

The educational researcher perspective: An interview with Daniele Morselli.

By Iván Diego. Valnalón. Asturias. Spain.

Daniele Morselli has a PhD in Education and has developed a comparative model between Italy and Australia for entrepreneurship education with vocational students undertaking work experience¹. He is now Marie Curie post-doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki. He is developing a model for teacher training in entrepreneurship education.



Daniele, your research activity has been largely focused on entrepreneurship education, arguably an “under-researched yet over-written” topic. What’s in it for you? And more importantly...why VET?

I consider entrepreneurship from a broad point of view. On the one hand, entrepreneurship is the 7th key European competence for lifelong learning, meaning active citizenship, social inclusion, personal fulfilment and employability. This key competence deals with our ability to turn ideas into action. On the other hand, when I think about entrepreneurship I look to its educational side. The European Union defines entrepreneurship education as all the educational activities seeking to prepare the individuals to be enterprising and responsible with the competences they need to match the objectives they set for themselves. It is important to understand that although not everyone needs to be an entrepreneur, everybody needs to be enterprising, in job, in private life and in education. It is maintained that, while the economic side of entrepreneurship has received a lot of attention from faculties in economics and business schools, the education side of entrepreneurship it is still in infancy.

I think that entrepreneurship education is particularly important in VET, when students are closer to starting to work and self-employment could represent an important opportunity. It is important to prepare young people to work in industry: while VET provides for the technical up-to-date skills, entrepreneurship education is key to endow students with the soft transversal skills to allow them to express their technical skills, to be enterprising by turning their ideas into action, either in employment, self-employment, or private life.

The theoretical framework you propose taps into some not-very-well-known adult theories of learning, and more precisely on Engeström’s theory of expansive learning. Can you boil it down for us?

The theory of expansive learning is a theory of innovation and change of practices, and this is the reason why I think it perfectly suits entrepreneurship education. The focus moves from the individual to activity systems, that is, organizations like companies and schools. Initially individuals begin to question the existing order and logic of their work; as more actors join in, a collaborative analysis and developing of a new model of activity are started and implemented. Eventually the learning effort of implementing a new model of the activity encompasses all members and elements of the collective activity system. The Change Laboratory is a type of workshop that seeks to trigger expansive learning.

¹ Morselli, D. (2015). Enterprise Education in Vocational Education: A Comparative Study Between Italy and Australia. Palgrave Macmillan.

The most recurrent question you get from VET teachers is... How does this translate into practice? Change Laboratory perhaps?

It is difficult to have teachers changing their teaching practices. On the one hand, their focus is on the curriculum such as knowledge and technical skills. On the other hand, they are not always convinced that they should embed entrepreneurship, which is often seen in a "narrow" way as starting a venture, a goal of business school and not secondary schools. Once teachers realise that entrepreneurship is about turning ideas into action and being enterprising in every life field, they are much more willing to cooperate. However, research suggests that the teacher will educate for entrepreneurship only when they teach in an entrepreneurial way. To do so, they have not just to sit for training courses, but take the lead of their learning and learn how to turn ideas into action. The Change Laboratory breaks away from regular training courses; in it the participants discuss issues important for them and find new solutions that are implemented, and in so doing they gain sense of initiative and entrepreneurship.

Few would deny entrepreneurial learning should be experiential but you talk about entrepreneurial learning as a transformation process taking place at the boundary ... where are these boundaries in VET? What makes boundary crossing so special?

Although many scholars agree that entrepreneurial learning is experiential in nature, we should differentiate between experiential in a wide sense and in a narrow sense. In a wide sense we learn from the experience, and there is no doubt about that. In a narrow sense, experiential learning is a learning theory where learning is an internal process to the individual of experiencing and reflecting. With the theory of expansive learning we break away from experiential learning theories, which gives little room to collectiveness and innovation.

According to many authors boundaries are important because it is there that innovation happens. The interaction with other professionals happens at the boundaries of organizations, and new ideas and practices are conceived of. During work experience students cross the boundary between school and work places. They are not empty boxes, but they also bring knowledge, competences and ideas from one organization to the other. In so doing, they can act as change agents. In my boundary crossing workshops (a variation of the Change Laboratory) teachers, students, work tutors and entrepreneurs meet and discuss the issues that students are facing during work experience. The discussion of problems which are important for the students and the presence of different points of view trigger expansive learning. New ideas are found and turned into action, and in so doing students become entrepreneurial.

A work-experience element is found in most European TVET systems. To what extent do these company placements expose students to the reality of entrepreneurship? Should we take this for granted in all cases or do special conditions apply?

If we consider the definitions above of the competence of the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurship education, we enlarge the definition of entrepreneurship. This means that entrepreneurship is not only about opening an enterprise, but also being intrapreneurial in the company, and learning employability skills. During work experience students can develop their employability skills: work by projects, work in group, show initiative, being autonomous to name a few. To do so, students should reflect on their employability skills, and discuss about the issues they are facing when moving from school to work. The discussion of these issues helps students to show initiative and become more autonomous, which are – the experts say – the main goal of entrepreneurship education in vocational students. But it would be naïve to think this is a spontaneous process. It needs careful planning and alignment of goals between all stakeholders involved: students, teachers, work tutors and entrepreneurs.

You underline the quintessential role of emotions and triggering events in entrepreneurial learning processes... I guess (and wish) you don't have mindfulness in mind... Do you think it is possible to design/plan for emotionally-charged entrepreneurial learning experiences? What's the role of negative emotions here?

Difficult experiences trigger negative emotions. It is important for students to learn to manage success and to learn from it. During Change Laboratory workshops there is an interplay between emotions bringing involvement and distanced reflecting on the problems. It is this interplay between reflection and involvement in groups that help finding a solution and new ideas and concepts that are then implemented.

What are you up to at present? Any other interesting projects?

At the moment my research is finding out how vocational teachers can teach in an enterprising way. To do so, I am using the theory of expansive learning, and organizing a Change Laboratory for vocational teachers in Italy. [EntreLab](#) project is financed by the European Commission through the Marie Curie funding scheme, rewarding the most promising researchers and the best research ideas. The host institution is the University of Helsinki, while the partner is Ca' Foscari of Venice.

And finally, what three things would you take with you to an ideal VET Entrepreneurial School?

I strongly believe that the teacher is the key element for entrepreneurship education in vocational education:

- **Active didactics:** teachers implement active didactics conducive of entrepreneurship: problem solving, learning by doing, group work, project work, mentoring, boundary crossing meetings between school and work experience.
- **Partnerships:** teachers set partnerships with industry and work experience for students. They also organize multidisciplinary projects with their colleagues, visits in the industry, and have professionals lecturing in the school.
- **Being enterprising:** teachers discuss about entrepreneurship with colleagues and experts, and attend regular trainings in entrepreneurship. In so doing, teachers are entrepreneurial inside and outside the school.

Through active didactics, partnerships and being enterprising themselves, teachers seek to develop in students enterprising attitudes such as risk taking, initiative and autonomy. It is clear that entrepreneurship education has to be an objective in the curriculum and be assessed. Finally, the institution and school director should offer strong support to the teachers and all involved.

Further reading:

Morselli, D. (2015). *Enterprise Education in Vocational Education: A Comparative Study Between Italy and Australia*. Palgrave Macmillan. <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137552594>

Morselli, D., Costa, M., & Margiotta, U. (2014). Entrepreneurship education based on the Change Laboratory. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 12(3), 333-348. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1472811714000445>