



LAURA PINTO

The Cultural Myth of the Entrepreneur: 2014 Remix

Does it matter if your image of the typical entrepreneur is incorrect and most of what you read about entrepreneurship is a myth? That depends. If you approach what you read about entrepreneurship in the same way you think about a good novel — as a work of fiction — then it doesn't matter. But people think of these myths as nonfiction. They take as gospel an inaccurate and romanticized view of who entrepreneurs are, what they do, and the impact they have. And they act on their beliefs. When people act on fiction thinking it's reality, they often get hurt and harm those around them."

~ Scott Shane, 2008, p. 4

Since I initially critiqued the cultural myth of the entrepreneur for *Our Schools/Our Selves* in 2006, the fervor for entrepreneurial curriculum has amplified. Whereas a decade ago entrepreneurship courses were typical in upper high school as stand-alone courses, resources have since been developed for younger and younger children, and provincial education authors have legitimized them by incorporating them into the "official" curriculum. These range from Go Venture's early childhood storybooks and lesson plans, to provincial

initiatives designed to equip teachers to encourage elementary school kids to take up entrepreneurial activity.

At the elementary school level, we have story books such as Go Venture's *Budding Entrepreneur*, "A touching and uplifting story of two siblings orphaned by a shipwreck. An imaginative little girl and her younger brother, who has Down Syndrome, discover the rewards of entrepreneurship and a positive attitude." The author is quoted on the Go Venture website: "Entrepreneurship is a mindset that empowers individuals to take control of their own future and helps them realize personal goals and objectives. It's about freedom, lifestyle, self-confidence, family, community, and more. The entrepreneurial mindset is one of the most meaningful gifts we can give to a child."

Last month, Manitoba launched "Building Futures", a Grades 4 – 10 curriculum developed in partnership between the province's Department of Education and the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education (CFEE), funded (with a prominently featured logo on all materials!) by the Investors Group. The curriculum includes entrepreneurship and financial literacy components and was undertaken, according to Manitoba's Minister of Education James Allum, "because of our commitment to providing high quality economic and financial education to children and youth." This curriculum, the Minister explained in March, "will reflect a rapidly changing marketplace."¹

It's not just Manitoba jumping on the K-12 entrepreneurial bandwagon. CFEE President Gary Rabbior claims to be in talks with other provinces to roll "Building Futures" out to other provinces. Other Canadian entrepreneurship initiatives underway include: the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program (AYEP) from Paul Martin's Aboriginal Education Initiative, Ontario's Specialist High Skills Major with certification in "Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship", The Young Entrepreneur "Make Your Pitch" contest (a joint project of the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade and the Ontario Centre of Excellence to support the province's Youth Jobs Strategy), British Columbia's "Young Entrepreneurship Leadership Launchpad" and Okanagan Valley "Entrepreneurship Strategy", and New Brunswick's "Youth Entrepreneurship Camp" and "Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge".

Two Canadian Premiers recently got in on the push for this education. Ontario's Kathleen Wynne argued (*The Liberal*, 2013) that "building creativity and entrepreneurship needs to start well before

high school." This took shape with entrepreneurial emphasis in the newly-released "Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario" (in which the words "entrepreneur" and "entrepreneurship" appear 11 times) and with the 2014 launch of certification for Specialist High Skills Majors in "Innovation, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship."

Likewise, New Brunswick's David Alward emphasized his "government's priority to develop entrepreneurship among young people in the province" at the launch of a K-12, French-language entrepreneurship curriculum (Foster, 2013).

All of this begs the question: what are we teaching our students, and why?

Youth entrepreneurship programs are touted as a solution to Canada's 16.5% youth unemployment rate (Holmes, 2013; Maimona, 2013) (in fact, a *National Post* headline about entrepreneurial education touted it as, "A cure for youth joblessness," Maimona, 2013), a means to bolster economically depressed regions (*Daily Gleaner*, 2013), and solution to the ill-defined "changing marketplace" facing youth.

Politicians and journalists insist the "urgent need" for children's entrepreneurial education will take care of Canada's lackluster education ranking in EY's G20 Entrepreneurship Barometer (Homes, 2013; Johne, 2014). The reasoning goes something like this: because small businesses represent 98% of Canadian companies, 30% GDP, and 45% of employment (Holmes, 2013), promoting entrepreneurship would result in more small businesses start-ups, higher GDP and lower unemployment. This entrepreneurial economy, proponents explain, has to be built "slowly and carefully, brick by brick, and each one of those bricks is a young entrepreneur" (*Daily Gleaner*, 2013).

