

# Assignment 2: WIL Reflection

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10/20/25

## **Part A: Five Diary Entries**

### **Diary 1: Project Selection**

On August 15th, we had to choose one project from 7-8 iLab options.

I didn't select the one that looked most "cool" or had the most market potential. Instead, I practically assessed: Do I understand this industry? Are research subjects easy to find? Will I need to learn a lot of new knowledge?

I ultimately chose Aloe Beverage. I had browsed supermarket beverage aisles, tried functional drinks, and had basic consumer intuition. Compared to biotech or blockchain projects, this didn't require much additional specialized knowledge. I could focus my energy on learning how to conduct user research.

Looking back, this "use what you have" approach was correct. During subsequent interviews, because I had basic knowledge of the beverage industry, I could more keenly capture interviewees' reactions and ask deeper follow-up questions.

If I could do it again, I would still choose this way.

### **Diary 2: Theory Tool Selection**

While preparing Assignment 1, we met with the founder and identified her three most confusing questions: unclear product positioning, ambiguous channel selection, and lack of user personas.

We then reviewed the course's list of theoretical frameworks and discussed which tools could solve these problems. We ultimately selected: Empathy Map and Journey Map to understand users, Problem Interview to validate problems, and Business Model Canvas to integrate hypotheses.

At the time, I was subconsciously matching "problem-tool" and didn't think it was anything special. Now I realize this was my first time using multiple theoretical frameworks on the

same project simultaneously. Design Thinking helped us understand users, Lean Startup helped us decide what to validate first, and Effectuation helped us assess what we could do.

I learned to "combine" different tools based on specific problems rather than using only one theory from start to finish.

### **Diary 3: Survey Strategy and Dilemmas**

After completing the survey design, we needed to quickly collect samples.

The founder mentioned attending a food exhibition, so we revised the questionnaire into a "3-minute version" within 2 days. The exhibition yielded 19 responses from real passersby, most likely Australian locals, but it wasn't enough.

We were all forwarding the questionnaire, but collection was slow. One day, a team member said he had found an agent on Taobao (a Chinese e-commerce platform) for 38 Chinese yuan (CNY) and had already collected 30 responses from Chinese respondents, primarily post-90s and post-00s females who matched our target demographic. Everyone was happy. I thought, "So this is possible, how clever!" Our total came to 49 survey responses.

During one meeting, we indirectly mentioned observed cultural differences. Many Chinese consumers questioned the concept of "carbonated plus healthy beverage." We asked the founder about her positioning regarding carbonation. Her response helped us reframe the target audience: not "health purists" but "people who enjoy carbonated beverages but want healthier choices." This reframe was important.

I also mentioned that my first impression of aloe juice was "with pulp," but the founder clearly stated it wouldn't contain add-ins.

However, a lingering question remained: these product core features, having carbonation and no add-ins, are so critical. Don't they need market validation? As student consultants, we worked within the founder's set parameters and lacked authority to insist on testing. But if I were a professional consultant, I might suggest A/B testing.

This ambiguity itself is learning.

#### **Diary 4: Journey Map Epiphany**

After the survey ended, we began designing interviews. But one question troubled us: Aloe Beverage wasn't yet fully developed. How could we create a Journey Map?

We discussed whether we could only "plan" how consumers would encounter the product hypothetically, or research similar products and adapt. We weren't sure, so we asked the instructor.

The instructor said: "Even for products in the development stage, you can create a Journey Map. But the prerequisite is: it must be based on real research data you've collected. Absolutely cannot use the founder's assumptions or data you've imagined."

This conversation, combined with techniques the instructor mentioned in class, gave me deeper understanding of user research methods. I learned about the say-do gap: what people say and what they do may differ. If I directly ask "Would you buy it?" I might get a polite "yes," but actual purchasing behavior could be completely different. More effective is researching historical behavior: What do you drink now? Why did you choose it? When did you last try a new beverage? How was that experience, good and bad? Why did you try it?

The instructor also mentioned in class to avoid purely textual descriptions or testing only one version. It's better to compare 2 or more visualized versions simultaneously for more meaningful data.

But reality is complex. We wanted to test health versus beauty positioning in the survey using visual mockups, images plus slogans, but due to continuous designer material delays (still no progress now), we could only use text slogan options in the questionnaire. The direct questions and images we originally wanted weren't retained.

This made me understand there's a large gap between ideal research design and what can actually be executed.

## Diary 5: Interview Execution

I posted on Red Note (a Chinese social media platform) using "university student assignment mutual aid" for recruitment. I quickly received many private messages asking, "Is there compensation?" but no one commented publicly, which was interesting. Private messages exceeded our needs, so I proactively hid the post. I ultimately decided on 30 yuan per person.

