Learning to become an entrepreneur: integrating the threshold concept approach and social learning theory in Higher Education

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This paper suggests a conceptual framework to inform entrepreneurship education, integrating the threshold concept approach and social learning theory. It forms part of a doctoral research project consisting of an extended transactional curriculum inquiry interrogating the perspective of entrepreneurs, educators and students regarding aspects critical to thinking as an entrepreneur. After outlining the threshold concept approach, social learning theory, in particular communities of practice, is suggested as a context in which to position threshold concepts. It is proposed that the purpose of entrepreneurship education could be to cultivate the ways of thinking and practicing of an entrepreneur in students. This will encourage the establishment of a pedagogy specific to entrepreneurship built around entrepreneurship threshold concepts, and informed by social learning theory, rendering it distinctive and enabling a greater degree of effectiveness, alignment and consensus.

Keywords: threshold concepts; social learning theory; entrepreneurship education; higher education

Introduction

When I was asked to take on a Programme Leader role for a new undergraduate programme in entrepreneurial business management, I wondered what exactly "entrepreneurial" meant. How was this programme different from any regular business management programme? Enterprise and entrepreneurship education have been identified as enablers of positive social, economic and political change (Matlay & Carey, 2007); but the three major stakeholders acting in this arena, namely policy makers, schools and universities, and entrepreneurs (practitioners) have disparate and sometimes conflicting agenda (Foliard, 2019). However, if entrepreneurship is to be learnt in an educational context, and curricula are to be developed, then it would be useful to identify a knowledge base for entrepreneurship (Neck & Corbett, 2018). This paper suggests a conceptual framework to be used in the development of entrepreneurship education initiatives, integrating the threshold concept approach and social learning theory.

The threshold concept approach

Threshold concepts are concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practising in that discipline (Meyer & Land, 2005). Threshold concepts have a particularly transformative effect on student learning and represent a transformed way of understanding, without which the learner cannot progress (Meyer & Land, 2005). In transforming the learner, threshold concepts change the learner's perceptions, subjectivities and world-view. There is a repositioning of the self (Meyer & Land, 2005); an ontological as well as a conceptual shift which can often be uncomfortable and is sometimes resisted. Mastery of a threshold concept simultaneously changes an individual's idea of what they know and who they are (Cousin, 2009). A threshold

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concept can be a form of disciplinary property (Cousin, 2006) and offers a useful way of identifying and distinguishing a discipline, subject, profession or field of study, defining the boundaries of academic territories (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008). In recognising the threshold concepts in a subject area such as entrepreneurship, individuals can recognise how it is distinct from other subjects areas and disciplines such as Management or Design (Donovan, 2017). Defining the threshold concepts in any subject is likely to inform the development of the curriculum in order that it might be optimised.

Nature of knowledge and theories of learning

Defining the nature of entrepreneurship as an academic subject is less than straightforward. Hannon (2005) suggests ways in which entrepreneurship education initiatives might be categorised according to the philosophical stance of the particular educators designing and delivering them (see Figure 1).

Conceptions of Knowledge and Learning	
Learning about …entrepreneurship	Learning for …entrepreneurship
Knowledge as acquisition	Knowledge as participation
Cognitive constructivism	Social constructivism

Figure 1. Conceptions of Knowledge and Learning

Approaches maybe usefully conceptualised as being "about", "for" or "through" entrepreneurship (Hannon, 2005).

Knowledge can be regarded as something that exists independently of the learner and has to be acquired through a process of cognitive constructivism. Learning in this case is a process of replicating the conceptual framework in the head of the

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expert, in the head of the students. The conception of knowledge as information to be acquired is evident in educational initiatives which teach students *about* entrepreneurship. If knowledge is regarded as something external to the learner, then a distinctive knowledge base for entrepreneurship ought to be definable; yet it is contested and unclear (Neck & Corbett, 2018). Trying to differentiate it from a typical business curriculum, even with an emphasis on start-up, somehow misses the essence of the subject. However, many entrepreneurship programmes in higher education do continue to adopt this approach. They are based on the assumption that learning is an individual and bounded process to be conducted apart from other activities, and happens as a result of teaching (Wenger, 1998). Students might learn *to understand* entrepreneurship, but the transferability, applicability and consequently the usefulness of this kind of knowledge is questionable.

