Delivering Entrepreneurship Education for Would-Be and Existing Small Business Entrepreneurs

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Chapter Contribution

If one accepts that a major task of educators in entrepreneurship is to equip students with knowledge and skills to survive in a fast and rapidly changing environment (Linton & Klinton, 2019), then such

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entrepreneurship education processes must be informed by robust understanding of just how enterprising individuals effectively cope with such change contexts.

This is particularly so in the case of nurturing entrepreneurial capabilities commensurate with small business development where problems associated with 'smallness of operation', organisational resource and ability constraints exacerbate the task of effective interface with the external environment. And where academia and the world of small business support continues to fall short in determining how best to help would-be and existing owner managers in this key task.

This chapter addresses that shortfall. Drawing upon our many years of in-depth case study and 'partnership working' action research within micro and small enterprises in developed, emerging and transitional economies, we demonstrate the potential application of personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955, 1977) in understanding entrepreneurial small business management and provision of entrepreneurship education which fosters that understanding and integral abilities.

Central to our thesis is how in-depth insight into what constitutes 'best small business strategic management practice' begins to make explicit the core body of managerial, organisational and learning skills and abilities that we as entrepreneurship educators should be fostering in both undergraduates and practising owner managers—and how it informs design and delivery modes of such education process.

We commence by making explicit the distinctiveness of small business and the unique problem-types they potentially face. Teasing out for special attention the key difficulty they face of relating to their uncertain external operating environment, we draw upon personal construct theory to demonstrate the highly complex strategic learning task they face. This chapter then proceeds with brief presentation of our own research findings of what constitutes best small business strategic learning and development practice.

We then consider the finer detail of the key parameters of personal construct theory (PCT) as robust foundation for proffering of how a more concerted utilisation of PCT can effectively inform design and delivery of entrepreneurship education for undergraduate students.

1   Distinctiveness of Small Business

Our ongoing research interfaces and partnership working with small businesses (Smallbone & Wyer, 2012; Wyer, 1990; Wyer & Bowman, 2019; Wyer & Smallbone, 1999; Wyer et al., 2010) continues to highlight their distinctiveness vis-à-vis large well-resourced companies and the need for those involved in their support to recognise, understand and respond to that distinctiveness.

Our work orients around micro enterprises and small businesses and as a classification approximation is guided by the EU defined employee base whereby micro enterprises are deemed those organisations employing up to 9 workers and small businesses are those with a staff base of between 10 and 50 workers (EU, 2015).

Integral to our co-working with micro and small enterprises is the progressive reinforcement of understanding of the distinctiveness of such businesses and use of that understanding in both training and consultancy support. Crucially, that 'distinctiveness understanding' informs our conceptualisation of small business entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education.

While smallness of operation confers possible benefits such as ease of decision-making, fast responsiveness or functioning as a close-knit social unit, such advantages are *not absolute*—rather they are potential benefits that have to be worked for and earned.

The early works of Gibb (1983, 1990, 1997) and Wyer (1990—ongoing) highlight how the distinguishing features of small businesses have their origins in owner manager and size-related characteristics and may culminate in unique problem-types. For example, owner manager attitudes, values, preferences and abilities can impact beneficially or in constraining manner on the development of his or her enterprise.

Potential size-related constraints can impact all functional areas of activity. Ability to access reasonable cost working and developmental capital is frequently restricted by lack of collateral or profit history—with banks perceiving smaller enterprises as high risk (Irwin & Scott, 2010). The early works of Curran (1988) highlighted key staffing issues: small businesses frequently face a marginal labour market whereby inability to match large company wage levels or career path can leave small firm owner managers attracting less experienced, qualified or committed workforce. Thereby encountering problems such as persistent lateness, low quality and productivity levels or leaving without notice.

Crucially, inability to cope with the vagaries of the external environment is a predominant size-related difficulty (Gibb, 1983) and major impediment to small business survival and development (Kwakuvi-Zagbedeh, 2019).

2   Use of Personal Construct Theory in Understanding and Supporting Small Business

The Highly Complex Nature of Small Business Strategic Learning

Integral to our work is the use of PCT to make explicit the complexity of the small business strategic learning task and unfold robust insight into how more entrepreneurial small businesses cope with that complexity and learn in practice. This understanding in turn helps shape the provision of entrepreneurship education.

