

Learning through Entrepreneurship: Infusing Immigrant Entrepreneurial Knowledge to Entrepreneurship Education for Students and SMEs

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Abstract:

The present paper discusses the concept of entrepreneurship in relation to emerging challenges of global markets and changing enterprise, and the ability of higher education to adjust to these challenges and deliver high quality learning outcomes for both students and SMEs. Immigrant entrepreneurship is emphasized as a tool to provide the necessary knowledge and real life experiences that may promote entrepreneurial learning in cross-cultural environments. It is believed that learning through the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can lead to a better understanding of the obstacles, challenges, and facilitating factors for successful entrepreneurship in times of economic hardship and globalization. This knowledge can later be infused into higher education curricula in order to better reflect the needs of students and SMEs in developing international and cross-cultural capability. Although immigrant entrepreneurship has been mostly studied in relation to ethno-cultural characteristics and processes, we offer a new approach that may potentially lead to culturally-sensitive lifelong learning and training programs, and thus increase access to global markets.

Keywords

Curriculum, Immigrants, International Entrepreneurship, Internationalisation, SMEs

1. Introduction

Immigration is not new to human nature. In fact, it can be surmised that immigration has played a key role to the survival of the human species throughout the centuries. In modern times, immigration can largely be seen as the shifting of people between countries. In most cases, immigrants move from a low-resource country, to a high-resource one, with the prospects of improving their overall quality of life and gain access to more opportunities for development and growth. Nevertheless, the society often views immigrants as low-skilled people intended to be employed in low-level

and low-paid jobs [1]. **Empirical research, however, points out that immigrants who take on entrepreneurship initiatives in a host country, are likely to outperform locals and lead growth in their area of interest [2-4].** Thus, entrepreneurship seems to play a key role in fulfilling immigrants' dreams for prosperity and improved quality of life, and helping them climb the social status ladder in the host country [5]. Furthermore, entrepreneurship has the potential to renew existing organizations and increase social capital, develop new business and leverage national economies [6-8].

Embedding entrepreneurial culture within formal education systems is of vital importance as it can lead economic growth and sustainability in the future. Still, transmitting entrepreneurship skills to students or non-student populations (e.g., in SMEs) is not an easy task, and has led scholars to wonder if entrepreneurship can really be taught at all, or whether it reflects personality attribute [9-10]. Following a systematic review of the literature on entrepreneurship teaching in higher education, Pittaway and Cope [11] argued that there are areas for development and gaps in the existing knowledge base, as well as a growing need for cross-fertilization of research themes.

The present paper responds to that need by proposing immigrant entrepreneurship as a potentially new driver in entrepreneurship education. Specifically, it is argued that the knowledge base and teaching of entrepreneurship can be significantly enriched by the careful consideration **of immigrant entrepreneurs' experiences in setting up and sustaining their businesses in cross-cultural settings.** The development of learning frameworks that can complement and improve the existing knowledge-base and delivery of entrepreneurship education using the knowledge gained from immigrant entrepreneurship experiences that focuses on the lived experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can provide students with a **more realistic view** of what it means to be an entrepreneur in a dynamically changing cultural environment, and may potentially highlight the skills needed to achieve this goal more effectively. Furthermore, focusing on the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs provides a shift in our attention from theoretical perspectives, to more applied and **realistic aspects** of entrepreneurship that can hardly be conceptualized at a purely theoretical

level. Finally, the challenges and prospects experienced by immigrant entrepreneurs can give an insight into the processes that promote (or hinder) entrepreneurship initiatives in the face of an emerging global market.

2. Characteristics of Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Immigrant entrepreneurship has been a topic of special interest, especially in Europe [12]. Several theorists and researchers have argued that immigrant entrepreneurship can have **different motives, ranging from labour market disadvantages, to group resources and opportunity structure** [13]. In particular, immigrants may start up their own business as a way to overcome discrimination and block mobility in labour markets of the host country, or as means to achieve a higher quality of life [14-15]. Also, immigrant entrepreneurs may initiate small-to-medium enterprises that serve locals (e.g., ethnic restaurants and bars), **focus on niche markets** [16], or exclusively serve customers of the same ethnic origin and/or immigrant network [17-18]. According to the 'opportunity structure' hypothesis immigrants enter businesses that are of less interest to large-scale markets and require **low human capital** and financial resources [19-21], and in some cases the traits and attributes of their **ethnic origin** (e.g., **religious beliefs, traditions**) may shape their business opportunities and choices [22]. However, there are reported cases where immigrant entrepreneurs have leveraged progress in their field of interest, or successfully led big corporations [23-25]. Overall, it can be surmised that immigrant entrepreneurs have vastly different experiences from local entrepreneurs, both in terms of access to rights and opportunities, and drivers and motives to entrepreneurial culture. The diversity of the immigrant entrepreneur experience has attracted the research interest of anthropologists, sociologists, and even human geographers. We argue that the lived experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can help researchers and theorists refine old concepts, and accordingly develop new **learning frameworks** of entrepreneurship that will benefit entrepreneurship teaching in higher education.

