Understanding the entrepreneurial learning process and its impact on students' personal development: A European perspective

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ABSTRACT

Based on what we know about the multiplex nature of entrepreneurship, we argue that entrepreneurship is a difficult topic to teach. One response has been a shift to constructionist perspectives where learning is seen as an active process of constructing rather than merely acquiring knowledge. We wonder how is it possible for students, lacking much professional experience, to 'construct' useful entrepreneurial knowledge? We address this question by analysing the learning experiences of 54 students and 19 lecturers in different European Entrepreneurship education programs.

The study explores the nature and processes of entrepreneurial learning in the university context. It provides understanding of how learners — across cultures and educational backgrounds — engage in the learning process. We identify three personal qualities, which constitute this process: a multi-dimensional sense of responsibility, independent ways of thinking, and the ability to connect to ones own and other peoples' needs. We identified the particular dynamics in which these qualities interact and develop and conclude with suggestions on how education may stimulate this process.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the nature and processes of entrepreneurial learning and teaching in the university context. We argue that entrepreneurial education is more complex than other business topics. In part, this is because of the multiplex nature of what we know about entrepreneurship, such that the content and processes elude a simple pedagogy (Gorman, Hanlon, & King, 1997). Defining entrepreneurship embraces behaviours, attributes and skills exhibited at all organisational levels and contexts (Gibb, 2005). Also Solomon (2007) argues that mastering the entrepreneurial process requires myriad talents, skills and knowledge. Furthermore, the issue of *what* we teach as entrepreneurship is also manifest in how we can, and how we should teach entrepreneurship (Blenker, Dreisler, Færgeman, & Kjeldsen, 2006). Hereby, constructivist learning theories provide solutions. Those perceive learning as a self-responsible process of the learner who is actively constructing knowledge (Kyrö, 2005; Loebler, 2006) as opposed to positivist approaches that are based on the premise that knowledge itself is objective and can be acquired (Bodner, 1986).

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However, if learning is considered to be a process of knowledge construction based on individual experience, we are asking how students who do not possess entrepreneurship experience yet can construct useful entrepreneurial knowledge? How do they learn to be enterprising?

To address this question, we begin by examining the problems associated with enterprise education in universities. We are interested in how the issues surrounding the multifaceted and complex nature of entrepreneurship have been addressed, and how this compares with the typical experiential learning of the entrepreneurial practitioner (Krueger, 2007). We contextualise the issue in the university's role as creators and disseminators of higher level knowledge. We next turn to consider constructivism, elaborating on how its philosophical and theoretical roots have led to quite radical, but seemingly convincing, perspectives about learning for enterprise. Our review of the problematic leads to our empirical work where we ask, how do entrepreneurial students engage in the learning process? We address this question by collecting and analysing the individual learning experiences of 54 students and 19 lecturers from four international entrepreneurship education programs held in Denmark, Finland, France and Germany. The Methodology Section introduces principles of the qualitative research approach and provides details on the sample. We then present the key results of the study and discuss these findings from a social constructivist perspective. We conclude that social constructivism provides a good explanation of entrepreneurial learning processes in a university context. However, learning processes of students are different from those of entrepreneurs and are not based on entrepreneurship practice in the first place. Based on the research results, we frame a model of the entrepreneurial learning process of university students and make suggestions on how to design an engaging learning environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. The problematic nature of entrepreneurship in entrepreneurial education

It is now generally accepted that the nature of entrepreneurship, especially its complexity, variability and contingency, makes it a difficult topic to teach (Gibb, 2002). It is furthermore characterised by extraordinary uncertainty and ambiguity (Shepherd & Douglas, 1997). Moreover, Johannisson (2002) showed how entrepreneurship is associated with anomalies and irrationality. As he comments, entrepreneurial venturing is reflected in the multiple social constructions in which individual and collective forces interplay. These constructs, our understandings of the entrepreneurial phenomenon, are complex and represent a synthesis of the entrepreneurial self and circumstance (Anderson, 2000; Welter & Smallbone, 2011). Neck and Greene (2011) propose that entrepreneurship education has to reach beyond the "known world" and deal with the uncertainties and contingencies that will arise in the unknown. Indeed, Jack and Anderson (1999) described this as the art and science of entrepreneurship education, whilst Béchard and Grégoire (2005) and Fayolle and Gailly (2008) see both craft and science. Baumol (1983, p.30) puts this issue very well, "How can we analyse and teach acts whose nature is not yet known and whose effectiveness relies to a considerable degree on the difficulties others have in foreseeing it?" An increasing number of authors suggest to refrain from predictive and exclusively goal-oriented approaches to understanding and preparing for entrepreneurship but to focus on presently available means to co-create value and thus shape future developments (Read, Dew, Sarasvathy, & Wiltbank, 2009; Sarasvathy, 2008; Sarasvathy & Venkataramen, 2011). Also Fayolle and Toutain (2009, pp. 20–26) depict the entrepreneur as 'tinkerer' coping creatively and flexibly with complex situations.

When we speak about entrepreneurship, we usually mean the process of becoming, thinking, planning, conspiring, and doing the things that lead to entrepreneurship as well as the skills necessary to enact these practices (Pyysiäinen, Anderson, McElwee, & Vesala, 2006). Thus it seems that entrepreneurship is a performance of the *process* of becoming an entrepreneur (Anderson, 2005). Moreover, given the strength of the evidence of how entrepreneurship involves networked individuals and the networking of individuals, it seems difficult to conceive of entrepreneurship as the isolated act of an individual (Drakopoulou-Dodd & Anderson, 2007; Fletcher, 2006). Minniti (2003) suggests we must include the milieu that supports, drives, produces and receives the entrepreneurial process. Indeed, Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) argue that entrepreneurship is as much a social as an economic phenomenon.

2.2. The problematic nature of entrepreneurship education and learning

It seems then that what we know of as entrepreneurship, and what we desire to teach, is a multifaceted phenomenon, sometimes co-created (Jack, Drakopoulou-Dodd, & Anderson, 2004) but always socially enacted (Taylor & Thorpe, 2004) and in multiple ways. Henry, Hill, and Leitch (2005), reflecting on Fiet's (2000) classic question about whether entrepreneurship can actually be taught, point out a prior issue, that it is not yet entirely clear what we should be teaching. Indeed, Saranda and Scott-Kemmis (2010) argue whilst there has been progress in recent years, it is widely acknowledged (Corbett, 2005; Harrison & Leitch, 2005; Politis, 2005) that much remains to be understood about the processes of entrepreneurial learning. Cope (2005, p. 379) too insisted, "a better theoretical grasp of entrepreneurial learning is imperative".

Anderson (2011) argues that universities fulfil a unique role as creators and disseminators of higher-level knowledge, which cannot be assimilated by everyday experience. Critical ability is the remit and purpose of universities and is founded on higher order skills. Izquierdo (2008) suggests that these are needed for enterprise because higher order thinking often yields multiple rather than unique solutions and it involves uncertainty as not everything that bears on the task at hand is known. Rae (2005) argues for what he calls practical theory; which emerges from the implicit, intuitive, tacit and situated resource of practice.