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**Moving forward by looking inwards: The need for reflexive awareness in the entrepreneurship educator’s classroom**

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**March 2019.** I have finally made it onto my flight. The morning was busy, filled with last-minute packing, ensuri*ng that I had all the material for my annual visit to a university in the south of France. As I sit in my assigned seat I have a sense of readiness tempered with apprehension; it is 12 months since I last taught a class. As I gaze out of the plane window, the crisp March morning sun glistens on the wing and the contrasting colours of a new day stir my thoughts. I wonder what the week ahead will be like, how the students will react to what I have planned – will they be filled with the sense of curiosity and playfulness that I hope my new teaching approach will convey? I have never before attempted to* engage is a style of teaching that is so practical and far from normal business school expectations. I worry that the students could find the participatory approach overwhelming*? I am actually more nervous thinking about the week ahead than I am about the flight. I tell myself to believe in what I have prepared, to trust in the values of what I am trying to achieve with the approach I am using to deliver a one week module on Entrepreneurship. The approach is a dialogical method using art-based dramaturgical storytelling. As the plane doors close and we begin to move, I realize that I am nervous not just because there is no turning back now (the plans are made, the notes prepared – it’s all or nothing) but also because of the closeness I now feel to this teaching method, which is firmly aligned with what I believe learning to be – a “lived experience”. I want this coming week to be a lived experience through which the students’ and the educator’s emotions, values and assumptions become the very foundation of learning. The realization that I am finally going to try a teaching practice that I have been discovering and developing over the past eleven months is both exciting and terrifying. This is something I will be judged on, so what if it does not have the impact I feel it could have? What will I do, how will I feel, not just about myself but more importantly about the students? I don’t want to let the students down: I don’t want to ruin their learning experience.*

*This is typical me: I always think of the negative before the positive, always question what I am doing and why I am doing it. Bringing emotion and personal experience into the classroom to expose weaknesses, vulnerabilities and provoke questions about what we know as a collective community of learners, in a safe and secure manner, has been part of my experience as an educator, experience that has shaped me as a scholar, who I am and what I stand for, and that determines the kind of educator I want to become.*

*This week ahead is not just going to be an experience: it is going to define my scholarly identity and what I will write about in the coming years. The need to pay attention to how I grow and develop in and through my teaching practices reflects for me the need for educators to share their thoughts, weaknesses and vulnerabilities so that they can become more skilful in a profession in which their experiences and practices shape the scholars they become. As the plane soars into the sky and I head towards the moment of truth, I contemplate these issues of practice and identity and wonder again if I am good enough to be the educator I want to be.*

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The choices we make about the teaching methods and research we undertake are not simply intellectual; rather, they are intricately interwoven with who we are, are developed through our relationships with others and have consequences for our identities and aspirations. Some of these consequences directly influence our ability to write honestly about ourselves and what we do – to undertake, in another words, an auto-ethnographic exploration which can expose vulnerabilities that, paradoxically, become a source of energy and inspiration and that otherwise may remain hidden in the shadows.

These choices are political in the sense that there is increasing pressure to conform to the ever-narrowing constraints of journal ranking lists such as those of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) and the research conventions of the discipline. Learning and teaching are two different things, and the opportunities to be imaginative and to write differently are diminishing. Choices are made for us (‘That’s not how you teach; this is the way we teach here’; ‘That’s not where you publish; this is where we expect you to publish’).

Teaching-focused research is not always given the recognition it deserves in the world of entrepreneurship education, but sometimes the best choices are those that reflect what we value and believe to be right whether or not that is recognized by our peers. We all have moments in our scholarly endeavours when we begin to think about something in a different way. As I sat on that plane bound for France, I was thinking about what might happen and, while the thoughts and ideas I was reflecting on were not new to me, the way I was beginning to think about them *was* new:. How we view ourselves as academics has become a topic of increasing interest for me – not just simply in terms of how academics develop as educators, but more importantly what teaching methods they employ and how those methods contribute, shape and influence approaches to learning and the learning experiences in the classroom. As I sat on the plane, I thought about all the academics I knew working in universities throughout the UK and elsewhere in Europe. While being a “teacher” is part of the job, it is a task to which some aspire and for which some have not been educated. The obligations that come with the practice of teaching are part and parcel of our academic positions, which are, however, acquired primarily on the basis of research competence and performance.