Our use of a version of Personal Construct Theory (PCT: Kelly, 1955) as drive motor to our small enterprise case study and action research has facilitated conceptualisation of the high-level complexity of the small business strategic learning task in coping with what is effectively an unpredictable external operating environment. And of just how entrepreneurial owner managers do in every-day practice learn about and act upon such operating contexts.

For Stacey (1990, 1993), the contemporary external environment is not only highly uncertain, businesses are predominantly facing open-ended change situations that are unknowable and unpredictable in terms of timing and consequences—essentially unplannable and requiring high-level management capability to identify and learn about such change.

In brief, PCT views an individual as a kind of 'inquiring scientist' ('man the scientist') who when faced with a change situation creates his or her own personal theories or mental models to try to understand that situation and guide his/her behaviour in dealing with that situation.

We as individuals, having formulated our own personal theory or hypothesis as to what appears to be happening and of how we should behave in order to deal with that situation, then test out our personal theory by putting it into action. If our behaviour produces the outcome we have anticipated, our personal theory is confirmed as valid. We have confidence in the theory and will use it again in the future if a similar change situation arises. In such circumstances, we merely undertake '*simple*' learning—using an existing personal construct more or less in

its current form, with only marginal adjustment to fit the encountered similar circumstances.

However, when a change situation that an individual faces is new to her, of a nature never before experienced, her existing personal constructs will be inadequate. In such cases, he or she is faced with a difficult learning task of surfacing and challenging the assumptions upon which the personal construct is based. This is a highly '*complex*' learning task—it requires her to attempt to improve her constructs by altering them to better inform her behaviour and actions or developing a totally new personal construct.

Thus, extrapolating this conceptualisation to the small business development context, to effectively '*complex*' learn owner managers have to:

- Surface underlying assumptions that underpin their existing personal constructs.
- Reflect on those assumptions.
- Consider those assumptions vis-à-vis insight being offered by alternative personal constructs and worldviews held by others (in dialogue; observation; reading and so on).
- Challenge their own existing personal construct assumptions.
- 'Try on for size' the world views of others to 'see if there is anything in it for me' (Beck, 1980).
- Test out in action their own newly developing personal construct for confidence-build and confirmation of practical usefulness.

Moreover, there are potential barriers or constraints that can hinder or constrain the owner manager's adjustment or enhancements of his or her personal constructs. Constraints which may be self- and/or externally imposed, including: holding fixed attitudes, selective focusing on limited issues or embracing frozen meanings where, for example, an individual lacks understanding of the issue under consideration, feels need for more information or dislikes being pushed beyond his comfort zone.

Clearly, if we can lift the lid on the current 'black box of hazy understanding' of how more entrepreneurial owner managers of successfully developing small businesses undertake such complex learning then we can be more robustly guided in the design and delivery of support provision for would-be and existing growth-seeking small enterprise entrepreneurs.

Within the following section, we begin to delve into that black box.

Effective Strategic Control in Entrepreneurial Small Businesses—Our Research Findings

Our ongoing case study investigations of and 'partnership working' with micro and small enterprises reveals insight into the management approaches and learning actions within growth-achieving small businesses that over time are successfully coping with their unpredictable operating contexts through effective forms of strategic control.

The key characteristics of effective small business strategic management embrace the following:

- The same three elements of strategic control as found integral to traditional rational planning modes of management are apparent. Thus, Discovery-Choice-Action management activities are evident in small business strategic management—but not as a tidy sequential step-process.
- Discovery of understanding of the external environment is predominantly from learning interactions and activities with key informants on the boundaries of the small firm's activities—such as from owner manager or key workforce learning conversations with suppliers, customers, potential customers, distributors and even competitors.
- Long-term written plans are rarely found as a guide to development and action.
- Instead, owner managers have a mentally held framework of understanding of the business's existing core markets, products and processes activities and the key relevant impacting parts of the external environment—and a flexible 'preferred end' which, given current understanding of the external environment, the owner manager feels the business should be striving towards.
- Such a mentally held framework does represent a form of long-term planning frame—an owner manager 'meaningful picture' of the business in its environment and its preferred direction of travel given current understanding (his personal constructs of the business and its parts).
- As such, the 'meaningful picture' is used as a 'learning focus'—a mental focal frame to focus ongoing strategic learning.
- Focus is on a 'slice' or 'slices' of the operating environment. Comprehensive external analysis is constrained by resource and management deficiencies, and by the unpredictable nature of the

environment—thus, attention often shifts from one issue to another as situations develop.

