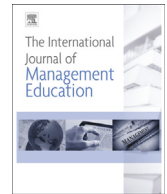


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A role for George Kelly's repertory grids in entrepreneurship education? Evidence from the French and Polish context



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ABSTRACT

This paper represents one of the few examples of cross-national research of innovative teaching approaches in entrepreneurship in Higher Education institutions (HEIs), in this case in France and Poland. The study focuses on the effectiveness of George Kelly's repertory grids, the methodological tool of Personal Construct Theory (PCT), as an innovative pedagogical tool in entrepreneurship education. The student experience and the perceived advantages and disadvantages and relevance of the tool were systematically explored in a post-course survey conducted among a similar number of postgraduate students in both countries, 60 in Poland and 55 in France. A theoretical model that connects social learning theory to Gestalt perception underpins content analysis of the qualitative data. Repertory grids are shown to have value as both a network analysis tool and for encouraging reflection. Repertory grids empower the student to be proactive in thinking about their network and as encouraging collaboration among learners. Hitherto repertory grids have been deployed as a research tool, but little is known of their value in teaching situations. This paper begins the process of establishing repertory grids as of educational as well as research value.

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1. Introduction

Aware of the economic and social significance of entrepreneurial activity, and responding to student demand, universities train entrepreneurship graduates on virtually every continent. Policymakers too are showing an increasing interest in entrepreneurial education, with a recent European report (EC, 2013) seeking to bolster activity in this area. Entrepreneurial educators are experimenting with innovative pedagogical approaches that use different ways of learning to create entrepreneurial and enterprising mindsets among a variety of student populations (see for instance Béchard & Grégoire, 2007; EC, 2013; Istance & Shadoian, 2009; Klapper & Neergaard, 2012; Robinson, 1996; Somers, Passerini, Parhankangas, & Casal, 2014; Verzat, Byrne, & Fayolle, 2009). Much of this is a response to a growing dissatisfaction among learners and educators with the traditional ways of teaching entrepreneurship in Europe and the US, namely through lectures and case studies. Yet, it also reflects an increasing recognition of the need to equip students with a mindset that is open to entrepreneurial action (Hytti & Kuopusjärvi, 2004), here in particular the entrepreneurial need to network to develop his/her start-up.

Social networking and in particular social networking services (SNS) such as Facebook.com and Twitter.com have become very popular and an integral part of every-day communication, in particular among young people. Yet, despite this interest in social networking and the well documented importance of networks for entrepreneurial start-ups (see for instance

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Johannisson 1988, 1996; Klapper 2008, 2011) we find that the entrepreneurial courses and training presently offered do not necessarily allow for an element of network analysis for start-up and career development purposes for entrepreneurship students. Indeed very rarely our Higher Education courses do teach our learners how to analyse their networks systematically, and little attention is given to promoting a critical reflection on advantages and disadvantages of networking. This article responds to Somer et al.'s (2014) call for more innovative pedagogical tools drawing on non-management disciplines to be integrated into management education. Hence this work contributes to the extant literature by offering insight into the effectiveness of an innovative network analysis tool, George Kelly's (1955) repertory grids, the methodological tool of Personal Construct Theory (PCT), in a technical University in Poland and a Grande Ecole Management School in France. This research is part of an on-going study that aims to establish a critical evaluation of different innovative pedagogy tools by different learner audiences in different contexts.

The two study countries and its HEIs were chosen for a number of reasons: a) the author had used George Kelly's repertory grids, which are the innovative pedagogical tool applied in this study, during her PhD research and had thus experienced its effectiveness for drawing out the cognitive dimension of entrepreneurial networks. After this positive experience of having worked with repertory grids in a research context she integrated these grids in the postgraduate entrepreneurial network courses at the French Grande Ecole Management where she was based at the time. The opportunity to benchmark and explore systematically the student learning with and through repertory grids in several cultural contexts arose when the author was approached to create a short course on entrepreneurship, including a session on entrepreneurial network analysis, at a Polish Technical University. The rationale for the invitation was that there was a lack of practical tools in Polish Higher Education, in particular in entrepreneurship education, and thus the integration of tools into the course curriculum was welcomed.

The student experience, the advantages and disadvantages of repertory grids as a learning tool as perceived by the learners, as well as the meaningfulness (relevance) of the tool for the learner at this stage, were systematically explored in a post-course survey conducted among a similar number of postgraduate students in both countries (60 in Poland and 55 in France). A thematic contents analysis of more than 110 qualitative questionnaires established a variety of themes, which were then compared and contrasted across the two cohorts to establish commonalities and differences.

The underlying theoretical model for the investigation is Wenger's (2009) social theory of learning, which was further developed by Klapper and Refai (2014) into a learner-focussed teaching model appropriate for entrepreneurship and enterprise. Wenger's (2009) learning theory consists of four dimensions: learning as doing; learning as experiencing; learning as becoming; and learning as belonging, which were combined with seven guiding educational design principles: Who learns what, how, why, with whom, where and when (Klapper & Refai, 2014). This theoretical model was used as an underlying theoretical framework guiding this research and will be detailed later in this article.

The findings indicate that innovative pedagogical tools that create a link between theory and practice such as the repertory grids applied in the entrepreneurial network analysis reported on this study can indeed make a significant contribution to learning. Here we treat repertory grids as innovative in that there is little to no literature on their use in teaching contexts.

This article begins with a discussion of the underlying theoretical framework and how it relates to this research. Next the author explains the research design and the method applied. This is followed by a discussion of the findings from the research, concluded by implications for education and business practitioner communities.

2. Theoretical framing

Underlying the model created by Klapper and Refai (2014) is the premise that entrepreneurial learning needs to be considered from a holistic perspective in which each dimension contributes to the others to create a sense-giving Gestalt, a concept translated as organization or configuration (Koehler, 1947; Philips & Soltis 2009). By bringing Gestalt theory and Wenger's (1998, 2009) social theory of learning together, Klapper and Refai develop a holistic way to designing entrepreneurial teaching programmes, intended to bring the learner closer to the realities of entrepreneurial practice, by raising awareness of the practice of entrepreneurial networking.

For Wenger (1998, 2009) the concept of learning consisted of four dimensions: a) learning as doing, i.e. the notion of practice; b) learning as experience, i.e. making meaning through experience; c) learning as becoming, which relates to the learner identity; and d) learning as belonging, i.e. as adhering to a community. Klapper and Refai (2014) related these four dimensions to the guiding questions of Who learns, what, why, when, how, with whom and where, in the context of entrepreneurship/enterprise education (Table 1).

Table 1

A conceptual framework of different learning styles and associated guiding design principles based on Wenger (2009), taken from Klapper and Refai (2014).

| Learning dimensions | Design principles | Represented as |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Learning as doing | What to learn? | Practice |
| Learning as experience | How to learn? | Meaning |
| Learning as becoming | Who learns why and when? | Identity |
| Learning as belonging | With whom? | Community |

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