

“Who is an entrepreneur?” - the orphan in entrepreneurship education
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Abstract:

Why and how is the question “Who is an entrepreneur?” still of fundamental importance to both students and teachers in entrepreneurship education - even though it has been refuted by most entrepreneurship scholars since Gartner (1988) stated that “Who is an Entrepreneur? Is the Wrong Question”?

Should something be done about this dilemma? What could and should be done? These simple questions are used to formulate a more coherent and complicated research question for entrepreneurship education:

Although “Who is an entrepreneur?” has been largely refuted in the field of entrepreneurship research it still seems highly relevant in the field of entrepreneurship education. This, we argue, presents a paradoxical tension to entrepreneurship education and educators in their didactical search for theoretical and empirical anchoring in the “mother” field of entrepreneurship. Rather than suppressing or accepting this paradoxical tension, we will confront the paradox by constructing a mutually accommodating understanding of the entrepreneurial role model transcending both the mother field of entrepreneurship as well as the field of entrepreneurship education.

The questions we care about in this paper

The present paper is based on some really naïve and open questions. The first question is:

Why and how is the question “Who is an entrepreneur?” still of fundamental importance to both students and teachers in entrepreneurship education - even though it has been refuted by most entrepreneurship scholars since Gartner (1988) stated that “Who is an Entrepreneur? Is the Wrong Question”?

Based on this question the paper further reflects on the following questions:

Should/could something be done about this research-teaching dilemma?

Finally, these simple questions are used to formulate a more coherent and complicated research question (Blenker et al, 2011) which we propose would be fruitful for entrepreneurship education scholars to engage in in the future:

Research Question for entrepreneurship education scholars: What constitutes a supportive way of using entrepreneurial role models in an entrepreneurial learning process (inside/outside the classroom) given the lack of empirical evidence for certain personality traits or demographic characteristics leading to entrepreneurship?

So far, no one has asked these questions. The paper thus contributes with some necessary conceptual housekeeping in the field entrepreneurship education research, by reframing some questions asked in entrepreneurship education research and aligning them with the questions asked - and answered - in its mother discipline entrepreneurship research. This is aligned with Fayolle (2013) who explicitly argues that entrepreneurship education: “...needs robust theoretical and conceptual foundations, drawing from the field of entrepreneurship and education to support entrepreneurship programmes and courses” (693).

“Who is an entrepreneur?”

An entrepreneur is a [man] equipped with good judgment, perseverance, and knowledge of the world and business (Say, 1816). The tendency to portray the entrepreneur as a special type of person encompassing certain characteristics and traits is easily traceable from the very beginning of entrepreneurship as an academic discipline. Although Schumpeter (1934, originally 1911) is primarily interested in entrepreneurship as the economic function that carries out innovation through new combinations of productive means, there are several places in his early work where the entrepreneur is seen as constituting certain personality characteristics. For example, Schumpeter points to descriptions of the entrepreneurial type as having initiative, authority and foresight - and a special ability to “see things in a way that afterwards proves to be true” (p, 85). 31 years later Schumpeter is much more pessimistic about the importance of entrepreneurial individuals. For the late Schumpeter (1942) the charismatic

entrepreneur has been caught in Weber's Iron Cage, as "more things can be strictly calculated that had of old to be visualized in a flash of genius" (p. 132). Therefore "personality and will power must count less" (p132). Instead of being performed by humans the performance of entrepreneurship is left in "the polar night of icy darkness" (Weber, 2009). In that way he managed to write out the individual in entrepreneurship – but not for long.

McClelland (1961, 1965) was the first, and typically seen as the most prominent scholar, to initiate more systematic research on these dispositional characteristics which greatly turned focus to the question of "who is an entrepreneur?" in terms of particular personal traits such as: need for achievement, need for power, locus of control, risk taking propensity or need for affiliation. His work spurred the interest of numerous scholars in entrepreneurship bringing the personal trait studies and the characteristics of the individual entrepreneur to the center of entrepreneurial research (Gartner, 1988; Rauch & Frese, 2007; Brandstätter, 2011). Gartner provocatively characterize this tradition as a: "if we can just find out who the entrepreneur is then we'll know what entrepreneurship is" (1988:23). Even Kirzner (e.g. Kirzner 1979), that continuously serve as a central influence and source of theoretical anchoring in the field of entrepreneurship, emphasises alertness as an entrepreneurial *predisposition* to be exceptionally perceptive to changes in the market underlying the importance of personality traits followed by the importance of cognitive abilities (Thrane 2006; Korsgaard et al. 2016).