That's the why. *What* is being taught is a more complex matter.

Building the cultural myth: narratives of entrepreneurs in the media

Certainly, the celebration of entrepreneurs in the media has added fuel to the fire — especially the popularity of reality shows such as *The Apprentice*, *Dragon's Den* and *Shark Tank* that position entrepreneurship as a quick route to riches and power. The rise of the hip-hop mogul as entrepreneurial icon further popularizes entrepreneurs among youth. The troubling reality is that business teachers routine-

CREATING THE CULTURAL MYTH OF THE ENTREPRENEUR



Figure 1: Cultural Myth



No matter where, I was going to try to do what I could do, anyway. I think the bigger thing was I had nothing. So I had nothing to lose, right? It was all about going for it.
—Mark Cuban



You become what you believe. You are where you are today in your life based on everything you have believed.
—Oprah Winfrey



I'm convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance.
— Steve Jobs

Figure 2: The Narratives

Cultural Myths come out of individual narratives — in other words, the stories that entrepreneurs tell us. After studying entrepreneurs’ narratives extensively, Richard Smith concluded that they are fables that follow a remarkably similar structure, and rely on “cherished storylines” and similar rhetorical tactics. The creative flourishes that make a good story are not necessarily accurate — and this is why Smith terms them fables. **Figure 1** depicts three common narrative components identified by Smith that run as threads through entrepreneurial narratives: morality (usually in the form of the Protestant work ethic), the entrepreneurial dream as a guiding force, and “rags to riches” accounts of success.

The Narratives almost always follow a plot structure that begins with the entrepreneur’s modest up-bringing, followed with an account of “The Ordeal,” in which the entrepreneur overcomes adversity. Then, they depict “The Quest” in which they begin to pursue their dream. The narrative ends with “The Genesis,” when the entrepreneur achieves his or her success and dreams.

Like most people, you’re probably familiar with the storyline. You’ve probably come across more than one narratives in the form of televised interviews, biographies, published articles, and other popular media. You’ve probably heard the soundbytes (**Figure 2**) of common-sense advice from those who achieved The Genesis.

While narratives are individual stories and stories of individuals, in their re-telling, they construct the cultural myth of all entrepreneurs in the public zeitgeist. The characters change (take your pick: P. Diddy, Martha Stewart, Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, Mark Cuban, and so many others) but the story remains the same. Many have been called out for not being the impoverished hard-workers they claim to be. Others have been accused of exaggerating or fabricating adversities they faced for the sake of a compelling story.

The real story is what is *missing* from the fables (and thus the myth): difference, luck, systemic factors and realities described in this article are erased. What is left is an “anyone can do this with enough determination” message. And, the fact that most of the fables represent outliers (in other words, the exception to the rule) remains largely uninterrogated.

ly use these media spectacles rife with cultural myths in their classrooms.

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 not everyone in a given culture agrees with all aspects of a cultural myth (Berry & Innreiter-Moser, 2002), 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).

Together, these colourful images in the curriculum and media construct the cultural myth of the entrepreneur. The entrepreneurs’ narratives typically describe about how their hard work has paid dividends in many forms — financial success, lifestyle freedom, fulfilling a lifelong dream, glamour, power, and so on. They’re quick to 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. These narratives are constantly being replayed in shows like *Shark Tank* — where Mark Cuban regularly recounts his tales of hard work as a teen, and Robert Herjavec’s “rags to riches” story about being a Croatian immigrant with nothing, who worked his way to the top with a little elbow grease is told and retold. Perhaps most appalling is the argument put forth by *Shark Tank*’s Kevin O’Leary on his CBC program, *The Lang and O’Leary Exchange* that poverty “is a great thing because it inspires

The narratives consistently conclude with the idea that “hard work pays off” for entrepreneurs in the form of financial success. This conveys a sub-myth of meritocracy that makes little or no mention of the role of luck, and fails to acknowledge that the entrepreneur’s social identity (predominantly white and male) had anything to do with their success.

everybody, gets them motivated to look up to the one percent and say, 'I want to become one of those people, I'm going to fight hard to get up to the top.'"

