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Using the Threshold Concept Framework to inform Entrepreneurship Education

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship is seen as a positive driver of economic, social and political change but as a relatively new, multidisciplinary subject it has a fragile identity, its educational validity is contested and a lack of conceptual grounding makes it vulnerable to the skills agenda and genericism.

The threshold concept framework is used here as a lens to explore its distinctive nature, offer a conceptual grounding, suggestions of ways to educate students in it and ways represent students' understanding of it.

A staged stakeholder curriculum inquiry was conducted, using semi-structured interviews, a Delphi survey and concept mapping workshops with purposive samples of UK entrepreneurs, educators and students.

The findings offer a response to the question "what is distinctive about thinking like an entrepreneur?" enabling the subject of entrepreneurship to be defined and curricula developed, also facilitating the application of entrepreneurial approaches across other subject areas.

Paper: Entrepreneurship can be seen as a positive driver of economic, social and political change but a lack of conceptual grounding makes the subject, when taught in higher education, vulnerable to the skills agenda and genericism. Entrepreneurship is a relatively new, multidisciplinary academic subject with a fragile identity and contested educational validity. The prevailing temptation in entrepreneurship and enterprise education to privilege experiential learning, focus on the assessment of competencies and encourage or even require students to start up new ventures can be interpreted as a bi-product of a neo-liberal approach, and the market managerial capitalistic ideology currently prevalent in the UK.

The aim of this doctoral research was to use the threshold concept framework as a lens to inform entrepreneurship education. The objectives of the research were; to conduct a staged stakeholder

curriculum inquiry involving purposive samples of UK based entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship educators and students of entrepreneurship; to suggest candidate threshold concepts in entrepreneurship; to suggest effective approaches to entrepreneurship education; and to explore how students understand entrepreneurship.

The threshold concept framework posits that in any academic discipline there are concepts that have a particularly transformative effect on student learning. Termed threshold concepts, they represent a transformed way of understanding something, without which the learner cannot progress (Meyer and Land 2005). In transforming the learner, threshold concepts change the learner's perceptions, subjectivities and world-view. There is a repositioning of the self (Meyer and Land 2005); an ontological as well as a conceptual shift. This can often be uncomfortable and is sometimes resisted. Mastery of a threshold concept simultaneously changes an individual's idea of what they know and who they are (Cousin 2009). Such changes are likely to be irreversible and are unlikely to be forgotten or unlearned. They are integrative in that they expose how other things can be related to each other. Threshold concepts can constitute "ways of thinking and practising" in a discipline and offer a way to understanding what it means to think 'like an entrepreneur', and to understand what is distinctive about entrepreneurship.

The threshold concept framework is appealing to educators as it offers a way of avoiding an over-stuffed curriculum by differentiating between core learning goals that enable the learner to see things in a different way, and other learning goals which, though important, do not have the same significantly enabling and transformative effect. The threshold concept framework can enable educators to un-block student learning by allowing them to locate troublesome aspects of disciplinary knowledge and identify appropriate ways of modifying or redesigning curricula to enable students to negotiate such transitions more successfully (Land, Cousin et al. 2006)..

The likely bounded characteristic of threshold concepts offer a response to the question "what is distinctive about thinking 'like an entrepreneur'?" Once the distinctiveness of entrepreneurship becomes clearer, the curriculum can be developed offering an answer to the question, "How can we educate students to think 'like an entrepreneur'?" The likely integrative characteristics of threshold concepts offer a response to the question, "How do students understand thinking 'like an entrepreneur'?"

Building on elements of transactional curriculum inquiry (Cousin 2009) in the identification of entrepreneurship threshold concepts, a 'staged stakeholder curriculum inquiry' was developed. This enabled two of the concerns expressed by Barradell (2013) to be addressed; namely the lack of involvement of external stakeholders and the importance of consensus among experts, whilst allowing the student voice to be heard. A pragmatic approach was taken to the choice of research method for each stage of the study with due consideration for methodological alignment. A Delphi survey was used with the entrepreneurs, semi-structured interviews with the educators and concept mapping workshops with the students. Taking an interpretivist and social constructivist approach, entrepreneurship has been treated as a socially constructed phenomena and a qualitative research approach has been adopted.

Candidate entrepreneurship threshold concepts were identified from the Delphi survey undertaken with entrepreneurs, and semi-structured interviews with educators as: 'entrepreneurial agency'; 'context is opportunity'; 'context is resource'; 'risk is missed opportunity'; 'value is determined by the

customer'; and 'entrepreneurship is a social practice'. Suggested ways to educate students in entrepreneurship were identified in semi-structured interviews with educators as; 'a framework for engagement', 'opportunities for real-life learning'; 'opportunities for reflection'; 'failure as a valuable learning experience'; 'closing the theory-practice gap'; 'team work' and 'teaching knowledge content'.

A number of interesting findings were made from the analysis of the students' concept maps, indicating in an explicit and graphic way, the development of their understanding of entrepreneurship. The quality of the structure and content of each concept map was evaluated based on its topography, its explanatory power in terms of number of causative dynamic propositions (e.g, heat *melts* ice), and the number of candidate entrepreneurship threshold concepts the concepts on the map could be linked to. The maps indicated a development in understanding of entrepreneurship over the course of the programme of study. The developing integration of the concepts by the students is used here as an indicator of their developing understanding of entrepreneurship.

Using the likely bounded nature of threshold concepts, the threshold concept framework has enabled the identification of a number of candidate entrepreneurship threshold concepts, thus enabling the subject of entrepreneurship to be demarcated and made distinctive, and enabling curriculum development. Using the likely integrative nature of threshold concepts within and across disciplinary areas, the threshold concept framework can be used to facilitate the application of entrepreneurial approaches in other academic subject areas.

This study demonstrates how the characterisation of entrepreneurial ways of thinking and practising can define what makes a subject distinctive, suggest how curriculum development might be informed and illustrate the development of student understanding. When education is treated as a process of transformation, it becomes much more difficult to commodify (Land 2016). It is hoped that this more conceptual approach to entrepreneurship education will offer a defence against the threat inherent in the skills agenda and the lure of genericism.

References

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