However, the research tradition spurred by McClelland never really fulfilled its promises, as conclusions were often only vaguely significant and sometimes even contradictory (Gartner, 1988; Boyd & Vozikis, 1994; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Thrane, 2006).

A turning point came in 1988 with Gartner's seminal article: "Who is an Entrepreneur? Is the Wrong Question". In this polemic paper, Gartner successfully buried the trait approaches proclaiming it a dead-end and a futile and unfruitful research question. Instead, he made a compelling case for studying what entrepreneurs actually *do* - namely undertaking activities to create organizations - rather than who they are in terms of certain characteristics. How can we know the dancer if we artificially separate the dancer from the dance - as Gartner suggests. The central point is *not* Gartner's definition of entrepreneurship as the "creation of organisations", but the promotion of a behavioral perspective within entrepreneurship research. Finally, the persistent dominance of the 'entrepreneurial opportunity' approach as the central construct within entrepreneurship research in almost two decades have equally supported the reframing of entrepreneurship away from the characteristics of the entrepreneur (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Davidsson, 2015; Thrane et al. 2016).

This is not to say that this stream of research has not resurfaced in new and even more refined ways (Zhao & Seibert, 2006; Rauch & Frese, 2007; Brandstätter, 2011). For example, a recent study by Shane and Nicolaou (2015) explore entrepreneurship through genetic predispositions in a comprehensive twin-study. Even though the study find that people with creative personalities and certain genetic factors are significantly related to entrepreneurial behavior the evidence still support the value of considering the complementary roles of biology and environment, since neither *determine* entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviour (Shane & Nicolaou, 2015).

Related to Gartner's call for a behavioral approach to entrepreneurship, Stevenson and Jarillo (1990) distinguish between three main categories of entrepreneurship research. One stream (Schumpeter and Kirzner) is occupied with *what* happens when entrepreneurs act; another

stream (McClelland) is the psychological and sociological approach, which is occupied with *why* entrepreneurs act; and the third stream is the behavioral (Gartner) and management inspired (Stevenson & Jarillo) tradition. Indeed, the behavioral 'how' form of entrepreneurship research is the most appropriate for business schools (as well as other types of education) as it focuses on understanding and improving practice (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990). Importantly then to entrepreneurship education, the result of this focus should enable entrepreneurship researchers to restate the question 'who is an entrepreneur?' in terms of the skills and abilities the entrepreneur would need to know or acquire to act and behave entrepreneurially (Gartner 1988). This is basically what Sarasvathy & Venkataraman (2011) refer to as a non-elitist and mundane "entrepreneurial method" that can be learned by everyone who cares to learn it. Thus, if we know how entrepreneurs act, entrepreneurship education could and should be seen as a question of bringing students into situations where they have to act as entrepreneurs and then reflectively learn from these experiences (Rae, 2010; Thrane et al. 2016).

The orphan in entrepreneurship education

Above we have explored how the question of "Who is an entrepreneur?", has been refuted, or at least nuanced, by most entrepreneurship scholars as the wrong question in modern entrepreneurship theory in favour of a behavioral approach. Indeed, from an entrepreneurship educational point of view, defining "who is an entrepreneur" in terms of personality traits defeats the entire *raison d'être* of entrepreneurship education (Neck & Greene (2011). On the contrary, enforcing the distinction between students with entrepreneurial personality traits or other sticky characteristics or not runs the risk of alienating numerous students with questionable empirically grounding (Thrane et al. 2016).

Hence, "Who is an entrepreneur?" is essentially an orphan within research questions in the "motherfield" of entrepreneurship as well as within entrepreneurship education - rejected by its closest relatives and and thrown into an isolated journey of survival. As in Snow White however, the orphan oftentimes finds its own path of survival after fierce battles with a wicked stepmother using its, at least in Snow White, unique abilities to build a network of friends. In the next section we will explore this friendship and take advantage of its fear of rejection - albeit with a hidden agenda and a poisoned apple. We will argue, that "who is an entrepreneur" is indeed of importance to students and consequently teachers in entrepreneurship education. However, we will try to reframe the question from a focus on characteristics and nouns, to a focus on storytelling, narratives, and verbs asking instead a grammatically challenging question - "How is an entrepreneur" - and use this as a role model. Below in table 1, a number of approaches related to the identity question are juxtaposed vis-à-vis their use in their respective mother field of research and entrepreneurship education research. A number of constructs such as entrepreneurial mindset, entrepreneurial intent, high self-efficacy, entrepreneurial role model or entrepreneurial identity has found way into the entrepreneurship classroom. They all, unclearly however, relate to the idea of "who is an entrepreneur?"

