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## **Developmental Paper Submission**

**Title - Conceptualising Higher Education students' entrepreneurial learning processes**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the research is to examine student conceptualisations of entrepreneurial learning to more effectively understand interpretations and operationalisation of entrepreneurial learning concepts at the Higher Education (HE) level.

Qualitative data will be collected from 40 participants studying a final year undergraduate Business programme module at a university in South West England. Each participant will produce an individual reflective portfolio whereby they reflect upon their entrepreneurial learning and in particular the influence of experiential, social and self-directed learning models upon their entrepreneurial learning processes. Alongside analysis of these portfolios, follow up interviews will also be conducted to explore emergent themes.

Research examining entrepreneurial learning is important in enabling a more effective understanding of the entrepreneurial process yet studies examining student perceptions of entrepreneurial learning remain limited. This research will enable an improved understanding of how students interpret and apply the theoretical concept of entrepreneurial learning and allow insight into the entrepreneurial learning process from a HE student perspective.

**Track 5 – Entrepreneurship.**

**Word Count – 1499**

## Introduction

Learning is considered pivotal to the entrepreneurship process at any stage, from nascent entrepreneurs to established (Harrison and Leitch, 2005) and studies regarding entrepreneurial learning have grown rapidly over the last 30 years (Wang and Chugh, 2014; Blenker *et al.* 2014; Nabi *et al.* 2017). As there is no single unified theory of human learning (Phillips and Soltis, 2009) difficulty follows in establishing a single theoretical framework for its examination (Rae and Wang, 2015). However, there have been key learning models that have shaped the literature and continuing research in the domain of entrepreneurial learning, those of; experiential, social and self-directed learning.

Experiential learning theory has become a particularly dominant perspective within the entrepreneurial learning research in large part due to the practical nature of entrepreneurship (Neck and Greene, 2011; Wang and Chugh, 2014; Pittaway *et al.*, 2015; Hagg and Kurczewska, 2019). Experiential learning opportunities whereby tutors act as facilitators to student learning and encourage practical learning activities are seen as optimal to encourage education 'for' and 'through' enterprise (Pittaway and Cope 2007b; Higgins *et al.*, 2013; Lilischkis *et al.*, 2015; QAA, 2018). This is supported by Lucas and Milford's (2009) interpretation of the Quality Assurance Agency (2007) expectations of business (and therefore enterprise) education provision at Higher Education level. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning has been particularly influential in shaping entrepreneurial education pedagogy (Politis, 2005; Fayolle, 2013; Rideout and Gray, 2013).

Entrepreneurial learning is often seen as a contextual phenomenon influenced by an individual's social interactions (Rae and Carswell, 2001; Pittway and Cope, 2007b) and empirical studies have found that entrepreneurs often learn from others by seeking guidance of those whom they perceive to have a superior entrepreneurial understanding or ability (Rae, 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Cope, 2005b; Hamilton, 2011; Zozimo *et al.*, 2017). Subsequently social learning theories have become a lens through which to examine entrepreneurial learning, in particular models of social capital and co-participation.

Heutagogical approaches, such as self-directed learning models, where the emphasis is upon the development of individual capabilities, such as learning how to learn, have become increasingly prominent in educational environments including enterprise education (Hagg and Kurczewska, 2018; Neck and Corbett, 2018). Heutagogical approaches are seen to empower students with the autonomy they are given and subsequently prepare them to respond to a competitive and fast-paced global job market that values self-leadership (Hase and Kenyon, 2000; Ashton and Newman, 2006). Lucas and Milford (2009) identify that these wider-world demands can lead to a 'shift in focus' on what the vocational approach can mean in HE teaching, and the subsequent pedagogical approaches that are applied. Van Gelderen (2010) proposed self-management and autonomy are critical elements of HE entrepreneurship education and may be cultivated through self-directed learning activities and Tseng (2013) explored the conceptual relationship between self-directed learning and entrepreneurial learning, in a practitioner context, with self-directed learning proposed as a conduit to enhanced entrepreneurial performance.

## Research Questions

- 1. How do HE students interpret the theoretical concept of entrepreneurial learning?** Entrepreneurial learning is a subjective concept with continuing debate regarding what it consists of and how it can be measured (Harrison and Leitch, 2005; Wang and Chugh, 2014). There has been limited investigation regarding students' awareness and perception of the concept. This study will develop understanding of how HE students may interpret the theoretical concept of entrepreneurial learning in their individual contexts through reflection of their personal learning journey.
- 2. How do HE students relate their entrepreneurial learning processes to the established theories of experiential, social and self-directed learning?** As it is recognised that the learning processes of students are often markedly different from practicing entrepreneurs (Mueller and Anderson, 2014; Hagg and Kurczewska, 2016), this study will review the utility of these established learning models to how students conceptualise entrepreneurial learning processes.

## Methodology

This research is framed by an interpretivist philosophical position with methodology and methods designed to understand the phenomenon rather than to generalise from it. The subjective and dynamic nature of entrepreneurial learning processes (Rae and Carswell, 2001; Cope, 2005a) encourages a methodological approach that has the flexibility to explore the topics' complexities and contradictions (Downing, 2005). This research recognises that individuals will learn in different ways, uniquely constructing knowledge even when all given the same material. Learning is considered socially, culturally and economically contextual (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998) shaped by the circumstances and community in which it is developed.

