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ACTION-BASED ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING CORPORATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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ACTION-BASED ACTIVITIES IN TEACHING CORPORATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: It is no longer a question of whether (corporate) entrepreneurship can be taught at university level, but rather one of developing and promoting its 'reachable' facets. This explorative research discusses the university-level course "Entrepreneurial behaviour and personal resources" (EB) run for Masters Students. The corporate entrepreneurship (CE) element was taught experientially and some action-based methods were used. The focus of this article is on these action-based activities, the aim being to gain a deeper understanding of the students´ perceptions and of the learning outcomes.

METHOD: The case study was based on rich written material produced by students, and a combination of qualitative methods and observation techniques was used in the analysis.

ANALYSIS: The action-based activities are described and analysed in the context of the crucial elements of action learning (AL).

RESULTS: All of the students claimed to have learned a lot about the CE phenomenon. They took at least a small step towards developing their own entrepreneurial behaviour. It remains to be seen to what extent such behaviour was instilled.

CONCLUSION: Although AL is far from easy to apply in the university setting it has its advantages in fostering entrepreneurial behaviour. More research is needed in order to understand its full potential and the effectiveness of action-based activities in teaching CE.

INTRODUCTION

There is no longer any doubt that entrepreneurship can be taught at university level: it is rather a question of developing and promoting its 'reachable' facets, i.e. the elements that are teachable (Henry et al., 2005; Kuratko, 2005). It involves the 'arts' (creative and innovative thinking) and the 'sciences' (business and functional management competencies) (Jack and Anderson, 1999; Rae, 2004). This 'science' is considered to be teachable, even via more conventional pedagogy, but the 'art', the matter of creation and innovation, apparently is not, at least not in the same way: it is a highly subjective skill that cannot be directly imparted given its fundamentally experiential nature (Jack and Anderson, 1999). It seems that universities have succeeded relatively well in teaching the 'science' of entrepreneurship by providing a conceptual background and stimulating the necessary analytical thought processes. Some of the crucial notions may have been ruined in the process, as the analytical approach does not allow for student imagination to stimulate the 'art', even though it may otherwise provide a sound platform for entrepreneurial endeavours (Jack and Anderson, 1999; Kirby, 2004). Even researchers and educators seem to find it hard to glean the true meaning and intent of the word entrepreneurship (Kuratko, 2005). Similarly, Hjorth (2003) calls for entrepreneurship that is not management-focused, and for education that acknowledges the creative, playful and passionate student.

The explorative research described in this paper was conducted as part of the university-level course "Entrepreneurial behaviour and personal resources" (hereafter EB) run for Masters Students. The course was taught experientially and some action-based methods[1] were used in order to support student learning in the field of corporate entrepreneurship (CE). The students were also involved in an R&D project being undertaken by my research team and commissioned by a municipal social- and health-care organisation. The project was set up to foster the identification and promotion of CE and its antecedents.

The aim of this article is to explore the action-based activities implemented as part of the EB course, and to gain a deeper understanding of the students´

[1] By action-based methods or activities I refer here to methods that emphasise learning by doing (see Rasmussen and Sorheim, 2006).

perceptions and learning outcomes through their own 'words' (see Bourner and Frost, 1996 for a similar approach). The paper describes the action-based methods used as well as the results obtained, but includes no in-depth discussion of the effectiveness of the course, which would require a more longitudinal approach. Finally, some conclusions are drawn and directions for further experiments and research are suggested.

THE CONCEPT OF CORPORATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND THE CHALLENGES INVOLVED IN TEACHING IT

Entrepreneurship and opportunity exploitation do not necessarily imply the creation of new firms as they may also take place in existing organisations (see Sharma and Chrisman, 1999; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) – a phenomenon that is referred to as CE or intrapreneurship. Some attempts have been made to clarify the concepts and terminological hierarchy (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999), but no unified understanding has been reached. I have purposely chosen to define the terms broadly here in an attempt to capture the related processes. It is the broad notion of CE that is important, not its exact form or guise[2].