Table 1 Identity related constructs i entrepreneurship education

	Theoretical background	Discourse in entrepreneurship education
<i>Entrepreneurial mind-set</i>	The origin is somewhat unclear, but mindset would seem to refer to a specific state of mind which would orientate or direct human conduct. The recent use of the concept probably is inspired by Carol Dweck’s distinction between fixed and growth mindsets	The mind-set norm is relatively new in entrepreneurship education. It is typically formulated as a purpose for entrepreneurship education: That education should contribute to the formation of an entrepreneurial mindset.
<i>Entrepreneurial intent</i>	The idea of ‘intent’ as a proxy for eventual later ‘behaviour’ or ‘action’ comes from cognitive psychology thinking often operationalized in Stimulus-Organism-Response models. The dominant approach in entrepreneurship education is from Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour.	Entrepreneurial intent is a psychological construct often used to measure the effect of entrepreneurship education. It is typically used as the dependent variable in studies of entrepreneurship education, where different forms of courses or programs are seen as the independent variable.
<i>High self-efficacy</i>	The concept come from Bandura and has from the beginning been related to education and personal development. It describes an individual’s judgement of how well one can execute the action required to deal with prospective situations.	Self-efficacy is typically used to express one of the learning goals of entrepreneurship education. The purpose of entrepreneurship education is formulated as an attempt to increase self-efficacy
<i>Entrepreneurial role models</i>	Learning through role models has its origin in situated and apprenticed based learning where knowledge is often tacit and thus has to be acquired through the observation of relevant role models	Established entrepreneurs are often used as examples and role models in entrepreneurship education. In some cases, famous and high profiled entrepreneurs are used - in other cases older students are seen as better models as they are within the next development zone of the students

<i>Entrepreneurial identity</i>	Philosophically identity refers to what makes an entity definable and recognizable. In the case of personal identity, it signifies a person's continuity of existence through time. Later this concept has been strongly relativised from social constructionist positions.	The learning activities of entrepreneurship education are understood as a elements of a formative process that facilitate the students processes of re-interpreting and forming themselves.
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The results of this conceptual analysis are twofold. Specifically, we will argue (and admit) that a number of the concepts illustrated in table 1 especially the concepts of mind-sets, role models and entrepreneurial identity relies heavily on the concept of “who is an entrepreneur?”.

Identity and entrepreneurship education.

Students, as well as all individuals, continuously strive for “identity relevance” in their behaviour as well as their actions (Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, students work on their professional identity in terms of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that help them define themselves and their behaviour and transform themselves into a specific professional role (Schein 1978). The notion of possible selves is often seen as a central mechanism within this process of identity transition (Ibarra 1999, Markus & Nurius 1984, Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010) – even within entrepreneurship (e.g. Hoang & Gimeno 2010; Farmer et al. 2009). In this context possible selves refer to students’ diverse, and often multiple, more or less developed images about what they might become, what they would like to become, and even what they might be afraid of becoming in their professional life.

From an educational and motivational point of view possible selves are important as they act as an interface between behaviour and students’ self-concept, in the sense that they not only provide students’ with a fairly clear goal to strive for, but also select new behaviour for trial and give direction and specific plans for action in the pursuit of those goals. Evidence even suggest that possible selves increase the efficiency and creativity in achieving these goals (Meara et al., 1995). Moreover, possible selves provide energy and motivation to pursue the actions necessary for attaining these possible selves and equally negative energy and demotivation if the possible selve is considered undesirable (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). This positive or negative effect is even accentuated if the possible selves are fairly well-developed (or under-developed) and regarded as highly desirable (or undesirable). Questions of identity and possible selves are prevalent in all educational settings. Students of economics, medicine or law of course try to imagine what it is like *to be* an economist, doctor or lawyer; but these possible selves are relatively well defined as they exist as professions. Thus, it is easier for students of well-defined professions to construct a potential professional identity, visualize a possible self or engage in identity work contrary to identity play (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Questions of identity and possible selves are, however, particularly essential

