



# **Critical thinking and the cultural myth of the entrepreneur in business education**

**E**ntrepreneurial education has grown in popularity across public schools internationally. Curriculum policy documents reveal similarities in the structure and content of entrepreneurial courses. One important commonality is the intent of entrepreneurial education to “sell” entrepreneurship in a positive light to students



through the perpetuation of the cultural myth of the entrepreneur. I argue that that this is problematic because students are not supplied with an accurate picture that would enable them to make an informed decision about entrepreneurship as a career option. Commonly used textbooks emphasize the advantages of entrepreneurship, but some important consequences of entrepreneurial life are kept hidden from adolescent students enrolled in entrepreneurial studies courses. By focusing on commonly-used classroom resources and curriculum policy, this article will illustrate the unbalanced portrayal of entrepreneurship through the perpetuation of the cultural myth of the entrepreneur, and sug-

gest the important role that critical thinking can play in directly addressing this myth in business classes.

### ***Entrepreneurial education***

Entrepreneurial education is a phenomenon that has been widely adopted in many jurisdictions over the past decade through education policy initiatives. Most Canadian provinces, US school districts, some Australian states, and the national curriculum in the United Kingdom have specific curricula devoted entrepreneurial education in public school. The majority of these take the form of high school courses with titles such as “Entrepreneurship,” “Venture Planning,” or “Start Your Own Business.” Some organizations (for instance, Junior Achievement, DECCA, Nation Business Education Association, Institute for Enterprise Education, Ontario Business Educators’ Association, and British Columbia Business Educators’ Association) support and encourage entrepreneurship in schools by offering standards, curriculum resources, and professional development for teachers.

Several rationales expressed have been offered for entrepreneurial education. Ontario’s provincial curriculum document suggests that:

In a world of accelerating change where both challenges and opportunities abound, students need to learn to live and work in an enterprising way — either as entrepreneurs who take the initiative to create new ventures or as enterprising individuals — applying their skills, attitudes and abilities while working within the various organizations that contribute to our society (Ministry of Ontario 2000:32).

Similarly, Canada’s Institute for Enterprise Education (n.d.) states that:

Where we are going (Vision): To create and nurture a learning culture based on entrepreneurial principles and practices in order to effectively pursue challenges in today’s chaotic, complex and rapidly-changing global environment.

How we intend to get there (Mission): To instill the ‘spirit of enterprise’ in the mindset of each person through a conscious process of self-discovery, experiential learning and self-determination.

As these examples illustrate, entrepreneurial education is perceived by some as an effective way to prepare students for success in competitive labour markets.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some teachers perceive entrepreneurial education as means of preparation for “at risk” students to engage in self-employment. In Ontario, for instance, entrepreneurial studies courses are only offered for students streamed as non-university bound. Some boards and teachers emphasize the value of these sorts of courses for students who will likely not earn a secondary school diploma or do not plan to pursue post-secondary education.

Some of the literature and empirical research suggest entrepreneurial education is an effective intervention tool for impacting student awareness of and attitudes toward entrepreneurship and its desirability as a career option (see, for example, the literature review by Rasheed 2001). Rasheed’s (2001) research suggests that students who engage in entrepreneurial education have higher motivation to achieve and are more likely to establish and grow businesses as an adult. Rasheed’s observations— as well as stated rationales in policy documents and entrepreneurial texts — carry an implicit attempt to persuade students that entrepreneurship is favorable and desirable.

Generally speaking, students enrolled in entrepreneurial studies courses select a business idea of interest to them, and engage in research that leads to a venture plan which presumably they could successfully implement. In practice, examples of successful entrepreneurs, primarily in the form of written case studies, are commonly used as instructional resources (see, for example, Solomon et al., 2003/2004).

### ***The cultural myth of the entrepreneur***

Cultural myths are “super stories” that people grow up with and unconsciously make implicit use of because they resonate with the cultural environment. Adapting Berry & Innreiter-Moser’s (2002) conception, cultural myths are “cultural scripts” that contain explicit and implicit models for roles and relationships. While, as Berry & Innreiter-Moser (2002) suggest, not everyone in a given culture

agrees with all aspects of a cultural myth, different parts of the cultural myth are used in different ways to advocate for particular views on society (for example, the cultural myth that an entrepreneur's hard work will inevitably pay off). Quite apart from textbooks, our culture creates a romantic myth of the figure of the entrepreneur. Textbooks both reinforce and promulgate this myth.

