Editorial: Entrepreneurial learning: a situated and contextual process

Introduction

There has been a growing interest in entrepreneurial learning over the last three decades, and the focus has shifted from an understanding of entrepreneurship as a specific set of skills and traits that define an entrepreneur to an understanding of how entrepreneurs develop both themselves and their business simultaneously. In other words, scholars are paying attention to entrepreneurship learning as a practical accomplishment. The focus has shifted from the process of cognitive learning, towards recognising that *doing* entrepreneurship, or entrepreneuring, is itself a learning activity (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001). This change in focus means that the situated, contextual and social aspects of learning are brought to the fore. This in turn has implications for how we understand the process of entrepreneurship education and what is necessary in terms of policy and practical support for new and growing businesses. Given this changing understanding, the aim in this special section of papers is to explore implications of a practice-based view on our understanding of entrepreneurial learning. The papers included in this section of the journal (which are described further below) attend to the process of supporting the learning of potential entrepreneurs during formal entrepreneurship education and reflect on the nature of learning they engage in during their day-to-day practice of entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial learning through practice

When explaining this learning process, scholars have turned to several perspectives to understand the situatedness of practice, such as practice theory (Schatzki, 2001), situated learning theory (Gherardi, 2000), activity theory (Engeström, 1987) and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In doing so, research in the situated practice of entrepreneurs has explored the way in which entrepreneurs negotiate and embed new practices in their firms and indeed in their own practice. Studies attempt to understand how entrepreneurs define their "competent practice" in their own context and in relation to others' expectations of them. There are some examples of this approach including Clarke (2011) who explores how entrepreneurs learn to use visual symbols to portray competence and gain support for their venture. Holt and Macpherson (2010) show how entrepreneurs learn to use rhetorical strategies to convince others about the efficacy of their business strategies. Rigg and O'Dwyer (2012) explore the way close interactions and relationships with mentors provide situated experiences that shape the learning trajectories of nascent entrepreneurs. Lefebvre *et al.* (2015) explore the way formal entrepreneurial networks provide social learning opportunities and specifically adopt communities of practice perspective to explore relations within the networks and their influence on participants' learning and practice. Konopaski *et al.* (2015) use communities of practice theory to demonstrate the non-linear and unpredictable nature of learning in the context of a family business.

An increasing number of articles also address the social aspects of learning though clubs, incubators and venture accelerators and their implications for entrepreneurial education (e.g. Yunxia *et al.*, 2016; Politis *et al.*, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2021). More generally, the topics of interest have advanced considerably and focussed on issues such as the social and situated nature of

learning (Voudouris *et al*., 2010; Karataş-Özkan, 2011), the relationship between individual and organisational learning (Thorpe *et al*., 2006; Zhang *et al*., 2006; Stinchfield *et al*., 2012) and the implications of vicarious learning on the process (Karataş-Özkan, 2011). During this time, theoretical perspectives have shifted to focus more on the implications of social relationships and of the practice of entrepreneurship. Consequently, this has given rise to an emerging consideration of how practice-based theories can further inform and explain our understanding. For example, Jones and Holt (2008) use activity theory to examine the ways in which entrepreneurial ventures change during their early years of operation and link individual experiences to organisational learning. Community of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) has had a significant impact on how we understand entrepreneurial learning in networks of entrepreneurs or in university supported and led incubators (Jones *et al*., 2021). In addition, this shift also examines the importance of learning to manage, not only the material, but also the symbolic aspects of entrepreneurial ventures as entrepreneurs learn how to manage stakeholder relationships (Clarke, 2011) and attend to aesthetics of their business (Vogt *et al*., 2022).

Dealing with the implications of practice and managing the conflict and tension involved in developing an entrepreneurial venture also provides an opportunity to explore the emotional aspects of learning (Cardon *et al*., 2009; Cardon *et al*., 2012), since managing a growing venture inevitably means managing the social relationships and networks that can help to support the venture. Whilst entrepreneurial learning initially focussed primarily on the learning process associated with individual experiences, studies have advanced a wider conceptualisation that includes social learning (Jack *et al*., 2008) and organisational learning (Jones and Macpherson, 2006; Jones *et al*., 2010). Thus, the social, situated and contested experiences of entrepreneurs are important in understanding how they navigate a particular situated experience. As well as navigating specific situated contexts, given the limited resources they hold, entrepreneurs often face events and situations that are beyond their control or are limited in opportunities to learn that arise just through the day-to-day events of the business. Event-based learning, such as crisis, projects or stakeholder interactions (supply chain, customers etc.), occur daily in their practice and provide learning opportunities (Shepherd, 2003; Shepherd and Kuratko, 2009; Herbane, 2010). These events occur during their life course, both before and throughout the emergence of the business, which shape entrepreneurial identity and capabilities (Cope, 2005; Jayawarna *et al*., 2014). Thus, taking this practice-based view also brings into the spotlight the specific social networks and social capital that are involved and embedded in these day-to-day interactions.

