

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AS A CHALLENGE IN STRATEGY

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Abstract. *The proposed paper is a comprehensive literature review in entrepreneurial management with a focus on organizational learning. The aim of the paper is to organize and clarify the diverse aspects of the field and enhance our understanding of the potential roles of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship in organizational learning. Authors propose that the entrepreneur inside the organization is the source, the trigger of organizational changes. The entrepreneur's way of thinking and learning affect the organizations learning mechanisms. This entrepreneur can be the owner-manager at the enterprise, but also can be a middle-manager with innovative way of thinking and good ideas. The entrepreneurial manager is the driver of both organizational learning and change. The topic of interest lies in the intersection of the two fields: entrepreneurial management and organizational learning. There were earlier attempts to collect the different interpretations of entrepreneurial learning. One of the most comprehensive is Erdélyi's (2010) who tried to differentiate between studies based on their research focus – within what scope the researcher investigated entrepreneurial learning –, and identified individual studies, organizational level studies and macro level studies. However, this categorization is easy to understand and good for separate different studies, it is limited only to investigating the scope where (on what level) the researcher examines the entrepreneurial learning phenomenon. There is a gap in the literature as there are several interpretations of entrepreneurial learning in the existing literature without any unified conception what entrepreneurial learning is. Authors seek answers for the following questions: (1) what can entrepreneurial learning mean inside an organization? (2) What are the similarities and differences between entrepreneurial learning and organizational learning? (3) How can change be interpreted across the four different research areas? Based on the literature review authors formulated a research model that highlights a research gap and identifies four different interpretations of entrepreneurial learning.*

Keywords: *entrepreneurial learning; organizational learning; corporate entrepreneurship; individual learning; intuition.*

Introduction

The entrepreneurial learning concept is an emerging area of literature at the intersection of organizational learning and entrepreneurship. Thanks to this complexity, the literature is diverse, and contains several interpretations of entrepreneurial learning, drawing on both areas. According to Erdélyi (2010), there are only few entrepreneurial learning researchers who are immersed in both research areas, so there is no unified concept of entrepreneurial learning.

In the authors' interpretation, this lack of holistic conception is not a problem but instead highlights that there are some research areas with unanswered questions. To introduce these questions, this paper starts by exploring the different entrepreneurial learning interpretations in the literature. Afterwards authors give an overview of the different aspects of the entrepreneurial learning phenomena based on a comprehensive examination of the existing literature. This results in a research model that identifies four different interpretations of entrepreneurial learning.

Literature review

Collection of entrepreneurial learning perspectives

Erdélyi (2010) made a detailed review of this topic and summed up the main results of entrepreneurial learning studies. In his opinion, the roots of entrepreneurial learning lie in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Studies in this period discussed the diffusion of innovation (Attewell, 1992; Van De Ven & Polley, 1992) or the role of networks in the entrepreneurial process in terms that imply some forms of learning (Birley, 1985; Dubini & Aldrich, 1991; Larson, 1991; Powell et al., 1996). The true concept of entrepreneurial learning, however, only began to emerge in the late 1990s. Based on this, the authors' conclusion is that the main roots of this research area are in entrepreneurship rather than organizational learning.

Erdélyi (2010) separated entrepreneurial researches into two main groups. The first examined entrepreneurial learning as personal learning, and the second conceived it as collective learning. Table 1 shows this categorization.

