Garrison's Self-Directed Learning Model: A Qualitative Study With Nascent Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: The qualitative phase of this study found four major themes influencing nascent entrepreneurial learning and attrition in a short-term formal learning program: 1) the entrepreneurs' motivation, 2) the entrepreneurs' affective experiences, 3) the entrepreneurs' obstacles contributing to attrition, and 4) the entrepreneurs' perceptions about the contextual congruency.

Overview

Prior research demonstrates that entrepreneurs learn from their experiences in business, especially those described as serial entrepreneurs. But little is known about nascent entrepreneurial discontinuance in a short term learning program (Liao & Gartner, 2007/2008). Entrepreneurial discontinuance is defined as an action taken by the entrepreneur to suspend his or her venture during the gestation phase (Liao et al, 2008/2009). This paper will first provide the reader with a review of the pertinent literature concerning entrepreneurial discontinuance and the comprehensive self-directed learning model guiding this study. Then, the findings including the four major themes will be introduced. Finally, this paper will discuss the study's implication for future research and practice.

Much is known about entrepreneurs who succeed, because they are easily identified and researchers are interested in the stories of successful entrepreneurs. Less is known about those entrepreneurs who fail. Even less is known about nascent entrepreneurs who engage in business start-up activity and then discontinue their activity before actually starting their businesses (Liao & Gartner, 2007/2008). This study helps to fill this gap in the adult learning literature and in the entrepreneurship literature by focusing on entrepreneurial discontinuance within the formal context of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) learning program.

There is little understanding about why some nascent entrepreneurs who enroll in entrepreneurial learning programs discontinue their educational program prior to completion. Yearly, over 6,000 nascent entrepreneurs start a business planning course in the SBDC program, but more than 60% discontinue their learning program prior to completion of their learning program or before completing a business plan (Post, 2014). The evidence suggests that business planning can have a significant positive influence over a nascent entrepreneur's ability to launch a new business (Delmar & Shane, 2004; Liao & Gartner, 2007/2008; Reynolds 2007). Moreover, business planning is recognized as an important step in the nascent entrepreneur's learning and in the eventual decision to start the business (Liao & Gartner, 2007/2008). Thus, when nascent entrepreneurs discontinue their business planning learning programs, it raises concerns because this could reduce the number of new business starts in a regional economy.

Entrepreneurial scholars have found that the conceptual frameworks used to study entrepreneurial learning phenomenon are underdeveloped. There are relatively few empirical studies that provide insight about how entrepreneurs learn (Cope & Watts, 2000). A theory from the field of adult education that offers potential for supplementing nascent entrepreneurial

learning is the self-directed learning framework. Self-directed learning (SDL) provides a conceptual learning framework that could help inform nascent entrepreneurial learning. "In essence, self-directed learning is a self-managed or self-motivated process to learn, change and improve" (Guglielmino & Klatt, 1994, p. 164). Research has shown that individuals with higher levels of self-directed learning and self-management tend to perform better in jobs that require these skills (Guglielmino, Guglielmino & Long, 1987). Moreover, successful entrepreneurs were found to possess a higher degree of self-managed, or self-directed learning readiness as compared to others in the general population (Guglielmino & Klatt, 1994). Despite this finding, very little entrepreneurial research has used the self-directed learning framework to explore entrepreneurial learning since the original study by Guglielmino & Klatt (1994). Our understanding of entrepreneurial learning will never be complete until we have a more well-rounded understanding of what causes discontinuation (Liao et al., 2008/2009). Garrison's (1997) self-directed learning comprehensive model could provide refreshing new insight into the nascent entrepreneurial learning literature that is concerned with those who discontinue their educational program.

Because little was known about nascent entrepreneurial learning, a mixed method study was used to provide information about the perceptions of the learners who withdrew from the SBDC learning program before completing their learning goals. This paper reports on the qualitative phase of a mixed method research study. The purpose of the qualitative phase of the study was to explore the perceptions of nascent entrepreneurs who had discontinued their learning program before successfully completing their learning goals and to determine if the comprehensive SDL model might provide new insight to guide entrepreneurial educators.

The qualitative findings were based on 10 in depth interviews and they are presented in four major schema: 1) entrepreneurs' motivation, 2) entrepreneurs' affective experiences 3) entrepreneurs' obstacles preventing completion, and 4) entrepreneurs' perceptions about contextual congruency (Post, 2014). The qualitative study provided the insight to develop the questionnaire that was used for the quantitative phase of this study. The sample included 4 Latino women, 2 Latino men, 1 Indian male, 1 White male and 2 White women who had each started the SBDC learning program but then withdrew from the program between January 2010 and December 2011.