3. The Potential to Drive a New Model of Entrepreneurship Research and Teaching

The current approach to entrepreneurship has been largely shaped by concepts that apply to large corporations, and can hardly reflect the dynamics and processes of small enterprises. Furthermore, the business concepts used tend to be culture-specific, and fail to grasp aspects of the globalizing economy. Consequently, the existing theoretical base of entrepreneurship is rather fixed, and relatively inflexible. This may **lead to several problems**, including a mismatch between theoretical concepts and views and realistic aspects of entrepreneurship, as well as limitations and outdated approaches to entrepreneurship teaching in higher education or in skills-training programs. Focusing on immigrant entrepreneurship can generate the knowledge needed to overcome these limitations, and provide a more realistic aspect of entrepreneurial culture in an era characterized by global economic challenges and ongoing mobility of people between countries. A few examples can better illustrate this argument.

Firstly, immigrant entrepreneurship is a **dynamic process**, requiring the acquisition of the necessary skills, overcoming challenges (e.g., discrimination), and identifying potentially successful business opportunities. The arsenal of traits, skills, and behaviours needed to complete this task successfully may vary between ethnic groups of entrepreneurs in a country. Hence it is difficult to distinguish between 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' qualities, unless a tailor-made theoretical model of entrepreneurship is used. Such a model can greatly influence current conceptions and understanding of entrepreneurship, and would only be feasible if we take a closer look at the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs. This way, the existing evidence and knowledge base of entrepreneurship would significantly widen, and allow for the development of culturally-sensitive models that better describe entrepreneurial cultural in times of global change.

Secondly, whereas large corporations' behaviour does not change very often (as it takes a lot of effort and risk to do this), small businesses must be very flexible and adapt to trends and new paths that might lead to success. It can be argued that the small enterprises of immigrants may represent case studies of business success and development (or failure), and this knowledge is important in at least two respects: a) it may inform governmental policies and plans for immigrant employment

opportunities, and b) it may drive lifelong learning and skills acquisition programmes, and thus improve the learning of entrepreneurial skills.

The aforementioned arguments pinpoint that an emerging aspect may be missing from our current understanding and conceptualization of entrepreneurship. Addressing immigrant entrepreneurship also changes the generation and flow of knowledge in rather interesting ways (Figure 1). Instead of using theoretical concepts generated by the academia to inform society and SMEs, it is suggested that academic recognition that the **immigrant entrepreneur is expert in their experiences will allow immigrant entrepreneurs to generate knowledge that will inform academia**, refining traditional views and terminologies of entrepreneurship, or developing new ones.

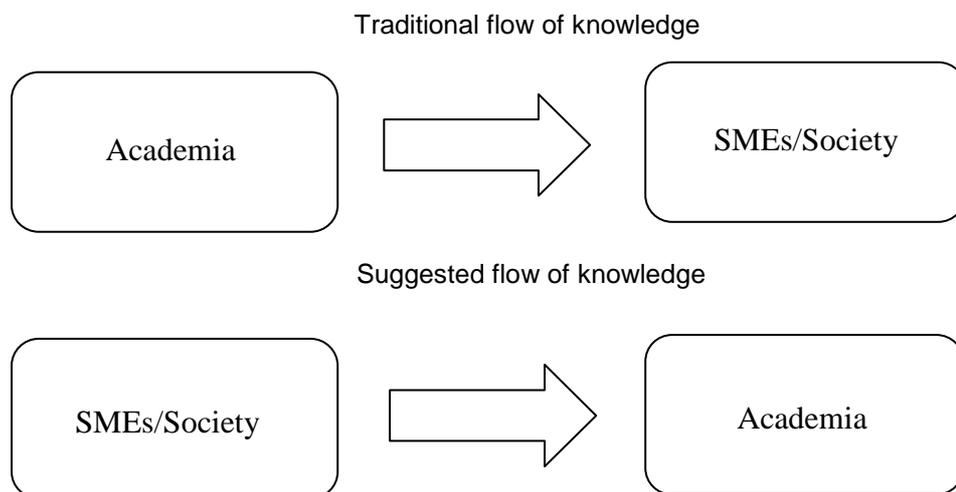


Figure 1 Flow of knowledge between academia and SMEs/Society

4. Bolstering Entrepreneurial Learning

Learning, as a concept, has been defined in numerous ways by many different theorists, researchers and educational practitioners. Although **a single definition cannot be given**, many common elements can be observed in various definitions. According to Ertmer and Newby [26] learners use past experiences to create new knowledge. In the same direction, Shuell (as interpreted by Schunk [27]) conceives