CE is defined here as entrepreneurship within an existing organisation – regardless of its size – involving emergent intentions and behaviours that deviate from the customary way of doing business. The outcome may be not only new businesses or ventures, but also other innovative activities such as product, service and process innovations, self-renewal, risk taking, proactiveness, and competitive aggressiveness. (Antoncic and Hisrich,[3] 2001; 2003; 2004) These dimensions differ, but they are closely related, thereby forming the basis of the phenomenon (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). CE is essentially an activity-based concept that operates at the organisational boundary, pushing current products and services, norms, technologies, orientations, structures and operations in new directions (Antoncic and Hisrich, 2003). It is not about business as usual, but rather implies unusual business or business approaches (Thornberry, 2001).

2 I acknowledge the fact that CE and intrapreneurship are not exact synonyms, but represent slightly different phenomena of organisational renewal (see e.g., Sharma and Chrisman, 1999; Åmo and Kolvereid, 2005). This slight definitional difference is not of crucial importance in this study as the focus is on the entrepreneurial processes of potential intrapreneurs, future promoters of CE in different organisations.

3 Antoncic and Hisrich refer to the concept of intrapreneurship, not CE *per se*.

As CE is rooted in theories of entrepreneurship (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999), the challenge in teaching it is to reach the 'art'. The challenge is even greater given that implementation is usually considered more of a managerial issue ('science') (see e.g., Kuratko et al., 2005) than a creative and innovative process ('art'). In order to support the true meaning of entrepreneurship (see Kuratko, 2005) it has been suggested that learning approaches and methods that incorporate elements of innovation and risk taking should be used (Gibb, 1993; 1996; 2002). The thrust of the teaching should be on the facilitation of learning to support corporate entrepreneurial behaviour.

A typical university setting is unlikely to include many entrepreneurial elements (Frank, 1996a; Heinonen and Poikkijoki, 2006). Traditional teaching methods, such as lectures and examinations, do not activate CE (Gibb, 2002; Sogunro, 2004) and do not provide students with an opportunity to be actively engaged with the learning process (Gorman et al., 1997; Fiet, 2000a; Kuratko, 2005). If education is to be effective and equip students adequately for their future work and careers there is a need to expand the pedagogies and to introduce innovative approaches. Fiet (2000b) similarly encourages student-led activities in the classroom in order to foster involvement in the learning process, but still stresses the importance of the underlying theories. University-level courses must support students in learning the theoretical concepts and putting them into practice, foster entrepreneurial behaviour and encourage reflection in order to improve individual performance (see Edwards and Muir, 2005). It is not only a question of substance and content, but also one of delivery and the learning process. In an attempt to integrate the substance and process of entrepreneurial behaviour into the corporate setting, some action-based methods were used in teaching CE in the EB course discussed here.

METHODOLOGY

During the EB course I experimented with some action-based methods in my teaching of CE. The course objective was to increase understanding about CE and to promote entrepreneurial behaviour within the corporate setting. Empirically this case study is based on rich written material produced by the students, namely personal learning diaries and a case-study assignment (Appendix 1). I used a combination of qualitative methods and observation

techniques during and after the course in order to explore student perceptions and learning outcomes.

The students were asked at the beginning of the course to describe their learning objectives as concretely as they could, and to list potential outcomes that would indicate that the objectives had been met (see Löbler, 2006 on increasing student commitment). This information was included in their learning diaries, which they kept in order to reflect on their learning (see Frank, 1996b on a role of a learning diary in reflection). At the end they were asked to reflect on how far the initial objectives had been achieved. The outcome of their main project – an empirical case-study on CE in a municipal setting – was also a clear indication of their learning. Finally, the group discussions, activities and exercises conducted during the sessions enabled me as a teacher and a researcher to observe student reactions and self-reflection. All these observations and the written material related to the action-based activities were carefully analysed in the context of action learning (AL).

ACTION-BASED ACTIVITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF ACTION LEARNING

The students on the EB course were actively engaged in the process of learning: as learners they acquired and generated knowledge through their own active search following a problem-solving process (see Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). The activities discussed in this article bear some resemblance to AL, in which "… real people resolve and take action on real problems in real time and learn through questioning and reflection while doing so" (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004, 186). Learning is understood here as a highly situational and holistic process, in which students flexibly tackle elusive problems and combine social processes with individual needs (Mumford, 1995a). Therefore I have decided to describe and analyse the action-based course activities in the context of the crucial elements of AL (see Marquart, 1999; 2004a; Marquardt and Waddill, 2004), even though I acknowledge that these activities do not include all of the AL components (see Marquardt, 1999; 2004a). The elements are discussed one by one, each including a description of the course in question (EB course) and an analysis of the perceptions and outcomes of the students (EB outcome).

