

# **How can I, as an entrepreneurship educator, contribute to changing a “learning for exam” practice into a “learning for life” practice?**

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## **Abstract:**

The paper argues that a mean-end confusion characterizes the educational practice of most western societies. Originally the goal of education was to prepare students for life, and students and teachers were engaged in a “learning for life” practice. In this practice exams are means used to check whether the learning for life ambition has been achieved. Over time the means-end relation however seems to have reversed – meaning that often both teachers and students see the passing of exam as the essential purpose of education, with severe damage on the educational system as a consequence.

The paper claims that an important contribution of entrepreneurship education could and should be a re-configuration of the rationale in our educational system. To do this the paper suggest that we see our role in the educational system not only as teachers and researches – but allow ourselves also to be entrepreneurial educators; meaning that we can eventually use our courses and teaching activities as a form of practical criticism. Rather than detached conceptual contemplation, a solution to the “learning for exam” problem calls for entrepreneurial action, in order to re-create a “learning for life” practice.

In following we seek to perform such a practical criticism by using the same educational approach that we prescribe for students to transform the disharmonies in their everyday practice into entrepreneurial solutions and action - but we use this approach on ourselves. We take the problem of “learning for exam” and bring it through the phases of our own entrepreneurship education approach. In the paper our work in each of these phases is

thoroughly described.

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## **Introduction and question we care about - How can entrepreneurship education contribute to a “learning for life” practice?**

The importance or legitimacy of entrepreneurship education has hitherto primarily been sought in economic arguments. 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.

This paper does not challenge this kind of reasoning, but takes it starting point in a different kind of contribution or legitimacy of entrepreneurship education. It claims that an equally important contribution of entrepreneurship education could and should be a re-configuration of the rationale in our educational system.

The paper claims that a mean-end confusion has pathologized the educational practice of most western societies. Originally the goal of education was to prepare students for life, and students and teachers were engaged in a “learning for life” practice. In this practice exams are a mean used to check whether the learning for life ambition has been achieved. Over time the means-end relation however seems to have reversed – meaning that often both teachers and students see the passing of exam as the essential purpose of education, with severe damage on the educational system as a consequence. The danger being that education and learning will focus on short term exam results, but neglect more profound learning for life achievements.

This problem could have been the starting point for a conceptual paper within a general education discourse. However, such a paper would typically only articulate the problem, analyze the reasons behind, describe the consequences and eventually suggest ways to solve it. Such critical academic endeavors are definitely worthwhile and important – but not the road taken in this paper. Instead we find that the problems of our educational system call not only for detached academic criticism – but also for entrepreneurial action; in order, not only as a researcher to talk about the problem, but also as an educator actually do something about it. A central question could thus be: How can entrepreneurship educators entrepreneurially use entrepreneurship education to reconfigure the relationship between the learning for exam and learning for life perspectives in ways that strengthen the role of the latter.

To do this we suggest that we see our role in the educational system not only as teachers and researches – but allow ourselves also to be entrepreneurial educators; meaning that we can eventually use our courses and teaching activities as a form of practical criticism. Rather than detached conceptual contemplation, a solution to the “learning for exam” problem calls for entrepreneurial action, in order to re-create a “learning for life” practice. Traditionally we see criticism as primarily verbal as we use words and arguments to examine the foundation of the problems we face, study the context and circumstances of the problem and eventually suggest solutions to the problems. In this paper, however, we focus on the role of entrepreneurship as practical criticism, where educators create and implement new forms of entrepreneurship education that seek to reinstall the learning for life perspective in concrete education initiatives. Such realized

initiatives can serve as a critique of traditional education based on a learning for exam logic.

In following we seek to perform such a practical criticism by using the same educational approach that we prescribe for students to transform the disharmonies in their everyday practice into entrepreneurial solutions and action - but we use this approach on ourselves. We take the problem of “learning for exam” and bring it through the phases of our own entrepreneurship education approach. In the paper our work in each of these phases is thoroughly described.

