Special focus: Towards entrepreneurship learning practices – thoughts and insights

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The field of entrepreneurial learning and education has adopted a strong positivist-based tradition in its epistemological perspective. The positivist approach seeks to codify objective knowledge by breaking it up into constituent parts and then delivering these elements through dietetic teaching methods. As a result, entrepreneurial learning and education tends to be broken into stages or categories which develop separate conceptual ideas. Resonating with Taylor’s functions of management, the essence of this approach, by studying the various stages of entrepreneurial development in a rational sequenced manner, is that it enables one to learn the process, to know what it means to be an entrepreneur and thus to become one. The underlying assumption is that by ‘doing’ or completing these stages through formal directed input, one becomes more effective as an entrepreneur. In terms of learning, the educator makes clear what it is the entrepreneur needs to know. The transfer of this knowledge in higher education is both objective and disembodied, often supported through the use of a structured syllabus, lecture notes and case-based material. The outcome in universities and similar contexts, however, is that the entrepreneurship students are sheltered and are not exposed to ‘real-life’ practice; they do not experience what it means to be a practising entrepreneur. Such approaches have met with frequent criticism, suggesting that entrepreneurs educated in this manner tend to be overly analytical, short-term oriented, technical and uninterested in continuous learning through practice (Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005).

On these grounds it is not surprising that entrepreneurship education and learning as a field has attracted substantial interest among researchers, academics and educators (Kolvereid and Moen, 1997; Matlay and Carey, 2007; Seikkula-Leino et al., 2010; Sequieira et al., 2006; Solomon, 2007). The field has witnessed numerous theoretical developments concerning how we should educate entrepreneurs, but none of them has been widely approved or accepted by academic society (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008; Gibb, 1993; Krueger and Carsrud, 1993; Kuratko, 2005). Through current research findings we know there are a variety of differing factors and mechanisms that influence practice-based entrepreneurship education and learning, but our knowledge in that field is fragmented and limited at best.

To advance our appreciation and understanding of what it means to educate, more attention must be directed towards the nature and practice of entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon. Current research is focused on viewing entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning as linear phenomena which can be described through the establishment of casual relations. Consequently, directed by this research, how we educate is through descriptive processes, and these fail to help us to create an understanding of why, where and how entrepreneurs enact their practice. Entrepreneurship education and learning, therefore, are not just pedagogical issues in terms of the methods we use to teach but ontological and epistemological issues in terms of how we conceptualize social behaviour and action.

There have been recent arguments that entrepreneurial learning and education studies need to explore the idea of practice through an enactment of bricolage and improvisation, through ‘on-the-job’ practice and ‘real-life’ experience (Anderson et al., 2010; Keating et al., 2013; Chalmers and Shaw, 2015). In this mode, entrepreneurial learning is more practice-based, without an established structure, relying instead on interpretation and instinct. Watson (2013) and Johannisson (2011) draw our attention to the significance of social practice theory as a means of decoding the processual nature of entrepreneurial practice. Social practice theory seeks to explore the sociological relationship between human agents and their social realities. Research in the social field has focused on how actions emerge in complex settings (Orr, 1996). In the entrepreneurship field, practice might be used to focus on the subjective nature of the relationships between the entrepreneur and the actual practices of organizing and enacting (Whittington, 2006). To better understand the ‘how’ rather than the ‘what’ in human action, a theory of practice brings numerous insights into how we construct, enact and make sense of social action. In the context of the entrepreneur, to practise represents a multitude of ways of doing – for example, buying, selling, negotiating, investigating and exploring opportunities.

In this sense, we position entrepreneurship in an ontological position of ‘becoming’ (entrepreneuring) rather than simply ‘being’, as a way of transcending how we view and appreciate the relationality of the entrepreneur’s patterns of interacting and enactment. Fletcher (2006) suggests that social, cultural and historical experiences heavily influence and shape the entrepreneur’s practice. Johnannisson (2011) similarly emphasizes the orientation of the entrepreneur, drawing his discussion towards the processual nature of the social enactment of becoming. Entrepreneurs tend to speak in rather practical terms, using very informal and taken-for-granted ways of making sense of their activities; they develop their sense-making in responsive and practical ways. Entrepreneurs do not exist in a vacuum devoid of emotion or social feeling: factors and emotions such as social tensions, joy, guilt and even helplessness are part of the entrepreneur’s life. These issues are not addressed in conventional approaches, which favour more objective, factual or functionalist views.