- Formal search for information does take place, but insight is often built out of opportunistic interaction or accidental encounter with key informants—both owner manager and key workforce exploit daily interfaces with external stakeholders as 'learning sources'.
- Interface with key informants often builds into deep dialogical learning interactions whereby an owner manager (and more able workers) 'tries on for size' the personal constructs (worldviews) of the informant and uses this to challenge his/her own existing personal constructs (worldviews).
- Integral to the learning is an owner manager's willingness to adjust parts of the core activity and/or the 'preferred end' if current learning activities so suggest: the learning process often requires 'try out' or experiment to facilitate full understanding of the change event under investigation.
- Intuitive judgements appear to frequently take the place of rational perspective and logical reasoning.
- In PCT terms, the owner manager is responding not to the actual stimuli of a change event he faces, but to his or her idiosyncratic interpretation of that event.

A 'discovery', 'choice' and 'action' strategic control process is thus in place: but not as linear, sequential process based upon logical reasoning. For example, discovery process may be embedded in experimental action (messier than a tidy step-process; iterative to-ing and fro-ing rather than linear).

Given this 'best practice' insight, we now proceed to consider the potential for creative embrace of personal construct theory alongside this understanding of the distinctive managerial and entrepreneurial learning activities of successfully developing small businesses in underpinning entrepreneurship education provision.

3   Drawing on the Parameters of PCT to Facilitate Entrepreneurship Education

Personal Construct Theory in Finer Detail

We have seen in the previous sections how PCT helps us understand the complexity of the small business strategic learning task and also aids our understanding of the learning activities and actions which make up the complex learning in successfully growing small enterprises.

A robust combination understanding of PCT and of how small businesses learn has key implications for design and delivery of entrepreneurship education provision. This section examines the key tenets of personal construct theory in more detail as further underpinning to consideration of a PCT-informed approach to entrepreneurship education. The proposition here is that PCT offers a rigorous theory-base for explaining an individual's learning and development process.

The Finer Detail of the Key Parameters of Kelly's (1955) Theory

- As outlined in Sect. 2, central to PCT is Kelly's (1955) positioning of man (or woman) as a kind of 'scientist' (man the scientist) who *makes sense of his world by building a personal theory of it*. These personal theories form the basis of subsequent actions and anticipations (Harri-Augstein et al., 1995). Thus, the personal theory guides the individual's anticipations: 'if I do *x* then I expect *y* to be the outcome'.
- It is his or her past experiences and positions and responsibilities in life that contribute to the formation of his/her individual personal constructs—and she uses her personal constructs as *a pair of spectacles or a lens* through which to view and deal with unfolding change situations that arise and confront him.
- Thus, for Kelly, we as individuals experience the world through the lens of our personal constructs. These constructs are used to predict and anticipate events, which in turn determines our behaviours, feelings and thoughts.
- Like a 'scientist', a layperson, ordinary man-in-the-street seeks to predict, and thus control, the course of events. The constructs that she formulates are intended to aid her in her predictive efforts.

- Crucially, in a constantly changing world man is *incapable of effecting an absolute construction of the environment that he is trying to understand* and thus has to be content with making a series of successive approximations. All of his *present interpretations of his world are open to revision or replacement* in the light of his testing them out in practice.
- In adopting this stance, Kelly created a philosophical standpoint of constructive alternativism which propounds that all occurring events or situations lend themselves to multiple interpretations. In effect, we as individuals are free to produce our own idiosyncratic interpretations of unfolding events or reflect back on our experiences and view them from a different perspective.
- Thus, for Kelly, an individual has the potential to hold his previous experiences open to the possibility of fresh construction; the opportunity to seek alternative perspectives and interpretations of a given change event and *use these as 'lenses' to put facts and insight together in more productive combinations*. He has opportunity to be more imaginative in unfolding alternative constructions and thus in providing more rigorous practical grounds for more effective anticipation and prediction.
- However, while we as individuals are natural predictors in our approach to coping with new change situations, this does not mean that we are all good at it. Or that we are all able and willing to persevere at predicting and anticipating the future by revising our constructs (our lenses). '*People (learners) are often not very skilled as scientists and their models of their world are often implicitly held in almost total non-awareness. Such models become impossible to revise and individuals become very impoverished as a result. This inhibits their growth*' (Harri-Augstein et al., 1995, p. 7).
- Crucially, in a small business development context, owner managers are in, PCT terms, natural predictors—but in a predominantly unpredictable external operating environment. Thus, like a scientist, the progressive and successful owner manager will, in order to achieve sustained growth, need to ably develop and test out his personal constructs in practice to determine their validity and build confidence in the adequacy and appropriateness of the personal construct. And, given the unknowability of his external environment, experiment and 'try out' activity will be key part of that development process. In short, he will need to become 'man the good scientist'.

