

On a Distance-Learning Approach on 'Train the Trainers' in Entrepreneurial Education in Greece. Theoretical Considerations Supported by Students' Response as Observed from the Career Office of the University of Athens.¹

Alexandros Kakouris

Career Office, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens, Greece

akakour@phys.uoa.gr

Abstract: In the present paper, we theoretically elaborate on advancing distance learning methods for a future 'train the trainers' phase in entrepreneurial education in Greece. This type of learning is highly accommodative to the interdisciplinary perspectives of the desired skills to be fostered (creativity, initiative, self-confidence, etc), to temporal/spatial restrictions, and it is usually suggested in various reports. It also supports 'learning by doing' tasks and 'problem based learning' usually adopted in higher and secondary entrepreneurial education. A good practice prototype in the field may also serve as a 'merger' for teachers and people with business experience who want to operate as educators. The previous goals were recently reported in the 'Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe'.

In the first part of this work, we focus on emerging needs for entrepreneurial education in Greece. The encouragement of youth entrepreneurship has been an active project of the Career-Office at the University of Athens for the last two years. Funded by the Ministry of Education, the project observes the students' responsiveness to the information provided on our website (<http://career-office.uoa.gr>, ~6500 reads/day) and in seminars. These results, along with current entrepreneurial activity in Greece, indicate the current understanding on the topic in order to discuss effective learning approaches as to follow the Oslo agenda.

In the second part, we discuss distance learning as substitute of conventional entrepreneurial training. In order to meet minimum quality standards based on adult education, we discuss the crucial role of communication, the interaction between the teaching material and the trainee and the key role of tutors in distance learning support. We also suggest what educational guides should intervene between conventional material and distance learners. Methodologically, we propose that transformative learning and critical reflection techniques, in accordance with regional entrepreneurial practices, could act as a catalyst in the initial 'train the trainers' phase which is expected to consist of adult, disciplinary-diverse group of trainees.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial education, Distance learning, Adult education, Transformative learning, Oslo agenda, Entrepreneurialism

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is commonly and spontaneously understood but defined in more than one way in literature (e.g. Drucker 1985, Low and MacMillan 1988, Timmons 1994). The designation that is most relevant to education, considers it as a mindset that can be learned, or more generally fostered throughout all levels of education. The European Commission's plans to promote entrepreneurial mindsets through education and learning were recently discussed in a conference (Oslo agenda 2006). The targeted entrepreneurial behavior is inherently recognized as interdisciplinary, while the task itself can be autonomous in the context of skill-based education. Apparently, the simultaneous involvement of diverse groups of educators/facilitators (teachers, practitioners, entrepreneurs, alumni, students) in the teaching process is considered beneficial yet the implementation of it is undetermined. Presumably, the necessity of an initial 'train the trainers' phase, in order to follow the vision of the Oslo agenda, is evident in a regional level. Adult education is a key element in the latter procedure and it has already been incorporated in the report as the *European Lifelong Learning Programme* is expected to support relevant activities in promoting entrepreneurial education. In addition, an open character in sharing educational material and practices through platforms is straightforwardly recommended.

Educational platforms usually accommodate distance learning (also *e* or *online* learning) which is considered as a substitute of traditional (face to face) educational methods. In this work, we follow the definition of Holmberg (1977) for distance learning (or distance education) as the form of study that does not imply continuous supervision by a teacher in the same location with the student.

¹ Referred as: Kakouris, A. (2007) "On a Distance-Learning Approach on 'Train the Trainers' in Entrepreneurial Education in Greece. Theoretical Considerations Supported by Students' Response as Observed from the Career Office of the University of Athens", 2nd European Conference on Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Academic Conferences Limited., Reading, UK, November, pp 75-80

Further definitions and comprehensive descriptions are given in Keegan (1986). Distance education waives tempo-spatial limitations from learners but it requires guiding timetables of study, specialized educational material and it is susceptible to communication means between teacher and student (Keegan 1986, Race 1993, Moore and Kearsley 1996, Trentin and Scimeca 1999). Thus, different organizational and methodological approaches have led to different types of distance learning (e.g. Sherry 1996).