A problem, a project or a challenge

AL is built around a problem, a project or a challenge, the resolution of which is of great importance to the individual, the team or the organisation. The problem should be significant, or urgent, for the team or individual to solve, and should provide opportunities for learning (Revans, 1982). It gives the group meaningful and relevant work, and creates a hook for experimentation using stored knowledge (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004).

EB course: A municipal social- and health-care organisation wanted to analyse and develop its ways of working. My research team was commissioned to support the project, and CE was taken as a future objective and the basis of our analysis. The research team conducted a large-scale survey to identify the level and nature of CE within the organisation. The survey measured a total of nine areas indicating the phenomenon of CE, its antecedents and outcomes. The areas were analysed separately and then compared in order to identify related strengths and weaknesses. The following Figure 1 presents the results of the survey by areas and units (N=569): the wider the area inside the graph, the higher the level of CE within the organisation.

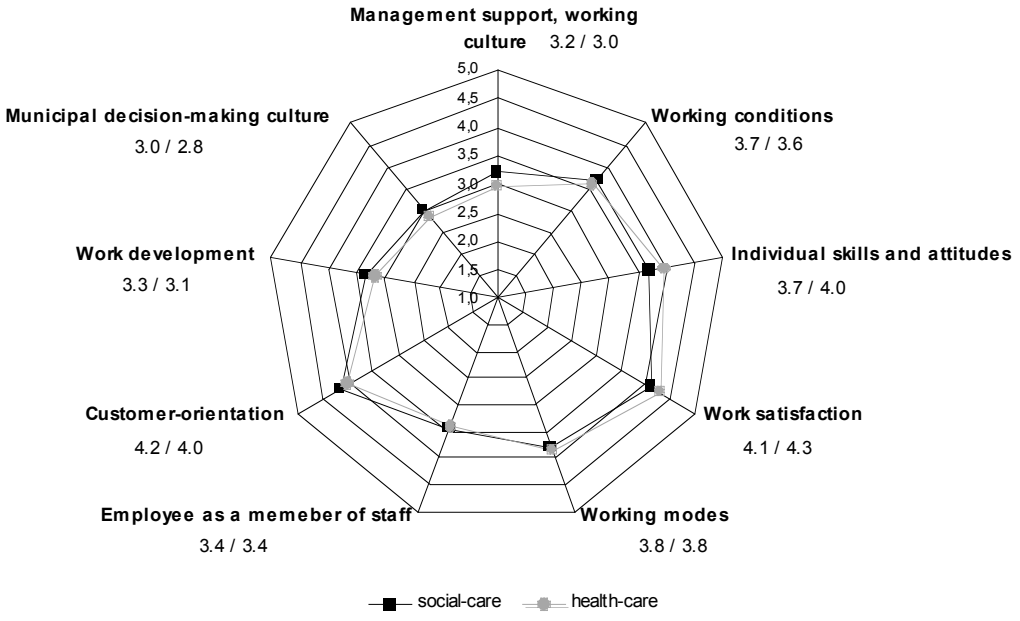

Figure 1 Indications of the phenomenon of CE, its antecedents and outcomes

The students on my EB course were linked to this analysis and development project as they were given the task of conducting, in pairs, an in-depth interview with one middle manager within the social- and health-care organisation. Their task was to gain a deeper understanding of the current situation and to identify the role of middle managers in it. They compiled a case-study report of their interview. The results of the case study and the CE survey were integrated and reported to the organisation for reflection. The students were informed beforehand of the objectives of the development project as well as of the use and importance of their contribution. It was made clear that the aim was to contribute not only to their individual and group learning, but also to the development of the organisation.

EB outcome: The case-study project was considered challenging and meaningful. All the pairs finalised it in time and were eager to present their findings to the group.

> 'For once there's a task about real life, not only about theories and charts, and human behaviour, existence, personality and the desire to develop are what count.' [individual learning diary]

The emphasis, indeed, was on combining theoretical knowledge and practical application in the context of CE. A theoretical introduction through more traditional methods, such as reading articles and literature followed by pair and group discussion, provided a good basis for the successful implementation of the project. It was easy to link the student contribution to the main project in the organisation, and thus to create value-added for the customer. In general, the results of the case study supported the survey results, but more importantly, they also gave a more heterogeneous and in-depth picture of the nature of CE in the organisation: middle-mangers had a key role in promoting it. Even in the same unit, however, they differed enormously in their attitudes.