4   Implications for Entrepreneurship Education Provision

Our parallel use of Personal Construct Theory as drive motor in our research and business support relationships with growth-achieving small businesses is facilitating build-up of enhanced understanding of best small enterprise strategic learning practices. This in turn provides rich informing insight with regard to approach to entrepreneurship education provision.

Resilient Learning Capability at the Fore: At the core of our research findings is the way that growth-achieving small businesses faced with an essentially unpredictable operating environment predominantly 'learn their enterprises along'. A key source of competitive advantage derives from the evermore effective and resilient learning capability of the owner manager. Fostering such entrepreneurial learning capability within students should thus be at the fore of entrepreneurship education provision.

PCT is a key vehicle for facilitating student understanding of how they themselves learn and thus of how they can progressively improve their learning capability. Students need to constantly enhance 'learning to learn' capability and become that ever more effective and resilient learner which epitomises small enterprise development success. If they do not understand how they learn, how can they improve their learning capabilities and become better learners?

Kelly does not refer to learning at all within his development and explanation of PCT, instead giving emphasis to bringing about changes in personal constructs over time. Proponents of PCT suggest that this is because the process of learning is so ubiquitous within the totality of an individual's personal construing activities.

Making Learning Process Explicit: Thus, for us, 'learning and development' can be viewed as a construing and re-construing process: an individual's progressive reflecting on existing personal constructs, surfacing underlying assumptions, challenging those assumptions; and 'trying on for size' the perspectives of others. Adjusting or replacing own existing personal constructs with this new 'try on for size' insight—and testing out the newly forming personal construct by 'try out' or experiment actions ('*my construct is informing me that if I behave like this, X will be the likely outcome*').

Making explicit such learning and development process to students at the outset of entrepreneurship education provision provides them with working frame of reference with regard to what learning involves and what is required of them in their plight to become ever more capable and effective learners.

Entrepreneurship Education Process as Joint Enterprise: Integral to the above is a parallel consideration of what a PCT-informed approach to entrepreneurship education involves from an 'action' standpoint from both the educator and the student perspective. Use of PCT tells us that a key dimension of effective entrepreneurship education or owner management development is helping the student or owner manager to 'simple' and 'complex' learn. Entrepreneurship education provision should thus involve the educator in helping would-be and existing small enterprise owner managers reflect on adequacy of existing constructs—not merely assuming need for new personal constructs; and then, where appropriate, to develop new personal constructs.

Thus, the fostering of both simple learning (single loop learning—or personal construct 'definition' in Kelly's PCT terms) and complex learning (double loop learning—or personal construct 'extension' in PCT terms) are equally significant. As entrepreneurship educators, our starting point with an individual student is thus that 'definition' (slight adjustment to existing constructs) is just as valuable a part of the owner manager/student learning process as more complex 'extension'. In short, our role is to help the student see the validity and utility of current personal constructs as well as to foster ability to complex learn. Effectively, help the individual learner stand outside himself and see himself from a new perspective in terms of relevance or shortfall of his current personal constructs in a given situation and provide opportunity to, where necessary, develop new constructs and alternative perspectives. For Beck (1980), the ongoing enhancement of simple and complex learning as a whole (definition and extension) represents a process of 'learning to learn'.

With regard to learning facilitation, PCT is giving emphasis to the 'active participant' role of student as learner, in both classroom and other learning contexts. Contrary to some ongoing cognitive theorising of student as passive recipient of information and perspectives presented by the teacher, Kelly's underpinning philosophical foundations of constructive alternativism would suggest teacher–learner in some form of action

oriented 'partnership working'. An enabling of learner reflection on own existing perspectives, robust consideration of those offered by the teacher and identification of potential for construction of new meanings. From the teacher's standpoint, such 'partnership working' requires facilitation of dialogue or development activities to surface learner understanding and start-point perspectives of focal issues being 'taught'; and to determine appropriateness and relevance of the materials under consideration with regard to enhancement, refinement or replacement of learner current constructs.

Informed by PCT, enhancing student capacity to learn thus becomes central to the entrepreneurship education process. With PCT making explicit the kinds of barriers which can constrain individual learning and development and prompt for us as entrepreneurship education providers to help student awareness and challenge of fixed mind set patterns of thought and ingrained feelings and perceptions that influence their behaviour and actions.