Table 1. Different perspectives of entrepreneurial learning (based on Erdélyi, 2010)

			Example of authors
Personal learning	Management learning	As experiential learning	Deakins et al. (2000)
		As cognitive process	Crossan et al. (1999)
	Management education	In the workplace	Lans et al. (2008)
		Role of educational institutions	Wee (2004)
		Role of government agency	Rae (2007)
Collective learning	Individual firm	SME, R&D unit	Van De Ven and Polley (1992)
	Network	Local network	Dubini and Aldrich (1991)
		National systems of innovation	Lundvall (1992)

The personal learning perspective can be divided into two main groups. The first includes research that takes entrepreneurial learning as a form of management learning (Deakins et al., 2000). In this field, experiential learning has a strong influence. Within the personal learning perspective, there is an approach that tries to capture the opportunity-recognition process and focuses on the entrepreneur's perception mechanisms during business opportunity identification and decision-making processes. In the second perspective, of learning as a cognitive process, researchers combine cognition with other approaches such as experiential learning (Corbett, 2005, 2007), the 4I framework of Crossan et al. (1999), or the psychological theories of creativity (Lumpkin & Lichtenstein, 2005).

Under the personal learning perspective, there is a particular subset of research that examines entrepreneurial learning from an educational perspective. Researchers within this perspective try to find answers to questions such as whether entrepreneurship can be taught, and if so, how (Lans et al., 2008; Lans & Mulder 2009; Kempster & Cope 2010).

Within the collective learning perspective, three main subgroups are considered. The first examines entrepreneurial learning at the individual firm level (especially SME or R&D units). The second focuses on inter-organizational networks, and the third investigates national innovation systems. In Erdélyi's (2010) interpretation, the organizational context is determinant, and much more important than the examination of personality or cognition of the individual entrepreneur.

At the individual firm level, there are new thoughts about exploration, organizational learning as adaptation, innovation development, and the learning organization. By broadening the scope of entrepreneurial learning, this collective perspective is more interested in the internal mechanisms of learning that lead to organizational learning.

First the authors give an overview of the individual approaches of entrepreneurial learning in the existing literature. The aim is to highlight that both individual and collective approach need to be examined parallel to capture the real nature of learning in entrepreneurial organizations.

Relationship between the individualistic and organizational approach

This section examines the learning of the entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial organization separately. The relationship between the two, however, is a very interesting research area. Warren (2004) proposed some challenges around the concept of the owner-manager. In the authors' interpretation, this narrow focus is not necessary, because the causes of the problems do not lie in the proprietorship. Authors therefore use the construct of an entrepreneur instead of owner-manager.

According to Warren (2004, p.7), the entrepreneur's "learning processes must be effective in terms of personal development, and also impact successfully on the enterprise. Thus, successful adaptation of the enterprise is inseparable from, and is to some extent an emergent property of, the entrepreneur's learning".

The entrepreneur has a pervasive influence on the learning ability of the firm, and his/her willingness to encourage learning in the organization greatly influences organizational learning (Chandler & Hanks, 1998; Stanworth & Curran, 2000; Jones & Macpherson, 2006).

As the organization grows, painful learning crises can result if the personal learning and development of the entrepreneur lags behind the managerial requirements of a growing organization (Cope & Watts, 2000). With a maturing enterprise boundary, the entrepreneur must delegate and control, including about learning. Middle managers play a significant role in vertical organizational communication, learning and knowledge sharing (Csepregi, 2012; Gaál et al., 2012; 2013). This delegation to middle managers can be a problem when the entrepreneur dominates the organization, relying on direct authority and high levels of informality (Rothwell, 1992; Vossen, 1998; Jones & Macpherson, 2006).

These problems and challenges are strongly related to the entrepreneur–manager discrepancy. As the entrepreneurial organization grows, internal processes and systems emerge and the organizational members begin to specialize. The organization begins to develop separately from the entrepreneur, as tasks and responsibility are delegated (Stevenson, 2006). In this period, "highly creative entrepreneurs are sometimes unable, or unwilling to meet the administrative challenges that accompany the growth stage. As a result, they leave the enterprise and move on to other ventures" (Kuratko, 2009, p.374).