that "Learning is an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience". Thus, learning may be conceived as continuous change in the observable behaviour of an individual, which can be acquired by interacting with situations like everyday experiences. However, this continuous change cannot be entirely defined in order to provide a suitable definition for learning and due to this, one can assume that a single definition for academic learning will be problematic also. According to Laurillard [28] "when asking academics to define learning they come up with ambitious definition. Academics see **learning** as not simply a product, **but as a series of activities**, and developing skills and capabilities as much as formal knowledge". This development of skills and capabilities provides a widely accepted framework for entrepreneurship learning which may be viewed through both concepts: learning and academic learning.

Entrepreneurial learning reflects the process by which entrepreneurs **accumulate and use knowledge** for future business ventures and entrepreneurial initiatives. **Entrepreneurial learning is largely experiential in nature**, mainly driven and shaped by past experiences of business failure or success [29-30]. The experiences of entrepreneurs, therefore, play a major role in shaping entrepreneurial knowledge. This knowledge is reflected in the entrepreneur's abilities **to recognize opportunities** and cope with the liabilities of newness [31-33]. By this token, the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can lead to models of entrepreneurial learning that are more concerned with cross-cultural and human mobility issues, such as the ability to adapt to the host cultural environment, coping with prejudice or discrimination from other ethnic groups or indigenous entrepreneurs or suppliers, and the ability to integrate one's own cultural views and traditions to the broader social and cultural context of the host country. Basically, **the cross-fertilization of the personal skills with the knowledge gained from the experiences faced in the host environment** creates a lateral transfer of knowledge that leads to an optimized set of skills/model directed towards a **more intuitive character**. This model of entrepreneurial learning can create a repository of experiences, which can lead informed decisions of future immigrant entrepreneurs and SMEs vendors.

5. The Internationalization of Curricula in HE and Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Higher education plays a central role in the development and prosperity of local economies, and may offer a competitive advantage to each country in terms of developing and sustaining knowledge economy [34]. A central aspect of competitive higher education is the **ability to become internationalized**, namely, to widen the participation of students from all over the world [35]. **The overall aim of such an approach is to promote equal opportunities for learning, and produce graduates who can work in an increasingly global environment** [33-37]. Gaining access and being competitive in a global market, however, requires that graduates are able to adapt to new and unfamiliar cultures, are culturally-sensitive, and can appreciate and cope with the cultural diversity of international businesses and markets [38]. At this point, it is useful to recall that these attributes are also essential and necessary for immigrant entrepreneurs. Besides, university graduates moving between countries with the intent to start up their own ventures or be employed, represent a new wave of immigrant entrepreneurs, albeit with comparably higher academic prospects and skills as compared to low-skilled individuals. Put simply, the necessity to foresee business and employment opportunities in other countries puts pressure on university graduates in terms of increasing their arsenal of attributes needed to successfully adapt to cross-cultural environments. The attributes and skills needed to become competitive in a global market can be effectively delivered through the learning outcomes of carefully designed HE curricula that commit to the new dogma of internationalization. **Learning from the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can lead the development of such curricula** and provide realistic views of what it means to adapt and develop successfully (or unsuccessfully) in a cross-cultural setting.

6. Conclusions

Overall, immigrant entrepreneurship has been traditionally viewed as the business initiative of low-skilled and low-paid immigrants in otherwise economically developed countries. While this topic has attracted the research interest of sociologists and anthropologists, immigrant entrepreneurship might have a lot more to reveal. Firstly,

the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs can benefit existing research and theory in entrepreneurship by allowing for a more realistic view of what it means to start up a new business or foresee self-employment opportunities in a dynamically changing and challenging global market. This approach can change the flow of knowledge from the society and SMEs to the academia, and, hence, strengthen the link between these two entities. Secondly, immigrant entrepreneurship represents a dynamic process of entrepreneurial learning, which can significantly widen the knowledge base of culturally-sensitive entrepreneurial experiences. Finally, **immigrant entrepreneurship can be an important aspect of internationalizing higher education and improving the quality of learning outcomes delivered to students aiming to access global markets with a competitive advantage.**

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