The efficiency was remarkable. I received private messages the same day, replied the same day, and 3 people completed interviews the same day. The other 2 scheduled different times. From posting to completing 5 paid interviews took only 2-3 days.

I also reverse-searched "interview mutual aid" and found someone who regularly accepted interviews, becoming my only proactively found unpaid participant. My final tally was 4 paid interviews (120 yuan, approximately 25 AUD) plus 2 free, totaling 6 interviews.

I later discovered the market rate was 10 yuan. I paid 30 yuan and overpaid by 3 times! But I don't regret it. 120 yuan converts to about one meal in Australia. And because the price was generous, recruitment was extremely fast.

I shared this method with team members, and they praised it as "very clever." I joked about "paying to do work," and the team member who found the Taobao agent said, "Still, paying gets things done." I agreed.

For technical tools, I used Tencent Meeting's (a Chinese video conferencing tool) free AI transcription for English transcripts, Capcut's (a Chinese video editing app) speech-cutting function to remove filler words, and manual error correction. Using professional services might cost hundreds or thousands of yuan. My solution was 0 yuan.

All six interviewees were post-90s and post-00s Chinese females, matching our product's target demographic. Even within this cohort, individual differences were significant. Views on carbonation, add-ins, and beauty functions all varied.

Honestly speaking, I chose paid Red Note recruitment (120 yuan) rather than contacting Australian passersby. The surface reason was that Chinese communication was deeper, but the real reason was: I didn't want to make English phone calls to strangers and didn't want to face rejection. I paid for convenience and psychological comfort.

## **Part B: Reflection**

Eight weeks ago, when I started this WIL project, my understanding of entrepreneurship theories came primarily from classroom learning. I knew about Lean Startup, Design Thinking, and Effectuation as separate frameworks.

Eight weeks later, my biggest takeaway is: **this was my first time integrating multiple theoretical frameworks within a single project.** Through conducting market validation research for Aloe Beverage, I began to understand that different stages require different theoretical tools, that theories are mutually supportive, and that real practice requires flexible navigation between frameworks.

This transition from "isolated theories" to "integrated application" enhanced my understanding of theory-practice relationships.

## **Past and Present Understanding**

Before this course, my understanding came mainly from textbooks. I knew about Lean Startup's Build-Measure-Learn cycle, Design Thinking's five stages, and Business Model Canvas. However, this knowledge was abstract. I didn't know what to do when stakeholders were unwilling to test critical assumptions, how to respond when "Get out of the building" felt uncomfortable, or how to balance when theory said "should do this" but reality said "can only do that."

Over these 8 weeks, we conducted market validation research for Aloe Beverage, an early-stage carbonated aloe beverage startup. We collected 49 survey responses (19 from a food exhibition and 30 via an agent on Taobao, a Chinese e-commerce platform, primarily

targeting post-90s and post-00s females) and I completed 6 in-depth interviews with Chinese females in the same demographic cohort. According to the course's WIL Methodology Matrix, the iLab/UQ Startup pathway reflects: Lean Startup (60%), Design Thinking (30%), and Effectuation (10%).

The shift from "I think consumers will..." to "consumers actually..." represents the core learning.

## **Learning from Practice**

Three key learnings emerged from navigating the gap between theory and reality.

### Effectuation: Resourcefulness and Affordable Loss

As documented in Diary 5, I used free or low-cost tools creatively: Red Note (a Chinese social media platform) for recruitment with remarkable efficiency (5 paid interviews in 2-3 days), Tencent Meeting (a Chinese video conferencing tool) for free AI transcription, Capcut (a Chinese video editing app) for editing, and Google Form for surveys. We repurposed consumer tools through clear framing ("university student assignment mutual aid").

This resonates with Sarasvathy's (2001) Effectuation theory: entrepreneurs start from "a set of means as given" rather than predetermined goals. I inventoried my means (international student status, familiarity with Chinese social media, access to Chinese-speaking communities, limited budget) and combined these resources creatively.

When recruiting interviewees, I paid 30 yuan per person, later discovering the market rate was 10 yuan. I overpaid by 3 times. From cost optimization perspective, this was a "mistake," but from efficiency perspective, correct. As an international student, 120 yuan (approximately 25 AUD, one meal in Australia) was within my affordable loss range, so I chose efficiency over cost minimization. This embodies Effectuation's "Affordable Loss" principle (Sarasvathy, 2001): decision-making based on "affordable loss or acceptable risk" rather than optimization. Entrepreneurship is knowing what is worth optimizing.

## Lean Startup: Evidence-Based Decision Making

In Diary 4, I documented a pivotal transformation. When confused about "how to create a Journey Map for a product that doesn't exist yet," the instructor said: "It must be based on real research data, absolutely cannot use the founder's assumptions or your imagined data."

