



Ethnographic evaluation of entrepreneurship education in higher education; A methodological conceptualization



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 January 2014

Received in revised form 28 April 2014

Accepted 4 June 2014

Available online 27 June 2014

Keywords:

Entrepreneurship

Teaching

Methodology

Ethnography

Evaluation

ABSTRACT

Ethnography is a research method that seeks to gain a detailed understanding of how informants see their world and how they understand the problems that they confront in everyday life. As such it is an ideal method to both study the practices that entrepreneurship educators engage in and the discursive and cognitive shifts that learners go through as they seek a more entrepreneurial understanding. The paper suggests that the flexibility and rigorous nature of ethnography provides an appropriate tool for evaluating entrepreneurship teaching in educational institutions. Entrepreneurship is a practice that has always been of significance to economic development and is increasingly playing an important part in many aspects of 21st century life. While the discourses that surround entrepreneurship have been widely contested they have nevertheless seduced many nation states into searching for new ways to encourage and sustain economic growth. These discourses are evident in policies that use rhetoric about creating more entrepreneurs through explicitly encouraging entrepreneurial behavior by teaching entrepreneurship to students at all levels of education. The introduction of entrepreneurship education into Higher Education discourses can be traced throughout the western world over the last two decades. Whether talking about starting businesses, often the focus for American universities, or encouraging enterprising behavior, the terms used in the UK and some parts of Europe, entrepreneurship education has, using models from cognitive psychology and social cognition theories from education gradually become established as a discipline in Higher Education. As educational anthropologists we are interested in exploring the parameters of this new discipline. We propose that the nature of this discipline lends itself to ethnography as a method for discussions about how enterprising behavior is nurtured, supported and evolves into entrepreneurial practices through socially constructed communities. A close look at the practices of entrepreneurship educators in a Danish Higher Education institute stimulated an analysis of what these teachers do and say they are doing in the entrepreneurship classroom.

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1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a practice that has always been of significance to economic development and is increasingly playing an important part in many aspects of 21st century life. At the grass-roots level some of the most common statements made

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about being an entrepreneur include being able to start a business, to be one's own boss, to work with something that you are passionate about and to earn money at the same time. At another level discourses of entrepreneurship have seduced many nation states searching for new ways to encourage and sustain economic growth. These discourses are evident in policies across Europe and the western world where entrepreneurship is heralded as a public 'good'. Policies are crafted around a rhetoric about providing incentives for growing entrepreneurs and encouraging entrepreneurial behavior. These in turn have increasingly influenced our education systems. In the past two decades entrepreneurship education has taken hold in Higher Education institutions particularly in Europe (Cope, 2005). Following from Cope's (2005) argument we agree that the discourses that surround entrepreneurship education have been very different depending upon the group articulating them. The position of Entrepreneurship education, initially situated in the business faculty, has moved into the 'wet' sciences, science and technology and has spread to arts and humanities to a greater or lesser degree. This raises a number of questions about the content and aims of entrepreneurship education. What is being offered in the different units across the university? What are the goals of entrepreneurship education? What should be taught? How should it be taught? How do Higher Education institutions justify courses that encourage new business ventures alongside traditional forms of courses that qualify students for employability in established sectors? Answering these questions requires much more space than is available in this paper. Our focus here is on one particular school of thought in Entrepreneurship education and on assessment of entrepreneurship education - the methods used to measure what works and what does not. In order to do this we suggest that ethnographic evaluation provides the opportunity to understand the multiple layers of the discipline.

This paper explores the use of ethnographic evaluation in Entrepreneurship education. As such it is primarily a methods paper focusing on the benefits that ethnography can bring to entrepreneurship education, especially around understanding which pedagogies are effective in teaching students to think like entrepreneurs. For our part, as educational anthropologists, ethnography is a research method that seeks to gain a detailed understanding of how informants see their world and how they understand the problems of everyday life that they confront (Zaharlick, 1992). As such we believe it is an ideal method to both study the practices that entrepreneurship educators engage in and to examine the discursive and cognitive shifts that learners go through as they seek a more entrepreneurial understanding.

While most ethnographers support the idea that ethnography is one of the very few research techniques that allow a researcher to first hand share a set of problems that informants have and to have a direct sense of how those informants make sense of their worlds, there are often a number of questions that those outside of ethnography have about its validity and reliability. Herzfeld (1997), for instance, has put forth the notion of cultural intimacy as one way to talk about the way that longer-term involvement in a community can produce an interesting form of validity even though the number of subjects an ethnographer works with are small. For Herzfeld, "cultural intimacy" are ideas that are central to a nation's identity but that might be a bit embarrassing to share with outsiders and so tend to remain very private Herzfeld (1997: 3). While Herzfeld is specifically speaking about nationhood, this principle is useful with other aspects of culture. People share intimate knowledge that binds them together and ethnography is one of the few ways to get at this kind of knowledge. It is this kind of knowledge that we suggest is an important part of the production of a community of practice around entrepreneurship.

In order to illustrate how we see ethnography being a benefit to entrepreneurship education, we reflect here on some of the data we have gathered through conversations with and observations of teachers of entrepreneurship in a Danish Higher Education institute. There were two main themes of conversation. One arose from discussions about how individuals shape their everyday practices and create new meaning. The second focused on how individual enterprising behavior is nurtured, supported and how this in turn evolves into socially constructed entrepreneurial practices. We found the Danish model of entrepreneurship to be a very interesting one, and its conception allows for the focus on pedagogical goals for entrepreneurship education. In this model the teachers focus on entrepreneurship as an everyday practice, which in turn means nurturing enterprising behavior. These interlinked foci of the definition of entrepreneurship combined with the focus on education being grounded in an individual's life, lends itself to ethnography which is about the way in which individuals 'make sense of the world'. Ethnography is therefore useful as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the pedagogy and what is going on in the student teacher interaction.

2. Macro structural framing of discourses of entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is one of those terms that has become, to use the words of the British anthropologist, Turner (1967, 1969), a multi-vocal symbol. It is used by policy makers, in different nation-states, who have different agendas that they seek to advance. At the policy level, entrepreneurship is generally code for motivating economic growth through neoliberal economic policies. According to Gershon (2011), one of the interesting things about neoliberal ideology is there is no concept of scale. Social actors are all of the same weight and size whether they are individuals or companies or nation-states. In this way individuals, small companies and major corporations can all contribute to their nation's economic growth through free market activity supported by deregulation.

Of course in different nation-states, this process is imagined differently. In many former welfare-states, they are seeking to "marketize" many of their social institutions such as education and healthcare. The United States has already deregulated so much of its activity, pushing its economic agenda in different parts of the world and seeking always to find new markets in untapped social arenas. China and some other Asian nations are practicing some interesting forms of state capitalism where the state helps discipline workers for the neoliberal agendas of domestic and international companies (Ong, 2006).

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