to students exploring entrepreneurship as a potential professional career choice, since it tends to be seemingly discontinuous and deviate from highly institutionalized academic and professional trajectories for most students (Rae, 2010; Pittaway & Thorpe 2012; Middleton and Donnellon, 2014; Thrane et al., 2016). Indeed, the idea that entrepreneurship, as a professional career choice, is somehow distinctively different from other professions is a widely shared belief and a central theme within entrepreneurship research as well (Shepherd & Haynie 2009; Baker and Nelson, 2005; Murnieks & Mosakowski, 2007; Fauchart & Gruber 2011). Hence, if entrepreneurship is not activated as one among several possible selves (or possible identities) among entrepreneurship students, it is unlikely that students will point their motivation, energy, behavior, and engagement towards realizing that specific direction (Thrane et al. 2016). Actually, research even suggests that entrepreneurship outside the classroom equally involves a process of identity construction or identity transition encompassing a powerful motivating force necessary to pursue fundamental entrepreneurial activities (Hoang & Gimeno 2010; Ireland & Webb 2007; Farmer et al. 2009; Cardon et al. 2009) highly influenced by the social environment – like parental, peer or social norm influence (Falck, Heblich, and Luedemann 2009). Facilitating and assisting such entrepreneurial identity transitions through possible selves is or should be then be an important part of entrepreneurship education. Indeed, as argued by Rossiter (2003), higher educational institutions (HEI's) also serve a heavy influence in the development of possible selves as well as providing a context for their elaboration.

The role of role-models in entrepreneurship education

Essentially, possible selves are formed by observing role models and tested, discarded and revised through evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback (Markus & Nurius, 1986, Ibarra 1999; Donnellon et al 2014; Harmeling 2011; Fletcher & Watson 2007; Johansson 2004). Most likely then, students, knowingly or unknowingly (to entrepreneurship educators as well), use and search for role models to discern what constitutes a credible entrepreneurial role in their role- or identity repertoire influenced by such things as family, friends, educators, academic experience, media, and by various role expectations associated with gender, class, or race (Oyserman et al., 2002; Rossiter 2007; Leondari, 2007). This is exactly where the question “who is an entrepreneur?” becomes a central question in entrepreneurship education, since it is the foundation for students’ experiment or play with possible entrepreneurial selves to answer the fundamental question: “am I or do I want to become an entrepreneur?”. However, what actually constitutes a credible entrepreneurial role? What can we as professional educators tell students, if anything, about the entrepreneurial role model? And, if we tell them that there is no such thing as an entrepreneurial role model or we simply ignore the question altogether, how will family, friends, media, and role expectations associated with gender, class, race, etc. influence their role- or identity repertoire if nothing but a naïve and sometimes even discordant image of the heroic depiction of the entrepreneur as a white male...

This, presents a paradoxical tension to entrepreneurship education and educators in their didactical search for theoretical inspiration and empirical anchoring in the “mother” field of entrepreneurship. Paradoxical, in the sense that each position may seem logical and true in isolation, but inconsistent when appearing simultaneously (Lewis, 2000). Rather than suppressing or accepting this paradoxical tension, we will try to confront the paradox by constructing a mutually accommodating understanding of the entrepreneurial role model transcending both the mother field of entrepreneurship as well as the field of entrepreneurship education.

“How is an entrepreneur?”, is the right question in the classroom?

Research on identity often emphasizes narratives and storytelling as an important part of entrepreneurial identity construction (Johansson 2004; Fletcher & Watson 2007; Harmeling 2011; Rigg & O’Dwyer 2012). Narratives are used to revise and reconstruct identities, which make these narratives not only expressive but also constitutive to identity as they help people articulate possible selves. Hence, identities and possible selves are constructed through the narratives we create.

