Understanding and practicing ethnography enhances entrepreneurial abilities.

Ethnography helps in the entrepreneurial discovery path, makes better marketers, facilitates brand building, creates equity and ultimately aids building something that at the end is extremely valuable to an entrepreneur – profound customer knowledge, Dr. Wendy Hein, Marketing and Consumer researcher at University of Edinburgh told in her workshop at the first parallel session.

‘Entrepreneurship is an ongoing, dynamic and a culturally situated process and hence is very difficult to teach. It can be, however, facilitated through participation. Ethnography and the ethnographic way of seeing can foster entrepreneurial discovery and also pave way for market-orientation and marketing activities’ she said. Engaging the audience into the conversation she asked them what they understood by an ethnographer, entrepreneur, entrepreneurship educator and marketer, and that the essence of her talk was to facilitate a dialogue across these disciplines so that each one understands the value of the other.

She cited the example of the airports and how each one of them had something ‘extraordinary and different’ about it to point out value of studying ethnography. ‘Ethnography helps in finding opportunities in everyday life by seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, helps us understand, grasp and interpret cultural aspect of market’ she said. ‘Ethnography is the study of culture - symbols, language, rituals, artefacts, objects, processes, values, history and structures’ she went on to explain.

‘Ethnography involves immersion to facilitate deeper understanding of the underlying cultural meanings – going native and that can only be accomplished by prolonged fieldwork, a minimum of twelve months’ she extolled. Delving deeper into the subject she explained that an ethnographer dives into his research subject to bring about a detailed and minute description of the culture from the perspective of the outsider. ‘The appropriation and reflexive awareness of the appropriation of a certain culture become aware of how do we change in a certain setting through participatory observation’. To make the point clear she went on to provide some theoretical background on importance of reflexivity –
distant yet native, study of difference and understanding what is taken for granted by others.

Going on to the practical application of ethnographic methods she explained the process of prolonged participant observation, co-creation of culture and reflexive awareness of meanings, processes, rituals, symbols and, fieldwork and research design. ‘Site selection, access, building networks and relationships, collecting data and, analysis and writing of data are the five stages of ethnography’ and entrepreneurship students should be taught to do them either through company internships or placements.

‘Choosing a natural cultural setting is an essential requirement of site selection’ she says. How does an entrepreneur select a site for ethnographic study that can help find the right application for his technology? ‘This is what she called as the first step towards ‘entrepreneurial discovery path’. The second step is to create a legitimate access and become deeply involved into being fully accepted as a member of that culture consciously building a network of informants for the next stage of data collection. ‘Data means your experiences, the appropriation and the reflexive awareness of the meanings and nuances of the culture – its symbols, rituals and processes’. She emphasised that these experiences and the transition from the peripheral to the fully accepted member is extremely crucial and hence the importance of notes, journals, recordings, interview data, pictures, films, objects and other forms of data collection. She also reminded that there are now new communities, settings, sources and formats of data like social networks and the internet that cannot be ignored. Last but not the least is the analysis of these data that can be voluminous to say the least and to arrange the jigsaw pieces to make a picture on your ethnographic map by decontextualizing in certain themes that are appropriate for you research.

Finally she tried to establish a link between Entrepreneurship, Ethnography and Marketing seeking opportunities in shared understanding. ‘Use ethnography to understand what entrepreneurship really is rather than using ethnography to become entrepreneurs. Ethnography helps in deep cultural understanding of the market - what market is, what they do, how they behave. It leads towards market orientation - experiential marketing, consumer culture theory and interpretive consumer research and a focus on narratives, consumption stories, consumer cultures and inter-subjectivities’.

Towards the close of the workshops there were some very practical questions posed to Dr. Hein. Firstly, Dr. John Mullin wanted to know as entrepreneurship educators ‘what is the thing that we should do, any recommendations’ to which she replied ‘get them out of class into their research cultures and make them take
notes’. John Murray of Scottish Enterprise wanted to know the approach on how to educate the entrepreneurs in ethnographic methods of research design and recording of data before they venture out. She responded that they needed to become an impressionist and move from passive to active participation, see things from different angles, uncover their biases and know themselves.