> 'It was surprising that the interviewees and their attitudes towards work were so different. Some were not interested at all in work-related issues, whereas others were truly committed from the bottom of their hearts.' [individual learning diary]

In addition, the survey and case study portrayed a somewhat different picture of CE in the units studied.

> 'It was great to observe from the interviews that the health-care unit seemed to be much more innovative and open to changes than the

social-care unit. This could not be seen from the survey results.' [individual learning diary]

From the learning perspective it was important not only that the different pairs arrived at different outcomes and conclusions as different persons were interviewed, but also that the survey highlighted some other aspects of the phenomenon under study. It became clear to the students that no such thing as an absolute truth existed in organisational development, and that the reality was constructed and developed by the actors involved.

A diverse group

AL is optimal within a learning group composed of four to eight individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences who are able to maximise various perspectives and absorb fresh viewpoints (Dilworth and Willis, 2003). According to Revans (1988), the success of the group lies not in the capabilities and skills of its individual members, but in the cross-fertilisation of its collective abilities.

EB course: The group consisted of 12 students. Ten of them were Master's-level students at Turku School of Economics, while the other two had enrolled via the Open University. These latter two brought some further working experience and diversity to the group, which otherwise consisted of second-year university-level students in the field of business administration with relatively scanty, although varying (summer) work experience. The group met over seven weeks and there were seven joint sessions (of two hours each). The project work was carried out in pairs (with one group of three), but the theoretical basis of CE and some preparatory work and exercises were covered during the joint sessions. The students also met autonomously to work on their projects.

EB outcome: Running a course for second-year Master's-level students within a single-faculty university (business school) with a view to promoting AL was not an easy task. The group was relatively inexperienced (in terms of working experience), and they all had a background in business administration or economics. Holding the course open to (usually older) students from the Open University was extremely useful and it enriched the discussions. As the students found the atmosphere in the classroom relaxed, pleasant, and inspiring the group was prepared to ask good questions and to learn from each other. The reflection in the group and pair discussions

supported the learning effectively. However, a wider variety of students would have benefited the learning process.

> 'It was interesting to listen to others´ achievements as I was really familiar with the substance from our own case-study report. The debriefing session was very fruitful due to the heterogeneous findings of the different groups.' [individual learning diary]

The importance of social and practical learning (see Rae, 1999 on sources of entrepreneurial learning) was highlighted in this respect. The students learned from their peers, and also from the municipal interviewees.

The process of reflective inquiry

AL focuses on the right questions rather than on the right answers, and on what one does not know as well as on what one does know (Mumford, 1995b). The questions and reflection are emphasised above factual statements and opinions as problems are tackled by first asking for clarification, reflecting and identifying possible solutions, and only then moving towards consideration of strategies and possible action (Marquardt, 2004b). Questions help to create a common goal, to strengthen listening skills, and to increase the learning (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004).

EB course: Before beginning the field work (i.e. conducting the interviews) the students were familiarised with the theoretical concept of CE, and carried out some action-based activities followed by group debriefing discussions in a classroom setting. First, a group assignment to construct a poster on CE[4] served as an opportunity to reflect on the knowledge gained individually and collectively. The assignment was also designed to promote a secure and familiar yet creative atmosphere within the group (i.e. warming-up and group formation), and to encourage the students to actively engage in their own learning. In order to complete the task they had to tackle the question: 'What are the crucial elements of CE?' The second task required them to identify entrepreneurial/non-entrepreneurial behaviour by analysing imaginary accounts of intrapreneurial organisations prepared by my students from the previous CE course [5]. The main question to be

[4] The students were given one empty poster paper, a pile of magazines and newspapers, glue, scissors and pens. Their task was to construct a poster portraying CE. Each group presented the outcome and justified its choices.

[5] The identification exercise comprised a handful of stories/descriptions of hypothetical organisations prepared during my previous course on CE, when each student wrote an imaginary story about an

addressed was: 'How can CE be identified, and what should we be looking at?' Thirdly, the students were thrown into the role-play situation, and had no option but to join in the game. Each one was given a specific role (incorporating an attitude to CE)[6]. This activity gave them the opportunity to take a new kind of role and to probe hidden aspects of themselves, as role-playing encourages people to view situations from new perspectives (Sogunro, 2004). It made them ponder upon how best to demonstrate the character they had been given, and on how they and the others in the group experienced the situation.

