



enterprise+
INNOVATIVE POTENTIAL MEETS EXPERIENCE

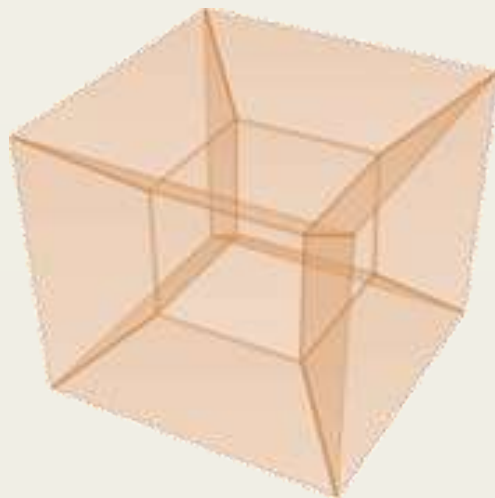
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Enterprise+: Concept of the student enterprises – Approaches for quality improvement

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RESEARCH PAPER



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Abstract

Against the background of an increasing importance of entrepreneurial competencies alternative and experimental forms of learning gain more relevance. The concept of student enterprises thus offers a high potential, as it allows young people to broaden their experience and to learn from the expertise of “Wirtschaftssenioren” (“economic seniors”) at the same time. The research paper at hand locates the concept theoretically in the framework of entrepreneur education and discusses critically, how the quality of the concept’s implementation can be improved and which approaches are possible solutions to improve the quality of implementation. For this purpose, experience from the project “enterprise+” and initial empirical findings are described and interpreted.

1 Initial situation and theoretical context

In the scientific discussion it is indisputable that the future professional life is more and more shaped by an increasing complexity and insecurity through the technical development, especially by digitalization, demographic change and globalization. Other megatrends that are going to influence professional life as well are the increasing mobility, the progress in health care and the development towards a knowledge-based society. Furthermore, the EU countries will also be facing a high rate of unemployment in the future even though the numbers have recently decreased to some extent. Especially youth unemployment is high in Europe. At the beginning of 2016 the rate of unemployed young people was 43.9% in Spain and 50.4% in Greece. Hence, the responsible actors are confronted with the challenge to create new employment opportunities. It should be noted in this context that it is important to reduce the gap between the labor world and the educational world.

To fulfil the challenges linked with it, it is assumed that a large part of prospective employees will increasingly face the task to think and act entrepreneurial in the future. That is why the promotion and the support of entrepreneurial thinking and acting is in the limelight of entrepreneurship education.

In the scientific discussion within the field of economic education it is said to be proven that it is not sufficient to teach entrepreneurial competences in classical class units. In this context other teaching-learning-methods are pointed to have better preconditions for the acquisition of entrepreneurial competences. Apart from the concept of student enterprises approaches such as simulation games, case studies, internships etc. are to be named (Kirchner & Loerwald, 2014). The following elaborations will refer to the concept of student enterprises.

To clarify the relevance of the concept of student enterprises for the promotion of entrepreneurial thinking and acting, the following questions arise: When and under which circumstances is the concept of student enterprises particularly suitable for promoting entrepreneurial thinking and acting? What has to be considered concerning the implementation of the concept of student enterprises? How can the quality of the implementation of the student enterprises' concept be ensured and improved? In this context, it is also a matter to identify starting points for the further development of the concept and the implementation of the student enterprises. It should be clarified which expectations has to be directed to which actors. Beforehand, the concept of student enterprises has to be classified in the field of entrepreneurship education against the background of theoretical approaches and respective empirical studies.

2 Theoretical frame of reference – state of entrepreneurial research

Within the framework of economic education the respective life situation is seen as a starting point to convey the different requirements that are set for the individual actors as well as the respective required competences - for example for the execution of a professional task - and using these to draw a conclusion for curriculum development of vocational training institutions (Steinmann, 1997). While doing so it is referred to the situation principle that - next to the knowledge principle and the personality principle - plays an important role within the field of business didactics (Reetz & Seyd, 2006/2).

According to Retzmann (2012a, S.7) the aim of economic education is to enable the individual actors – Retzmann refers to students – to „a reflected, self-determined, professional competent, responsible and co-designing participation in the labor and business world. The role of the employed person equally comprises the role of the selector of an occupation, the role of a trainee, the role of the employee as well as the role of an entrepreneur or self-employed person” (Translation from the author). Retzmann emphasizes that economic education cannot only be aligned to the typical life situation of those who are employees (Retzmann & Schröder, 2012). Economic education should rather show an interest in actors that need to think and act as entrepreneurs in economic and labor life as well.