Systematic distance education in Greece has been provided since 1999 through the courses of the Hellenic Open University (HOU, <http://www.eap.gr>) while other distance courses are also available in Greek universities. By focusing on adult learners, HOU has adopted adult education principles in delivering distance courses and it could be considered as a good example in Greek society as far as we consider a 'train the trainers' phase associated to entrepreneurial education. Traditionally, adult education techniques follow principles introduced by Knowles (1980) under the method of *andragogy* and accepts the *Kolb Learning Cycle* based on *experiential learning* (Kolb 1984). However, given the criticism on the previous approaches and the emergent beliefs and attitudes which seem relevant to youth entrepreneurship in Greece, more innovative approaches in adult learning will be discussed in the sequel such as *transformative learning* (Mezirow 1978). Under this methodological approach, we aim to suggest effective trainer's training supported by distance learning.

The rest of this article is organized as follows: an initial description of observations relevant to youth entrepreneurship in Greece is given in section 2. The observations are mainly provided by the career office activities, operating on the encouragement of youth entrepreneurship for more than two years at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. As any educational design should meet student's needs, our observations mainly focus on the current background understanding of youth entrepreneurship and the relevant subjects of interest. Afterwards, in section 3, an effective adult education approach is introduced and discussed in connection with a distance learning supported phase for a 'train the trainers' phase towards implementation of entrepreneurial education in Greece. Finally, our conclusions are presented (section 4).

2. Observed subjects of interest by the career office project

2.1 Career office electronic services

Career Offices in Greek universities operate as projects funded by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs since 1997. Due to the University of Athens student's population (~82000 students) and the geographic distribution of faculties, the office maintains electronic services through its website (<http://career-office.uoa.gr>). This website information (in Greek language) is not strictly accessible to university's students. The provided information is both *static* and *dynamic*, where the latter consists of daily updated postings of various categories. The "encouragement and support of youth entrepreneurship" is a sub-project of the career office and operates for more than two years. Therefore, entrepreneurial information appears as a separate category in the overall site material. This electronic activity has received attention throughout the country and as a result, the daily visit of the overall dynamic content of the site is of the order of ~6500 reads per day (June 2007). Technically, the website is a content management system (CMS, drupal application) that enables observability of the visits in each individual webpage. Hence, daily data of site traffic have been recorded for the last 15 months and a full statistical analysis is under preparation. Although the present original data do not track individual visitors, they clearly reveal overall client's preferences on career services because they are sufficient for *robust* statistical analysis and they were collected in an *unbiased* manner and for a *long period*. Visitor's demographic data were collected by 418 responses to a web-form questionnaire and they show that 63.64% of them are students or alumni of the University of Athens. The client's age distribution is shown in Table 1. As expected, they are predominantly recent alumni or postgraduate students.

< 18 years old	2 %
18 - 23 years old	21 %
24 - 28 years old	51 %
29 - 35 years old	21 %
> 35 years old	5 %

Moreover, the office has organized seminars and invited lectures in workshops concerning youth entrepreneurship. The promotion of these activities and the delivery of material are done electronically.

2.2 Subjects of interest

Static information on youth entrepreneurship is provided in a single webpage (<http://career-office.uoa.gr/node/view/827>) through a table of four cells (A,B,C,D) where the relative topics concern:

- Texts, presentations and articles (A)
- Support of youth entrepreneurs – financial resources and guides - (B)
- Information on entrepreneurial education (C)
- Bibliography and links (D)

Daily reads per category are reported and the relative interest is measured as a percentage of the sum of the daily reads. If the interest is the same for each category the previous index should be 25%. In Figure 1, we illustrate the mean weekly percentage index for each category measured from December 1st 2006 to June 30th 2007. In this period the webpage table received reads with a mean rate of 465 reads per week. Notably, the timeseries exhibit 'equilibrium'. Disturbances shown in weeks 23 to 26 are due to special promotion given to a workshop on the subject.