Most likely then, students need some kind of framework to discern what constitutes a credible entrepreneurial role in their role- or identity- prototyping. However, since we cannot discern what constitutes a credible role model in terms of personality traits and characteristics, i.e. we cannot answer “who is an entrepreneur”, we will look for a coherent entrepreneurial narrative related to an entrepreneurial process (Blenker et al, 2015; Thrane, 2016). The fact that these narratives are constructed does not suggest that they are just ‘made up’. Instead, these narratives should potentially represent an authentic, coherent, purposeful, imagery, and plausible story as close and true to life as possible (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

Ibarra & Babulescu (2010) suggest that coherence, legitimacy, and audience participation are important features of the validation of self-narratives in an identity transition. Accordingly, self-narratives and their structured plots need to make coherent sense and be plausible on their own terms, even though they can be loosely structured, fragmented, or provisional constructions. By the same token, for narratives to be convincing and legitimate, they need to relate to familiar and culturally accepted plots and contain archetypical character portrayals and settings (Thrane & Basaiawmoit 2015)

Today we will meet a real entrepreneur

Also, what happens when we introduce the entrepreneur into the classroom as a visiting teacher or guest lecture in the entrepreneurship curriculum to support this process of playing with possible selves?

There may be several reasons to appreciate entrepreneurs in the classroom; they have practical expertise that academic staff do not possess and they can demonstrate hands-on and personal experiences of living with the insecurity of entrepreneurial process (Blenker & Christensen, 2010). One mainstream view on the role of the entrepreneur in the classroom is that (*he*) can

showcase best-practice from real-life entrepreneurship. This would typically be the case if the entrepreneur is brought into “learning *about* entrepreneurship” education. In this case he would serve as the teachers “live case” that on the one hand illustrates the teachers theoretical points, but on the other hand serves as a practical and experience based corrective to academic teacher dominance (Blenker & Christensen, 2010).

However, another well-known reason for bringing the entrepreneur to the classroom is for him to serve as a role-model. The life of students is quite different from the life taking place in entrepreneurial communities and they therefore have difficulties in seeing how they can develop themselves into being part of such communities. To fulfill this role the entrepreneur must personify values of credibility and integrity, but he must also represent something that is “within reach” of the students. This form of entrepreneur involvement in education would typically take place in the case of “learning *for* entrepreneurship”. In these learning situations, the presence and discussions with the entrepreneur can enrich student’s reflections on whether or not entrepreneurship is a relevant career path for them. Ideally this can combine the practical training for entrepreneurship with building entrepreneurial attitudes and aspirations (Blenker & Christensen, 2010).

In the case of “learning *through* entrepreneurship” the entrepreneurs’ role as a role-model becomes more complicated. In this case the fundamental pedagogical idea is to let the students learn experientially by bringing them through an entrepreneurial process. Such a process would involve organizing a set of entrepreneurial activities (analysis of resources and opportunities, creation of an entrepreneurial solution, committing stakeholders, creating and testing prototypes, testing a business model etc.) that the student should go through and learn from (Blenker & Christensen, 2010; Thrane et al, 2016). During such a process of personal transition the student would need someone to mirror, discuss or reflect personal or even existential development with. The concept of role-model may not be the best way to understand this supportive role for an individual in transition. The student will typically be one individual at beginning of the processes and another at the end. Instead of “role-model”, perhaps the concept of “mentor” is better able to grasp the dialectics between on the one hand infusing entrepreneurial attitudes and aspirations - and on the other hand humbly helping the student formulate “how the student can be the particular entrepreneur he/she wants to be”.

Above we have tried to demonstrate that, although “Who is an entrepreneur?” has been refuted by most researchers in the field of entrepreneurship research the question still seems highly relevant in the field of entrepreneurship education. Something should therefore be done to bridge differences between the mother discipline of entrepreneurship research and the pedagogical discipline of entrepreneurship education.

Implications

A fruitful reframing of the question we work with in entrepreneurship education has implications for both didactics and pedagogy. Didactically the questions of learning goals are transformed from installing particular preconceived identities or mind-sets in the heads of the students to letting the students themselves actively construct how their particular identities and

mind-sets can be. Pedagogically the learning process changes from teacher dominated presentations of an ideal entrepreneurial identity through preconceived role models, to students gradually constructing their own repertoire of how to behave and be.

Instead we need approaches (Thrane et al, 2016) that are both *person-centric* as they allow and encompass learning through entrepreneurship by which individualized knowledge of future selves is created - and *process-centric* as this learning is created through the transformation of experience from an authentic entrepreneurial process. We argue that entrepreneurship education students during their learning process add ingredients to their repertoire of possible selves revolving around entrepreneurial behavior instead of personality characteristics and evaluate their experience with these behaviors against internal standards of appropriateness and modify their identity repertoires accordingly. Through this process of identity evaluation students gradually construct and personalize their repertoire, by selecting certain elements and form behavioral role models as exemplars of desirables or undesirable possible selves.

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