Eliciting Personal Meaning: The early work of Harri-Augstein, et al. (1995) gave focus to the potential for development of reflective and meaning-eliciting tools to systematically foster learner awareness of 'personal meanings' and to show how these personal meanings are constructed and used to influence actions. Such tools can allow learners to stand outside themselves and see themselves from a new perspective.

For Harri-Augstein et al., a key role of the educator and trainer is developing an individual's capacity to learn through experience—on the job and in daily life. Here, they proffer how the educator fostering of 'learning conversations' with a learner can facilitate his or her nurturing towards 'Self Organised Learning'. Individuals can then progressively learn to develop the conversational skills for themselves. Thus, fostering ability and propensity to converse with oneself as well as with other key information and knowledge holders and explore the possible relationships between experience and action. This requires developing a frame of reference of how personal meanings, needs and purposes lead to anticipations and actions; and how the results of actions feedback and lead to revised or new meanings. Integral to such an approach is Harri-Augstein, et al.'s perception of how learning as a process of self-organisation is a key vehicle for living and working on the edge of chaos.

Nurturing Entrepreneurial Learning: In a small business development context, such conversational learning capability is prevalent in

more entrepreneurial owner managers. Layering in our case study and action research findings, demonstrates how both design and delivery of entrepreneurship education needs to embrace understanding of how entrepreneurial learning in growth-achieving small businesses differs from other forms of learning. And thus reflect the creative ways in which innovative owner managers undertake the personal construing/re-construing learning and development process in the uncertain operating environment.

Our successful owner managers are, through entrepreneurial learning, inventing and reinventing models of the reality of their enterprises and their organisational life to help them understand what is going on and where development opportunity may exist. Some may periodically use formal training inputs or specialists and experts but all seek out the less formal support input of others as a resource for learning, predominantly milking insight and understanding from key informants on the boundaries of their enterprise's activities. Thus, suppliers, agents, distributors, customers and competitors as a 'resource' for the 'learning conversation' and as key part of their personal construing/re-construing process.

Crucially, integral to the central focus on enhancement of student capacity to learn through experience, is opportunity to embrace student exposure to 'best small business entrepreneurial learning practice'. A fostering of understanding of, and abilities and behaviours relating to, the different entrepreneurial learning activities that progressive owner managers undertake in challenging and enhancing their current personal constructs in given situations and the development of new constructs to cope with unfolding change.

Thus, the entrepreneurship education process would embrace the nurturing of entrepreneurial learning capability using innovative teaching–learning vehicles both in classroom and in live business context learning environments. With focus upon how more capable and progressive owner managers engage in *distinctive entrepreneurial learning activities* involving *simple learning* to reinforce existing personal constructs and *complex learning* to create and develop new personal constructs. This includes:

- Learning in context (in the internal and external business contexts).
- Treating learning as a social process involving multiple actors.
- Dialogical learning from internal workforce.

- Dialogical learning from external key informants and expert/knowledgeable individuals.
- 'Trying on for size' the perspectives and world views of others.
- Learning by doing.
- Learning by problem solving.
- Learning by opportunity seeking.
- Learning from mistakes.
- Learning by observation.
- Learning by copying.
- Learning by experiment and 'try out'.
- Learning by telling one's story to others—and responding to feedback.

PCT Informing Creativity and Innovation: Finally, deserving here of specific focus are two behavioural and ability areas that are core to small business entrepreneurship: opportunity identification and discovery; and owner manager creativity and innovation. PCT offers rich guidance on both.

Discovery or revealing of niche opportunity is pivotal to entrepreneurship and integral to the sustained development of the growth-achieving small enterprises within our studies. But our use of PCT shows that owner manager undertaking of entrepreneurial learning activities such as those listed above facilitates build-up of understanding of slices of the firm's external environment and creative interpretation of change situations. Frequently, the more entrepreneurial owner manager is transcending mere identification of discovery of latent opportunity to *co-create* parts of his operating environment and create business development opportunity. Application of PCT thus guides us as entrepreneurship educators towards fostering student understanding of and behaviours surrounding personal idiosyncratic and creative interpretation of events and situations with which we are faced. In PCT terms, we respond not to the stimuli of an unfolding change event, but to our own personal interpretation of that stimuli.

