

# **Why should I learn Entrepreneurship?**

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It is time for, and I will quote the Award Committee, some “constructive criticism on traditional forms of teaching entrepreneurship and for suggesting novel approaches” (Sten K. Johnson Centre for Entrepreneurship, 2018). To give this constructive criticism - I will use a format for this presentation that I am used to, and comfortable with – It is the same format that we suggest the participants in the ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference to use. In this way, I try to relate my speech today – to the arguments given by the committee for why Helle and I should be given this prestigious award.

## **The questions we ask – and the questions we care about**

The ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference format suggests presenters to focus “on problems and questions rather than on ready-made solutions and presentations of research findings” (3E ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference, 2018)

If you go to an ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference it is suggested in the call for papers that: “The ideal conceptual paper raises an interesting question, and through dealing with this question, arrives at a richer and possibly transformed challenge, which helps us perceive the question in a whole new way that we have not thought about before.” (3E ECSB Call for papers, 2018)

We really didn’t invent this format ourselves; we stole it (Blenker et al. 2011) from Saras Sarasvathy and her article “The questions we ask, and the questions we care about” (2004). In this article, Sarasvathy argues that “The questions we ask often prevent us from asking other questions” (p. 707). In most disciplines, it happens that standard questions sneak into the research - and scholars tend to get occupied with answering these standard questions. This may not be a big problem – except that asking the standard questions sometimes prevents us from asking the questions we really care about.

In this presentation, I will use the same structure as suggested by Sarasvathy and taken on and used in the ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference. You could also say that I will use the logic behind the ECSB Entrepreneurship Education Conference as my method of progressing this presentation.

I will first look at how questions to the rationale behind entrepreneurship education typically are asked, and examine what kind of answers this question produce. I have already argued that particular ways of formulating questions lead to particular answers. Second, I will discuss what could be wrong or insufficient with these answers - and from this I will, third, try to reformulate the question into a new one, which I suggest that we

should care more about – hoping that a reformulation of the question we ask, will make us able to create new, better and more relevant answers.

### **The question we ask: Why should we teach entrepreneurship?**

First, the question assumes that entrepreneurship can be *taught*. In this way, the question relates to an old and probably rather futile debate in entrepreneurship research; whether you are born as an entrepreneur or entrepreneurship is something that can be taught. This debate typically ends up unfruitful and dichotomized. In one corner, we would often find entrepreneurs arguing that they were born with this gift – in other corner we would find teachers claiming that they can teach entrepreneurship, just as well as they can teach any other subject. There are, however, other and perhaps more fruitful positions available; for instance, that “entrepreneurship is learned”, “entrepreneurship can be learned by most people” or eventually “entrepreneurship should be learned by most people.

Second, the question of “why we should *teach* entrepreneurship” takes the teachers point of view - not the student’s position. It is the teacher who has the answer to the question; it is the teacher who knows the purpose of entrepreneurship education, and it is the teacher who can provide the answer to the question of purpose. This is not atypical in education. Often as educators we experience students who ask us as teachers why a subject is relevant to them or why they should follow a given course.

The situation may however be different for entrepreneurship education. It could be, that there is something particular about entrepreneurship educations, that sets a situation where only the students themselves has the answer to the question.

Thirdly, the way the question of is asked, typically leads to *extrinsic motivated* answers to the question. These answers often follow a logic of: we need economic welfare – therefore we need economic growth – therefore we need innovation in society – therefore we need creative individuals – therefore we need entrepreneurship education.

In this logic, the legitimacy of entrepreneurship education is found in economic arguments and societal needs. It has been argued that entrepreneurship education can contribute to the increase of small firms, to a rise in employment, to innovation in society through creative destruction and to economic growth in society.

As an alternative to this extrinsic orientation - we could seek for question where the answers would enhance intrinsic motivations for learning entrepreneurship. Such answers would focus either on “learning for learning's sake” or “learning entrepreneurship for entrepreneurship sake”.

Fourth, when the teacher defines the purpose of education, it tends to produce a “learning for the teacher” or “*learning for exam*” culture. What is lost in the traditional formulation of the question, is the very idea behind all education, that students should seek to “learn for life” and not just for exam. What seem to have happened in this case is a simple means-end reversal. Originally the purpose of education was to produce a learning that was relevant for life. Exams where simply means we had to check whether the students had achieved this goal of learning for life. Learning was the end – exam was a mean.

What has happened over time was this means-end reversal, where exam has become the end and learning the mean. I guess that many of you present will recognize, that as teachers, you often face classrooms where the students see exam as the purpose of their studies – and see the learning as a mean to pass exams. The danger is that our educational

activities and learning processes will focus on short term exam results, but neglect more profound learning for life achievements.

### **Insufficiencies in the original formulation of the question**

As we have seen there are a number of inadequacies related to examining the purpose of entrepreneurship education from the teacher's perspective. We can sum up these insufficiencies into a few dilemmas we face in entrepreneurship education:

- We assume that entrepreneurship can be *taught* – but entrepreneurial competencies are perhaps better understood as *learned*
- We accept that the *teacher* has the answer to the purpose of entrepreneurship – but ideally the *student* has the answer to his or her purpose of entrepreneurship
- Our answers are based on *extrinsic* motivations for learning – but our answers should be based for *intrinsic* motivations for learning
- The formulation of the wrong question creates a *learning for exam* orientation – while a better formulation of the question should create a *learning for life* perspective

There seems to be good reason to see if we can re-formulate the question in a way that allow us to focus on *learning, students, intrinsic* motivation and *learning for life*. My suggestion for the re-formulation of the question we really care about is “Why should I learn entrepreneurship?”, where the I in this case is the student. In the following I will briefly examine if this could be a more interesting question to answer.