To disclose and estimate the different extents in the entrepreneurial thinking and acting which are expected by the members of organizations one can refer to the differentiation of Wunderer and Bruch (2000; see also Wunderer, 1997). Based on the manifestation of both categories “independent and self-responsible” and “implementing innovation” one can make a distinction between (a) employees (b) entrepreneurial employees (c) co-entrepreneurs (d) subcontractors (e) intrapreneurs and (f) entrepreneurs. The manifestation of both categories is

the lowest for employees and the highest for entrepreneurs. Also entrepreneurship research highlights that not only entrepreneurs or founders need to possess entrepreneurial competences but also co-entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs (Aff & Lindner 2005). In this context it is also referred to the theoretical concepts that deal with employees (in terms of blurring of boundaries) (“Arbeitskraftunternehmer”) (Pongratz & Voß, 2000).

The present article builds on the understanding of Entrepreneurship Education of Kirchner and Loerwald (2014). Their understanding of Entrepreneurial Education which is based on the considerations of Retzmann and Hausmann (2012) and Aff, J. (2008) includes “...all educational processes which promote entrepreneurial creativity, innovative capability, self-efficacy conviction, achievement motivation, rational dealing with risk and the sense of responsibility and which impair economical and generic competences which are necessary for the preparation, realization and reflection of entrepreneurial initiative (Entrepreneurship).” (Translation from the author) (p. 39). Thus, Entrepreneurship Education cannot only be seen as a training for business formation and business start-ups. Instead it is about acquiring sufficient economical knowledge and gaining respective experience to come to grips with the own life and to organize it. In this context it can be referred to the idea: „Make yourself to a project“.

The Entrepreneur-research deals with following questions (Wiepcke, 2008): Who is an Entrepreneur? Which milieu has an impact on an Entrepreneur? Which different types of an Entrepreneur exist? Why does one become an Entrepreneur? To answer these questions one can point to different approaches. With regard to the first question one can indicate approaches of characteristics, referring to the second questions demographic-sociological approaches, referring to the third question typological approaches and concerning the fourth question behavioral approaches. At the same time it becomes clear that the Entrepreneur-research falls back on economic as well as on psychological, sociological and professional pedagogical approaches. Therefore, the Entrepreneur-research excels in an interdisciplinary procedure. The interdisciplinary approach forms a central reference point in the present paper as well as in the project upon which findings this paper builds on.

Entrepreneurship Education assumes from the premise that the spirit of enterprise or the entrepreneurial acting and thinking is teachable and learnable (Retzmann, and Schröder, 2012). The concept of student enterprises, which will be dealt with and examined in the following, is one method to discover and further develop the respective competences.

The concepts of student enterprises must be differentiated from the concept of student companies (Mittelstädt & Wiepcke, 2014). Within the concept of student enterprises there is a

focus on the development of a business idea and the more or less detailed workout of a business plan. In contrast, the concept of student companies also deals with the implementation of a business idea at school. To assess and make use of the learning effects which occur or can occur in the context of the student enterprise concept it can be drawn on the principle of complete action expiration (Gudjons, 2008). According to this principle, the learner should deal with the planning, execution and evaluation of the action. Only then the desired learning effects can be achieved and the acquisition of action competence can be made possible. In this context it is stressed out that concepts such as the student enterprises offer the participants the opportunity to gain experiences in complex teaching-learning-situations and acquire competences in the context of experience-based learning. Thereby, the experience-based learning can be interpreted as circular process which includes the four steps of (a) specific experience, (b) reflected observation (recognize problems/work on alternatives), (c) abstract concept formation (formulate theories, define problems), and (d) active experimentation (test theories, solve problems and procure resources/implement solutions) (Kolb, 1984).

In the context of the organization of student enterprises the question arises how one can develop quality standards and how the quality of the planning, of the implementation and evaluation of the student enterprise can be improved. Because the quality of a performance, here a service in a broader sense, cannot be determined without taking the expectations of the respective actors into account, the question arises which expectations the actors have in the context of student enterprises. First of all, the expectations of the participants towards the mentors should be taken into account. In order to fulfil these expectations, the mentors need to know these expectations and other expectations of other actors, for instance the organizers of the student enterprises. Furthermore, the quality standards derived from scientific research on vocational competence development should be taken into account. One of these quality standards is the support and fostering of self-reliant learning (Deitering, 2001, Heyse, 2003). The concept of student enterprises fulfils, at least in principle, the requirement to promote independent learning by trying to develop the self-regulation competence of the learners. It should be noted that in the course of this concept the learners themselves can at least determine the learning time, the learning content, the learning methods as well as the learning partner to a certain degree. At the same time it should be taken into account that the determination of learning goals and the evaluation of the learning success is usually made by a third party.