Findings

The qualitative themes were developed through an iterative process of reviewing the transcribed interviews from the 10 participants, and member checks were completed with each participant. The transcriptions were reduced to four major themes that will be discussed in the next four sections.

The Entrepreneurs' Motivation

Many of the participants described being motivated to pursue an entrepreneurial career to balance family needs and their own passion for doing something that provided meaning to their life (Post, 2014). For example, Joyce had worked in a corporate job until she recently gave birth to her child. During her leave of absence from her corporate job, she had time to reflect on her career choices. She stated: "My parents always told me to go to college and get a good job in an office somewhere. So entrepreneurship for me is freedom, freedom from the status quo." Similarly, Carolina, a married Latina mother of two young children, viewed the opportunity to open her own bakery shop as a way for her to have a flexible career that would allow her to

spend time with her young children while also contributing to the household income. This was a familiar theme for many of the participants who had children. For example, another participant discussed how her decision to open a daycare business was influenced by her desire to have a business and raise her children simultaneously, because her children were her main priority in life (Post, 2014).

Starting a business is often viewed by nascent entrepreneurs as a positive way to balance family needs with the need to produce an income. However, several participants discussed the family conflict that resulted when they entertained the idea of opening a business. For example, one participant discussed the conflict that opening a business caused with a marital partner when the issue of financing the business surfaced. Her husband did not want their household funds to be used to help the participant start her business. One participant discussed how her sister was an accountant and she always pushed her to move forward with her bakery. But the support by this participant's sister was viewed as superficial because her sister had no children of her own. Because of this, she had no way of understanding the challenges of starting a business when you have young children to raise.

Other participants discussed how entrepreneurship had been an idea that formed at a much earlier stage in their life, but the pursuit of an entrepreneurial career was not acted upon until they encountered a life-changing event. For example, Mike emigrated to the U.S. from India, which then triggered his pursuit of opening his business because he had access to information and resources. Mike stated: "I thought about opening a business in India, but access to information was very limited. I did not have the guidance in India to pursue my dream." Family played a significant role in motivating nascent entrepreneurs to start their entrepreneurial learning program. Life-changing events, such as having children, moving, or facing a job disruption allowed these entrepreneurial learners the time to reflect on their career choices, ultimately leading many of these learners to seek more of an independent career through opening a business. Student emotions are often overlooked or minimized in research studies. However, affect and emotions surfaced as a major theme in this study and these are discussed in the next section (Post, 2014).

Entrepreneurs' Affective Experiences

The entrepreneur learners experienced both negative and positive emotions while they were participating in the learning program. The negative emotions that were described centered on emotions such as fear, anxiety, and frustration (Post, 2014). The entrepreneurs' fears stemmed from the unknown aspect of starting a business that placed them in the role of being responsible for their own income. For example, one participant stated: "I am afraid of making mistakes and wasting time because when starting something new, everyone is afraid." Other participants recalled their feelings of frustration when they encountered obstacles to starting their business, and these emotions influenced many of the participants' motivation about finishing their learning program (Post, 2014).

Even mentors and instructors in the SBDC learning program elicited negative emotions from some of the entrepreneur learners (Post, 2014). For example, some participants recalled the implicit messages sent from instructors about the challenges of starting a business. These messages were fraught with overtones of how many people fail when starting a business, implying that the learners were embarking on a nearly impossible venture that was more likely to fail than succeed.

Some learners desired more encouragement and connection with their instructor and mentor. For example, Sonya, a young Latina vocalist, said that she lost the motivation to continue when she missed several classes and her instructor did not call to ask if she was having trouble with the homework. Negative emotions reduced the learners' motivation to continue with the learning program. Other participants discussed the positive emotions that they experienced during the classes and they recalled how these positive emotions provided motivation for them to successfully complete the learning program.

Several of the Latina mothers who participated in the interviews described feelings of passion and joy about the prospect of being able to start or grow their business while doing something that made them really happy. For example, Carolina, a professionally trained chef, stated: "I love what I do. My passion has always been pastries." For her, the prospect of opening her own bakery brought feelings of joy because it would afford her the ability to use her creative talents to bake and design creative pastries. However, these positive emotions often subsided when the learners experienced obstacles such as funding the business start-up or other family issues that were impeding their ability to start their business (Post, 2014).