The paper is structured in the way that first we introduce the background and raise some of the methodological problems that such an autobiographic involves. Second, we present the conceptual foundations behind our educational philosophy and describe the different stages of the entrepreneurial learning process we bring our students through. Third, we use the exact same philosophy and stages to analyze our own entrepreneurial ambition to overcome the learning for exam practice. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of how entrepreneurship educators can use their own educational approach to act entrepreneurially in the education system.

### **Background and methodological problems**

Doing research in entrepreneurship education often face a number of methodological challenges, where one of the central problems is that entrepreneurship scholars often do research on courses or programs they are responsible for themselves. They are often involved as teachers in the courses they study (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Blenker et al, 2014). This may in some respect be an advantage as this embedded subjective sensitivity can strengthen empirical awareness to the context and contribute with a deep insight into the subject matter - but it may also make the researchers biased and to “native” (Miles and Huberman, 1994) as they are unable to maintain a detached objectivity.

In the present case – one could argue that the methodological problem is even worse! The authors of this paper have for a number of years been involved in developing and validating a particular approach to entrepreneurship education. We take this didactical and pedagogical design for entrepreneurship education that we (together with other scholars) have developed ourselves - and we use this approach, originally developed for students, on ourselves, in the sense that we take an educational problem, which we find calls for an entrepreneurial initiative and use our own didactical and pedagogical design on this problem.

The methodological problem is two sided. On the one hand, there is the question of quality of the didactical, pedagogical and entrepreneurial learning process we bring our students through and also use as a base for our analysis. This approach is developed over a number of years, is based on solid theories of entrepreneurship, learning and pedagogy;

and has been described, presented and exposed to critique in a number of academic fora (Blenker et al, 2011, 2012, Blenker 2015, Thrane et al 2016). We find that this is sufficiently argued and documented and expect that we are able to maintain a detached analytical distance to this part of the study.

On the other hand, there is the methodological problems of using this educational approach on ourselves to examine our opportunity of acting as entrepreneurial teachers by using our own teaching model. Ideally this should create empirical sensitivity and deep insight. In this part of the study it is much more difficult to maintain an analytical distance - we are surly both native and naïve. We will, however, argue that the study is an early phase study, where we simply want for examine what happens if we use our own educational approach on ourselves. This part of the study is explorative and experimental and we find that it is acceptable that we at his point are unable to maintain a detached objectivity.

### **Our educational philosophy and the stages of the entrepreneurial learning process**

The approach we use for entrepreneurship education, and in this case on ourselves, is described and validated in a number of publications ((Blenker et al, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, Blenker 2015, Thrane et al 2016)). This approach rests on three pillars:

1. an understanding of entrepreneurship as an individual-opportunity nexus (Shane & Venkataraman 2000),
2. an understanding of the entrepreneurial process as comprised of an effectual foundation in the means of the entrepreneur (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011),
3. and a disclosing sensitivity towards disharmonies in the individuals everyday practice (Spinosa, Flores & Dreyfus 1997).

Based on these few axioms, an entrepreneurship education approach is developed (Blenker, 2015). This approach rest on an ontology where entrepreneurship is about how persons deal with their individual-opportunity nexus; and opportunities are seen as created by individuals. This *ontology* involves a view on the entrepreneurial process where the everyday practices of the actors can become opportunities through their actions. In this entrepreneurial *process*, the involved individuals not only create opportunities, but they also create themselves as entrepreneurs when they create these opportunities. Both opportunity creation and entrepreneurial becoming are thus processes of social construction. Further the approach rest on the assumption that entrepreneurship is learned; and that entrepreneurial *learning* take place when individuals create opportunities – and in that process, they become entrepreneurs, but what is adequate entrepreneurial learning differ from individual to individual. 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.

These overall principles have translated into a six-step teaching model, which operationalizes a series of entrepreneurial learning elements. These include (1) identity work, (2) disclosing disharmonies, (3) qualifying disharmonies into general anomalies, (4) constructing innovative solutions, (5) prototyping and (6) business modelling. In the following we briefly present the logic in each of these.

