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# Developing an evolutionary/ecological approach in enterprise education



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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ecological/evolutionary approach to enterprise education. Ecological approaches are used at the University of Tasmania to heighten the awareness of students to a raft of difficult to observe environmental factors associated with developing enterprising ideas. At Sheffield University, the discovery and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities is viewed as a co-evolving system of emerging business ideas, and routines/heuristics respectively. It is argued that using both approaches enables students to develop a greater awareness of their situated environment, and ultimately the degree of fit between their learning process and a changing external world. The authors argue that in order to improve the chances of longer-term survival what is needed is a new level of organisation where the individual is capable of developing a representation of the external world that he or she can use to sense the appropriateness of local decisions. This reinterpretation of events allows individuals to step back and examine the broader consequences of their actions through the interpretation and anticipation of feedback from the environment. These approaches thus seek to develop practice-based heuristics which individuals can use to make sense of their lived experiences, as they learn to evolve in an increasingly complex world.

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## 1. Introduction

As we advance into the 21st century, organisations and communities today face an increasingly turbulent environment, with major socio-economic, financial and political shocks disrupting the status quo (Tidd & Bessant, 2011). Never have issues of adaptation and learning become more salient for Business & Management students in the face of such challenges. Lessons however can be learnt from the living world around us. One hundred and fifty years after Darwin wrote his seminal book on the Origin of Species, science has shown how nature's survivors learn to adapt to the tumultuous changes in earth's history, with some microscopic organisms adapting to change over the millennia. More recently a group of social scientists have been searching for clues in this evolutionary story, with a view towards understanding the wider 'evolution' of culture, politics, technology and more recently organisations (Aldrich et al., 2008). In light of the need for all organisations to learn to adapt in the face of such socio-economic and political challenges, an evolutionary language is emerging which offers entrepreneurs the opportunity to draw from nature's survivors. In this paper a practice-based language is presented as a key development in

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enterprise education, as students face the challenge of dealing with the complexity of sustainable future worlds (Breslin, 2014).

The role expected of enterprise education globally increasingly seems directly related to increasing economic prosperity (O'Connor, 2013). In this paper the authors step back to consider what should be expected from enterprise education, and conclude that the outcomes of enterprise education should be measured at the level of the student, not the economy. The long-running mantra is that enterprise education should be not merely *about* entrepreneurship, but primarily *for* and *through* entrepreneurship (Gibb, 2002). The authors concur with this sentiment, and see enterprise education as a process of preparing individuals for future entrepreneurial behaviour, consistent with recent policy work in this area (QAA, 2012). Thus, the authors see enterprise education as a transformational process through which students develop skills *for* tomorrow *through* engagement with practice-based curriculums today (see Neck, Greene, & Brush, 2014). While the words *enterprise* and *entrepreneurship* are used throughout interchangeably, it is acknowledged that there are differences educationally in their application. Therefore, the authors take the student as our primary subject of consideration, arguing that through the use of practice-based curriculums fashioned around the principles of evolutionary and ecological ideas, the process of student transformation is achievable. The authors care less for being accountable for how many new businesses might actually be created from any particular cohort. The central focus is upon how evolutionary and ecological approaches impact the development of new thinking and behaviours required to act entrepreneurially in society. It will be demonstrated that such approaches enable students to become more attuned to the nature and process of change occurring around them, a pre-condition the authors see as fundamental to being entrepreneurially active.

It is argued that a key characteristic of entrepreneurial behaviour is the individual's awareness of the world around them and their ability to adapt to fit within that changing world (Breslin & Jones, 2012). After all entrepreneurs are alert to new opportunities (Gaglio & Katz, 2001; Kaish & Gilad, 1991; Kirzner, 1997), and are unique in the sense that they interpret and internalise feedback received from the external environment (Rotter, 1966). Through these characteristics entrepreneurs develop business ideas, skills and heuristics to meet the changing needs of an external world. In this paper the authors argue that adopting an ecological/evolutionary approach prompts students to develop this external focus, as they consider the wider implications of their actions. Reinterpreting the emergence and development of habits of thought and business ideas as an evolutionary system forces students to take a step back, and consider the embeddedness of that system in the wider socio-economic world. In a sense, adopting an ecological/evolutionary approach allows students to develop entrepreneurial heuristics as they continually consider the evolutionary fit between internal processes of learning and the changing dynamics of the external world. Such an approach to enterprise education thus focuses on developing practice-based heuristics which individuals can use to make sense of their lived experiences (Weick, 1979). So rather than imparting prescriptive knowledge or checklists, the authors argue that individuals can learn to evolve (Breslin & Jones, 2012).

This has implications not just for the creation of new ventures, but also for the ability of all individuals to adapt and manage the challenges of an increasingly complex world. This paper thus seeks to make a contribution not only to enterprise education, but also to our understanding of learning and adaptation in the context of fast-moving environments. The paper is therefore structured as follows. First an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of both approaches is put forward. This is then followed by a detailed account of how the ecological and evolutionary approaches have been implemented at the universities of Tasmania and Sheffield respectively. In these accounts the authors outline the process through which learning occurs, and its impact on student behaviours. Finally a discussion section addresses the key implications of the approaches taken for our understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour.

## 2. Locating the impact of entrepreneurship education

The authors contend that students of entrepreneurship should be highly reflective learners, who are capable of discerning between assumptions and known (or experienced) facts. Although past research has identified the importance of developing social and human capital (Aldrich & Martinez, 2001; Mueller, van Stel, & Storey, 2008), a slightly different approach is taken here. If educators accept that students will arrive before us with different levels of social and human capital (see Athayde, 2012) due to the heterogeneity of their individual life histories, then our focus should perhaps be elsewhere. As the call for more experiential learning in our field intensifies (Mason & Arshed, 2013), the authors call for the need to identify a type of learner we aim to create. For example, Jones (2011) identifies his objective as creating a reasonable adventurer, a graduate capable of creating his or her opportunities for satisfaction. This reasonable adventurer isn't some passive subject of external environmental selection forces, but an active adaptive being capable of creating their own world of opportunities. Such an approach provides the educator with a specific outcome to aspire to. It also enables clear learning outcomes to be set, and constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003) learning activities to be developed.

Given that we cannot know what thoughts may occupy our students minds in years to come, it is vital that we ensure that our students have the opportunity to develop the capacity to make sense of their dreams relative to the environments those dreams may occur in. In the spirit of Cranton (1994), the authors believe in developing an emancipatory form of learning, or a process of freeing our students from the forces that may limit their options due to overconfidence and/or ignorance. For us, the impact of enterprise education should be associated with the development of higher-order thinking related to opportunity recognition and sense-making. In the cases that follow, this higher-order thinking is represented by evolutionary heuristics that students develop and use to interpret the worlds around them. To further illustrate this point, the authors present narratives outlining two approaches adopted in enterprise education at the Universities of Tasmania and Sheffield, in

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