



Learning by failing: What we can learn from un-successful entrepreneurship education



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand why some Entrepreneurship Education (EE) initiatives in secondary schools are ineffective. Specifically, the goal of this paper is to identify mistakes, which could have been responsible for the failures and to derive some useful lessons from them. From a theoretical perspective, it reviews entrepreneurship literature in order to examine the main five constitutive elements of EE in secondary schools: what should the goals of EE be, who should attend EE, who should teach it, what should be taught and how it should be taught. From an empirical perspective, it provides descriptions of the unsuccessful EE initiatives under investigation and discusses failure by collecting the opinions of stakeholders (teachers, principals and students) involved.

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1. Problem statement and research objectives

Future generations will face a more uncertain work environment, with multiple job shifts during a career and greater prospects of becoming self-employed (Frank, Korunka, Lueger, & Mugler, 2005). We need to make them aware that while previous generations had to “find” a job, the future generations will have to “invent” a job (Friedman, 2013). Inventing a job could entail providing a job only to the “job inventor” (solo entrepreneur or self-employed) but also employing other people. For this reason, recent policy actions aimed at promoting employment (see for example documents available at the European Commission's DG for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion website) tend to join the concepts of “entrepreneurship” and “self-employment” (for a detailed review of issues in the definition and measurement of the two concepts, see Parker, 2006). In this vein, UEAPME¹ 2010 claims: “In order to promote entrepreneurship and to make the future generation aware of an orientation towards self-employment, it is of utmost importance to teach about entrepreneurship already in the primary schools”. However, what “teaching about entrepreneurship” means is still unclear. While courses broadly labeled as Entrepreneurship Education (EE) flourished in recent years, very few authors have attempted to define EE and, those who did have been caught in conflicting sides of entrepreneurship schools of thoughts. As noted by Mwasalwiba (2010), the majority of EE programs are designed as educational processes aimed at influencing attitudes and values of individuals towards entrepreneurship, either to present entrepreneurship as a possible career or to enhance an appreciation of entrepreneurs' role in the community (i.e. creating an entrepreneurial society). Coherently with these findings, it is our opinion that, to reach the

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¹ UEAPME (Union Européenne de l'Artisanat et des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises, The European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises SMEs) is the employer's organization representing the interests of European crafts, trades and SMEs at EU level. UEAPME represents over 12 million enterprises with nearly 55 million employees. It acts as an ‘agenda setter’ in the area of European policy.

goal of getting students really considering entrepreneurship and self-employment as attractive valid alternatives to paid employment or unemployment, it is useful to work along two directions. From one perspective, we have to improve how entrepreneurship is understood and perceived because it affects intentions to undertake entrepreneurial behaviors (see e.g. Autio, Keeley, Klofsten, & Ulfstedt, 1997; Fayolle, Gailly, & Lassas-Clerc, 2006; Kolvereid, 1996; Peterman & Kennedy, 2003). Moreover, we have to equip youth with wider skills in order to be able to adapt to our rapidly changing world and to generate innovative solutions (Chell & Athayde, 2009; McWilliam & Haukka, 2008). In line with UEAPME practitioners, many scholars agree that EE programs should start as early as childhood and adolescence (Chigunta, 2002; Frank et al., 2005; Hytti & O'Gorman, 2004; Lee & Wong, 2007; Raposo & do Paco, 2011). In this period, in fact, entrepreneurship drive is in development, individuals are more malleable, and career options are still open (e.g. Byrne, Willis, & Burke, 2012; Lepoutre, Van den Berghe, Tilleuil, & Crijns, 2011; Low, Yoon, Roberts, & Rounds, 2005; Van der Kuip & Verheul, 2004). Therefore it is not surprising that the European Commission (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005b, 2006, 2010) states that EE should be a core element of national primary and secondary education policies. Nevertheless, still little attention has been dedicated to measure the overall effectiveness of EE programs (see e.g. Basu & Virick, 2008; Souitaris, Zerbini, & Al-Laham, 2007; Testa, 2010; Von Graevenitz, Harhoff, & Weber, 2010). This further applies to EE in secondary and primary schools, as the literature's main focus is on EE in universities and business schools. Indeed, recent papers have focused on unsuccessful initiatives with negative or insignificant impact on participants based on a variety of outcome measures (Oosterbeek, van Praag, & Ijsselstein, 2010; Souitaris et al., 2007; Von Graevenitz et al., 2010). New data collected by this research team in the context of EE initiatives implemented in secondary schools also seem to be heading in the same direction. Although effectiveness of EE is extremely difficult to measure (European Commission, 2005b, 2006; Hytti & Kuopusjärvi, 2004), it is essential for at least two reasons. First, it provides understanding of whether or not public money is used properly and, second, it allows for improving EE by means of appropriate feedback.

