Chapter XVIII
E-Learning:
The Cornerstone to Transferring Entrepreneurship Knowledge

Cecilia Hegarty
University of Ulster, UK

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial knowledge and innovation resonates with positive views, hence the need to tell everyone about entrepreneurship and give students the opportunity to learn more about it. By the same token, universities have long experimented with different learning environments to accommodate student needs (Hannay & Newvine, 2006). Internet-based education and distance learning are commonly known as e-learning. E-learning provides a method of reaching high volumes of students within a culturally rich virtual workspace. It is arguable that e-learning has become a cornerstone tool in entrepreneurship delivery. This chapter aims to stimulate debate among practitioners on the use of information technology in the process of ***entrepreneurial learning****. Learning activity, pedagogical shifts within the wider disciplines of* ***entrepreneurship education,*** *and the spin-off effects for entrepreneur training programs are all considered. The application of information technology through entrepreneurship e-learning packages is shown to have magnified the entrepreneurship potential in wider society.*

INTRODUCTION

Education is on the brink of a major paradigm shift if we listen to Two Siew Chin and Williams (2006). Following the explosive growth in educational opportunities offered over the Internet, Campbell informs us: "new technologies are increasingly relied upon to support innovative approaches to business education" (2000, p. 351). The adoption of these technologies has become a vital source in sustaining traditional universities striving to cope with demanding changes in the education landscape. Students getting into debt by paying steep university fees expect to receive an education responsive to their individual needs. This leads to increased competition between universities and when coupled with the growing demand for entrepreneurship courses and increased pressure

on resources, this has initiated educators within Business faculties to rethink delivery and turn their attention to e-learning methods. There is an overwhelming body of research to support this shift. Academic research on **online learning** has catapulted over the last six years. This is illustrated in Hiltz and Goldman's (2005) book while they highlight further improvements in approaches are necessary, overall they indicate that e-learning courses are as effective if not more effective when compared to "in-seats" courses at university level. Similarly, improving the way we teach entrepreneurship and train entrepreneurs has been an ongoing debate within management science and related disciplines in recent years.

Having accepted that there has been great expansion in the number of entrepreneurship courses offered in universities, it is important to outline what entrepreneurship and **entrepreneurial learning** means in the context of this research and why both phenomena are now demanding greater attention. Entrepreneurship has always existed in some form but as economies become more entrepreneurial driven and focused on creating an enterprise culture entrepreneurship can now be considered as a human and cultural behavioural concept rather than simply an economic one. Following Gartner's (1989) direction, research has moved on from studying the actual entrepreneur and towards a processual understanding of entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial process is recognisably different from managerialism because something new is created. It can be viewed as holistic and a dynamic process, which is both an art and a science.

For instance, the growth in entrepreneurial activity within the creative industries shows how the entrepreneurial process accommodates art and science. Jack and Anderson (1999) inform us that as academics we cannot replicate the experiences of successful entrepreneurs probably because entrepreneurship does not take place in a vacuum. We can however use these experiences to develop theory and bridge the abyss between art and science. In summary, the entrepreneurial process is treated through a positivist approach where logic and analysis are deployed to validate theory.

By comparison the process of **entrepreneurial learning** is more closely aligned to management education because it encompasses action learning a theory of management where learning incurs reflection upon actions being taken within real organisations (McLaughlin & Thorpe, 1993) and is similar to the Harvard business case online (Sensiper, 2000, p. 618) and also similar to project-based learning "…the theory and practice of utilising real-world work assignments…" (DeFillipi, 2001, p. 9). Hanti and Kairisto-Mertanen (2006) provide more recent evidence of how learning entrepreneurship through real life company assignments can spread the entrepreneurship agenda into the wider university curriculum and simultaneously create networks between education, industry, and enterprise in the region. **Entrepreneurial learning** is about developing entrepreneurial capability since it can be argued that there is a learning experience from merely establishing a new enterprise. Another view is concerned with "learning by doing" that Kolb (1984) takes a step further in his cycle of experiential learning. Kolb believes that while you can learn by doing, the concepts learned are modified when you start to practice behaviours and reflect upon them, learning is thus modified by experience. Experiential learning has implications for knowledge transfer, since the outcomes of the process could be said to represent only historical record and not knowledge of the future. Both education and training in entrepreneurship has been carried out through many guises. For example improving core skills such as business planning or through personality attributes. In summary, in both education and training contexts, individuals are continually learning (changing, doing, experimenting, and sense making) throughout the development of their own lifecycle. On a point of clarification, it is generally accepted that during the **learning process** attitudes, habit, skills, and