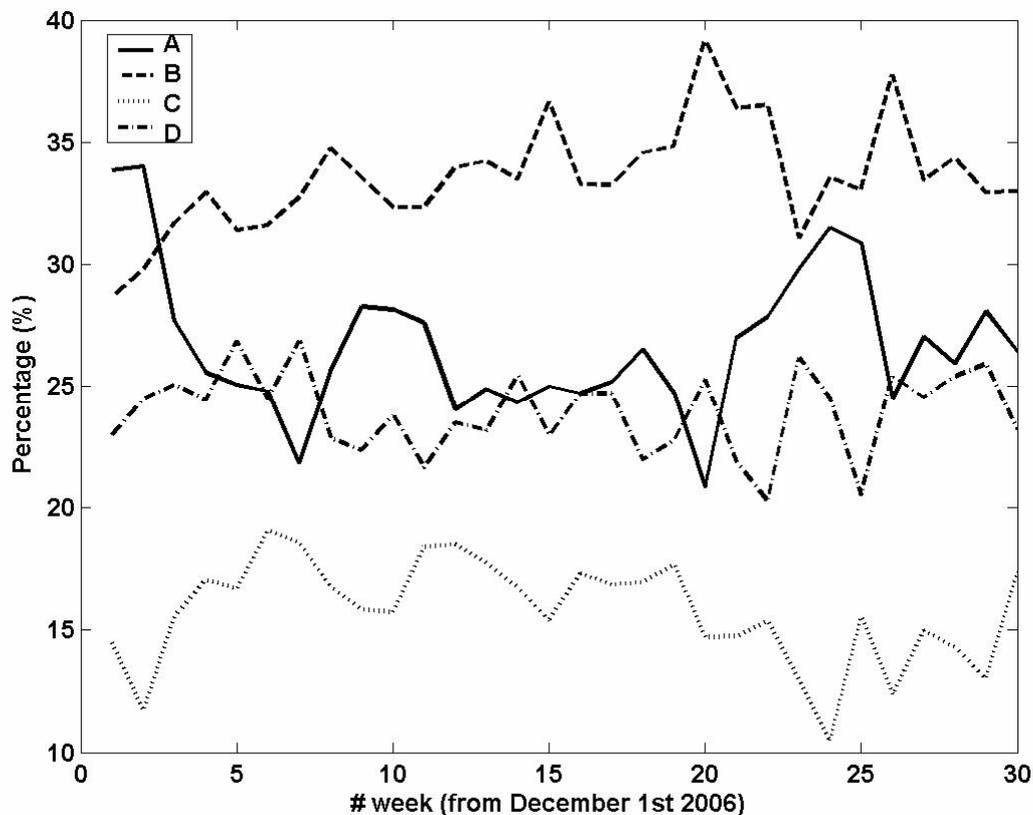


Figure 1: Mean weekly percentage index of website content interest for the period December 1st 2006 to June 30th 2007. Content categories A to D, described in section 2.2.1., are represented by different line styles and concern youth entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial education content corresponds to curve C (dotted line), values of which remain less than the expected 25%.

Overall (15-month) mean values are: 27% (A) 34% (B) 15% (C) and 24% (D). While (A) and (D) receive the expected attention, information that concerns support of youth entrepreneurs (B) is highly favored compared to entrepreneurial education (C). This attitude can be understood in comparison with demographic data indicating that “*there are young people that consider themselves capable for entrepreneurial activity provided they manage to receive initial funding*”. The result from the dynamic website content analysis (not presented here) is the same since announcements that concern governmental financial support receive the highest reading.

2.3 Background information

Student's considerations and beliefs on entrepreneurship are also observed in face to face counseling appointments and in seminars. It is evident from their comments that they question the efficiency of traditional teaching on entrepreneurship and they ask for 'practical' training. Even the most enthusiastic express certain concerns on the origin of entrepreneurial teaching, common fears, and emphasize the word "risk", possibly influenced by their families. When asked to describe potential teachers on the topic, students incorporate psychological qualities, such as encouragement for example, among the desired professional skills. The role of experience transfer is not clear yet.

In a recent questionnaire-based research of the office on recent alumni careers, a high percentage (~40% of men) admitted that they had the willingness to become entrepreneurs at the time entered the university and about half of them finally became entrepreneurs. Therefore, the causes of discouragement have to be investigated. In order to support interested students, the university introduced optional entrepreneurial courses in all discipline curricula lately. We have to note that most of the attitudes identified by the career office activities are in accordance with the recent findings in the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2006 summary results* for Greece (Harding and Bosma 2007). Greeks are highly entrepreneurial but in a "shallow" manner (as described in the Greek press releases). They start expensive business, with a mean initial capital almost double than the GEM average and risky in terms of personal funds; they feel confident concerning entrepreneurial knowledge and skills and they are simultaneously dominated by the fear of failure factor. Conclusively, there are established negative attitudes for entrepreneurship that any educator on the topic will have to face. Most experts in the field are generally aware of these attitudes and this may lead them to repeat many definitions for entrepreneurship and to discuss in order to confute "myths" in their lectures and reports.