> 'I found it far from easy to act my own role… It was hard all of a sudden to imagine how an intrapreneurial employee would behave in a real-life situation…' [individual learning diary]

The group discussions during and after the exercises supported the reflection process and broadened the learning in the spirit of co-participation (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; see also Löbler, 2006). Finally, the project – the case-study (Appendix 1) – gave the students an opportunity to apply their acquired theoretical knowledge. It integrated two different learning arenas, the university and the organisation (see Leitch and Harrison, 1999), and as Binks et al. (2006) suggest, it connected the processes of academic learning, reflective self-awareness and experiential learning in a practical context. The students were given guidance in preparing and conducting the interviews, but they took full responsibility for the implementation of the case-study (see Löbler, 2006 on supporting student autonomy and not solving problems for them). They drafted the themes, conducted the interviews and prepared the case-study reports, which were presented and discussed in the group. They could not refer to the CE concept during the interviews because the interviewees were not familiar with it, and they therefore had to find ways of identifying the phenomenon, its antecedents and outcomes by discussing the individual and organisational factors that portrayed it.

> 'The challenge was to encourage the interviewees to discuss CE and related themes when they were not familiar with the concept. You need to have quite innovative and down-to-earth questions.' [individual learning diary]

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intrapreneurial organisation. Now the students were asked to judge (and to justify their judgment) how well their predecessors had managed to capture the essence of CE in their stories.

[6] The group was given the task of planning and organising a one-day strategy/development event for an imaginary company in which they were all employed. Each student was given a specific role (position and task in the company and attitude in relation to CE). The students did not know the others´ roles. The role play continued until the task was completed, after which the debriefing was conducted in the group.

It was not only a question of planning and conducting the case-study, but also of interpreting the results. What did each of the findings mean? What did they reveal about the current situation? During the discussions the students attempted to move from their own solutions and interpretations to seeking what would be best for the municipal organisation.

EB outcome: The theory-based activities allowed the students to test and assess their own entrepreneurial skills and capabilities, as well as to imagine their future behaviour in managerial situations, for example. The course opened up new perspectives on management and shaped student attitudes towards work. The theory-based activities made it easier for them to understand and assess their current and past behaviour in their (summer) jobs. The case-study supported their learning most as they had to ask questions and to integrate theory and practice during the process.

> 'Clearly everyone had attempted to explore the same themes. It was evident that the theories had been internalised during the sessions and now we wanted to test them in practice.' [individual learning diary]

What was perhaps the most important was the student reflection during the course. This study gave contradictory evidence on reflection: on the one hand the students needed time to internalise the learning experience to be able to reflect effectively, but on the other hand it was important to start the process as soon as the learning intervention had taken place. Teaching interventions may appear separate and sporadic in the short term, but in the longer term they form more holistic and sequential learning circles in which new knowledge and activity continuously produce new experiences through individual reflection in a social context (Heinonen and Poikkijoki, 2006). My students very consistently admitted that even more could have been achieved had they only realised the importance of reflection from the very beginning.

> 'Sometimes it would have been better to be able to reflect on your thoughts just after the session, but usually I had time to do that only later in the evening, and some ideas might have been lost.' [individual learning diary]

The learning objectives, the process, the experiences and the results were discussed in a final group session with a view to integrating all the sources of learning through student reflection (Fiet, 2000b). The sharing and

drawing of conclusions, together with reflection, are vital aspects of action-based activities in teaching.

Power to take action

Members of an AL group need to have the power to take action themselves, or to be assured that their recommendations will be implemented (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004), otherwise the group is in danger of losing its energy, creativity, and commitment (Marquardt, 2004b). The most valuable learning occurs only when action is taken and reflected upon, for one is never sure an idea or a plan will be effective until it has been implemented (Pedler, 1997).

EB course: The students were fully responsible for conducting the case-study as well as for interpreting the results and recommendations based on their findings. Such freedom and responsibility are quite exceptional for second-year Master's students, whose courses mostly comprise traditional lecturing, literature reading and examinations. It was made clear to them that any empirical findings and their implications would be of great importance and would be incorporated into our final report and discussions with the customer. The role of the case-study and the survey was highlighted by inviting the students to participate in the briefing organised for the staff of the organisation under study. Given the different time frames of the EB course and the municipal R&D project, the students could not be given any customer feedback on their contribution, nor were they able to reflect upon the results and potential measures to be taken with the customer.