Entrepreneurial activity is a type of behavior and administrative management is different from entrepreneurial management. Administrative managers focus on everyday work and operate the organization using routines. Entrepreneurs focus on directing and modifying market processes, search continuously for new ideas and opportunities and try to realize and exploit these new opportunities (Stevenson, 2006). The entrepreneur aims for fast growth. An entrepreneurial culture therefore encourages employees to seek new opportunities and does not penalize failure (Szerb & Márkus, 2014). "An effective entrepreneur is not one who, from the outset, is able to plan a particularly effective organizational form, but one who is able to make an organization responsive to new information and reactive towards new opportunities" (Hortoványi, 2012, p.34).

One of the most well-known ideas in this area is Schumpeter's (1980) claim that the entrepreneur ceases to be an entrepreneur as he/she starts to manage his/her enterprise. This statement places a negative slant on management. It also suggests that the entrepreneur will struggle to manage the organization. The conclusion is that only those entrepreneurs who are able to find the balance between being an entrepreneur and a manager will succeed in moving to the next stage. "Adaptive firms need to retain certain entrepreneurial characteristics to encourage innovation and creativity. The entrepreneur needs to translate this spirit of innovation and creativity to his or her personnel while

personally making a transition toward a more managerial style. Remaining entrepreneurial while making the transition to some of the more administrative traits is vital to the successful growth of a venture.” (Kuratko, 2009, p.378).

The shift and balance between entrepreneur and manager is also crucial to organizational performance and organizational learning. However organizational learning is a separated research area, some entrepreneurial learning perspectives encompass the effect of the entrepreneur on the organization’s learning processes, which is huge. According to Quinn (1978), entrepreneurs are facilitators of organizational learning. Authors therefore think it is important to examine in parallel entrepreneurial and organizational learning, looking at the intersection of the individual and firm level. To authors’ mind, the intersection of entrepreneurial and organizational learning is an interesting and under-researched area.

Individual aspects of entrepreneurial learning

Holcomb et al. (2009) used the term ‘entrepreneurial learning’ in both a descriptive and qualitative sense. The descriptive sense refers to learning by people known as entrepreneurs, while the qualitative sense refers to a type of learning process by which managers recognize learning opportunities. Authors will introduce these two approaches separately and then highlight interesting research questions about the different aspects of entrepreneurial learning.

Descriptive sense - learning of the entrepreneur

The descriptive aspect of entrepreneurial learning uses certain assumptions:

“Learning is not an optional extra, but is central to the entrepreneurial process: Effective entrepreneurs are exceptional learners. They learn from everything. They learn from customers, suppliers, and especially competitors. They learn from employees and associates. They learn from other entrepreneurs. They learn from experience. They learn by doing. They learn from what works, and more importantly, from what doesn’t work.” (Smilor, 1997, p.344).

Learning plays pivotal roles in the new venture creation process, from developing the competencies needed to start a new venture (Erikson, 2003) to recognizing opportunities and coping with the challenges of the external environment (Cope & Watts, 2000; Harrison & Leitch, 2005; Politis, 2005; Fayolle & Gailly 2008). According to Bagheri and Pihie (2011), the majority of entrepreneurial learning definitions are based on different aspects of the experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984), including experimentation, conceptualization, reflection and experience (Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

Politis (2005) identified three main components in the process of entrepreneurial learning. These were (1) entrepreneurs’ career experience, (2) the transformation process, and (3) entrepreneurial knowledge, which encompasses recognizing and acting on entrepreneurial opportunities and coping with the liabilities of newness. In this interpretation, entrepreneurial learning also focuses on the individual learning process of the entrepreneur.

Rae and Carswell (2000) looked at entrepreneurial learning as the cognitive processes of gaining and structuring knowledge as well as giving meaning to experiences. In the model of Holcomb et al. (2009), entrepreneurial learning includes two types of experiential learning, direct and vicarious. According to Bagheri and Pihie (2011), there is a strong belief that entrepreneurial learning is an action-orientated process through which entrepreneurs experience the various phases of business creation and management. They suggested that entrepreneurial learning has four dimensions, experience, reflection, social interaction and observation. Based on other works (Cope & Watts, 2000; Cope, 2003), Bagheri and Pihie (2011, p.455) proposed that reflective learning was the most significant learning mechanism for entrepreneurs, because it “creates fundamental changes in their self-awareness and insights on how to manage their business effectively”.