The cultural myth of the entrepreneur is constructed and perpetuated in classrooms through a combination of explicit, hidden and null curricula. The explicit curriculum — those perspectives, skills, and information that are presented to students in classrooms — leads directly to the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is the underlying assumptions and values transmitted by the explicit curriculum (Portelli, 1993, Skelton, 1997). In the case of entrepreneurial studies, the explicit and hidden curricula presented in texts and emphasized in curriculum policy documents reflects a myth of entrepreneurs. That is, entrepreneurs are presented in a particular light that is simply not an accurate portrayal of the realities of self-employment. The null curriculum contains the perspectives and stories not shared with students which provides a more accurate picture of entrepreneurship.

The cultural myth of the entrepreneur as it exists in classrooms is transmitted to students through the way in which entrepreneurs are described in the classroom. Case studies, videos and profiles of successful entrepreneurs, as well as guest speakers who have "made it," are regularly used. While, undoubtedly, some entrepreneurs enjoy this sort of success, the texts and curricula do not acknowledge that these represent the minority of individuals who embark on careers as entrepreneurs. The individuals typically portrayed talk about how their hard work has paid dividends in many forms — financial success, lifestyle freedom, fulfilling a lifelong dream, glamour, power, and so on (see, for example, Cranson & Dennis, 2001). These sorts of stories usually explain the difficulties that an entrepreneur faces — the long hours, "pounding the pavement" for financing or customers, and the stress of being fully responsible for one's business. But the narratives consistently conclude with the idea that "hard work pays off" for entrepreneurs in the form of financial success. For instance, Werbner (1999) suggests that traditional conceptions

of entrepreneurial success are narrow and “economistic,” creating and perpetuating stereotypes.

The fact that success stories are the minority in a world where the majority of all new businesses fail (Thornhill & Amit, 2003) is overlooked. Only one-third of new Canadian businesses will survive beyond their fifth year (Start Up Internet Marketing, n.d.), while the average lifespan of a new Canadian business is six years (Baldwin et al., 2000). Statistics Canada reports that failure rates are high the first few years after start-up (Statistics Canada, 2004). These statistics are not included: texts aimed at K-12 entrepreneurial studies in Canada, and stories of unsuccessful entrepreneurial ventures are visibly absent. Answers to a variety of important questions are thus left out of the explicit curricula: What are the stories of those who did not “make it”? What were the consequences of success or failure on their personal lives and relationships? What were the costs of failure, including but not limited to financial loss?

As a whole, the explicit curricula transmit a particular conception of successful entrepreneurs. The entrepreneur as represented in texts possesses certain characteristics and dispositions, works hard, and as a result is successful in his or her business. Examples such as Donald Trump or Anita Roddick embody a particular myth about entrepreneurial success. The overwhelming message is that successful entrepreneurship is an attainable goal for students.

While entrepreneurial education policy and curricula contain powerful hidden and explicit curricula, these result in a particularly important null curriculum (Eisner, 1985). The null curriculum contains the information (perspectives, information, and data) “left out” when decisions are made by policy-makers, textbook writers, or teachers of what to include in a particular course. While the null curriculum is not something exclusive to entrepreneurial education since there is always limited time and space for topic coverage, this

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subject area tends to omit significant portions of information relevant to students who might entertain the idea of business ownership upon graduation. While there is no existing empirical data to account for the reasons behind these omissions, one can hypothesize some of the possible reasons for the null curricula of entrepreneurship. First, if an “accurate” picture of entrepreneurship were presented, students might be less inclined to consider entrepreneurship as a career. This has political ramifications as pointed out by Smyth (1999), as well as course enrollment implications which might negatively impact business teachers. Second, discussing some of the realities of entrepreneurship would require revealing systemic barriers (especially those related to race and gender) that policy-makers and school districts do not want to deal with.

The cultural myth of the entrepreneur creates false hope in at risk students so that they will be more inclined to finish public school.

Some of the important themes and realities not discussed or misrepresented in entrepreneurial studies include:

- **Risk.** It is important, when embarking on the entrepreneurial path, for students to think carefully about the risk of failure, not to mention the high probability of failure. Entrepreneurship texts tend to emphasize the importance of “risk assessment” as it relates to success. They generally suggest that risks can be mitigated, and this mitigation will increase the probability of success. For example, in a student reading titled “Freedom and Power,” Luczkiw and Loucks (1992:85) suggest the following: “The odds of pulling it off aren’t high. But they improve if you say ‘I’m going to give it a good shot and have a business adventure, and I’m going to be sensible in terms of minimizing downside risk.’” Though this may be true, the factors that lead to entrepreneurial success or failure are extremely complex, and impossible to predict, even for “experts” (Thornhill & Amit, 2003), let alone secondary school students. Examples such as Toronto’s and China’s bouts of SARS, the impact of government policy changes, and competitor actions can negatively affect a small or new business. Incidents such as the opening of a “big box” discount retailer (e.g., Walmart, Chapters, Barnes &

Nobles, etc.) have been known to cause failure even among established small and medium sized businesses. While arguably those who venture unsuccessfully into entrepreneurial work may learn from their experience, the devastating losses may outweigh these benefits. However, where entrepreneurial courses are “sold” to fragile students who may not have the resilience to bounce back from unsuccessful attempts, there exists a danger that they are being set up for failure by not being honest about these sorts of realities.