EB outcome: The students had the freedom and power to organise their projects and other learning activities within the EB course. It was made clear that it was of utmost importance to deliver the case-study on time because it was an elementary part of a wider, commissioned project. They were not seen in the customer interface, however, in other words the results were reported and discussed by my research team. In terms of learning it would have been better if the students had been involved in reporting their contribution not only to the group, but also to the customer. Similarly, it was a pity that the course ended before the final discussion with the customer was held. Even though it was made clear to the students at the outset that it would be the customer who would decide what action to take, it would have been meaningful and useful for them to recognise the consequences of their contribution. However, I dare to argue that their motivation to conduct the case-study and to learn from it did not suffer from the lack of power to take

action: this approach was challenging and motivating enough for second-year Master's students.

> 'I enjoyed the case-study and especially the fact that our study might be useful for the organisation.' [individual learning diary]
>
> 'It was a delightful thought that I was a small part of a large project in this city.' [individual learning diary]

Commitment to learning

As AL was developed as a method for management learning and development (Bourner et al., 2000), it is used in solving organisational problems providing immediate, short-term benefits to the organisation (Marquardt, 2004b). Equal emphasis is put on accomplishing the task and on the learning of individuals, teams and organisations. The greater and longer-term multiplier benefits are usually gained from the latter. The competencies developed individually will serve the people concerned throughout their professional lives (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004).

EB course: At the beginning of the EB course the students were advised that the course project was not only a learning opportunity, but also a problem-solving process in which acquired knowledge and experience would be put into practice. They were expected to learn about the CE phenomenon, as well as to practice their own corporate entrepreneurial skills and competences for use later in their professional lives in different organisations. It was emphasised that learning was far from an individual process, and rather included elements of social learning from others (see Rae, 1999).

EB outcome: The students were committed to increasing their understanding of the CE phenomenon and to promoting their entrepreneurial behaviour. A cynic might say that they were most interested in passing the EB course, the assessment of which was based on the case-study, active participation during the sessions, the take-home examination, and the learning diary (see Löbler, 2006 on the idea that entrepreneurship courses should not be tested in the 'normal' way). They nevertheless managed together to solve the problems they faced during the process, and were able to achieve their project objectives. Their learning process, on the other hand, was revealed in their learning diaries. They considered their holistic learning experience through action-based activities exciting as it managed to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practice by way of active involvement and

problem-solving in a hands-on multilogue approach involving their peers (Hjorth and Johannisson, 2006).

> 'I found the debriefing session interesting… In the final session I realised how everything I had learned and done during the course finally became integrated into holistic learning about CE.' [individual learning diary]

The learning coach

The role of the AL coach is to ask questions, and to focus on those that are related to the learning of the group (e.g., what could we do better?), of the individual (e.g., what have we learned about ourselves?), and of the organisation (e.g., what have we learned that is applicable to our organisation?) (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). All her/his efforts are directed towards helping the group to learn, while the other members focus on solving the problem. Marquardt (2004a) discovered that this makes the group effective more quickly in terms of problem-solving activities and group interactions.

EB course: As a teacher (or a coach) I attempted to help and facilitate the co-learning process of my students. I also saw myself as a guide creating entrepreneurial learning environments and processes (Heinonen, 2006). The most important aspect emphasising my role was the debriefing, not the completion of the exercises or the project. By facilitating the discussion and the co-learning process, I was attempting to help the students to recognise their own CE potential. In this I acknowledge that I was not a teacher in the traditional sense (one who teaches), I was a member of a learning group, and also a learner in a dialogue with the students (see Leitch and Harrison, 1999).

EB outcome: The action-based activities gave me an interesting opportunity to engage my students in the learning process: they had ownership of their learning and I acted as a guide and a facilitator (Fiet, 2000b; Hannon, 2005). I trusted their capabilities and skills and did not provide them with clear answers.

