Introduction

Scholars of entrepreneurial learning discuss for the most part, the learning of individuals as they developing a for-profit enterprise. Relatively few scholars explore the learning of social entrepreneurs, or the learning of entrepreneurs in new forms of enterprise incubation, such as accelerators. Cohen (2013) defines accelerators by suggesting that in contrast to incubators, they last for a short period (usually two to four months) and involve cohorts of entrepreneurs in an intensive process of entrepreneurship education. Hallen, Bingham and Cohen (2014) note that some accelerator processes are associated with significant venture development. Nonetheless, only a year before the publication of their article, a professional development workshop noted that research on accelerators remains “embryonic” (AoM, 2013). Miller and Bound (2011) reinforce this impression by pointing out that there are few studies of accelerators which target less traditional categories of entrepreneur – such as social entrepreneurs.

The objective of this paper is to begin to remedy some of the “gaps” identified in the above paragraphs, by exploring the learning of social entrepreneurs in accelerators. In particular, my ambition is to discuss how learning is influenced by both human and non-human factors.

Entrepreneurial learning and theories of adult learning

Scholars of entrepreneurial learning suggest that entrepreneurs learn experientially: through practice, experimentation and personal experience (Cope & Watts, 2000; Deakins & Freel,

Although scholars of entrepreneurial learning suggest that entrepreneurs’ learning is “experiential” in nature, few dig deeply into contemporary scholarship on adult learning. Frequently, scholars refer to the foundational ideas of Kolb (1984) without discussing publications that critique and extend his work. Jarvis (1987, 2010) is one prominent scholar of adult education who develops the work of Kolb and others. He suggests that adult learning is as much “existential” as it is experiential – and argues that adults learn by transforming unexpected or unfamiliar experiences (which he terms “disjuncture”). Jarvis draws on Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) in emphasising the important role of intentionality in learning. Consequently, his ideas inform the literature on entrepreneurial learning by adding detail to scholars’ discussions of how experience is transformed into knowledge – and by heightening our awareness of the impact of entrepreneurs’ intentions on the learning process.

**Studying social entrepreneurs’ learning in accelerators**

A series of Scandinavian accelerators was studied using ethnographic methods over a three year period. Each accelerator was eight weeks long and the study involved three different cohorts of social entrepreneurs from several different regions of the world. Twenty-four social entrepreneurs were interviewed during and after the programme. Secondary data such as CVs and applications to the programme were collected and analysed – and the social entrepreneurs
were asked to fill in an online questionnaire one year after graduation. During each accelerator, regular visits were made to the programme in order to document the behaviour and interactions of the social entrepreneurs. Data was managed using Nvivo software and analysed manually drawing on abductive methodology, informed by the methods of applied thematic analysis.

The co-creation of entrepreneurial learning by human actors

The three accelerators were run in a similar manner and education was provided at the same physical location. Initial impressions were therefore that accelerator design would be the principal factor influencing social entrepreneurs’ learning. The characteristics of the accelerator cohorts were however different, with the first programme recruiting primarily Scandinavians – and the second and third programmes recruiting a higher proportion of social entrepreneurs from emerging economies. The cohorts of the second and third accelerators were therefore characterised by starker contrasts between participants, not only with regards to ethnicity, but also in areas such as education and social class. Interviews and direct observations also suggested that some of the social entrepreneurs in the second programme arrived at the accelerator with a mix of expectations. In particular, several social entrepreneurs arrived in Scandinavia expecting the accelerator to provide them with significant opportunities to obtain funding for their ventures, while others were more oriented towards learning.

The learning processes associated with each accelerator were distinct from one another, with the second accelerator characterised by conflict. In contrast, participants in the first and third accelerators described the learning environment as very positive. When these differences were explored, social entrepreneurs described how their learning was affected not only by the backgrounds of their fellow participants, but also by their perceived attitudes towards learning.

Initially, accelerator managers recruited social entrepreneurs with the expectation that individuals with a background in the same industry (such as energy or water), would benefit from interacting with one another. In subsequent interviews however, participants emphatically
stated a preference for similarity in terms of venture stage, rather than industry. As noted previously, learning theorists suggest that learning takes place when individuals’ experiences contrast with what they expect to experience (or what they usually experience) – and what they actually experience in a new situation. In the accelerators, social entrepreneurs appeared to be conscious of the relationship between their own learning and their exposure to new experiences. However, their reasoning about learning also reflected a desire for a degree of similarity to their peers, in terms of a common task (navigating the challenges of launching a social venture). In this study therefore, social entrepreneurs appeared to manage their learning to a certain extent, by selectively exposing themselves to other individuals who displayed “strategic difference”, in terms of background.

Despite the exposure of social entrepreneurs to other individuals who were very different from them in accelerators two and three, their learning appeared to be influenced not only by other entrepreneurs’ backgrounds, but also by their attitudes. In all three accelerators it was clear that the learning of the social entrepreneurs was affected by not only by educational design, but also by individuals’ perceptions of one another – and the patterns of interaction related to these perceptions. Hjorth (2013) suggests that incubators stimulate venture development by creating psychological “space” for learning – and in the accelerators it was clear that social entrepreneurs were able to both enhance and diminish the “learning space” associated with the programme. When individuals displayed humility, warmth and an enthusiasm for learning; other social entrepreneurs described high levels of energy, focus and interaction. When individuals displayed arrogance or a disinterest in learning, their peers described negative feelings and difficulties in focusing. The latter group dynamic was described particularly in the second accelerator, where social entrepreneurs also developed strategies to minimise the impact of other participants on their learning. For example: by
physically sitting near the front of the room to avoid observing the activities of individuals who they felt detracted from their learning.

The co-creation of entrepreneurial learning by non-human factors

The preceding paragraphs provide initial evidence for the idea that, in accelerators, a substantial amount of social entrepreneurs’ learning is co-created as individuals interact with other members of the accelerator cohort. In other words: by “human” space. Other evidence however, suggests that social entrepreneurs’ learning in accelerators is also affected by non-human or “material” factors. In all three accelerators, the formal educational activities of the programme took place at a building in which local social entrepreneurs rented office space in an “open-plan” environment. This location, actively chosen and managed by accelerator staff, is referred to as primary physical space and was described by participants as conducive to interaction, networking and learning. Managers did not however, actively manage the secondary space associated with the accelerator. That is: the physical places (such as shared accommodation) in which social entrepreneurs interacted after leaving the office building. Accelerator participants reported however, that the patterns of interaction that were formed in these informal contexts were reproduced in the accelerator’s more formal “primary” spaces, such as the open-space office. In other words: social entrepreneurs who tended to interact with a particular person or sub-group in (for example) their accommodation, often maintained this pattern of interaction when they returned to the accelerator venue. These limited patterns of interaction were observed and commented upon in interviews, and seemed to form primarily around gender and ethnicity. It is therefore concluded that although social entrepreneurial learning in accelerators depends upon the establishment of psychological “space”, this space is significantly influenced by physical – or “material” – space. Edward Relph’s (1976) term “splace” is therefore borrowed to describe the combination of psychological and physical space that emerges in accelerators, and that enhances or detracts from learning.
References


Erdélyi, P. (2010). *The Matter of Entrepreneurial Learning: A Literature Review*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities (OLKc), Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA.