In the frame of an empirical study Josten and van Elkan (2010) had questioned students and teachers to evaluate the current Entrepreneurship Education programs at schools. The main programs to evaluate were: entrepreneurial spirit-project JUNIOR, JUNIOR-compact, The German Founder price for students and Youth Start-Ups. The target group includes in total 2.800 students and 193 teachers. 1.581 students were participants in the programs from the school year 2008/09, 766 non-participants from the same school year as well as 449 former participants from the school year 2004/05.

The mentioned study concluded that the students believe they improved their ability to work in a team, their communication and presentation skills through participating at the appealed projects but also concerning their expertise especially with regard to issues of business start-ups (business plans) or entrepreneurship and their business knowledge their rating showed an improvement. At the same time, they classify the relevant activities as very time-consuming.

The teachers who looked at the participants assessed that the participating students improved their skills with regard to their self-confidence, their communication skills, presentation skills and independent working. In this context, one needs to take into consideration that these assessments are made by the students and teachers. Whether the ability to work in a team, the communication skills, the presentation skills and the conflict ability have demonstrable improved, would need to be checked with help of suitable procedures of competence diagnostics. From the point of the quality management it is of relevance which motives or reasons stand for an entrepreneurial independence. The “Ability to realize own ideas” was the most important reason for the questioned students, secondly they chose “Being his or her own chief” and as third reason “Show what I can”. Further motives are “Earn more money” and “Higher reputation” but also social motives are pursued with self-employment which is why the students also chose “Create jobs” and “Possibility to do something for the society”. The questioned teachers see uncertainties regarding the project implementation as well as the partial lack of know-how as a significant problem. Additionally, they refer to high expenditure of time and amount of work which is related to the performance of the appropriate projects. At the same time the questioned teachers mention a lack of required support in their college.

3 Aims and tasks of the project

The three-year lasting EU project enterprise+ (<http://www.enterpriseplusproject.eu/>) forms the background of experiences for the following explanations. The project is financed by the national agency of the BiBB through funds of the EU budget. The main focus of the project

involves the following two key questions: (1) How can we identify entrepreneurial competences of young people? and (2) How can we support entrepreneurial competences in a suitable manner? Regarding the first question the potential analysis that has been developed and tested in the context of the project “Losleger” by the research team of Prof. Retzmann is picked up. With regard to the second question an alternative project-oriented professional competence development program is taken up: the concept of the student enterprises that has been implemented in the framework of the German Founders Award for pupils. In Germany 65000 pupils have already participated in the German Founders Award for pupils. Every year around 2000 new groups of pupils are formed to participate in the German Founders Award for pupils. The German Founders Award for pupils is sponsored by Porsche, by the German saving banks „Sparkassen“, the magazine “Stern” and by the public TV channel “ZDF”. Within the lines of the project this method of student enterprises is defined as founder workshop concept and is further developed with the help of representatives of the organization “Alt hilft Jung” (Old ones help young ones). Both of those practice-oriented concepts or rather their results are interconnected within the project.

The first concept focuses on the assessment of competences, especially entrepreneurial competences. In contrast, the second concept puts an emphasis on the development of competences through specific practical exercises. The focus of the competence development can take up the results from the potential analysis. Some elements of the two concepts were tested in advance of the project but the linkage of the two concepts is new. Furthermore, it is special that the two concepts are being implemented in five selected EU countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, Lithuania and Spain).

For the founder workshop a corresponding task book was developed that the students worked through. This task book is the basis for the mentors in order to support the students while implementing the founder workshop. The potential analysis was implemented by “talent scouts”. They were also able to refer to a corresponding handout. The talent scouts for the potential analysis and mentors for the founder workshop were trained on the basis of the respective task book or handout in a multi-day training in each EU country.

The primary target group of the project activities is persons who were trained to be talent scouts or mentors and who then function as multipliers in the respective EU countries. These persons could for example be managers who already have retired and possess the needed social competences for the work with young people (also referred to as „Wirtschaftssenioren“, engl: “economical seniors”). They function as multipliers by implementing the trained

practice-orientated concepts multiple times. The participants of the potential analysis and the founder workshop are young people in the age between 16 and 21 years. The implementation is also supported by the respective project partners and their networks, through which interested enterprises, (vocational) schools, employment agencies and career centers provide further actors.