- **Consequences of business failure.** The impacts of failure on entrepreneurs vary, depending on the level of investment the entrepreneur has made. The first thing is that once the business closes, the owner no longer draws a salary, and may not be eligible for employment insurance benefits. The implications of bankruptcy on individuals and their families are simply not discussed.
- **The realities of “hard work.”** Self-employed work longer hours than employees. The self-employed worked 40.8 hours per week in 2003 compared with 35.5 hours for employees. Even more striking is that 33% of self-employed persons worked over 50 hours per week, compared with only 5% of employees (Statistics Canada, 2004). Moreover, this hard work does not guarantee a salary, especially for new entrepreneurs. At the same time, entrepreneurs miss out on certain benefits afforded to their “employee” counterparts, such as paid vacations and provisions for parental leave. Indeed, these realities are misrepresented in entrepreneurial curricula. For instance, Luczkiw and Loucks (1992, p.62), in a student reading titled “Myths About Entrepreneurs,” attempt to debunk the myth that “entrepreneurs work longer and harder than managers in big companies” with the following rationale: “There is no evidence at all that entrepreneurs work more than their corporate counterparts. Some do, some do not. Some actually report that they work less.” This sentence constitutes the entire passage related to this “myth,” and no sources are cited.



- **Social implications.** Smyth (1999) emphasizes ways in which entrepreneurial education takes attention away from crucially-important problems such as the changing nature of work, the creation of meaningful work for the young, and social justice. He argues that a danger of entrepreneurial education is that it locates problems in individuals and whose function is to shift responsibility for economic growth and stability on to individuals and their schools. This shift, he suggests, takes responsibility away from business and government to generate meaningful jobs with opportunities for success.
- **Unique challenges facing women and minority entrepreneurs.** While there is a growing body of literature on the challenges facing women and minority entrepreneurs (see, for example, Rhyne, 1983, Heidrick & Nicol, 2002, Lo et al., 2002, and the meta-analysis by Richtermeyer, 2002) this is not discussed in conventional curriculum resources aimed at high school students. Much of the evidence in these sources points to greater difficulty in financing and start up, and in some cases these groups are limited to “ethnic markets” as their consumer base.

The overall evidence suggests that entrepreneurship is a career choice that requires high-stakes risk-taking. Failure rates are high, and entrepreneurs stand to lose a great deal in the form of hours of toil and loss of financial investment. Yet, the discourse in entrepreneurial education texts transmits a particular cultural myth of the entrepreneur that ignores the realities presented here. Other high-stakes professions with high failure rates (e.g., actor, musician, artist) are culturally viewed with a more realistic lens. The stereotype of the “starving artist” and the “starving actor” persist. Yet a parallel “starving entrepreneur” stereotype is not prevalent. The cultural myth of the entrepreneur persists, and prevents the realities raised in this discussion from entering classroom discourse. In addition to simply leaving students misinformed, a greater danger is that students are set up for potential failure via an inaccurate view of entrepreneurship as a career option.

## ***The role of critical thinking in entrepreneurship***

Alston (2001, p. 27) suggests that critical thinking ought to play a role in “expressions of social imagination, illuminations of ourselves and relationships, and ethical choices and public engagements.” She illustrates how critical thinking can shed light on dominant cultural myths and cultural narratives that students turn to in order to define themselves and their aspirations. As such, critical thinking can be used to address the re-inscription of the cultural myth of the entrepreneurs as they are portrayed in entrepreneurial education programs. To do so, students and teachers must engage critically with dominant portrayals of entrepreneurs in conventional curriculum artifacts such as textbooks with the aim of uncovering the null curriculum.

The challenge to teachers is how to responsibly navigate critical thinking in the classroom in light of curriculum artifacts that perpetuate the cultural myth of the entrepreneur. While curriculum policy documents outline the topics to be addressed in the entrepreneurial classrooms, they generally do not prescribe how these topics must be presented. However, many teachers choose to use textbooks aligned with curriculum policy documents to assist them in entrepreneurial studies courses. Whereas textbooks and published curricula tend to be taken as “truths,” teachers and students must look beyond the pictures they paint by asking questions that might bring forth those issues, dangers, risks, realities and perspectives that tend not to be addressed in portrayals of entrepreneurs in widely-used textbooks.