Fight hard, indeed.

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Some have termed this "roll-with-it neoliberalization," where society "incites" people "to conduct themselves after the model of the enterprise and the general norm of competition" (Keil, 2009, p. 232). Keil describes the normalization of entrepreneurship in Toronto, where it is couched in language of "opportunity" and "diversity" (Keil, 2009, p. 237) while ignoring contradictory realities.

Entrepreneurial curriculum and its problems

The powerful myth of the entrepreneur is reinforced in entrepreneurial curriculum aimed at kids. The "official" curriculum in the form of textbooks, resource guides, and a series of videos included Manitoba's "Building Futures" depicts a similar narrative to the one in the media. All kids need, the myth tells them, are some good attitudes and a bit of hard work. And, it implies chances are the same for all, regardless of gender, race, social position, or geography.

To achieve its end, the cultural myth of the entrepreneur relies on curriculum content that appears to be pretty much the same everywhere in the Western world: self-assessment of entrepreneurship characteristics and dispositions (according to CFFE, they include passionate! Spirit of adventure! Confidence and self-reliance! Goal orientation! Innovative, creative, and versatile! Persistent! I am hardworking and energetic! A positive thinker!). Enrobed in Cosmo-style quizzes and self-exploration activities, the students learn about "skills" (budgeting, business planning) once they have satisfied dispositional learning.

Scott Shane (2008) argues that no evidence exists that things like persistence, self-confidence and hard work have any effect on entrepreneurial success. Rather, he suggests that focusing on these

characteristics may leave would-be entrepreneurs spending time on things that would interfere with their success. And that success may be modest: failure rates are high — about 50% of Canadian businesses fail in the first five years of operations (Fondation de l'entrepreneurship, 2010) — and entrepreneurs stand to lose a great deal in the form of hours of toil and loss of financial investment. The fallout of business failure (another aspect not discussed in curriculum) can be devastating: the entrepreneur no longer draws a salary, and may not be eligible for employment insurance benefits.

Even successful founders usually earn 35% less over 10 years than they would working for others (Shane, 2008). In fact, only the top 10% of American entrepreneurs out-earn their conventionally-employed counterparts. Statistics Canada reported that in 2010, about 2.7 million Canadians were self-employed as their main job, accounting for 16% of the workforce (LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2011). Yet, the median income of these entrepreneurs was about 19% lower than those employed by others (LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2011).

And Canadian entrepreneurs tend to work harder than their employed counterparts for the paltry wages: 30% of self-employed persons worked over 50 hours per week, compared with only 4.1% of employees in 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2012). In the classroom, this remains entrepreneurship's secret: Luczkiw and Loucks (1992, p.62) frequently-used textbook attempt to debunk the fact 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 — and is obviously incorrect.

Yet, the discourse in entrepreneurial education texts transmits a particular cultural myth of the entrepreneur that ignores the realities I've just described. 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. Where is the (more accurate) "starving entrepreneur" stereotype?

Apart from promoting false ideas about meritocracy, the cultural myth of the entrepreneur is also problematic because it attempts to erase difference, while privileging certain characteristics and

behaviours typically associated with patriarchal structures. It implies competitiveness and a certain type of confidence (a macho swagger) are desirable and rewarded. It tends to de-emphasize participatory collaboration, equity, and difference. 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) which 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.

In doing so, entrepreneurship curriculum encourages passive student acceptance of existing economic, labour market, and social conditions. By narrowly defining desirable, entrepreneur-friendly

characteristics, other important areas of learning are completely eliminated from the “official” curriculum. For instance, in the view of Emery Hyslop-Margison and colleagues (2007), this type of instrumental-technical education privileges “competitive leadership” that works against “caring, inclusive, democratic communities.”

Here’s the truthy part of the entrepreneurship movement: there’s absolutely no reason to believe that entrepreneurial education can “fix” individual or systemic economic woes. In fact, evidence suggests the contrary.

Just the facts: do entrepreneurial curricula fulfil their objectives?

Myths aside, the “official” aim of these entrepreneurial curricula is to address youth unemployment by promoting entrepreneurship. Does it?