For reasons mentioned above, this paper aims to understand why some EE initiatives in schools are ineffective. It is worth noting that any kind of effectiveness assessment can be done only on the basis of ex ante fixed goals which depend on the audience and which in turn influence contents and pedagogies in a complex set of cause–effect relationships (Alberti, Sciascia, & Poli, 2004). Specifically, the aim of this paper is to identify mistakes that could be responsible for EE ineffectiveness and to derive some useful lessons from them. From a theoretical perspective, it reviews entrepreneurship literature in order to examine what EE means in the context of schools. In order to reach this goal, the main EE constitutive elements have been identified: what should the goals of EE be, who should attend EE, who should teach it, how it should be taught and what should be taught. From an empirical perspective, it provides descriptions of some unsuccessful EE initiatives and discusses failure by collecting the opinions of stakeholders (teachers, principals and students) involved. The paper is divided as follows. Firstly, the research context is introduced; secondly, the theoretical background is described; thirdly, research methodology is presented; fourthly, the EE courses under investigation are described and lessons learned are discussed. The last section provides the main conclusions that can be drawn from this research.

2. Context

This study stems from a survey conducted from March 2008 to June 2009 to detect teenagers' beliefs and attitudes towards entrepreneurship in a large Italian city characterized by low propensity towards entrepreneurship and in economic decline. As already stated in the previous section, investigating such elements is extremely important because it is widely accepted in the field of entrepreneurship that how entrepreneurship is understood and perceived affects how attractive it seems and, in turn, affects behaviors (see e.g. GEM, 2010; Kolvereid & Isaksen, 2006). The theoretical framework that guided the survey stems from the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1987, 1991) according to which the intentions that precede any type of planned behavior are determined by three factors: attitude towards the behavior, subjective norm (both referring to the desirability of the behavior) and perceived behavioral control (referring to the feasibility of the behavior). Due to space limitations, it is not our intention to specifically focus on these concepts. Comprehensive discussions are available elsewhere both in general terms and related to entrepreneurship (see e.g. Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000; Shapero, 1982). More specifically, the theory has been recently applied to examine entrepreneurial intentions of secondary school students by Do Paco, Ferreira, Raposo, and Rodrigues (2011) and Do Paco, Ferreira, Raposo, Rodrigues, and Dinis (2011) and Ferreira, Raposo, Rodrigues, and Dinis (2012).

The survey sample was comprised of 1364 students from 39 secondary schools (out of a total number of 49 secondary schools in the area under investigation). The total number of questionnaires returned was 1234. Students were aged between 16 and 19 years old. The survey revealed the following:

1. Poor interest. Teenagers did not demonstrate an interest in entrepreneurship as a future career option. Only 29% of the interviewees considered entrepreneurship an option for his/her future career.
2. Luck. The majority of teenagers (89.3%) considered luck very important for entrepreneurial success and believed that forces outside one's own control determined the outcome (external locus of control).
3. Fear of failure. The majority of teenagers (78.6%) were extremely worried about failing and showed a low propensity towards risk.
4. Entrepreneurs are born. The majority of students (about 60%) believed that entrepreneurs are born rather than made.

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