Entrepreneur's Obstacles to Success

These entrepreneurial learners often experienced discouragement when they discussed their personal financial situations in relation to starting their businesses (Post, 2014). For many of these learners, the perception that they could not obtain financing for their business was the ultimate reason that they discontinued the entrepreneurial learning program. For example, Andrea stated: "I discovered the renovations required for the family center would take more money than it is worth…. Once I saw the financing that was needed, I stepped back from moving so fast and I stopped taking the SBDC workshops." For others, the perception that obtaining financing was going to be a major obstacle discouraged them from continuing to pursue their SBDC learning program. Ironically, for many of the participants, these perceptions seemed to have been formed with little input from the SBDC mentors. Unfortunately, very few learners were aware that free mentoring was available to them. In fact, there was very little awareness from any participants about the array of free services that are available to the learners. The learners' levels of awareness seemed limited to only the program in which they were currently participating. In addition, students' lack of time and their work schedule conflicts were also pointed out by participants as obstacles to completing the SBDC learning program (Post, 2014).

Entrepreneurs' Perceptions About Contextual Congruency

The participants were nearly unified in why they came to the SBDC entrepreneurial learning program. They were seeking a mentor and advice on their business idea in hopes of avoiding costly mistakes. In addition, they were seeking advice on putting their business plan together and testing various business models. What was clear was that they were seeking a mentor who would guide them and help them make decisions based the mentor's own experience. They valued the experience of their mentor and they wanted their mentor to take a more direct approach in guiding them. A number of the participants enjoyed hearing the individual success stories from local entrepreneurs who came into the classroom to share their stories and obstacles that they overcame to start their business.

Another perception that was of interest was the challenges that resulted from blending nascent entrepreneurs and experienced entrepreneurs in the same classroom. While some

participants appreciated the experienced entrepreneurs' stories and wisdom that they shared, others were intimated by their presence and less willing to ask questions. Several participants mentioned that they thought the nascent entrepreneurs should be paired together and not blended into the same classroom with established entrepreneurs. Others also viewed some of the content as not pertaining to them, and this was a distraction to successfully completing the program. For example, some participants were opening home-based businesses with little need to borrow money. Consequently, the classroom content that was devoted to financing a business start-up was not relevant to some of the learners.

Finally, several recommendations were offered to help improve the program. For example, several recommended making the class size smaller. Claudia recommended that the class size "be a maximum of 12 people and be in the same stage of business." The rationale for this was to improve the ability to get their questions answered and to help everyone feel comfortable in asking questions that might seem too basic to be asked. Some enjoyed the ability to obtain content online, and some participants said they would prefer if more options like this were available.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

Although many adult learners participate in a formal adult entrepreneurial educational program at some point in their lifetime, many of those learners will discontinue their learning before they reach a successful completion. This study was interested in learning what a unique group of nascent entrepreneurial perceived as obstacles toward successfully completing their learning program in a short-term formal learning context. In addition, this study helped to confirm the positive effect that a learner's emotions have on sustaining the necessary motivation to complete an educational program in a formal context. Other participants were also motivated to pursue entrepreneurship out of a desire to use their creativity, especially those learners who were engaged in an artistic field (Post, 2014). The emotional experiences of learners have often been overlooked in the practice of adult education and especially in the field of entrepreneurship. However, this study found that emotions and family dynamics play a substantial role in determining if someone will persist with their learning goals in an entrepreneurial program. Specifically, when family support is evident to the learner, this can improve the positive emotions that are experienced. Positive emotions are thought to increase the ability of learners to overcome negative emotions and obstacles encountered either in their daily life or from the classroom experience.

The SBDC learning program could improve by focusing on raising the level of awareness with the participants about all of the free learning resources that are available for them to access. In addition, the program could improve the assessment of the students entering the program to improve the match between the services offered and the needs of the student. These assessments should consider evaluating the students' ability to be self-directed with their learning.

Life changing events, such as a new child or job change, often provide time for adult learners to reflect on their career choices. This period of reflection can provide an incentive for learners to start their participation in short-term formal educational programs. These life events can also be an impetus for adult learners to change careers or to think about the priorities in their life.

The comprehensive SDL model was viewed as having some relevancy to this group of learners. Specifically, the role of the mentor surfaced as an important dimension with these learners, and the role of mentoring was a major theme in this study. In addition, entering and

task motivation is a major dimension in the comprehensive SDL model, and in this study motivation surfaced as a major theme. Self-regulatory and self-management strategies are important dimensions in the comprehensive SDL model. These dimensions surfaced as sub themes that this group of learners discussed. Therefore, the comprehensive SDL model is viewed as having relevancy to nascent entrepreneurs in a short-term formal learning context. Future studies could expand on this study and utilize the comprehensive SDL model as a guide to future studies.

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