The arguments may sound compelling, even luxurious in their simplicity. They make sense. But that’s the difference between “truth” and “truthiness”: Truthiness, a term coined by pop culture icon Stephen Colbert, refers to attachment to your opinions and beliefs because you feel the truth in your gut. Truthiness ignores “facts” and hard data in favour of things that “feel right.”

Here's the truthy part of the entrepreneurship movement: there's absolutely no reason to believe that entrepreneurial education can "fix" individual or systemic economic woes. In fact, evidence suggests the contrary.

First off, the logic begins with the dubious claim that learners retain what they are "told" in a curriculum. If only this were the case! Think back to everything you were told in your early education. How much do you remember? I'd reckon not much. And that's the case for entrepreneurship education. Beyond the simple issue of remembering "facts," research on the integration of career learning and business concepts among younger learners calls into question its developmental appropriateness.

Second, there's the claim that (assuming learners recall what they're told) that this will affect their future actions. This claim rests on the belief that entrepreneurial education will lead youth to start businesses. Yet, research shows that entrepreneurship education is not especially effective in leading to business start-ups or intention to start businesses in the future (see, for example, Nicolau, Shane, Cherkas, Hunkin & Spector, 2008 and Oosterbeek, van Praag & Ijsselstein, 2010). Beyond the issue of learning and retaining information, there is also the issue that genetics and personality play in entrepreneurial intention — and relatively recent large-scale research with pairs of identical twins seems to suggest that genetics play a significant (but not exclusive) role in entrepreneurial action (Nicolau, Shane, Cherkas, Hunkin & Spector, 2008) — something that education cannot alter.

Third, there's the claim that once youth (a) learn about entrepreneurship; and (b) start a business, their successfully self-employment will solve Canada's startlingly high youth unemployment rate. This claim fails on a few fronts.

Finally, given the high failure rates and lower income just described, entrepreneurs stand to find themselves among the ranks of the unemployed despite their best efforts. Entrepreneurs are a far cry from the wealthy captains of industry much of the press conjures up.

Second, last-ditch entrepreneurship to escape unemployment doesn't help much. Scott (2008) characterizes entrepreneurial programs' economic impact as "disappointingly low" in the U.S. based on his extensive synthesis of data. Similar results appear internationally. According to a study of 23 OECD countries over 28 years, high

unemployment rates seem to lead to more entrepreneurial activity (known as the “refugee effect”). Yet, refugee effect start-ups do not effectively reduce unemployment as compared to “entrepreneurial effect” start-ups (that is, entrepreneurial activity when unemployment is already low) (Thurik, Carree, Stel & Audretsch, 2007). Canada’s move to introduce youth entrepreneurship to address unemployment during our current challenging economic times would fall under “refugee effect” tactics.

What does this tell us? Entrepreneurial education’s alleged value appears to be a case of truthiness, and Canadians need to challenge the metaphorical straw men that prop it up. The data are clear: entrepreneurship cannot solve macro-economic problems. The successful entrepreneur is a powerful synecdoche not representative of most people’s experience. And finally, attention to entrepreneurship in education fails to address the systemic reasons for the problems it is supposed to solve.

Taking back the curriculum: critical thinking and critical media literacy as weapons against the crusade for entrepreneurship

Despite problems with official curricula like “Building Futures”, the problematic cultural myth of the entrepreneur can be resisted and subverted. My 2006 recommendations are still relevant: by focusing on asking questions which uncover hidden aspects of entrepreneurship, teachers and students can collaboratively explore taken-for-granted stereotypes. 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 — and can build democratic capacity. The only way that this can be achieved is by fostering the critical spirit in the classroom, and teaching students how to challenge the often deceptive entrepreneurial curriculum.

LAURA E. PINTO is an assistant professor at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). She has been recognized with a Canadian Governor General’s Gold Medal, the University of Windsor Odyssey Award, and the Ontario Business Educators’ Hillmer Award. She has authored and co-

authored 11 books, and was recently shortlisted for a Speaker's Book Award from the Ontario Legislature for Curriculum Reform in Ontario (University of Toronto Press, 2012).

This article builds on a shorter piece that appeared in the May 2014 issue of the *CCPA Monitor*.

ENDNOTES

1 <http://www.wthr.com/story/24894012/building-futures-in-manitoba-program-launched-to-help-manitoba-students-succeed-in-the-global-economy>.

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