

Conference Paper

Inspiring Entrepreneurship through Creative Thinking

Quentin Lefebvre

LARGEPA Research Center, University of Paris

Abstract

Considered a critical trait for entrepreneurs, creative thinking is a skill that can be learned and thus taught. Whereas, the role of creativity in entrepreneurship is undisputed and has been established by numerous studies within management literature, its fostering has become pivotal within entrepreneurial education. However, and despite those findings, business—and specifically entrepreneurship education programs (in France)—have not yet satisfactorily managed to introduce creativity into the entrepreneurship curriculum, not to mention give it the central role it deserves. In order to stimulate the entrepreneurial intention and ingenuity among business students, it is argued that creativity training should be included within entrepreneurial education programs, and specifically real-life business cases are explored as a means to do so.

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Corresponding Author:
 Quentin Lefebvre
 quentin.lefebvre@u-paris2.fr

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1. Introduction

Responding to the importance of entrepreneurship as the essential driver behind economic growth, entrepreneurial education programs (EEPs) have been booming across the globe in an effort to equip the countries' future entrepreneurs with the necessary skillset to respond to the uncertainties of today's economic realities. And while EEPs are generally considered an effective means to promote entrepreneurial intention among students [1], they often fail to appropriately address and stimulate creative thinking, the other side of the EI-coin, thus leaving the curriculum focused on mere knowledge acquisition and the development of hard skills, such as writing a proper business plan.

Yet, in order to succeed and persevere in the long term in an ever-changing environment, entrepreneurs need to amend their creative abilities—abilities that should be taught and trained within EEPs.

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One possible way to stimulate this creative side of entrepreneurial intentions is by putting students in real problem-solving situations. This conviction stems from a personal experience that is depicted further.

« This is not at all what I need to progress on my project”

This direct and frank feedback was delivered to us by a student less than two years ago in the middle of a class—right before actually leaving the room. The voluntary class dealt with the principles for writing a business plan and targeted advanced students, who already had a well-defined personal venture project in mind.

This unpleasant event could have been easily minimized with a common defensive reaction by saying: *‘this student obviously didn’t catch the essence of the class and was simply not ready for it’*. But knowing this student, who up until then appeared rather interested by the program and quite motivated for launching a business, we couldn’t help but wonder whether and where we went wrong.

After that incident, we exchanged with the program coordinator in charge of course evaluations who told us that the course was rather appreciated by the students until we got into the main topic: tables, figures and forecasting. And even though the ability to deal with the technicalities of a business plan are naturally a crucial and fundamental part of any entrepreneurial education, the students felt particularly uncomfortable with that kind of exercise arguing that detailed forecasting is impossible when you have nothing tangible yet. All in all, it was perceived as a useless effort, demotivating and frustrating.

From that moment on, we realized that traditional entrepreneurial education in its deterministic and technical nature and without a rather inspirational counterpart might affect students’ entrepreneurial intention and motivation in the wrong way, leading us to explore alternative ways of teaching and promoting entrepreneurship in the form of creative thinking.

2. Creativity in the Entrepreneurial Process

Numerous studies explore entrepreneurial characteristics or the factors influencing entrepreneurial intention among university students. Typically, those studies examine personality-related variables [2] and demographic variables like gender, age, level of studies, role of parents [3, 4], and less often creativity.

According to Bygrave [5], an entrepreneur *'perceives an opportunity and creates an organization to pursue it'*. Amabile defines creativity as the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain [6]. Welsh (in [7]) defines creativity as *'the process of generating unique products by transformation of existing ones. These products, tangible or intangible, must be unique only to the creator, and must meet the criteria of purpose and value established by the creator'*.

Novel-idea generation predominantly applies to artistic or scientific spheres. But if we see entrepreneurship as the ability to generate and implement novel ideas within a business context, by logic extension, we can easily consider it as part of the application scope for creative thinking [8]. Creativity can therefore be seen as an important antecedent of entrepreneurial intentions and consequently individuals with a well-trained creative skillset are more likely to engage in entrepreneurship [9].

3. Creativity Can Predict Increased Entrepreneurial Intention and Perseverance in the Process

The path to entrepreneurship usually starts with a clear motivation to become an entrepreneur and an idea for a new good or service that will appeal to an identified market. The challenge is then to bring the idea to reality, usually by convincing potential partners of the value of the project. This ability to generate ideas and craft them into business opportunities naturally derives from the creative ability.