This helped me understand the **say-do gap**: what people say and do may differ. If I ask "Would you buy this aloe beverage?" respondents might politely say "yes," but actual behavior could differ completely. This is why Lean Startup and Customer Development emphasize: don't ask hypothetical questions such as "would you buy," but observe past behavior and current pain points. As Blank and Dorf (2020) emphasize, "Get out of the building" means observing users' actual behavior. Ries's (2011) "Validated Learning" embodies this: Learn-Build-Measure from genuine market needs.

Our interview design shifted from "Would you buy it?" to "What do you drink now? Why? When did you last try a new beverage? How was that experience? Why did you try it?" Focusing on past behavior yielded more reliable insights.

We originally planned to test health versus beauty positioning using visual mockups, but due to designer material delays, we could only use text options. This made me understand that early-stage reality is often not "not knowing best practices" but resource constraints preventing execution.

## Theory-Reality Gaps in Practice

This WIL revealed two qualitatively different gaps.

The first gap is **our active choice of convenience**. One team member found an agent on Taobao (a Chinese e-commerce platform) for 38 Chinese yuan (CNY), and I chose paid recruitment via Red Note (a Chinese social media platform) (120 yuan, approximately 25 AUD) rather than contacting Australian respondents. Superficially, this aligns with Effectuation theory (Sarasvathy, 2001), but honestly, we wanted to avoid uncomfortable

things. I didn't want English phone calls to strangers or face rejection. The team formed implicit understanding: within affordable loss range, using money to buy efficiency and avoid discomfort was acceptable.

The second gap is **validation we wanted but were constrained by authority**. In Diary 3, the founder clarified product positioning regarding carbonation and pulp. We understood her vision, but these core features are critical. From Lean Startup perspective, they should be assumptions needing validation. Ries (2011) emphasizes testing fundamental hypotheses, especially riskiest assumptions. When designing the survey, we wanted to test these, but more direct questions were modified. As student consultants, we worked within the founder's set parameters, lacking authority to insist on testing. This made me understand the consultant's dilemma: respecting client vision versus recommending rigorous validation.

This experience taught me entrepreneurship requires two abilities: willingness to be uncomfortable (addressing the first gap) and courage to speak up diplomatically (addressing the second gap). I haven't become braver, but I have awareness of when I'm rationalizing avoidance or staying silent due to role limitations. This ambiguity itself is the most valuable learning.

## **Connections and Networks**

The connections I built taught me to navigate conflicting stakeholder perspectives.

Collaboration with teammates revealed we independently made pragmatic choices (one member found a Taobao agent, I used Red Note recruitment) without discussion, yet formed implicit understanding. When that member said "It's better to pay for things to get done," I agreed. This showed me team culture is implicitly formed through individual actions.

The founder clarified her vision about product features, but I believed this needed validation. This tension taught me the consultant's dilemma: balancing respect for client authority with professional recommendations. As a student, I lacked diplomatic confidence to navigate this.

The 6 interviews revealed diverse consumer perspectives, reminding me my job is capturing the full spectrum, not finding supporters. The instructor's "must be based on real data" reminder reshaped my thinking at a critical moment.

These connections taught me entrepreneurship is continuously navigating among stakeholders with different priorities, risk tolerances, and success definitions. This capability is more transferable than any specific framework.

### **Future Application and Course Suggestions**

Among all learnings, **the most significant was the mindset shift from "validating my hypothesis" to "letting data challenge my hypothesis."** This fundamental change underpins all other learnings.

This WIL changed how I approach problems. When making decisions, I will ask "What assumptions am I using? How can I validate them?" When encountering difficulties, I will ask "What resources can be used creatively?" When feeling uncomfortable, I will ask "Am I rationalizing or engaging in strategic thinking?"

I may not necessarily become an entrepreneur, but this experience taught me creative problem-solving under constraints, balancing stakeholder expectations and professional judgment, and maintaining critical thinking while executing. Most importantly, self-awareness: knowing my strengths (resourceful, analytical) and limitations (avoid discomfort).

### **Three course improvement suggestions:**

First, provide a "consultant dilemma" workshop on navigating between respecting client vision and recommending validation. Second, include budget simulation: give teams a small budget (50-100 AUD) to force real trade-offs. Third, create peer learning sessions where teams share "creative solutions" and "failures."

These suggestions aim to make WIL closer to real constraints, because "imperfect" situations are the most valuable learning.

## References

Blank, S., & Dorf, B. (2020). *Startup owner's manual: The step-by-step guide for building a great company*. K&S Ranch.

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

Sarasvathy, S. D. (2001). Causation and effectuation: Toward a theoretical shift from economic inevitability to entrepreneurial contingency. *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 243-263. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259121>