Cope defined (2005) five types of learning for entrepreneurs: (1) learning about oneself, (2) learning about business, (3) learning about the environment and entrepreneurial networks, (4) learning about small business management and (5) learning about natural and management relationships. The last two have been largely excluded from entrepreneurial learning research, thank to the focus on the second and third. There is, therefore, a huge need for research on the entrepreneur's learning about how to run and control the business effectively, and the relationship between internal and external elements.

According to Harrison and Leitch (2007), entrepreneurial learning is still fragmented. There are therefore, a number of areas of learning in the context of entrepreneurship and the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), for example:

- New venture creation (Lichtenstein, Lumpkin & Walton, 2000; Erickson, 2003);
- SME growth and development (Wyer, Mason & Theodorakopoulos, 2000);
- Innovation (Ravasci & Turati, 2005);
- New technology-based firm formation (Fontes & Coombs, 1996);
- Venture capital (Busenitz, Fiet & Moesel, 2004);
- Enterprise training and learning capability (Chaston, Badger & Sadler-Smith, 1999; Rae & Carswell, 2000, Szabó et al., 2011); and
- Applications of the learning organization construct in SMEs (Choueke & Armstrong, 1998).

In spite of this fragmentation authors think there are still research areas that have unanswered questions on the learning of the entrepreneur.

Qualitative sense – Opportunity recognition and intuition

In the qualitative sense, entrepreneurial learning is a way of thinking, in particular about opportunity recognition and intuition. Crossan and colleagues defined a learning process starting with individual intuition (Crossan et al., 1999; Dutta & Crossan, 2005). They identified two kinds of intuition: expert and entrepreneurial intuition (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of expert and entrepreneurial intuition (based on Crossan et al., 1999, pp.528-529)

Expert intuition	Entrepreneurial intuition
Process of recognizing past pattern The expert no longer has to think consciously about action	Capability to make novel connections, perceive new or emergent relations and discern possibilities that have not been identified previously.
Rooted deeply in individual experience that hardly can be explained and examined	Relation to innovation and change
Past oriented	Future oriented
Supports exploitation activity	Supports exploration activity

Dutta and Crossan (2005) matched expert intuition with what they described as the ‘Kirznerian approach’ and the entrepreneurial intuition with the ‘Schumpeterian approach’:

“The Kirznerian entrepreneur is essentially concerned with restoring balance in the economy by embarking on entrepreneurial opportunities that arise out of knowledge and of information asymmetries among its constituents. In contrast the Schumpeterian entrepreneur is primarily involved in a process of creative destruction in which entrepreneurial opportunities arise essentially as a result of a disequilibrating action of the entrepreneur” (Dutta & Crossan, 2005, p.432).

Lecher and Kinghorn (2014) used this approach to compare expert and entrepreneurial learning based on three factors: (1) opportunity recognition, (2) opportunity realization and (3) problem-solving strategy. Based on this comparison authors suggest:

- Expert learning has similar characteristics to single-loop learning (Argyris, 1977) because of the non-conscious and path-dependent attributes; and
- Entrepreneurial learning is similar to double-loop learning (Argyris, 1977) due to the path-breaking nature, and its search for new and better ways of working.

The characteristics of expert intuition and learning are outside the qualitative sense of entrepreneurial learning, but these processes can also be characteristic for the entrepreneur.

Zoltayné (2006) investigated bounded rationality and the role of intuition in decision-making. Intuition is usually defined as knowing or sensing something without the use of rational processes. Gladwell (2005) defined it as: “The moments when we know something without knowing why”. He said that there are decisions that cannot be explained rationally and the brain has an adaptive subconscious part that works in a special way. This kind of intuition resembles expert intuition.