*1 Identity work:* The first part of the learning process is directed towards the students working with their own identity. This involves creating an awareness of on the one hand their individual resources and capabilities; in terms of their means and their social network (Sarasvathy 2001, 2008), but on the other hand also their preferences and their motivation.

*2 Disclosing disharmonies:* Students learn that a profound knowledge of disharmonies is needed in advance of finding creative and innovative solutions. In this process of a process of disclosing disharmonies students are asked to produce detailed description of their everyday practices and the styles governing these practices that together constitute a disclosive space (Spinosa et al. 1997). Thus, everyday practices constitute the “how” we behave and styles constitute the “why” we behave. This part of the student activity is operationalized into asking questions of where the disharmony unfolds itself. “Who” is involved in the disclosive space; “what” is involved in terms of objects, artefacts or symbols; “where”, in terms of which places does the everyday practice take place and “how” in terms of which activities, routines and behavior are associated with the everyday practice. The objective is for the students to work with the disharmony, to disclose and explore it, until it appears where and how the everyday practice fails. The ambition is in detail to describe a conflict, resistance, irritant or similar, which is embedded in the everyday practice and styles governing the disclosive space.

*3 Qualifying disharmonies into general anomalies:* The aim of this part is to investigate if other people experience the disharmony (differently) (Spinosa et al., 1997) and thus qualify if and how one’s personal and subjective disharmony constitutes a general anomaly. Students learn to analytically detachment themselves in order to examine theoretically and empirically whether their personal disharmonies may be general anomalies (Spinosa et al. 1997) of relevance for other people and therefore a potential opportunity for entrepreneurship. Thus, students learn about the importance of engaging with outsiders and stakeholders in the qualification of disharmonies (Sarasvathy, 2008) in order to assess the generalizability of disharmonies into shared anomalies. In this part of the process students can use their general academic experience and methodologies. The theoretical qualification involves studies where the personal disharmony is analyzed theoretically in order to understand how it has arisen, how existing theory can inform about it and identify a variety of ways in which the anomaly can be understood. The empirical qualification process may include experiments, quantitative and qualitative analysis, case studies, secondary data or expert interviews. Students are asked to enrich their understanding of their individual disharmony by reflecting upon how, when, where and why others (who) experiences the potential anomaly. Herby they develop an understanding of how the disharmony might be different to other people

*4 Constructing innovative solutions:* Everyday practices are constituted by a variety of ways in which we deal with objects and activities. Some everyday practices are good; others are poor. Luckily, bad everyday practices have a tendency to become obsolete and be replaced by better practices – but sometimes it happens that good practices are forgotten or supplanted by worse practice. It is also possible that practices become mixed up in ways that result in poor practices blocking good practices. Anomalies in everyday practices and styles is the foundation of entrepreneurial opportunities; but the outcome of the entrepreneurial process must also produce changes in everyday practices and styles. Students learn about articulation, cross-appropriation and reconfiguration as ways to create such changes in a disclosive space (Spinosa et al., 1997).

Articulation is a way of making what is implicit explicit. precise articulation may help bring about changes in confused or forgotten practices in a disclosive space. This could involve bringing back forms of practice from the past and re-articulate them in new and better ways. Cross appropriation can take takes place when a disclosive space is unable to create fruitful new forms of practices by itself. Instead it may import useful practices that it could not generate on its own from another disclosive space and show how these can be used to address anomalies. Finally, reconfiguration is the case in which a solution is created by reprioritize between good and bad practices. It seeks to emphasize positive but marginalized practices where a hitherto marginal aspect of the practices coordinated by a style becomes dominant. Students are asked to construct an innovative solution to the anomaly through articulation, cross-appropriation or reconfiguration.

*5 Prototyping:* Students learn that a prototype is not just useful for engaging customers, users, partners or investors; but an important tool to advance abstract conceptions of their solution into concrete activities (Buchenau & Suri, 2000). Students are asked to experiment with and create prototypes such as videos, storyboards, flow charts or cardboards that advance their abstract concept into some more concrete elements.