### **The question we care about: Why should I learn Entrepreneurship?**

To a large extent, the problems I have presented are not isolated to entrepreneurship education. The university system and government initiatives has contributed to the institutionalization of the “learning for exam practice”. As an example, we have seen a number of initiatives towards aligning teaching and assessment through exam oriented specification of learning goals (Biggs, 1996).

We are actually dealing with the very purpose of enlightenment and education. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1784) defines enlightenment as an age where we dare to use our reason, independently of external authorities. This ability to use our reason further relates closely to one of our central concepts in the evaluation of whether entrepreneurship education works or not. One of the central measures of good entrepreneurship education is whether it creates an increased level of self-efficacy in our students. Self-efficacy we would typically understand as the judgement of how well individuals are able to perform the actions that they bring ourselves into (Bandura, 1997). When we are looking for answers to why eventually our students would wish to learn entrepreneurship, I hope, and I also experience, that it has to with increasing their ability to use their reason and being able better to perform in the situations they bring themselves into. How do we as educators help them with this journey? As I see it, entrepreneurship education must bring our students into places, where they are able to train themselves in using reason to perform in entrepreneurial situations.

My point is that in entrepreneurship education, we simultaneously have to deal with two parallel formation processes. This dual formation process has to do with what Shane and Venkatraman (2000) has labeled the individual-opportunity nexus. On the one hand,

students learn through the process of forming opportunities – which we typically would describe as the opportunity formation process. On the other hand, students learn through the formation of themselves as entrepreneurial individuals – which we would typically describe as an learning process. And neither of these processes can take place without the other.

To understand such an educational formation process further, we may have to look to Germany again. In the German language, we have the word “bildung”, in Danish this is translated to “dannelse”, and it translates neatly into Swedish to the noun (ut)bildning or the verb “bildande”, which is fundamentally the same as German word. As with many other continental concepts they are often difficult to transfer to Anglo-American language and thinking. Bildung in German thus does not translate well into English. Sometimes the word “literacy” is used as possession of education, but this describes better the result of the learning, but not the learning process. The best concept in English is perhaps the word “formation” in the sense that something is being formed. This is, however, in entrepreneurship education a dual formation – the formation of something outside – and the formation of the learner (Kristiansson, 2018).

Entrepreneurship education, from this point of view, is about facilitating socially constructive training processes - where students socially construct opportunities, themselves and each other as entrepreneurs - and in this process, reflect on their process of becoming entrepreneurs (Thrane et al 2016)

### **Why should I teach entrepreneurship – Revisited**

What does this mean for me as a educator? There are two elements of being a teacher! You teach something, the subject, the discipline, the matter – and you are a teacher, a pedagogue or a kind of midwife.

As long as the central question we ask is “Why should we teach entrepreneurship?” – there is a focus on what we teach and on extrinsic reasons of relevance for entrepreneurship. We teach opportunity identification, entrepreneurial finance or effectuation because these competencies are necessary for entrepreneurs in order to create firms, innovation and growth for society. But, when we have visited the question that we really care about, which is “Why should I learn entrepreneurship? - and in this way taken on the students point of view – we can re-visit the question of “Why should I teach entrepreneurship?”

During my so-called professional career, I have taught a number subjects; accounting, marketing, strategy, innovation theory and a lot of other courses - but the biggest gift, that being an entrepreneurship educator has given to me, has been that it has allowed me to re-focus on what I am doing. I am not primarily teaching something. My role is not to impose somebody else’s goals as extrinsic motivations on my students (at least I hope that I am not doing that), and I am not primarily the caretaker of a discipline – but I am primarily a pedagogue or an educator trying to facilitate my student’s formation of themselves as entrepreneurs, social innovators or whatever form of enterprising individuals they seek to become.

When they are constructing, forming or building themselves in this way – they are also constructing, forming or building something else. We may disagree on what this something else is (opportunities, organizations or value for others), but they are forming themselves by forming something else.

When my students are performing this dual formation process of building themselves while they are building something else, it is their process and not mine. They own the entrepreneurial formation process and they own the learning process. For many teachers, this may seem as a loss of control, and if there is anything teachers hate, it is losing control. And Yes, perhaps there is a loss of control. At least in the sense that; as it is their process, I have only little control of what they should learn and what they actually learn. And this is what we usually focus on controlling as teachers.

But this does not necessarily mean that we as educators have to give up all forms of control of the learning process. But the focus of control changes – and eventually increase other forms of control. It is the view on entrepreneurship as a subject that results in the focus of control of content and control on what the students learn. But when we change the focus of entrepreneurship education towards the dual formation processes; these processes belong to the students. We as teachers cannot control what kind of project they form or opportunity they seek – and therefore we can neither control what they learn from this process – nor what they learn from the process of forming or building themselves as entrepreneurs.

The little control we have as educator of entrepreneurship is not full control, but co-control of how the students learn. When we organize learning through entrepreneurship courses – we can co-control the processes where students learn through the formation or building of firm, projects or opportunities and in this way together with the students also co-control how they form or build themselves.

Thank You for the award.

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