than assumptions.

Through these interviews, I learned more about how to listen deeply, discover trends, identify real pain points, and transform collective insights into a value proposition for Sepal. Moreover, my qualitative research was strengthened, and I recognized that aligning with customers' real frustration would be impactful innovation.

Diary Entry 5 – iLab × Momentum Accelerator Pitch Night

21st Oct 2025

Near the end of the semester, Kanish invited us to attend iLab × Momentum Accelerator Showcase Pitch Night, where he presented Sepal to mentors, the UQ community, and investors. The opportunity to see all the pitches was inspiring and valuable for me, especially the presentation of Sepal, which we work with throughout this semester. He introduced Sepal's validated problem, stakeholder insights, and plan to scale up. Witnessing how our interview data partially contributed to the pitch made me and my team so proud of our efforts.

The event reminded me of the theory of Lean Startup's build-measure-learn loop regarding how early validation forms the foundation for credible scaleup. Additionally, I noted that an effective pitch is the result of both data and emotion.

This event contributed a memorable mark in my WIL course journey. It showed how small problems validation can grow and become an interesting project that attracts the attention of investors and brings real solutions to customers' pain points instead of solving surface-level problems. Through the event, I could collect more techniques in terms of research, storytelling, and strategy, which made me more confident in my capability and my future career.