Through this Special Focus, which forms a sequel to the Special Issue published in the December 2018 of *Industry and Higher Education* (Higgins et al., 2018), we seek to develop space for educators, scholars and practitioners alike to consider the main issues affecting their own experience of learning and entrepreneurship . Through the articles presented in this Special Focus, as Editors we call on the field to think critically and reflexively about our practice as a means of aiding and developing collective awareness of what are philosophically informative pedagogical practices and approaches to entrepreneurial education We invite the reader to consider how a focus on what we can see and do (research methods, teaching programmes, course design, pedagogy) might obscure the important but crucial elements of practice (what we believe and feel). Hannon (2005, p106) suggested that the ‘purpose and aspirations for entrepreneurship education are driven by many contrasting and perhaps conflicting beliefs emanating from some core, deeply rooted philosophical assumptions’. The papers included in this Special Focus provide fertile ground for exploring some of these assumptions.

In the first paper, ‘Strategizing in the micro firm: A “strategy as practice” framework’, Arthur Kearney, Denis Harrington and Felicity Kelliher expose the lack of suitability of traditional approaches to strategizing – and teaching strategy. The authors note the lack of depth of investigation into the strategies and strategizing of micro firms as a specific type of business. To date, education and training in business and entrepreneurship have focused on traditional approaches to strategizing without taking account of the specific micro context. The authors find, however, that the micro firm context itself influences how strategies are developed and operationalized. Kearney et al. therefore propose a framework for strategizing for the micro-firm, and recommend its applicability and potential utility to teaching and learning for those creating and operating micro firms.

With a similar central message of entrepreneurship as a special type of business activity, in ‘The beneficial differentiation within entrepreneurship of self-employed, business owner and entrepreneur’, Annemarie Østergaard explores the different ways individuals venture. By investigating personality factors that might help to explain why some people seek self-employment and others seek business creation and development, three distinct types are suggested – the self-employed, the business owner and the entrepreneur. The implications for teaching and learning are substantial, and Østergaard advocates that training, education, development and other support must take account of the different perspectives, ambitions and approaches so as to enable and facilitate business success, as defined reflexively by the venturer in context.

The two remaining papers each explore specific contexts for entrepreneurial learning and education: the high-tech small firm, and an unstable, developing economy. These two very distinct examples illustrate how entrepreneurial development is contributory at individual, firm and economic levels. In each case, though, there are very different implications for entrepreneurship education – again, with the central message that flexibility and openness to the value of learning through experience and in context have developmental utility.

In ‘Entrepreneurial learning in practice: The impact of knowledge transfer’ by Stephanie Cowdean, Philip Whitby, Laura Bradley and Pauric McGowan, the specific context of high-tech small firms is explored. Using two case study examples of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships that are facilitating links and knowledge exchange between firms and universities, the authors report an in-depth study of the learning process. They find that one barrier to learning is created by established wisdom and practice, and that ‘on-the-job’ learning is transferred more readily and usefully to the firms. The implications for education and development are the need for openness to emergent learning experiences and knowledge, flexibility of approach, and the support of practice.

In the final paper, ‘Entrepreneurship education as human capital: Implications for youth self-employment and conflict mitigation in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Paschal Anosike points out the concentration of studies in the developed nations. Providing an alternative perspective, this paper focuses on entrepreneurship education in the unstable region of northern Nigeria. The paper explores secondary education in particular and the focus of the empirical work seeks to determine if entrepreneurship among young people might mitigate adversity created by conflict and reduce direct engagement with it. Anosike asserts that entrepreneurship has a positive role to play and recommends entrepreneurship education as a means by which human capital might be developed in the direction of entrepreneurial endeavour. The implications are wide-ranging and apply also to universities, as higher education might similarly contribute to this agenda.

To summarize, entrepreneurship as a field of study has been dominated by functional- based disciplines that have sought to channel our conceptualizations of what it means to be an entrepreneur according to a narrow set of epistemological and ontological principles. Positioning practice as a process of human engagement which is emergent and enacted has enormous potential to reinvent how we recognize entrepreneurial action.

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