To see how this might be done, I turn to Apple and Christian-Smith (1991), who describe three ways to respond to texts: (1) dominated; (2) negotiated; and (3) oppositional. These three approaches describe the nature of the interaction between the reader and the text. In the dominated approach, the reader accepts the message at face value. In a classroom context, this happens when information in the text is positioned as “fact” and there is no attempt to seek alternate perspectives nor question the content and its underlying assumptions. In an entrepreneurial studies course, this would

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involve accepting readings about entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship as truths. For instance, a teacher may ask students to read a number of profiles of entrepreneurs in a text, and generate lists of entrepreneurial characteristics with the class based on those readings. This does not challenge the nature of the text content nor profiles. In the negotiated approach, the reader is encouraged to dispute some portions of the text, but to accept the overall interpretations presented. In an entrepreneurial studies course, this

would amount to accepting as true the general “message” that entrepreneurship is a positive choice that results in likelihood of success if correctly planned — a message common in conventional entrepreneurship textbooks. However, specific facts or cases might be disputed, and additional readings contradictory to the text would be introduced occasionally. Finally, in the oppositional approach, the reader repositions herself in relation to the text, and takes on the position of the absent voice or voices. In an entrepreneurial classroom, this would involve identifying overt and hidden messages in the text — such as the general positive message about entrepreneurship as a career choice — and encouraging students to question them by seeking out alternative conceptions and information. Alternate conceptions and information would certainly include the stories of unsuccessful entrepreneurs and the impacts that business failure had on their lives, specific data and cases that describe the experiences of minorities, immigrants and women, investigation of local and international policy and legislation that impacts small business ownership, and so forth.

As these examples suggest, teachers must encourage oppositional readings in order to address the cultural myth of the entrepreneur in entrepreneurship texts. This could be accomplished through distribution of guidelines for reading or questions for reflection, to foster student inquiry. These are opportunities for teachers to encourage

different approaches to student reading while helping them raise important questions, such as:

- Whose perspectives or stories are excluded from the text?
- What specific information, data, or facts are excluded from the text? What community or personal sources can we draw on to help us determine what is missing?
- What evidence is used to substantiate claims made about entrepreneurs or entrepreneurship?
- What other notions or conceptions of success can you think of (that is, in addition to those described in the text)?
- How does the relatively low success rate of new business impact those considering self-employment?
- What are the social costs of entrepreneurship?
- What benefits or social safety nets are entrepreneurs excluded from?
- What are the real risks that entrepreneurs and their families face? For example, what are the long-term ramifications of bankruptcy? Of working long hours?
- How do broader legislation and policies in your community support or hinder entrepreneurial success?

There is some evidence to suggest that teachers of entrepreneurship courses may not perceive that they are in a position, for many reasons, to reflect upon or have students interact in a critical way with textbooks in their entirety. Solomon and Allen (2001, pp. 231-232) assert that teachers “may be predisposed to reproducing social order rather than disrupting it.” Anecdotal evidence suggests that some entrepreneurship teachers feel that they must present entrepreneurship in a positive light since students may not be inclined to enroll in such courses if the curriculum discourages self-employment. Finally, some teachers may not have critically reflected on entrepreneurship curricula themselves, and therefore would not be inclined to do so in the classroom. However, the omission of pertinent information and perspectives in typical entrepreneurship curricula opens up pedagogical space for critical thinking among teachers and students. In addition, an oppositional approach to con-

ventional entrepreneurial texts is essential for students who are seriously considering self-employment. The misinformation transmitted through the cultural myth of the entrepreneur is potentially dangerous, since it leads students in a particular direction without the benefit of being informed, thus potentially leading to personal and economic hardship.

### **Conclusion**

While entrepreneurial education offers potential for students to engage in a variety of forms of critical thinking — from decision-making associated with career choices, to specifics of business planning to ethical and social issues — it appears that such conversations do not regularly occur. Through an exploration of the cultural myth of the entrepreneur, I have identified some specific and important issues that are neglected in entrepreneurial studies courses. By focusing on asking questions which uncover hidden aspects of entrepreneurship together, teachers and students can explore taken-for-granted stereotypes about commercial activity and business ownership. As educators, we owe our students as balanced and realistic a picture of the world as possible to help them understand and to make informed and intelligent choices. The only way that this can be achieved is by fostering the critical spirit in the classroom, and teaching students how to read the often deceptive entrepreneurial curriculum.

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