> '…The teacher told as about the objectives of the interview… She gave no ready-made suggestions for the interview questions although we all expected her to give a list of questions or that we would prepare the list together. She pushed us into asking questions so that we would

> get an idea of what to do. Finally, things became clear, but anyhow the interview was challenging…' [individual learning diary]

My role as a guide and a facilitator was influenced by my role as an academic teacher and researcher. Even though I was truly facilitating the learning of the students, I was also heavily involved with the substance to be learnt, namely CE, the field of my particular research interest and expertise. It was therefore difficult for me to confine myself to the learning process, and I realised how easily I had started to guide the problem-solving process of my students. When they faced difficulties in drafting the themes and questions to be discussed during the interview, for example, I might have helped them too much, or rather too early in the process.

> 'During the session we constructed the preliminary questionnaire for the interview.' [individual learning diary]

Similarly, I may have influenced their reflection during the exercises that gave them a chance to experience entrepreneurial behaviour, and thus have prevented some entrepreneurial learning from taking place. It was too easy for me as an expert to focus on 'hard' aspects of the substance to be learnt, rather than concentrating on the creative and social aspects of learning so often emphasised by entrepreneurs themselves (see Collins et al., 2006). This could have been related to my ultimate responsibilities towards our customer, the municipal social- and health-care organisation. Perhaps I did not trust my students enough, and was perhaps sometimes guilty of making things too easy and manageable for them (see Lizzio and Wilson, 2004 on balancing between guidance and demands), although they sometimes hinted at the opposite. Despite my shortcomings as a coach my approach was quite strange to university students and not traditionally considered very academic. CE as a learning process is about innovative action and extending life beyond experiences, the teaching of which requires an innovative approach inviting reflective and intellectual activity (see Hjorth and Johannisson, 2006). The role of the teacher is to stretch the traditional boundaries likewise.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study described and analysed the action-based activities I have used in teaching CE to Master's-level students on an EB course in the context of the crucial elements of AL (Marquart, 1999; 2004a; Marquardt and Waddill,

2004). The lack of theoretically robust studies on different teaching methods and experiments in entrepreneurship within a university setting was my motivation. This final discussion is aimed at strengthening the learning process and further developing the action-based activities in the teaching of (corporate) entrepreneurship in the university setting.

The course not only focused on the CE phenomenon in its many guises (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999), it was also aimed at encouraging students to reflect upon their own propensity to behave entrepreneurially, and to identify and promote CE in any organisational setting. It was taught experientially and some action-based methods were used in order to support student learning. The focus was on learning about (context and process) as well as for (practice) CE (Edwards and Muir, 2005) in order to broaden understanding of its manifold opportunities in different organisations. A further objective was to 'push' the students into CE through the structuring of learning as an entrepreneurial process (Hjorth and Johannisson, 2006) and project by using action-based activities.

All of the students claimed to have learned a lot about the phenomenon of CE: the concept, the individual characteristics and behavioural patterns, the organisational antecedents and the outcomes on both the individual and the organisational level. After the course they were able to identify CE and its absence in an organisation. They usually mentioned this in their learning diaries, and it was confirmed in the group discussions and in the case-study reports. Another objective was to promote entrepreneurial behaviour, namely CE, the assessment of which is far from straightforward. The EB course incorporated experience, practice and action during and after the acquisition of the necessary knowledge (theory). The students learned about CE through exercises and while solving the problems related to the case-study. Their learning took place through questioning, and through feedback from me and from each other. My observations and experiences in the classroom gave me reason to believe that they took at least a small step towards learning 'in' CE – their own entrepreneurial behaviour – which is where the invention of new practices takes place (Hjorth and Johannisson, 2006). They claimed to have gained a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses with regard to CE, and of their self-image, which was advantageous in terms of their future self-development not only in their studying and working lives, but also in mastering their personal lives.

> ‘I think CE is about mastering your own life. A small intrapreneur lives in all of us, but mine needed to have some encouragement to find its way out… I feel that my entrepreneurial behaviour did not face its end, but rather the beginning.’ [individual learning diary]

How well the course managed to instil entrepreneurial behaviour in the students remains to be seen, however. The critical reflections in the learning diaries look promising, but further longitudinal research is needed.