*6 Business modelling:* Students learn that business models are dynamic tools for testing basic assumptions pertaining to the anomaly and the solution and a medium for entering into a dialogue with stakeholders. The business model thus supports an effectual opportunity creation process through social co-construction of opportunities with stakeholders (Sarasvathy, 2008). Students are asked to use the business model canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010) as learning tool that help them to identify critical assumptions in the value creation of their solution.

If the model outlined above is a valid entrepreneurial learning process for students, it may work for educators as well. In the following we examine its usefulness on our own most severe disharmony as educators: The “learning for exam” practice.

### **Taking the medicine, we prescribe to our students**

The following part of the paper is explorative and experimental and can probably best be

termed as a collaborative auto-ethnographic approach. We wish to examine what happens if we use our own educational approach on ourselves. In the following go through each of the steps outlined in the previous paragraph

### *1 Identity work:*

The group behind this paper is a mix of junior and senior researchers and teachers. We teach primarily courses in various elements of entrepreneurship across the faculties of Business and Social Science and Arts and Humanities. Our primary research area is entrepreneurship education and we have from these activities gained a rather deep insight into both entrepreneurship and pedagogy and education research. We have sufficient influence in their university system to be able to take initiatives to new courses and design the content and pedagogy of these courses quite autonomously. We are motivated by trying to develop entrepreneurship courses that are useful for the future life of their students – but we are also quite critical towards existing forms of pedagogy at the university, which leads us to quite a lot of experimentation with pedagogical approaches.

### *2 Disclosing disharmony:*

In our everyday practice as university teachers we have witnessed a very strong focus on exams among our students. As teachers who are primarily interested in preparing our students for their future life, both professionally and in general, this often feels frustrating. This frustration is so deep that we would characterize it as an disharmony in our everyday practice.

The disharmony unfolds itself in many situations. Students often ask whether a specific topic is relevant for exam and only shows interest in the topic if this is the case. Further students tend to focus most of their time and energy on preparing in the exam periods and less on working through the semester. Some students regret this, but often explain that the “learning for exam” approach is the only viable way to survive at the university.

The same exam orientation seems to be the case for several of our fellow teachers. They seem to understand the primary purpose of their teaching activity as preparing students for exam and some of them seems to welcome this as it simplifies what they are doing. Other teachers are frustrated but often explains the problem as coming from the students, arguing that the students are not sufficiently prepared for studying at a university.

We are well aware that this behavior among individual students and teachers are probably only symptoms of a deeper and institutionalized behavior and norm system that has developed over years. The university income to a large extent depends on the number of students passing exam.

We find that the disharmony can best described as a situation where one dominating style in the university system, the “learning for exam” behavior has grown so strong that it tends to suppress a “learning for life” approach university life.

### *3 Qualifying the disharmony into a general anomaly:*

The question now is to examine if other people experience the disharmony and if they do whether they experience it differently and thus qualify if and how it constitutes a general anomaly. A quick Google search in March 2017 gives 156 million hits on “learning for

life” and 220 million hits on “learning for exam”. Both expressions – or lines of thought are widespread.

Talking to students about the “learning for exam” dominance produce a mixed feed-back. Students signal dissatisfaction with the “learning for exam” practice. They remember that they chose this particular study because of interest in the subject – but they also seem to be unable to envision any forms of alternative to the “learning for exam” behavior. They appear to be socialized through a long journey of the educational system where they had to focus on grades in the gymnasium in order to get accepted into the university – and they had to focus on the grades in primary school in order to get accepted into gymnasium. In that journey, they seem to have lost sight of any other rationale for studying than the grades.

Fellow teachers also give mixed signals. Some teachers express dissatisfaction with the “learning for exam” practice and respond by developing a number of student involvement activities; other teachers respond by adjusting their teaching to the “learning for exam” norm, by transforming their courses into exam preparation activities. The university system and government initiatives contributes further to the institutionalization of the “learning for exam practice”. In recent years, we have seen a number of initiatives towards aligning teaching and assessment through exam oriented specification of learning goals (Biggs, 1996).