However, according to social learning theories, knowledge is something that *cannot* exist independently of the learner, and learning is about becoming and identity creation, through a process of social constructivism (Sfard, 1998). Wenger (2011, p. 1) defines a community of practice as "a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". Knowledge is gained through participation in a community of practice, and is more about who the learner becomes, than what they come to possess. In educational initiatives where students learn *for* entrepreneurship, the educational experience can be regarded as a form of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), a step on the path to becoming a member of a community of practice.

Social learning theories focus on the importance of social interactions, imitation and modelling to learning (Bandura, 1977). It is useful to treat entrepreneurs as a community of practice and to treat entrepreneurship as a profession for the purposes of understanding how anyone learns to become an entrepreneur. Regarding

entrepreneurship as *a practice* would also imply that entrepreneurship education is most relevant when students are engaged in the practice of entrepreneurship.

The relevance of threshold concepts to social learning theory

Threshold concepts in the context of social learning theory can be regarded as "ways of thinking and practicing"(McCune & Hounsell, 2005), integral and embodied in the learner. Ways of thinking and practicing (McCune & Hounsell, 2005) emphasise the sense in which learning is the route to enter into a community (Davies, 2006, p. 71). The act of learning is an act of identity formation. In coming to see the world in a particular way, learners associate themselves with a community of people who share distinctive ways of thinking and practicing and through this, they position themselves in relation to others inside and outside that community.

Others researching entry into professional communities of practice such as healthcare, note that a number of transitions are required as learners proceed from novice to expert (Benner, 1984; Neary, 2000; Turner, Abrahams, & Harris, 1995). There is a link between these transitions, and the notion of liminality in threshold concepts, and identity development. As each concept is understood, each threshold crossed, the learner approaches fuller membership of the community of practice.

According to Davies (2006, p. 74), "A threshold concept necessarily helps to define the boundaries of a subject area because it clarifies the scope of a subject community." A threshold concept might also be a powerful, integrative idea that is characteristic of a particular community of practice. Threshold concepts are by nature discursive; "The acquisition of transformative concepts it is argued, brings with it new and empowering forms of expression that in many instances characterise distinctive ways of disciplinary thinking" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 20). Distinctive disciplinary thinking is characteristic of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Discussion

Combining the threshold concept approach and principles of social learning theories offers a rich framework with which to conceptualise entrepreneurship education.
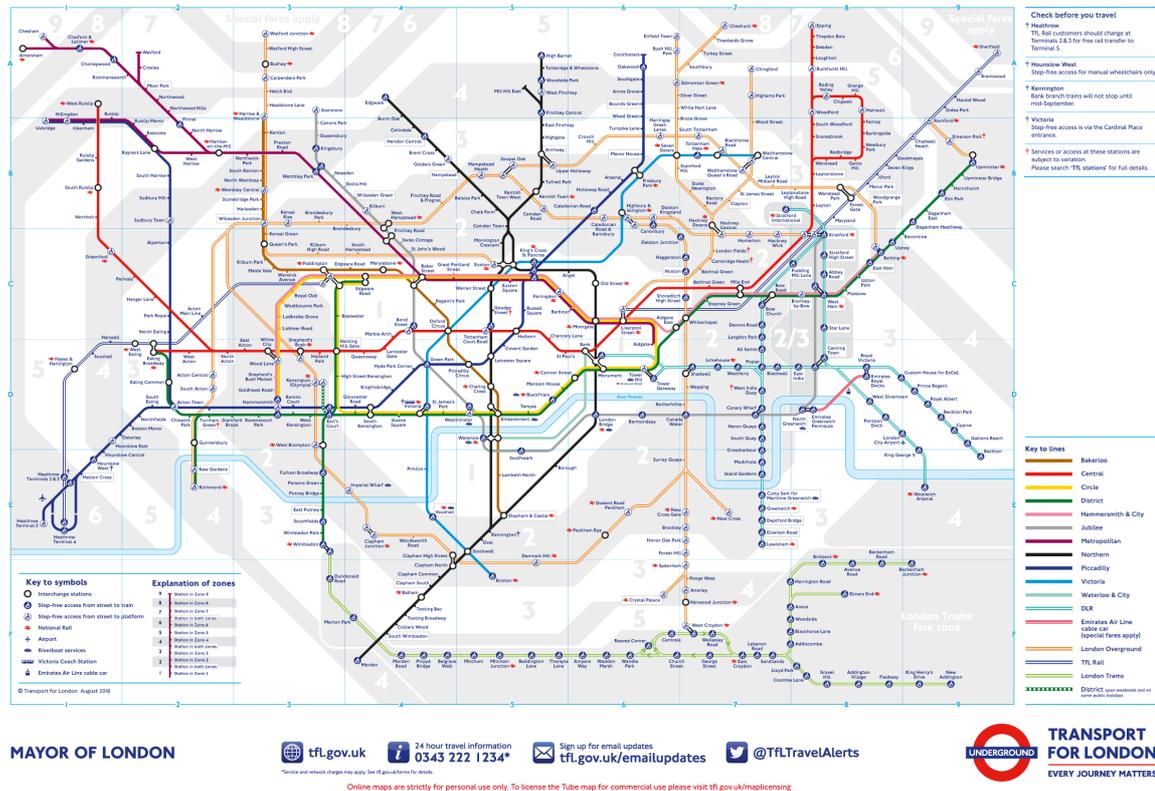