In authors’ opinion, entrepreneurial intuition has a dominant role in entrepreneurial learning and entrepreneurship. It is, however, also interesting to investigate expert intuition, especially when the entrepreneur has to manage his or her firm.

Discussion

Entrepreneurial learning bears the marks of both entrepreneurship and learning. To define my research interest, I created a model (see Figure 1) of these two dimensions. The first dimension covers the interpretation of the entrepreneurial aspects of entrepreneurial learning. The word entrepreneurial can be related to the person who learns (descriptive sense) or the way of thinking, which is strongly connected to opportunity recognition and intuition (qualitative sense). The second dimension is the learning part, which can be seen as individual or organizational. This dimension considers which part of learning is the focus of the research.

Figure 1 shows this model and Figure 2 the most relevant questions and challenges along each part.

Entrepreneurial part		
Qualitative sense: a type of a learning process	Entrepreneurial learning as the entrepreneurial intuiting and way of thinking in individual learning	Entrepreneurial learning as entrepreneurial intuiting and way of thinking in organizational learning
Descriptive sense: learning by people known as entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurial learning as the learning process of the entrepreneur	Entrepreneurial learning as the learning process of the entrepreneur and its effects on organizational learning
	Individual	Organizational
	Learning part	

Figure 1. Interpretation of entrepreneurial learning across 2 dimensions

Entrepreneurial part		
Qualitative sense: a type of a learning process	What cognition does characterize the entrepreneurial way of thinking and learning? Why are entrepreneurs different in regard of learning?	How can an organization explore new opportunities? How can it enhance entrepreneurial way of thinking and learning in existing organizations?
Descriptive sense: learning by people known as entrepreneurs	How does the entrepreneur learn? How can an entrepreneur build up his/her enterprise with the help of his/her own learning?	How does the entrepreneur affect the organization's learning processes? How can the organization get through internal and external challenges with the help of organizational learning?
	Individual	Organizational
	Learning part	

Figure 2. Most relevant research questions across the dimensions of entrepreneurial learning

Authors propose to focus on the relationship between the learning of entrepreneur and organization (boxes colored grey in Figure 1 and 2). Authors have not been able to find much prior research on this area. Erdélyi's (2010) categorization of personal learning as a cognitive process can be linked to individual learning in the qualitative sense. Likewise, personal learning as management learning can be mapped to individual learning in the descriptive sense in my model. In Erdélyi's (2010) work, the individual firm category can be mapped onto the organizational dimension in the authors' model. This work, however, mostly covers the qualitative interpretation and not the intersection of entrepreneurial and organizational learning.

In regard of change this paper proposes that the individual parts of this model means in qualitative sense a cognitive change and in the descriptive sense the change of the entrepreneur's behavior based on his/her experience. The organizational part means change at organizational level. Authors assume that in the qualitative sense of entrepreneurial learning change means cognitive change, double-loop learning in strategy and exploration activities. On the other hand they presume that in the descriptive sense of entrepreneurial learning change has to be investigated in the entrepreneur-organization relation by assessing the change in organizational behavior and cognition affected by the entrepreneur.

Conclusions and implications

This paper is a comprehensive literature review in entrepreneurial management with a focus on organizational learning. Authors identified four different interpretations of entrepreneurial learning and highlighted that there is a gap in literature regarding the entrepreneur's effect on organizational learning. The entrepreneur is the trigger of changes and learning however the qualitative sense of entrepreneurial learning focuses on the entrepreneurial behavior and thinking rather than on the entrepreneur as a person. To manage change and learning is a great managerial challenge within an organization, specifically for an entrepreneur who is good in opportunity recognition but not always good in managing its organization. By understanding the role of learning, especially entrepreneurial learning in change, can help practitioners as well in enhancing the organizational ability to change and learn in reply to the challenges of the changing environment and organizational growth. Authors propose that the explored gap in literature needs to be investigated in order to answer the defined research questions and to deeply understand organizational learning processes and change in entrepreneurial firms.

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