#### *4 Constructing innovative solutions:*

Everyday practice is the variety of ways in which we deal with objects and activities. In some cases, it happens that good forms of practices are forgotten or replaced by worse practices or that practices become mixed up in ways where poor practices block for good practices. We find that this is the case of parts of the educational system.

Articulation is a way of making what is implicit explicit. It seems that a mean-end confusion has pathologized the educational practice of most western societies. Originally the purpose of education was to prepare students for life, and students and teachers were engaged in a “learning for life” practice. In this practice exams are a mean used to check whether the learning for life ambition has been achieved. Over time the means-end relation however seems to have reversed – meaning that often both teachers and students see the passing of exam as the essential purpose of education, with severe damage on the educational system as a consequence. The danger being that education and learning will focus on short term exam results, but neglect more profound learning for life achievements. Articulating this means-end confusion is however insufficient to make changes. Articulating would mean that we analyze the reasons behind, describe the consequences and eventually suggest ways to solve it. Such critical academic endeavors are definitely worthwhile and important, it will create insight, but not necessarily change. Instead we find that the problems of our educational system call not only for detached academic criticism – but for entrepreneurial action.

To create an entrepreneurial solution reconfiguration would be needed. A solution would need to reprioritize between good practice of learning for life and the dominating practice of learning for exam. It would need to re-emphasize the positive but marginalized practice of “learning for life” instead of the originally marginal practice of “learning for exam” that has become dominant. It seems however that the educational system is unable to perform such a reconfiguration.

A cross-appropriation could be a solution. Cross-appropriation can take place when a disclosive space is unable to create the needed new forms of practices by itself. Instead it may import useful practices from another disclosive space and show how these can be used to address anomalies. Bringing entrepreneurship into education may be a such form of practice. The advantage of entrepreneurship and especially entrepreneurship based on the individual opportunity nexus is that it re-focusses on the individual student. We do witness that students who are allowed to work with their own individual disharmonies and examine these in detail in order to construct entrepreneurial solutions at least for a while seems to “forget” about exam, and it also seems that when they forget about exam and start working on their own entrepreneurial project they start learning for life.

#### *5 & 6 Prototyping & Business modelling:*

For us the gradual development of the entrepreneurial learning concept has been a long prototype development. The first course description is a prototype. The design of the lecture elements, the exercises and home assignments and the construction of the e-learning support system are other prototype elements.

The insight produced in the use of our entrepreneurial learning process is still personal experiences and anecdotal information from students and teachers. To gain deeper insight we need to examine in more detail information about the student’s reception of the learning process.

### **Results and consequences - reconfiguring the educational system**

The paper has addresses a central problem in modern education and contributed by being not only conceptual and contemplative – but as a showcase of how educators try act entrepreneurially themselves in order to solve some of the problems in our educational system.

The paper has argued that in order to change the “learning for exam” practice into a “learning for life” practice, several forms of practice in the educational system have to be reconfigured and that the educational system is not able to create this reconfiguration by itself. Forms of practice from outside education need to be cross-appropriated into the educational system. One such practice form is entrepreneurship, and it seems that bringing entrepreneurship into education can contribute to a recreation of a “learning for life” approach to education.

The paper has also shown that for this to happen, educators have to act entrepreneurially themselves. In this way, the paper serves as an example of how entrepreneurship educators can use their own educational approach to act entrepreneurially in the education system

The specific entrepreneurship education approach described in the paper is not “the” solution to the problem of learning for exam – but it may be “a” solution. As any other

solutions, this approach has drawbacks and creates new problems and questions. Some of these problems are:

- Students may simulate a “learning for life” approach in order to get better grades
- Entrepreneurship education using this approach may end up as isolated bubbles in the educational systems

In our presentation, we intend to engage the audience by having them bring their own entrepreneurship education approaches to the table. In the presentation, we examine together with the audience, how they as educators can use their own educational approach, not only for the teaching of their students, but eventually also for acting as entrepreneurial educators.

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