The project activities are rested on multiple premises and principles. Exemplarily three principles are named: (1) Learning ability: entrepreneurial thinking and acting should be identified at an early stage and can be learned at least to a certain degree (here it is referred to the discussion whether these entrepreneurial competences are innate or learned (Bijedic, 2013)). (2) Learning by doing: young people and mentors (f.e. “economical seniors“) work together on a project (student enterprise or founder workshop) and (3) Learning philosophy: the focus is on strengths-orientation which means that the potentials of young people are central and are the starting point of activities for the development of competences and not their deficits. The deficits are only taken into account as they may prevent the further development of their strengths.

The following points are characteristic features of the concept of student enterprises according to the German founder’s price of students: students from senior classes form voluntary teams. The team normally consists of 5 - 6 students. There was developed a task book for the implementation of the student enterprises. The aim of the student enterprises is the development and establishment of a new founder idea by simulating the way to a business start-up. The students get support by a business mentor which they can chose. To find such a personality the students can also contact the respective chamber. The chamber reverts to a huge pool of economic seniors who work as mentors on a voluntary basis. One of the results of this work is a business plan which can be communicated and proved by a third person.

The concept of the founder workshop basically follows this procedure, but some changes were introduced. The task book was revised in a way that allows a compressed implementation of the concept within a 5-day-workshop as well as a longer implementation period. Furthermore, the project enterprise+ is not only open for groups, but also for individuals, so that teams are partly built within the project.

There is a developed two-days training program for both the talent scouts and the mentors which was already performed in the five EU-countries of the project (Bulgaria, Greece, Lithuania, Spain and Hungary). In the course of the project, the project partner “Alt hilft Jung

e.V.”, an organization of “economic seniors”, contributes to the qualifying of the mentor in the respective EU-countries.

4 Difficulty of the implementation: Disclosure of the potentials and resistances

Scientific approaches that deal with the implementation of practice-orientated concepts derive at the conclusion that not only the securing of acceptance of the respective practice-orientated concept by the affected actors is important but also a sufficient amount of reflection in order to prevent a failure of the implementation (Gondo & Amis, 2013). The result of the corresponding study demonstrates that with a comparatively high acceptance but a low reflection there is the risk of a decoupling of the practice-oriented concept and the respective (organizational) circumstances in which the practical-oriented concept is going to be implemented. An initial starting point to face this risk and ensure a certain amount of reflection is to look at the potentials and resistances which can arise during the implementation of both concepts in the EU countries.

In the center of the strengths and resistances analysis is the question: Which resistances and potentials are present in the EU countries which promote or impede/prevent the implementation of the concepts of the potential analysis and the founder workshop?

In this context, the resistances on the one hand need to be assigned textually (that is legal, organizational and personal resistances) and on the other hand to carve out to which extent these resistances are modifiable. With regard to the last point one can differentiate between easy and difficult or not to surmount resistances.

While trying to implement the two practice-orientated concepts it became clear that there are programs and project measures in the individual EU countries that deal with the individual aspects of the enterprise+ project. But at the same time it also became clear that these activities seem to be applied unsystematically and that there is no overall and general concept that tries to examine and secure the quality of these activities.

First of all, it is to be adhered that the concept of the potential analysis and the concept of the founder workshop is seen as a valuable contribution for (vocational) schools amongst others in every EU country that is participating in the project. Additionally, the fact that the two concepts can be seen as a further development of initiatives for the support of entrepreneurship or that the two concepts can be linked to these initiatives is seen as beneficial by the responsible actors. The relationship between students and “economic

seniors” was positive. From the viewpoints of the generations a relationship compared to those between a grandfather and a grandson/granddaughter was established.

At the same time cultural differences in the individual EU countries became significant. For instance in Bulgaria the term “business man/woman” is negatively connoted. In the media the “business man/woman” is equated with a fraudster. That is why it is necessary that the founder workshop also deals with ethical aspects of entrepreneurial thinking and acting and emphasizes that entrepreneurship contributes to positive developments in society.

If the participants of the founder workshop do not have any or only few economic competences then the implementation of the founder workshop, especially the five-day-version, is very challenging. That is why it is very helpful if the participants acquire some economic knowledge in advance. These tasks could be – if possible – undertaken by the respective teachers. As an alternative, self-learning material could be developed for the participants that they would have to work through in advance.