Research-intensive higher education environments have the capacity to facilitate the development of highly competent researchers, but their identity as educators may remain underdeveloped. How we develop as academics, specifically as educators, in the present higher education climate can seem confused?. In the context of entrepreneurship education, what constitutes good teaching practice and what is expected of the entrepreneurship educator? While being an educator is only one part of our academic identity, there is increasing demand for academics to become “good” teachers, not least in entrepreneurship education which requires a high level of interactive engagement. Universities throughout the world offer instructional courses that are intended to support the pedagogical development of staff, but in many cases these courses are simply tick-box exercises. There is a need for sustained pedagogical initiatives which create space for academics to openly explore and share their classroom practices and experiences – whether good or not so good. Such initiatives are vital to facilitate change and embed innovative methods of developing teaching competencies as well as scholarly identity ([Coffey and Gibbs, 2000](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191491X15000048#bib0025), [Gibbs and Coffey, 2004](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191491X15000048#bib0045); Rideout, E. C., & Gray, D. O. 2013).

This special issue was initiated for several reasons. First, there is a need to recognize and understand different styles of teaching and engagement which influence what is thought of as valid knowledge and therefore what is taught, what is learned and how learning takes place. In the current literature on entrepreneurship education supposedly “scientific” norms continue to govern what is considered worthy of study and how those accepted areas of interest are delivered to the student body. Such norms in teaching can inhibit our own inclinations as educators and how we engage with our own knowledge, understanding and learning in the classroom. In developing this special issue, we wanted to offer contributors room to breathe and to pay attention to issues of identity and the scholarship of teaching (Vorley, & Williams, 2016). The core aim was to produce an issue that would deepen understanding of the entrepreneurship educators classroom, by questioning and examining assumptions, practices and experiences, so as to create new insight about what is happening at that human level. Broadening our understanding of “teaching practice” would be part of this. The act of teaching is a performance that has the capacity to inspire, nurture, develop and create: understanding that capacity and what brings a classroom to life, enabling learning to become a valuable social experience, must be a critical point of discussion.

To ask a poststructuralist question, what would happen if entrepreneurship education were less concerned with normalizing sets of “best practice” for teaching and learning and more focused on offering discursive approaches, creating space for representing the distinctive qualities of one’s own experience of learning in one’s teaching?

Research that seeks to account for how we teach and the methods used in the entrepreneurship classroom has remained a silent voice. We know relatively little about what happens in the entrepreneurship classroom, what teaching methods educators employ, what assumptions underpin those methods, how those methods play out in practive - in the moment, between people and in very different contexts - and how they contribute to what is learned and achieved (or not) by the entrepreneurship student. (Nabi, Liñán, Fayolle, Krueger, & Walmsley, 2017). The educator’s classroom remains a private place in relation to the entrepreneurship education literature, and yet the classroom is the very locus of “action”, where relationships with students as a learning community are developed, where the curricula and teaching plans are actually enacted. Although entrepreneurship academics may spend a sizeable portion of their working lives in the classroom, their writing is usually directed to subjects outside the classroom (Westhead & Solesvik, 2015). This special issue Has sought to start to redress the balance : what is it we actually do, as educators, in the classroom; what methods and technques do we employ and why – what is the underpinning rationale? Redressing the balance by directing more attention towards the “scholarship” of teaching has important implications for how students understand and explore what it means To be an entrepreneur, or to think entrepreneurially.. Examining how learning is made possible through the application of educational theory to the practice of teaching becomes, therefore, an important topic for scholarly debate.

A scholarly community that is serious about developing and crafting its practice must be constantly mindful of the need to question its own assumptions and beliefs. Developing a scholarship that seeks to foster innovative inquiry is essential for any research field (Newbold *et al.,* 2014). Among the most important contributing factors in the expansion of our knowledge are the questions we ask, and the way we ask them. At the most basic level these questions demand careful consideration of the relevance and application of existing knowledge by opening the way for new insight and debate, and so for the introduction of different perspectives on how we practise in the field of action learning.

In this context the role of our own attentiveness – what it means to be reflexively aware – concerning our practice in the entrepreneurship educator’s classroom, is crucial. Thoughtful inquiry requires questioning of the relationship between our role as educators, how we interact with our students and the theories and concepts with which we work. Through such analysis we can develop an understanding of how our assumptions influence what we say and do, and of how others respond, while at the same time discovering what is left unsaid or unasked. In summary, we need to:

* question our assumptions about who we are and what is it that we want to achieve;
* develop a deeper understanding of our relationship with our social environment and its dynamic and changing nature.

Such fundamental questioning and analysis poses challenges, as it involves exploring deeply rooted beliefs and epistemological factors and interrogating conceptual, practical and philosophical contradictions within the entrepreneuship educator’s classroom (Fayolle, 2013; Pittaway and Cope, 2007).

How well we educate and develop students through these programmes depends on our abilities as educators and our approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom. What educators do in the classroom, and the rationales behind their teaching practices have not yet been studied to any great degree (Fayolle et al., 2016; Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020). We hope that this special issue will become a foundational work of reference for the further development of a scholarship of teaching practice for entrepreneurship educators.

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