On the issues of creativity and innovation, PCT offers similarly robust guidance. Integral to Kelly's development of PCT are the processes of 'loose' and 'tight' personal constructing. 'Loose construction sets the stage for creative thinking. This loosening releases facts long taken as self-evident from their conceptual moorings. Once so freed, they may be seen in new aspects hitherto unsuspected and the creative cycle my get under

way' (Kelly, 1955; Wyer et al., 2010, p. 21). Thus, for an individual to be creative or create something new, he or she has to surface, address and challenge the assumptions upon which his existing personal construct is based. She has to loosen her constructions and produce alternatives.

Moreover, for creativity to effectively feed into innovative small business development, the creative individual must be capable of moving his loose construing forward. Fransella (2003) emphasises that the creative person must have the ability to move from loosened to tightened construing. The person who uses loose constructions never gets out of the stage of mumbling to himself. He must get round to testing out that construction. Those locked into loose construing find it very difficult to come to any firm conclusions.

It is such owner manager ability to loosen current personal constructions, create and follow up on potential alternatives and subsequently tighten those constructions and subject them to experimental testing that distinguishes the more entrepreneurial small business owner managers with whom we work and support (Wyer & Bowman, 2019; Wyer et al., 2010).

PCT thus offers clear guiding frames of reference for fostering entrepreneurial opportunity creation abilities, creativity and innovation capability as pivotal to entrepreneurship provision.

In the following section, we provide example of the kinds of meaning-eliciting tools used in our own entrepreneurship programmes.

5   Example Reflective and Meaning-Eliciting Tools

Following Harri-Augstein, et al.'s lead, as key part of our provision we develop 'meaning-eliciting tools' to help our learners see the validity and limitations of their existing personal constructs in given situations under consideration. Thus, meaning-eliciting tools to foster and heighten awareness of personal meanings and help the learner challenge rigid thought patterns and perceptions.

Indicative of the meaning-eliciting tools used are integration of our own and literature-based business models and concepts—as alternative 'frames of reference' for students/owner managers to 'try on for size'. Examples include:

- *Innovative Small Business Strategic Management Model*

The model is developed to provide alternative perspectives on how successful growth-achieving owner managers understand and manage their often-hostile external environment.

It is derived from our own research (as outlined in Sect. 2 above) and the grounding of existing strategic management theory and knowledge base in understanding of the distinctiveness of small business.

The approach uses the traditional rational long-term planning model as base frame of reference and offers alternative perspectives for the learner to 'try on for size'—as vehicle to reflect upon and challenge own existing personal constructs and perspectives.

The model demonstrates how best small business strategic management is a predominantly learning-oriented strategy formation process (learning school of strategic management thought)), but significantly underpinned as a mental process (cognitive school of strategic management thought) and visionary process (entrepreneurial school of strategic management thought).

Figure 1 provides indicative snapshot of our modelling which we continue to progressively refine in the light of our experiences of its application in our entrepreneurship research, consultancy and teaching contexts (Wyer & Baldwin, 2022, forthcoming).

- *Conceptualisation of the Small Business as Potential Learning Organisation*

We are progressively developing a robust meaning-eliciting tool through integration of our own research and the Learning Organisation knowledge base (Wyer & Bowman, 2019; Wyer & Mason, 1998; Wyer et al., 2000).

It uses key areas of traditional organisational behaviour knowledge as base frame of reference.

The tool offers key dimensions of best practice small business entrepreneurial learning activities in their identification and understanding of unexpected external change situations. Embracing:

– The pivotal and hub positioned role of the owner manager.
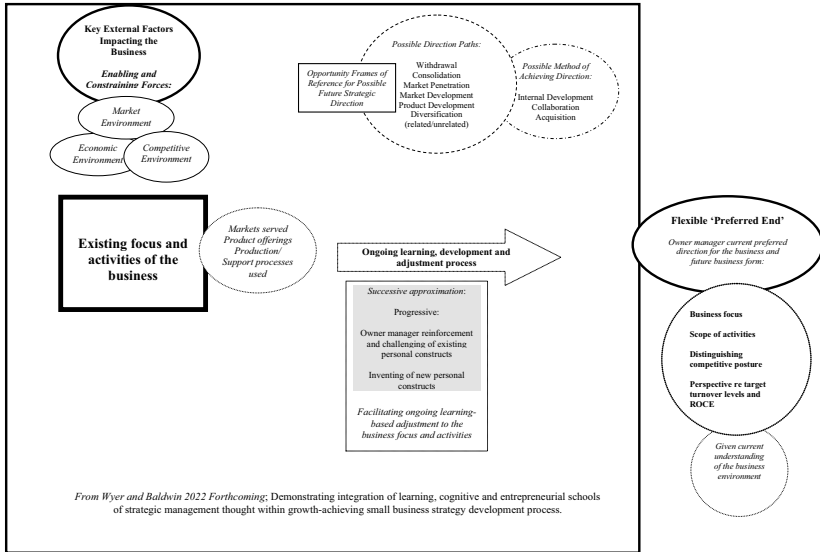
Fig. 1 Small Business Strategic Planning and Development Frame