If we accept a practice-based view, then we need to rethink entrepreneurship education since, even as ideas are formulating, and before the first steps are taken as entrepreneurs, the social relationships and activities that might provide practical help for budding entrepreneurs can be supported in networks or communities of entrepreneurship practice. Thus, the implications are that, whilst entrepreneurial learning can still take place in organised settings, these are very different from classrooms (Jones *et al*., 2021). Rather, a practice-based perspective on learning suggests that they need to focus more on practical activities and social development to extend networks and contacts to grow the social capital of the potential entrepreneur. Here incubators (for early-stage entrepreneurs) or building communities of entrepreneurs (for mutual support in their day-to-day practice) can be an alternative approach through a programme of activities (Jones *et al*., 2014). For example, the leadership, enterprise and development (LEAD) model is often used in UK settings, offering experiential learning, reflection days and "strategic space" (Jones *et al*., 2010), for owner-managers to work with experts and other entrepreneurs on their business (Gordon *et al*., 2012; Pugh *et al*., 2021). Learning in this context is conceptualised as occurring in the entrepreneur's natural setting (their business) using knowledge gained through participation and reflection in the programme and in the company of others (Barnes *et al*., 2015).

Thus, this shift to practice-orientated studies means the mundane day-to-day processes and relationships from which entrepreneurs draw their experiences are amongst the most important influences on their growth trajectory and a fundamental influence on the opportunity for individual, collective and policy learning (Ram and Trehan, 2010; Anderson and Thorpe, 2004). The promise of a practiced-based view is that it suggests learning is potentially a pervasive activity, which is embedded in all practices and through the complex webs of social interaction in which we participate (Hamilton, 2013). As Konopaski *et al.* (2015) demonstrate in their study of learning for continuity in family firms, it is relationships, and particularly the depth of meaningful participation with others, that are important. Moreover, whilst there have been several theoretical advances (Politis, 2005; Kempster and Cope, 2010), there still is a lack of solid empirical studies about the types of practices and contexts that support this learning (Wang and Chugh, 2014). This raises several areas in which further studies in entrepreneurial learning have an opportunity to contribute to the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial learning and the dynamics of practice that all too often remains implicit within extant studies. In the papers included here, we attempt, in a small way, to extend the debate and trend towards a practice-based view of entrepreneurial learning.

Overview of papers

The first paper, *Learning among Practices: Aesthetic and Sensible Knowledge in the Life Trajectory of Entrepreneurs* (Vogt *et al.*, 2022), uses the concept of knowing-in-practice (KINP) to explore the sensible and aesthetic processes that occur in entrepreneurial learning in their study of 25 founders of start-ups. Their interest in understanding the sensory inputs that guide entrepreneurs during the stages of idea formation and acting is influenced by the notion that aesthetic-sensible knowledge and KINP are developed in day-to-day practice and are critical to learning and transformation. By adopting a practice lens (Gherardi, 2006, 2009), they show how entrepreneurs' decisions and behaviours are influenced by sensory judgements and experiences that occur throughout their lives and not just whilst engaged in their entrepreneurial endeavours. The study focusses on how and what these start-up founders learnt before they became entrepreneurs, thus viewing the "entrepreneurial life" as a journey and examining how previous social and sensory experiences had helped them develop ideas and to bring them to fruition in the form of a business.

The combination of an abductive lens and the use of narrative analysis in this study offer a new way of understanding the entrepreneurial learning journey and the critical role of bodies and senses in the process of practicing and learning. The authors set out how each of the senses – sight, hearing (and talking) smelling, touching and tasting – is part of KINP and lead to knowledge that is produced by sensory experience. They also explain how aesthetic judgements, although apparently subtle, can have a significant effect on managers and their decisions and lives. The study explains why certain decisions are taken by entrepreneurs, how cognition is influenced by bodily experiences (Rigg, 2018) and how other non-rational explanations of knowledge creation enable us to see entrepreneurial learning in a new and different light.

The second paper, *Entrepreneurial Learning Behaviour of Community Insiders* (Haneberg and Aaboen, 2022) provides important insights by drawing on empirical work to offer new and novel contributions to our thinking about entrepreneurial learning by utilising the concept of community of practice to illuminate how the socially situated entrepreneurial learning of community insiders could be considered an adaptive process following multiple learning trajectories depending on with whom and about what the entrepreneur involves in social relationships. This paper highlights the value and importance of leaning processes that are adaptive and engage with a variety of stakeholder communities. The broader the community, the wider the potential for potential learning trajectories. The practical purpose

of this paper is to illustrate and discuss the connection between communities of practice as a vehicle to advance the scholarly conversation on the practice of entrepreneurial learning

The final paper, *Entrepreneurial learning in extra-curricular start-up programs for students* (Pocek *et al.*, 2022) addresses how the social and relational environment influence and shape the learning experience of students in setting up their own start-up businesses. The paper responds to calls to advance entrepreneurial learning by developing more nuanced process focussed models that illuminate the connections between individual and collective learning. Through the study of social practices, the paper presents a compelling case based on the empirical data to illuminate how researching entrepreneurship education outside of the formal curriculum provides new insights into how social and environmental learning environments can both constrain and enable the learning experience of students. The papers' core argument is that the entrepreneurial learning needs to connect and extend learning frameworks which encompass practice-based learning to understand how and why entrepreneurial learning works and how it is enacted by students.

These papers open ways to consider how the practice of entrepreneurial learning can create the opportunity for knowledge and understanding to be co-created and enacted into practice by directly bringing together methods of inquiry, learning and practice.

Allan Macpherson, Lisa Anderson, Kiran Trehan and Dilani Jayawarna

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