At the same time it became clear that not every professionally experienced economic senior is suited for the role of a mentor. They especially need a minimum amount of methodical and didactical competences. This should be considered in future trainings for mentors as well as for the further development of the task book for the founder workshop for the mentors. The fact that a task book could be referred to during the training of talent scouts and mentors turned out to be positive.

The concept of the founder workshop will be adapted to the respective cultural and country specific situation. For instance, in one country it is implemented in one week full time. In another country the implementation is scheduled to last several weeks with nine dates, each having a duration of four hours. Normally, the results of the project groups are presented to an expert committee. It seems to be reasonable to take the technical, cultural and micro political fit into account for the further adaption of the two practice-orientated concepts.

5 First Results of Empirical Studies

With regard to the implementation of the student enterprises concept the following items have not been explored yet: Which role and which tasks does the mentor have or should he/she undertake? Which competences should mentors have in order to realize tasks? Which of these competences can be further developed in which way through training?

In the present work the results of a qualitative survey is being reported which has been carried out in the context of the project enterprise+ in Germany (Kolwitz, 2016). All in all, ten persons took part in the study. Six persons have participated in the founding simulation in the context of the German Founder's Prize. Four persons have taken over the role of an enterprise mentor. A guide forms the basis for the carrying out of the semi structured interviews. In the following passages some results of the qualitative study are punctually being referred to: From the retrospective, the participants regarded the professional support by the enterprise mentor as very important. They were able to select the enterprise mentors by themselves and made sure that the enterprise mentors came from the branch in which they had developed their project idea in the context of the student enterprise. Apart from the personal talks they communicate by telephone or email. The enterprise mentors took relatively much time for the communication and were from the participants' point of view accessible at any time. The enterprise mentors were not only economic seniors but also persons at the age of 20-50 years. Crucial for the participants was the fact that the enterprise mentors had sufficient professional experience. Principally all of the questioned participants pointed out that they would like to take over the enterprise mentor's task in the future if they had the necessary experience. Most of the questioned participants regarded the enterprise mentor as a counsellor.

On the other hand, it was very important for the mentors to be able to contribute to the contents of the project even if they merely dealt with questions on marketing. It was not sufficient for them to be the "good uncle".

The enterprise mentors regarded it important to create a dialogue and be addressable for the participants dealing with the tasks of the student enterprise. It was admitted that the students' group has already "mingled within the contents", and in this point of view the participants wish some support by the mentor. The mentor himself was not confronted with conflicts within the participants' group because if those occur the participants' group does not mention them beyond their group or even these conflicts do not exist because the group founded itself voluntarily so that it has a mutual understanding from the beginning. Mentors wish more information on what is expected from them and how they have to perform.

Actually, a quantitative study is being implemented. Starting point for this quantitative study which is carried out in the context of the project enterprise+ is 16 criteria with which the participants are due to value the mentors' work. The existing questionnaire is oriented on criteria which are addressed to a service and which are regarded as standard questions with regard to the scientific discussion within the topic of quality management.

In the first step, the former participants evaluate, which criteria they regard as 1 - unimportant - to 5 - extremely important. In the second step, they evaluate how they assess the mentors' behaviour with regard to these criteria. First results show that the three most important aspects regarding the enterprise mentors' work from the previous participants' point of view are (a) feedback, (b) interest and (c) sympathy. The extent of the perceived performance of the mentors in all three areas was high according to the participants' assessment. For the further research in the context of the student enterprises concept, especially for measures of quality improvement, it has been proved helpful to attach feedback in order to further develop the work in a qualitative way and to improve the quality of specific activities. The quantitative evaluation on basis of this questionnaire will be executed in other EU countries after the introduction of the founder workshop.

6 Outlook

In the next step it should be clarified which further activities could be seized to guarantee and to improve the quality of the founder workshop-concept's implementation in the sense of the aims and the programmatics of entrepreneurship education. Thus, the implementation of the concept of student enterprises has to be reflected more broadly and intensively against the background of for example the approaches and measuring methods for the determination of service quality. It could also be advantageous to further clarify the relation and the distribution of tasks among the actors who participate in the implementation of the practice-oriented concepts, as e.g. among teachers, chamber members, talent scouts and mentors. Moreover, the implementation of the concept of student enterprises has to be interpreted in terms of a project work. In doing so, approaches concerning the topic of project management offer concrete starting points for improving the quality of the implementation of the student enterprises concept.

A further approach to improve the quality of the implementation of student enterprises could be to have a critical look at the concept of complete action as a basis for the assessment of possibilities and limitations of experimental learning.

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