Qualitative data will be collected from 40 students studying a final year undergraduate Business programme module at a university in South West England. Data will be collected from individual 5000 word reflective portfolios produced for assessment of the reflective business portfolio module. These will be collated for analysis through use of NVIVO software. Students were provided with a portfolio template to follow, which asked students to reflect on the learning of personal skills, knowledge and experience relevant to operating as an employee or entrepreneur through social learning theory, experiential learning theory, and self-directed learning theory and mind-set. Students were also asked to reflect on a practical case study activity to demonstrate how these skills emerged. Students were asked to provide evidence from their HE learning experiences and employment and entrepreneurial experiences to support their reflections on learning.

The conceptual model (Figure 1) will guide the collection of empirical material.

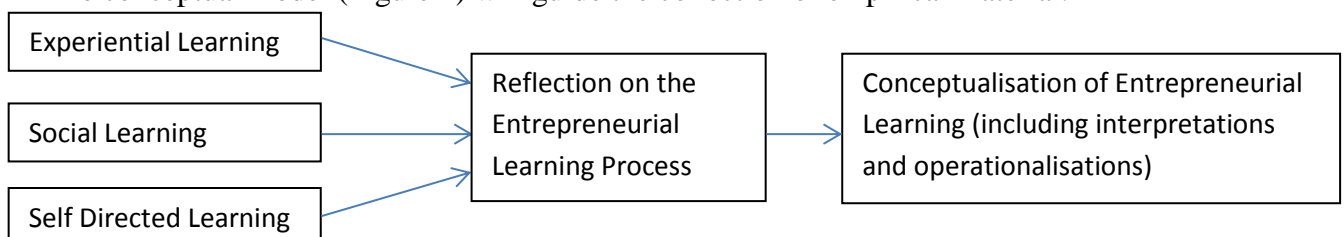


Figure 1. Conceptual model

The lens through which students reflect (as a student, as an employee or entrepreneur), and how they select to evidence their learning journey will be key components to both understanding and contextualising their interpretations of entrepreneurial learning. Learning is most often associated with classroom settings but it is a process which is not restricted to formal educational settings and can be life-long influenced by one's every day personal and professional experiences (Coombs, 1985). The myriad of situations in which learning can occur is recognised in this research and forms part of the rationale for using the research instrument of reflective portfolios as participants reflect upon learning experiences by holistically reflecting upon their life experiences and not just on in curricula activity. The differing levels of experience held by individual students may impact upon this, as practicing entrepreneurs may be more likely to reflect-in-action (Schon, 1983) based on prior experience whereas a student, with limited entrepreneurial experience, may need to reflect-on-action to develop their knowledge as they cannot draw upon a wealth of prior experience (Hagg and Kurczewska, 2016).

Follow up interviews will be undertaken with students to further discuss their learning journey in relation to established learning theory. Topic guides for the interviews will be written after analysis of the portfolios to enable common and emergent themes to be explored with participants and interviews will take place until data saturation has been reached. All interviews will be recorded, transcribed and then analysed using NVIVO software. This will enable the researchers to quantify the data gathered wherever possible including analysis of data according to differences between groups such as; gender, ethnicity, age and work experience.

Methodologically, education research faces significant challenges in terms of measuring outcomes. Causal relationships are difficult to establish between teaching activities and learning outcomes because of the complexity of factors and influences upon the learning process (Boud *et al.*, 1985; Jarvis, 1987). Qualitative methods whereby students are asked to reflect on their own learning such as reflective portfolios are seen as an effective alternative to standardized pre and post intervention testing. The difficulty of measuring learning is acknowledged in this study and as such the research does not seek to measure learning outcomes but instead to examine and explore learning benefits as identified by participants.

## **Contribution**

Research examining entrepreneurial learning is important in enabling a more effective understanding of the entrepreneurial process (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001; Cope, 2005a) yet studies examining student perceptions of entrepreneurial learning remain limited (Mueller and Anderson, 2014; Wang and Chugh, 2014). An improved understanding of the individual differences between students' entrepreneurial learning processes has the potential to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness (Jones and Matlay, 2011). For instance, this research can establish whether student perceptions of entrepreneurial learning align with established theory.

For students, this research will enhance understanding of their own entrepreneurial learning processes. Despite the increasing emphasis upon students shaping their educational experience they often remain the 'missing perspective' in education research (Tymon, 2011) with studies instead centred upon the educator's perspective (Politis *et al.*, 2010; Jones and Matlay, 2011). This study responds to calls within prior research for more studies on entrepreneurial learning from a student perspective (Pittaway and Cope, 2007; Politis *et al.*,

2010; Mueller and Anderson, 2014) through a methodological approach that enables students to discuss learning in their own terms.

### **Development plans prior to presentation at the conference**

By September 2019, the data will have been collected and the majority of analysis complete. This will enable discussion of results at the conference presentation prior to final analysis and reporting. Key trends and emergent areas of enquiry will be included in the presentation thereby encouraging rich discussion regarding the future of the research.

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