



This is an english manuscript of an article "Pourquoi un regard critique pourrait-il bénéficier à l'enseignement de l'entrepreneuriat ?" published in Revue de l'Entrepreneuriat / Review of Entrepreneurship 2022/4 (Vol. 21)
<https://doi.org/10.3917/entre.214.0020>

Why a critical perspective is positive for entrepreneurship education?

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship education has gained a strong foothold at various levels of education in most Western countries; it is seen as vital for increasing venture creation and entrepreneurship skills among those interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Furthermore, educational institutions and programmes implement entrepreneurship education to facilitate student employability, as enterprising employees are considered to benefit their employers (Killingberg et al., 2022). Thus, the field tends to view entrepreneurship education as primarily good, leading to mainly positive outcomes at various levels, such as for the individual, their ventures or companies, and society. There has not, however, been much room for any critical voices in this domain—the only ‘critical’ perspective is represented by the question of whether entrepreneurship education will be successfully implemented across all disciplines and faculties quickly enough.

It is within other research fields, such as that of education, that voices critical of entrepreneurship education have been heard. For example, the wave of entrepreneurship education—with its fluid and ever-changing aims acting as a ‘Trojan horse’—has been suggested to strengthen neoliberal ideology in schools and, ultimately, in society (Komulainen et al., 2011). As such, entrepreneurship education is posited to cultivate neoliberal subjectivity, or the concept of an ‘enterprising self’ who has the capacity to overcome any individual or societal challenges (Rose, 1992). While these analyses and conceptual discussions are powerful and interesting, my interpretation is that these contributions advocate for abolishing entrepreneurship education rather than improving its practices.

‘Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater’

As an entrepreneurship researcher and educator, I am curious about—and wish to search for—an alternative to abandoning entrepreneurship education. Thus, I have joined with other entrepreneurship educators who want to adopt a critical perspective but to use it to the advantage of entrepreneurship education (Berglund et al., 2020). The question is no longer one of stopping entrepreneurship education but of aiming to transform it, to give it new directions

and to open it up to becoming critical of (some forms of) entrepreneurship (Dodd et al., 2021; Transforming Enterprise Education, n.d.). In my encounters with the mainstream entrepreneurship education community, I have noticed that a critical perspective is not always welcome. It is seen to undermine entrepreneurship education as a form of resistance to change. In this short essay, I argue that being critical of entrepreneurship education can contribute to its positive development.

First, allowing our students (and ourselves) to be critical of entrepreneurship enables more autonomous and free decision-making. The mantra that becoming an entrepreneur (or at least an enterprising individual) is a necessary condition for every person deprives entrepreneurship of agency, despite its strong connotations with autonomy and freedom. Thus, I argue that it is important that entrepreneurship students are allowed, and actually invited, to critically explore the extent to which (neoliberal) society is governing us and the extent to which we have freedom in becoming entrepreneurial subjects of different kinds. In this way, students can also engage in resistance and make better decisions for themselves (Berglund & Verduyn, 2018).

Second, entrepreneurship research has clearly demonstrated how entrepreneurship as a phenomenon is gendered, classed and connected to race and ethnicity (Knight, 2016). Yet it seems that these considerations have not been fully integrated into entrepreneurship classes and programmes; entrepreneurship (education) is mostly presented as a neutral practice available to all. Indeed, entrepreneurship is often hailed as a means by which to level out any obstacles when it comes to gender, race, ethnicity and class (Berglund et al., 2017). However, such a perspective can, in fact, perpetuate the existing challenges. By adopting a critical perspective as educators, we can design our educational practices in ways that address potential challenges—for example, by acknowledging the role of gender and gendered language in our courses (Jones & Warhuus, 2018).

Third, although entrepreneurship education often promotes quite broad aims (e.g., developing creativity and initiative)—in particular, at the lower levels of education—as opposed to business venturing skills, it is surprising how usual it is to use businesses and enterprises as learning vehicles in all forms of entrepreneurship education and at all school levels. For example, ‘mini company’ educational models are common even in primary schools. From a critical perspective, such models further solidify the connection between entrepreneurship education and venture creation (Kyrö, 2015). A critical perspective thus opens the possibility for questioning practices that have been taken for granted and provides an opportunity for

educators to envision and cultivate other connections—for example, between the arts and entrepreneurship education (Bureau & Zander, 2014).

Fourth, acknowledging that society is facing many ongoing crises that threaten our very existence (e.g., climate change, the biodiversity crisis and wars), it is important to seek new pedagogies and ways to engage with the world and the future. This calls for placing entrepreneurship education within the environmental ecosystem (in a literal sense) and working together with many different stakeholders towards transforming the unknown future through sustainability, social justice and hope (Dodd et al., 2021; Transforming Enterprise Education, n.d.).

To sum up, I understand that entrepreneurship education comes with the potential to exacerbate existing societal challenges (e.g., inequality and environmental challenges). However, it also comes with the potential to work towards better futures for all, both human and non-humans. I argue that taking a critical approach to entrepreneurship education can help us to be a part of the solution—not of the problem.

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