- Owner manager entrepreneurial learning activities—and use of more able staff as learning nodes in supporting key areas of strategic learning.
- How individual strands of learning are creatively yoked by the owner manager into potential new innovative business development activity (such as new market niche opportunity).
- The key role of experiment and 'try out' in practice of the newly emerging understanding of the potential business development opportunity (that is, the owner manager testing of newly developing personal construct of opportunity).

- *Use of Live Practising Small Businesses as Learning and Assessment Vehicles*

This meaning-eliciting vehicle involves student undertaking over time of a strategic development audit of a growth-achieving micro or small enterprise.

It is an 'In-small business-context' learning process that embraces student co-working with the owner manager and conducting own external environment analysis to build-up of understanding of historical development path of the business, current strategic position and key external and internal development context, and identification of potential future strategic development path.

Assessment is formative through the audit process and summative through completion of end of audit strategic consultancy report. Ongoing support input from owner manager and academic coach facilitate student progressive personal construing/re-construing learning and development process—progressively reflecting upon and challenging own existing personal constructs and as appropriate refining, enhancing or replacing those constructs. Thus, an ongoing approximation and re-approximation of 'meaningful picture' of the business in its environment—and use of owner manager, academic coach and key informants on the boundary of the enterprise's activities as complementary sources of'learning conversations'.

Figure 2 provides diagrammatic example of the frames of reference that we are developing in facilitating the fostering of student learning from the small business practice interface. Not least in the nurturing of student 'reflexivity capacity'. Thereby encouraging student continuous examination of self and the research and project relationship with the owner manager—including making explicit the forms of 'conceptual baggage' he or she may be carrying (personal constructs that may be embedded with academic theory or conceptualization, personal assumptions and current theories-in-use). Here, we are emphasising reflexivity as the bedrock assumption of personal construct theory (Fransella & Dalton, 2000) and how in a qualitative investigation and learning context 'reflexivity' embraces the capacity of learners and researchers to reflect upon their actions and values during a project, whether in producing data or writing accounts (Feighery, 2006).

While not scientifically evaluated as to efficacy, some 20 years of development and application of such learning facilitation tools has helped enhanced student learning as evidenced in production of high-level student performance and module pass rates; and by insight and recommendations within student consultancy reports adopted by participant practicing small businesses. Students have regularly progressed onto further entrepreneurship study at both Masters and PhD levels and/or own enterprise start up.
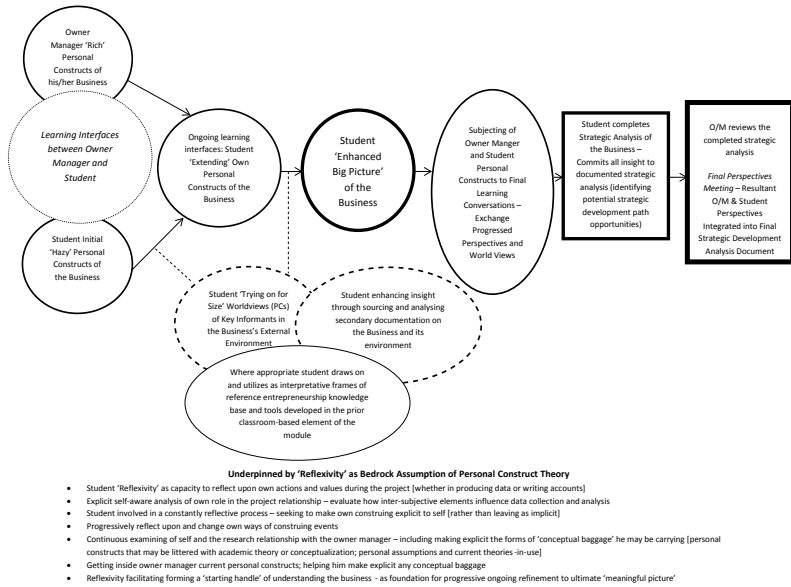
Student Strategic Learning and Analysis Process:

Owner Manager 'Rich' Personal Constructs of his/her Business

Learning Interfaces between Owner Manager and Student

Student Initial 'Hazy' Personal Constructs of the Business

Ongoing learning interfaces: Student 'Extending' Own Personal Constructs of the Business

Student 'Enhanced Big Picture' of the Business

Subjecting of Owner Manger and Student Personal Constructs to Final Learning Conversations – Exchange Progressed Perspectives and World Views

Student completes Strategic Analysis of the Business – Commits all insight to documented strategic analysis (identifying potential strategic development path opportunities)

O/M reviews the completed strategic analysis *Final Perspectives Meeting* – Resultant O/M & Student Perspectives Integrated into Final Strategic Development Analysis Document

Student 'Trying on for Size' Worldviews (PCs) of Key Informants in the Business's External Environment

Student enhancing insight through sourcing and analysing secondary documentation on the Business and its environment

Where appropriate student draws on and utilizes as interpretative frames of reference entrepreneurship knowledge base and tools developed in the prior classroom-based element of the module

Underpinned by 'Reflexivity' as Bedrock Assumption of Personal Construct Theory

- Student 'Reflexivity' as capacity to reflect upon own actions and values during the project [whether in producing data or writing accounts]
- Explicit self-aware analysis of own role in the project relationship – evaluate how inter-subjective elements influence data collection and analysis
- Student involved in a constantly reflective process – seeking to make own construing explicit to self [rather than leaving as implicit]
- Progressively reflect upon and change own ways of construing events
- Continuous examining of self and the research relationship with the owner manager – including making explicit the forms of 'conceptual baggage' he may be carrying [personal constructs that may be littered with academic theory or conceptualization; personal assumptions and current theories -in-use]
- Getting inside owner manager current personal constructs; helping him make explicit any conceptual baggage
- Reflexivity facilitating forming a 'starting handle' of understanding the business - as foundation for progressive ongoing refinement to ultimate 'meaningful picture'

Fig. 2 Personal construct theory-based action learning and development path (Co-driven—Student and Owner Manager)

6   Conclusion

The underlying premise of this chapter is that a major task of educators in entrepreneurship is to equip students, particularly today's undergraduates, with knowledge and skills to survive in a fast and rapidly changing environment (both within business and in daily life). With this effectively achieved by an entrepreneurship education process informed by robust understanding of just how enterprising individuals effectively cope with such change contexts.

We have suggested that creative application of a version of Personal Construct Theory can help make explicit the high-level complexity of the small business strategic learning task and underpin the unfolding of understanding of best small business entrepreneurial learning practice in micro and small enterprises who successfully undertake that complex task.

Our own research confirms that a key source of small business competitive advantage in highly uncertain operating environments derives

from the evermore effective and resilient learning capability of the owner manager. Fostering such entrepreneurial learning capability within students should thus be at the fore of entrepreneurship education provision.

Our proposition is that PCT offers itself as innovative vehicle for facilitating student understanding of how they themselves learn and thus of how they can progressively improve their learning capability. Propounding a significant meta-learning orientation (Maudsley, 1979), we position to the fore student need to constantly enhance 'learning to learn' capability and become that ever more effective and resilient learner which epitomises small enterprise development success. If they do not understand how they learn, how can they improve their learning capabilities and become better learners?

The rich insight revealed by our own research as to what constitutes 'best small business strategic management practice' begins to make explicit the core body of managerial, organisational and learning skills and abilities that we as entrepreneurship educators should be fostering in both undergraduates and practising owner managers—and how it can inform design and delivery modes of such education process.

We suggest that PCT provides robust steer for the entrepreneurship educator with regard to the key role of facilitating student personal construing-based simple and complex learning capability, potential barriers to that learning and opportunity for development and application of innovative reflective and meaning-eliciting tools and vehicles to more effectively assist that student learning process. A steer that, in its totality, posits entrepreneurship education as a 'joint enterprise' transcending teacher as mere knowledge provider and student as passive recipient of information into a predominantly action and activity oriented experiential learning process.

Prominent therein is opportunity for encouraging of a discovery approach to learning: bringing out the student as inquiring man ('man the good scientist'). Engaging him or her in formal and informal research activities and inquiry and in learning interactions with live practicing small enterprises and the wider business environment and community. Thereby providing opportunity for development of creative thinking, proactivity, creativity and innovativeness capabilities.

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