Figure 2. London Tube map showing different routes, connecting and through stations, and zones (TfL, 2018)

Students of entrepreneurship education are effectively embarking on a transformational learning journey which will result in some of them becoming entrepreneurs. The learning journey to becoming an entrepreneur is a social process, because the knowledge required to get to the final destination is not something that can be acquired, it must be experienced through participation.

Entrepreneurship threshold concepts may be regarded as connecting tunnels or bridges that need to be passed through or over on the way to becoming an entrepreneur

in order to arrive at the terminal "being an entrepreneur" station. They do not need to be understood in any set order, but they do all need to be understood in order to become an entrepreneur. It is unlikely that a student of an entrepreneurship programme will graduate having fully grasped all the entrepreneurship threshold concepts. Higher education in isolation may not be regarded as an experience which necessarily culminates in full membership of a community of professional practice. The context or domain of the learning remains an educational one and therefore distinct from "real-life" learning. Being able to see the world as viewed by a member of a particular subject community only comes with sustained engagement with the domain, the community and the practice. Some students will get stuck at a particular tunnel or bridge (entrepreneurship threshold concept) and make no further progress. As students progress towards the terminal destination (being an entrepreneur) they will become fuller members of the entrepreneurship community of practice. Areas of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) manifest as travel zones on an underground train system (see Figure 2). The role of the educator is to shepherd the students on their learning journeys and to design intense learning experiences that offer opportunities for students to understand the entrepreneurship threshold concepts. This educational architecture must include provision for a powerful learning community where opportunities and space to learn and understand the threshold concepts of entrepreneurship are optimised.

Conclusion

The relationship between entrepreneurship education and becoming an entrepreneur can be understood by considering the former as a possible station en-route to the latter. A degree in entrepreneurship is not a prerequisite for an individual to become a successful entrepreneur, but it should make that outcome more likely if entrepreneurship threshold concepts (ways of thinking and practicing) have been identified and well-designed

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opportunities to learn them created. Higher Education courses in entrepreneurship should be key enablers and predictors of entrepreneurial success. However, the number of business start-ups should not be the only measure of success of university programmes in entrepreneurship. If a student ultimately decides they do not want to start a business, then their educational experiences should have helped them progress towards alternative terminal destinations, enhancing their employability and wellbeing; and increasing their chances of flourishing in the future whatever career direction they choose to take.

When entrepreneurship is treated as a professional practice, it follows that educational initiatives in entrepreneurship are more effective when practice-based. If entrepreneurship knowledge is embodied and not distinct from the individuals who have that knowledge, then learning entrepreneurship will come through participation. Entrepreneurship education that recognises entrepreneurship as a professional practice where social learning theories are relevant will foreground design elements that promote the development of strong learning communities. The identification of entrepreneurship threshold concepts in this context will allow educators to focus on aspects of the curriculum that will facilitate the entry of their students into the community of practice of entrepreneurs and ultimately to become entrepreneurs themselves. Entrepreneurship is more likely learned through participation than taught. Viewing higher education for the professions, including entrepreneurship, as a possible means of entry into the respective communities of practice will affect how associated educational programmes are designed and how effective they are.

By considering entrepreneurship as a professional practice and redefining entrepreneurship education as a social learning process, educators can regard programmes of entrepreneurship education as situated experiences of identity formation, transforming both who a student is and what a student does. The objective

of entrepreneurship education is then, to cultivate the ways of thinking and practicing of an entrepreneur in the students. These ways of thinking and practicing can be seen as the threshold concepts of entrepreneurship. This will encourage the establishment of a pedagogy specific to entrepreneurship built around entrepreneurship threshold concepts, informed by social learning theory, rendering it distinctive and enabling a greater degree of effectiveness, alignment and consensus.

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