ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING WITHIN PEER NETWORKS (SUMMARY)

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ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING WITHIN PEER NETWORKS

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Principal Topic

It is widely recognized that “entrepreneurship is a process of learning, and a theory of entrepreneurship requires a theory of learning”. However, the entrepreneurial learning literature is still in the emerging stage. This paper explores the learning process of entrepreneurs in a largely ignored but very important context: peer networks, and examines its special values on both personal development and firm growth.

Method

Guided by action research methodology, we created and modified the peer learning environment for 68 local entrepreneurs by providing a one-year training program. Six entrepreneurs were interviewed three times each over the learning process.

Results and Implications

A theoretical framework was proposed with five emerged themes: (1) “Learning outcome” – The major effects of peer network learning were personal development, which was mainly reflected on confidence-enhancing. (2) “Learning mechanism” – Reflection, with highlights on questioning/disagreement and central role of ego, was the major mechanism of entrepreneurial learning through peer networks. (3) “Peer learning network characteristics” – The network features and the benefits one gains from it varied. Trust and learning through open communication among peers co-evolved over time. (4) “Entrepreneur characteristics” – The network features and benefits were primarily determined by the commitment that the entrepreneurs made into peer network building and maintaining, and also their social skills to do so. (5) “Exogenous learning conditions” – Learning through peer networks bore various advantages compared to through the other types of networks.

The key theoretical contribution of this article is that it offers a new understanding of the mechanisms of reflection in the process of experiential learning, a cornerstone of entrepreneurial learning. Reflection can be triggered drawing upon both individual (internal) experience and peer (external) experience. Moreover, reflection through affirmation instead of failure may reduce the costs of experiential learning. Theoretically, cognitive and social processes are interrelated mechanisms that support reflection in experiential learning.

This study provides suggestions for the institutions providing training to SMEs. Most importantly, a program should be aimed at creating an environment enabling collaborative learning in a community of specialist entrepreneurial practice. Trust has to be created in this process first, which does not automatically generate in a short period or in an environment with competitors.

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