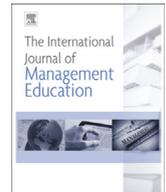


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Seeing around corners: How creativity skills in entrepreneurship education influence innovation in business



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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship programs and courses provide the context and content to help students learn and apply skills and behaviors intended to create value in entrepreneurial firms. Creativity skills enable students to discover new ideas and opportunities that contribute to innovation. The present study investigates the impact of perceptions of creativity skills acquired by 137 students enrolled in a part-time MBA program, and who were full-time employed. The students completed an entrepreneurship course on creativity and innovation and utilized creativity tools and methods within a team context in the entrepreneurship classroom. Results showed that creativity skills acquired by students influenced their self-perceptions of creativity, that they transferred their creativity skills to their work teams, leading to a positive impact on perceptions of team support for innovation, and their team's and firm's actual innovative outcomes. Pedagogical approaches play an important role in students' creative thinking and behavior, and can effectively stimulate and strengthen students' ability to fully participate in their work teams, as well as their ability to generate new value for their organizations.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, as a result of the global economic downturn and the subsequent shifts in marketplace and societal needs, organizations are under pressure to deliver new value in response to these changes. Global competition in nearly all industries has emerged, stimulating the demand for new products, services and technologies, alongside increased competition for talented and creative employees and the need for breakthrough solutions to persisting business and societal problems (McMullan & Shepherd, 2006). As both new and established organizations attempt to fulfill these needs and reach new and challenging performance goals, creativity and innovation are becoming significant processes to help organizations survive, grow and prosper in the 21st century marketplace (American Management Association, 2010; Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2009). Founders and managers are discovering that the traditional methods and solutions they have deployed to solve problems and discover opportunities are no longer effective. Creativity allows entrepreneurs to discover and exploit opportunities that

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enable their firms to be more competitive and innovative (Fillis & Rentschler, 2010). This awareness has proliferated interest in acquiring and enhancing creativity and innovation skills, and the entrepreneurship classroom has increasingly become the context for this learning.

The present study examines the influence of individual creativity skills acquired by students in an entrepreneurship course on creativity and innovation on outcomes including their self-perceptions of creativity, perceived team support for innovation, and actual innovations produced by their team and organization. Learning goals in entrepreneurship courses such as the one used for the context of this study include the transfer of skills learned and practiced in the classroom to the work and organizational setting.

Our study is centered around this key question: Within the context of entrepreneurship education, how do creativity skills learned in entrepreneurship coursework matter, with regards to their impact on innovative behavior in students' work settings? To this end, this study measures the potential influence students' creativity skills may have on their work teams, including the extent to which the team fosters a supportive environment for innovation, and, ultimately, on the innovative success of the team and firm in developing new products and services. This research has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the significance of entrepreneurship education on innovative behavior in organizations. While previous studies of creativity in the entrepreneurship classroom have included outcome measures of creative behavior on a variety of individual assessments (Schmidt, Soper, & Facca, 2012), this study extends the examination of the impact of students' creativity skills on team and firm innovation in the workplace. If a goal of entrepreneurship education is to help students create value and positively impact their organizations and the marketplace – whether they found their ventures or join entrepreneurial organizations – then it is important to examine how the skills they learn in the classroom can be transferred and enacted in their businesses.

2. Creativity and innovation in entrepreneurship education

A recent analysis of entrepreneurship programs showed that 82% of program directors and chairs perceived creativity as important in the entrepreneurship curriculum, and while a majority of the programs sampled offer stand-alone courses in creativity and innovation, in all, 80% of programs required some degree of training in creativity (Schmidt, Soper, & Bernaciak, 2013). Approaches to creativity training often include instruction and practice in Creative Problem Solving (CPS), based on the Osborn (1957) and Parnes model that enables problems to be solved in imaginative and innovative ways. CPS is a multi-stage approach that includes steps for both *divergence* and *convergence*, two important behaviors for creative problem solving to be effective.

Divergent behavior includes building on others' ideas, discovering ways to enhance the potential value of an idea or opportunity, and avoiding the reliance on conventional thinking methods ("what is known") to reach unexpected solutions. Isaksen, Dorval, and Treffinger (2000) defined divergence as creative thinking, describing it as the process of forming and communicating connections allowing people to think of many possibilities and alternatives from different perspectives. Convergent behavior includes judging, and deciding among the ideas suggested. It is a process of refining ideas, eliminating ideas, and ultimately applying decision parameters to the selection of ideas. Isaksen et al. (2000) defined convergence as critical thinking, comprised of idea comparison and analysis, evaluating and reaching decisions, and taking appropriate and effective action. Research on group creativity shows that when group members listen to and are open to others' ideas and opinions, they are more likely to perform well in divergent thinking (Isaksen & Lauer, 2002, and others). Entrepreneurs and managers are utilizing divergence and convergence as they identify new opportunities and strategies for growth in their organization (Hughes, 2003).

Despite the importance of both divergence and convergence to creativity and innovation, a recent study disclosed that convergent thinking approaches were more likely to be utilized than divergent approaches – emphasizing problem solving over problem finding (Schmidt et al., 2013). The authors noted this as a concern for entrepreneurship curricula, since divergent thinking skills across educational levels have been decreasing in recent years (Bronson & Merryman, 2010) and they are deemed central to the entrepreneurship process. As researchers recently concluded, "Entrepreneurial creativity should be concerned with continual creation of alternative solutions to problem solving and identification of new opportunities... as a competitive strength and portfolio of competencies" (Fillis & Rentschler, 2010: 73).

As previous researchers have posited, one of the primary purposes of entrepreneurship education lies in the preparation of prospective entrepreneurs to meet the challenges they will face as they plan and launch a new enterprise. With the inclusion of creativity skill development in the entrepreneurship classroom, including helping students navigate the opportunity recognition process to bring new ideas to market, along with knowledge of how to support a culture for creativity within teams and organizations, some key questions arise. What are some of the transferable outcomes for students? Have these skills helped students contribute to innovative outcomes in their organizations, such as developing new products and services? As students are exposed to and practice creativity skills, are they more effective in generating new ideas, and encouraging team or organizational 'openness' that supports innovation?

Creativity is the production of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996), and is often the result of a discovery process in which existing elements are combined and blended in new ways. Creative connections can lead to new opportunities, including innovations such as new products, services, processes, technologies, and organizational arrangements. These are the heart of entrepreneurship, as first articulated by Schumpeter (1934) and explored by entrepreneurship scholars and teachers who define entrepreneurship as the dynamic interaction of the individual with the environment (Shane &

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