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Entrepreneurship education based on the Change Laboratory

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a new model for entrepreneurship education in vocational education with students undertaking work experience. It surveys the contemporary theories of adult learning applied to entrepreneurship education, and then presents the theory of expansive learning within a Cultural Historical Activity Theory framework. The Change Laboratory, a kind of formative intervention developed within this framework and aiming to trigger expansive learning, seeks to redefine work practises through participation and dialectics among the stakeholders within the organization or at the boundaries of intersecting organizations. This model is applied to entrepreneurship education. In Italy and Australia small groups of vocational students undertaking long periods of work experience took part in Change Laboratory workshops. During the workshops the students, together with the researcher, their work tutors and teachers discussed the problems students were having at the boundary between school and work. They found shared solutions and put them into practice. In this process the students displayed entrepreneurial behaviour. The article analyzes the triggering events and the banners made during the workshops by the students in Italy and Australia as proof of expansive learning, as well reflective and transformative learning processes at the boundary.

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1. Introduction

The aims of this article are twofold. The first aim is to present a learning theory – namely expansive learning – for entrepreneurship education. The second aim is to present a possible application of the theory in vocational education and its results. The first part of the article will provide an overview of the theories of learning used when studying entrepreneurial learning, and then will consider expansive learning within a Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework. It will then outline the Change Laboratory, a formative intervention developed by Yrjo Engestrom et al. at the University of Helsinki to boost expansive learning. The second part of the article will present a possible application of the Change Laboratory for entrepreneurship education in vocational education with students undertaking work experience. Two Change Laboratory workshops were set up in two different contexts: a technical school for building surveying in Italy and a Certificate III in Childcare in Australia. The qualitative analysis of the data gathered permits tentative conclusions to be drawn about the Change Laboratory for entrepreneurship education. The article finally presents pedagogical considerations about the connective models for entrepreneurship education to prepare students not just to deal with problems and changes, but to learn how to turn them into opportunities.

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When examining entrepreneurship education, scholars have considered the learning mechanisms underpinning entrepreneurial conduct. As learning is an important element of the entrepreneurial process, "a theory of entrepreneurship requires a theory of learning" (Minniti & Bygrave, 2001, in Cope, 2005, p. 7). Since an entrepreneurial process is considered as intrinsically experiential, many scholars modify existing theories of adult learning with the aim of breaking away from static approaches. Of the most prominent sixteen contemporary theories of learning listed by Illeris (2009), only a few have been used in research to underpin entrepreneurship education. Among these contemporary theories, in their literature review Wang and Chugh (2014) identified: Mezirov's (2009) theory of transformative learning, Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning, Wenger's (1999) communities of practice, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning. For instance, the theory of transformative learning (Mezirov, 2009) is used by Cope (2005) to stress how major challenges are loaded with emotion. Cope also applies the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to study the contextual dimension of entrepreneurs and to see them as practitioners operating within multiple communities of practice.

Not surprisingly, Wang and Chugh (2014) found that experiential learning is the most widely used learning mechanism underpinning entrepreneurial learning. This is because experience is seen to be the most significant source of learning for the entrepreneur. At a policy level, for instance, within Europe 2020 the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan recommends that entrepreneurship education and training is "brought to life through practical experiential learning models and experience of real-world entrepreneurs" (European Commission, 2013, p. 6). When used by scholars in a broader sense, experiential learning means learning by doing, learning from positive or negative experiences, learning from the past, learning from participation and from the others' experiences (Wang & Chugh, 2014). Experiential approaches in a broader sense are also classified by Man (2006) as one of the three theoretical foundations for entrepreneurial learning. Entrepreneurial learning "is a process whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience" (Man, 2006, p. 310), hence making sense of one's experiences and critical reflections of important events.

In a narrow sense, experiential learning refers to Kolb's (1984) theory which draws on the theories of prominent scholars of the 20th century who gave experience a central role in their theories: Lewin, James, Jung, Dewey, Piaget, Freire. The theory is based on six assumptions shared by these scholars. According to experiential learning, people learn through two dialectically related processes of experiencing, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, and two dialectically related process of transformation, namely reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The process is conceived of as a cyclic spiral where "the subject touches all the bases, experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting" (p. 194). However, learning is considered to be an individual and internal phenomenon. In the fourth assumption, for example, it is claimed that: "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving" (p. 194). Also in the sixth assumption it is clear that the yardstick of learning is the individual: Experiential Learning Theory "proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner" (p. 194).

This theory was originally developed as a classification to support the Learning Style Inventory developed by Kolb (see Engestrom & Sannino, 2012). However, it does not explain why the sequence of four actions follow one another in the prescribed order, suggesting some rationale behind the sequence is missing (Engestrom & Sannino, 2012). Kolb's theorization is also criticized by Gosen and Washbush (2004) due to the fact that throughout the past twenty years experiential learning has been used as a kind of "postmodern fantasy", that is "a Rousseauist invitation for students to return to nature and their genuine cleverness" (in Vozikis, Solomon, Winkel, Radu Lefebvre, & Redien-Collot, 2013, p. 371). On the other hand, the theory of legitimate peripheral participation put forward by Wenger (1999) conceives of learning merely as "one way movement from incompetence to competence, with little serious analysis devoted to horizontal movement and hybridization" (Engestrom & Sannino, 2010, p. 2).

In their review on entrepreneurial learning Deakins and Wyper (2010) suggest that many authors are unsatisfied with the existing learning theories as they do not provide scholars with an adequate explanatory conceptual framework for entrepreneurial learning. For example Smith, Collins, and Hannon (2006)'s Discovering Entrepreneurship program emanates "with the frustration with the way entrepreneurship is taught in higher education institutions" (p. 556). There is a need to stimulate entrepreneurial activity by concentrating "on the role of practice as a process of learning, which in term can have a profound impact on entrepreneurial motivation and ability to recognize learning as a situated enacted process" (Higgins & Elliott, 2011, p. 358). Similarly, Mwasalwiba (2010) argues that most researchers call for innovative modules on entrepreneurship education that can be useful for learners to achieve their desired outcomes.

2. Theoretical framework

In this article a fifth contemporary theory of learning identified by Illeris (2009) is put forward, namely expansive learning. So far, only Kauppinen and Juho (2012) have utilized this theory as a conceptual framework in entrepreneurship education to demonstrate how entrepreneurial interactions between small and medium enterprises build international business opportunities. In so doing the authors display a possible means of creating internationalization.

Within CHAT, scholars argue that the types of learning challenges in organizations have dramatically changed in the last decades:

> The life cycles of entire product-, production- and business concepts are rapidly becoming shorter. There is an increasing need to meet societal needs in new ways that break away from traditional concepts and organizational

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