3. Adult education and distance learning

Adult education has been founded by the original works of M. Knowles, P. Freire, C. Rogers, J. Mezirow, P. Jarvis and others (cf. Keegan 1986). As an educational field it supports substantially the expanding contemporary need for *lifelong learning*. It is also the basis for the provision of distance learning as it underlies its tools. A 'train the trainers' phase in entrepreneurial education is expected to attract educators/trainers/facilitators from different working environments and 'cultures'. Therefore, a common training of trainers may face resistance due to different assumptions or beliefs that people from different workplaces are expected to possess in their frames of reference. In that case, transformative learning techniques may assist in order to 'discuss own assumptions', reflect critically on them and finally achieve perspective transformations as described by Mezirow (1978). The transformative learning theory has been implemented successfully in a variety of problems (Taylor 1998, 2007). Transformative learning is a rather ontological than epistemological process (Lange 2004). As a method, it is a qualitative approach that refers solely to adult education, it employs tools (Mezirow 1990) focusing in major irreversible changes in a person's attitude, but it is generally difficult to distinguish resulting changes which due to critical reflections of a person on his own assumptions from them due to the society. For example, a main question to be answered in the trainers' training stage and in accordance to transformative learning is 'why we teach entrepreneurship?', not only 'how' and 'what' we will teach (Kreber 2004). This question may be of special importance for secondary education teachers. Other similar questions may concern 'myths' or different definitions of entrepreneurship. Finally, a major advantage of this approach is that is in accordance with problem-based and with competency-based learning which are recommended types of study for entrepreneurial education.

Problem-based learning (PBL) has already been successfully introduced even in online entrepreneurial courses for undergraduates (cf. Warren *et al.* 2006). PBL as other types of study that differ than traditional teaching are especially recommended in the Oslo agenda. Therefore, adoption of distance learning for training the trainers should be advanced not only because it accommodates PBL but primarily because it enables training of distant and busy trainers (as for example practitioners and businessmen). Well organized platforms enable low-cost sharing of redundant educational material for problem-solving in a way that the learner is motivated to access on his own way the demanded material. Moreover, successful examples can be easily shared among teachers in a global level. Apparently, distance learning based on online resources exhibits certain similarities with real entrepreneurial activity and accordingly experienced teachers may introduce similar methods in their institutes or schools.

In Greek education, experience in distance learning is usually related with HOU which delivers primarily printed material (books) and employs tutors as to support learners either using the web or in face to face group meetings. As expected, during the initial phase of distance courses and due to the lack of face to face communication, adults prefer more personal contact (telephone,

meetings) with the tutor, whose important role is to provide encouragement (Loizidou-Hatzitheodoulou et al. 2001). It is also important to develop high confidence material and in accordance with adult learning principles because it plays the role of teacher while the tutor is essentially a facilitator of the process. The latter point is sometimes questioned in scheduling. It is also convenient to use high quality conventional material provided that it is supported by an educational guide in order to become "teaching" (Loizidou-Hatzitheodoulou et al. 2003).

In conclusion, recent developments in adult learning are able to support effectively a 'train the trainers' phase for entrepreneurial education. The adoption of a distance learning as the appropriate methodology further enables the involvement of different educators who are necessary for the new subject. Supported by technology, the training framework can act as a 'merger' of diverse experience and background people that can easily incorporate best regional entrepreneurial practices.

4. Conclusions

The present article has been motivated by the perspectives of the Oslo agenda for entrepreneurial education in Europe. We elaborated in promoting distance learning as the most appropriate approach in trainers' training for the provision of entrepreneurial education in Greece. Basic advantages of this method were discussed in connection with its crucial characteristics for successful implementation.