Prior research reports a number of cases in which AL has been successfully applied. It is equally important to find disconfirming cases that promote the further development of the learning process. (Bourner et al., 1996) Analysing the EB course in the context of AL principles brings up some issues worth mentioning. Given the fact that AL has been developed and designed to support management learning and organisational development (Bourner et al., 2000), it is not directly applicable to Master’s-level students in the university setting: they tend to be too inexperienced and homogenous to fertilise genuinely new ideas. On the other hand, deep expertise and professionalism might hinder the development of truly fresh ideas, and create more pressure in terms of finding a sufficiently challenging task for the group. It was not too hard to find a manageable, although meaningful, project with plenty of learning opportunities for these second-year students, but from the AL perspective the most demanding objective to fulfil was to empower them to take action. They were not given the opportunity to intervene in the work of the case organisation during the EB course, and they were merely outside ‘researchers’ rather than genuine actors influencing the development project. In the circumstances it did not decrease their motivation, but it certainly weakened the learning outcomes. It would have been most valuable for them to reflect upon the customer feedback and the measures to be taken as a consequence of the project.

This study demonstrated that even though AL is far from easy to apply in the university setting, it has its advantages in teaching entrepreneurial behaviour. The action-based activities, with some AL elements, that were used represent a move from pre-packaged teaching towards a questioning approach to teaching and learning. Its deep focus on getting something new and innovative created and accomplished in the group facing time pressure, and producing a learning experience of a tough joint venture, fits extremely well with the core of entrepreneurship – the entrepreneurial process – in

which entrepreneurial individuals interact with their environment and discover, evaluate and exploit opportunities (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Shook et al., 2003). Action-based activities are less straightforward and more demanding, but they provide a wider range of learning outcomes (O´Hara et al., 1996). The approach has the potential to support learning in the field of (corporate) entrepreneurship in different settings and learning environments as it addresses and attempts to promote the entrepreneurial processes of students.

Finally, this EB course was also a true learning experience for me – not only as a teacher but also as a researcher. The role of coach is not an easy one to take in academia. Moreover, I sometimes found it hard to legitimise the use of action-based activities. Nevertheless, the learning outcomes and student feedback – demanding more activities, more exercises and more discussions – encourage me to run new experiments in teaching CE. It is of utmost importance to patiently and systematically reflect upon and assess the respective learning outcomes in the longer term rather than merely to focus on the hands-on reactions of the students. That is the only way to cumulate our knowledge of the effects of different approaches, and hence to reduce the conceptual and contextual shortcomings that make it hard to understand what the real effects of entrepreneurship studies and enterprise education are (see Matlay, 2005). Accordingly, I will continue to combine and experiment with action and learning in my future teaching endeavours!

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Appendix 1 Written material produced by the students during the course

Learning diary

The completion of a written learning diary was compulsory and a condition for earning the course credits. The learning diary was used as a method of self-assessment and process evaluation in order to help the students to reflect upon the things learnt. They used them for working on the learning material, linking personal experience with the course substance and notes, and making a self-assessment and analysis of the contents. The following elements were included:

- Personal expectations and learning objectives
- After each session: the highlights of the day and reflection upon what had been learned
- Inter-session work, group work in particular: material related to the topic on the Internet, media, discussions etc., and writing down the main points.

At the end of the course the students were asked to assess:

- How well the objectives had been reached
- Their own input
- The input of the other group members
- The course as a whole, and to give suggestions for improvements.

Each personal learning diary was given to me after the course, and was assessed as an indication of student performance.

Case-study and the report

Each pair of students (and the one group of three) interviewed one middle manager within the case social- and health-care organisation. Five middle managers in total were interviewed: three from the social-care unit and two from the health-care unit. The task was the same for all the pairs, but the interviewee was different. Each pair prepared a case-study report of their interview.

The objective of the interview was to gain deeper understanding of the CE phenomenon and its antecedents and outcomes in the organisations studied. No format for the report was given beforehand. The reports discussed and presented the working modes and practices of the interviewees in order to provide information on the CE phenomenon and its antecedents. Usually the nature of the change that was taking place in the unit was also described in order to highlight innovativeness and proactivity. The reports threw light on the performance and outcomes of CE as identified based on the interview. They all painted a heterogeneous picture of the CE phenomenon, and even interviewees from the same unit perceived the current situation in very different ways. Their attitudes towards development (superior-employee) discussions, for example, illustrated the situation:

> 'I don't know how useful they are as the employees don't talk.' [Interviewee A, social-care unit]
>
> 'In the development discussions I try to identify new innovations and best practices in order to improve our performance.' [Interviewee B, social-care unit]

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