Regardless of the context, idea generation and implementation usually require minimum knowledge, skills, specific personality traits, environmental factors and a very strong motivation [6, 10]. Motivation within a creative process on the other hand predominantly comes from the pleasure and satisfaction of creating in itself [11]. Individuals with a strong creativity anchor are therefore inherently motivated to creating something new [12, 13].

In a business context, motivation for creativity promotes entrepreneurial intention because it stimulates idea generation, exploration and testing (*I like the idea of creating a business because I like working on new projects and creating new things*). In other words, creativity impacts entrepreneurial intentions because it helps future entrepreneurs find valuable ideas.

But motivation for creativity also drives another dimension in the entrepreneurial process, that is, idea *implementation*. Creative individuals more easily engage in entrepreneurial venturing because they more obviously perceive the effective feasibility of the project (self-efficacy construct). This ability to convince oneself and others

that it is worth pursuing it (*I have a clear vision of the outcome, I can bring the project to reality*) helps cope with risk and uncertainty to bring the original idea into fruition. As Birds suggests: “Inspired by vision, hunch, and expanded view of untapped resources, and the feeling of the potential of the enterprise, the entrepreneur perseveres.” [14].

As for an artistic project, entrepreneurship requires a significant dose of conviction, and creativity generates that positive vision of the outcome, which by resonance increases self-confidence and force of persuasion. As Thomas B. Ward suggests:

In addition to being able to generate ideas (...), entrepreneurs presumably ought to have high levels of intrinsic motivation, belief enough in their ideas to push them in the face of negative feedback, at least some expectation of external rewards, and capacity to persuade others of their worth [9].

Entrepreneurs’ conviction that their idea can become reality must remain strong when creating a new business. Criticism, skepticism, jealousy as well as indifference are common reactions that entrepreneurs endure all along the entrepreneurial pathway. They generate doubt and frustration, but they should never prevail over that conviction that it *can* work. Otherwise, there is a great chance that dreams dissipate before they become reality.

That intuitive or holistic part of entrepreneurial intention is primarily driven by feelings, inspiration, positive vision of the potential of the project. Even though entrepreneurial intention is considered as a critical source of resilience and perseverance, few (French) education programs incorporate that specific dimension of entrepreneurial intention into their curriculum.

4. Which University Education Programs Are Most Effective to Stimulate Entrepreneurial Intentions?

We have no clear answer to that question, but we notice that the foremost pedagogical tool in many entrepreneurship programs still is having students learn how to produce a business plan, even if there is little evidence about its efficiency [15, 16]. Some critics argue that planning is constraining, resulting in the limitation of the range of creative responses to environmental changes.

Like other teachers, we argue that entrepreneurial teaching should not only or at least not mainly focus on business planning as *the* unique entrepreneurial tool, hence reducing entrepreneurial intention to its pure rational, that is, its cause-effect-oriented dimension and leaving its intuitive and creative counterpart unexplored. We do not

deny the importance of the objective dimension of entrepreneurial intention, but we find it regrettable that education programs predominantly focus on the rational side of entrepreneurship, to the detriment of the creative one.

Entrepreneurship programs should therefore include more training in thinking and acting creatively. One possible tool to do so is through real-world business cases or what we call *in-vivo business cases*.

5. In-vivo Business Cases to Complement the Dominant Business Planning Paradigm

Programs that provide real-world experience are useful in enhancing intentionality through increased perceived desirability and feasibility [17]. Thus, real-world business cases are one possible way to introduce entrepreneurship and help students develop both creative and feasible solutions. We call it real-world or in-vivo business cases because they enable students to focus on real projects, interact with real people and work on real business issues. By doing so, students are enabled to develop their creativity and ingenuity, in turn leading to an increased predisposition toward entrepreneurship.

For the last year, we conducted several studies dealing with business survival or development issues. Several students revealing great creative capacities kept in touch with entrepreneurs long after the case studies were concluded to prolong the brainstorming exercise. Our aim is to develop and continuously enhance and advance pedagogical devices forging the creative ability of students in the future and demonstrate that situational, collaborative and global problem-solving training in a business context is a great lever to stimulate creating thinking and entrepreneurial intention among students.

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