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CONCEPTUALIZING THE OBSERVATIONAL SIDE OF ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING - A SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY APPROACH (Interactive Paper)

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Entrepreneurs are constant learners (Smilor 1997). Entrepreneurial learning processes allow vital information to be acquired, interpreted, processed and used for business decision making and opportunity discovery and acquisition related tasks. Until now, the bulk of scholarship on entrepreneurial learning theory has explored the importance of experiential learning (Wang & Chugh 2010). Adopters of this individualistic view advocate that entrepreneurial learning is developed through acting and then reflecting on their actions (Cope & Watts 2000; Rae & Carswell 2001; Cope 2003; Corbett 2005). However, this view fails to capture and integrate other important forms of entrepreneurial learning such as observational learning. Our approach is based on the use of an established observational learning theory – social learning theory by Albert Bandura (1977) – as a starting point for our empirical efforts.

Method

The overall objective of this paper is to uncover in-depth processes used by entrepreneurs when learning through observing significant people. Consequently an inductive qualitative research approach was used to explore the following main research question: how do entrepreneurs learn by observation? In particular 18 entrepreneurs were interviewed through semi structured interviews in 2011. Each participant was asked to draw a timeline highlighting significant people in their entrepreneurial journey. At a later stage participants were asked to describe what they considered to be the learning acquired from each significant person in the timeline. Data was recorded in digital format and most timelines were photographed. Data was then analyzed drawing on grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss 2008).

Results and Implications

Our focus is to conceptualize the observational learning angle within entrepreneurship. Based on Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory our preliminary findings suggest that entrepreneurs go through a 5 stage process when learning through observation of significant people: Connection, Retention, Stock, Evaluation and Reproduction. The conceptualization of entrepreneurial observational learning carries implications for researchers, practitioners and course organizers. For researchers this study adds to the ongoing debate on conceptualizing entrepreneurial learning. By modeling a total different angle on entrepreneurial learning this research also opens other investigative avenues. For practitioners this research highlights the need to a constant screening of role models that present a consistent entrepreneurial behavior. For entrepreneurship course organizers our research suggests the requirement for the incorporation of observational learning spaces in the student’s learning journey.

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