Starting from our observations as working for more than two years on the encouragement of youth entrepreneurship at the career office of the University of Athens, we identify negative attitudes that concern entrepreneurial activity. Given an observed, socially established set of rather negative beliefs, we consider crucial the choice of the adult learning method as it will be the basis for distance learning development. Beyond the classical approach, we discussed transformative learning as a means for essential change, mainly for potential educators in a way that their diversity in experiences may benefit the process.

Statistical data from our website traffic, along with daily experience from face to face interaction with our clients, indicate preferences on the topic among young people in Greece. Such preferences help in inferring future educational needs as a starting point in the introduction on the subject. However, further research is needed in order to ensure such results.

Given the perspectives and the guidelines of the Oslo agenda on European entrepreneurship, the creation of best practices in entrepreneurial education and subsequent extrapolation of them from the regional to the European level will enlighten footpaths towards handling the difficult task of entrepreneurial learning.

Acknowledgements This work was financially supported by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs through the Second Operational Programme for Education and initial Vocational Training. The author acknowledges Dr. Panagiotis Georgiadis for encouragement and Dr. Anthony Warren, Dr. Aggelos Tsakanikas and Mr. Kostas Katsogiannos for helpful discussions.

References

- Drucker, P.F. (1985) *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles*, Harper and Row, New York.
- Harding, R. and Bosma, N. (2007) "GEM 2006 summary results", [online], Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, http://www.gemconsortium.org/about.aspx?page=global_reports_2006
- Holmberg, B. (1977) *Distance Education: A Survey and Bibliography*, Kogan Page, London, pp 9.
- Keegan, D. (1986) *Foundations of distance education*, Croom Helm, London.
- Knowles, M. (1980) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential learning experience as a source of learning and development*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey.
- Kreber, C. (2004) "An Analysis of Two Models of Reflection and their Implications for Educational Development", *International Journal for Academic Development*, Vol. 9, pp 29–49.
- Lange, E. (2004) "Transformative and Restorative Learning: A Vita Dialectic for Sustainable Societies", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 2, pp 121–139.
- Loizidou-Hatzitheodoulou, P., Vassala, P., Kakouris, A., Mavroidis, I., and Tassios, P.T. (2001) "Communication in distance education and its contribution to teaching methodology: The case of the students of the post-graduate course 'Distance Education' of the Hellenic Open University", Paper read at 1st Hellenic Conference Proceedings on Distance Education, Hellenic Open University, Patras, Greece.

- Loizidou-Hatzitheodoulou, P., Kakouris, A., and Kyriakides, L. (2003) "Educational guide construction, in electronic form based on existing conventional material, for teacher training on educational evaluation", Paper read in 2nd Hellenic Conference Proceedings on Distance Education, Propobos Publications, Athens, pp 486 – 496.
- Low, M.B., and MacMillan, I.C. (1988) "Entrepreneurship: Past Research and Future Challenges", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp 139-161.
- Mezirow, J. (1978) "Perspective Transformation", *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp 100-110.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Moore, M. G., and Kearsley, G. (1996) *Distance Education: A Systems View, 2nd edition*, Thomson/Wadsworth, Belmont.
- Oslo agenda (2006) "Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe", [online], European Commission, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/entrepreneurship/support_measures/training_education/doc/oslo_agenda_final.pdf
- Race, P. (1993) *The open learning handbook: promoting quality in designing and delivering flexible learning*, Kogan Page, London.
- Sherry, L. (1996). "Issues in Distance Learning", *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1 (4), pp 337-365.
- Taylor, E.W. (1998) "Transformative Learning: A Critical Review", *ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education*, Information Series No. 374.
- Taylor, E.W. (2007) "An update of transformative learning theory: a critical review of the empirical research (1999–2005)", *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp 173–191.
- Timmons, J.A. (1994) *New Venture Creation: Entrepreneurship for the 21st Century, 4th edition*, Irwin Press, Burr Ridge.
- Trentin, G., and Scimeca, S. (1999) "The roles of tutors and experts in designing online education courses", *Distance Education*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp 144–161.
- Warren, A., Kisenwether, E. and Hanke, R. (2007) "A Scalable Problem-Based Learning System For Entrepreneurship Education", Paper read at 2006 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition: Excellence in Education, Chicago, USA, June.