

Empowerment Through Enterprising Competencies

A Research Based Developmental Program

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ABSTRACT

Enterprising competencies are needed in a society that is more and more characterized by self-reliance and uncertainty. This paper presents the rationales for, and an outline of, an enterprising competencies training that meets the challenges of being research based as well as action oriented. It employs a behavioral approach to competencies combining knowledge acquisition by means of studying the 'how to' aspects of theory and research, and knowledge application by means of developmental exercises.

Keywords: Enterprising-Competencies, Enterprising-Skills, Experiential-Learning

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INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines an approach to teaching enterprising competencies in a university setting. It is characterized by two features. First, it has an experiential component in the form of developmental exercises. Second, the exercises are research-based: students study academic articles that give clues about how to practice the various competencies. The method is inspired by Gibb's (1993, 1998, 2002a, 2002b) ideas about simulating the essences of enterprise in the learning environment. The paper begins with offering the rationales for the course. First, it provides arguments as to why enterprising competencies are becoming increasingly important for students. Second, it is argued why, out of three approaches to competency, the behavioral approach is deemed to be the most suitable. Third, in the debate about generic versus situation specific competencies, it argues for the relevance of generic competencies. The paper then describes entrepreneurship / small business (E/SB) research on competencies, and discusses why entrepreneurship research is often of little help for research based 'how to' approaches. Finally, the practices for the assurance of learning are described.

THE WIDER RELEVANCE OF ENTERPRISING COMPETENCIES

Individual level enterprising competencies are increasingly important as a result of various socio-economic trends. As outlined by Gibb (2002a, 2002b), there have been profound changes, all favoring increased self-reliance in the ways in which individuals relate to the State, organizations, and other individuals. Among the examples Gibb offers in using this three-

dimensional frame is that of the State providing less certainty and welfare support, and relying increasingly on the market to attain social ends. Few organizations still provide life-long employment and large organizations mimic small ones in their organizational structures in order to meet the demands of ever more competitive environments. On the individual level, we see more of an individual growth and happiness ethic, and an increase in relationship break-ups and divorces (Gibb, 2002a; 2002b).

Career researchers study these trends and write about *employability*, the *Protean Career*, and the *Boundaryless Career*. Employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market gaining initial employment, maintaining employment, and obtaining new employment if required (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashfort, 2004). The Protean Career (Hall, 2004) describes a career orientation in which the person, not the organization, is in charge. Success criteria are subjective (psychological success) and the person's core values drive career decisions (Hall, 2004). The Boundaryless Career, a related concept (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994), refers to a career in which people have worked for many employers, alternated with periods of entrepreneurship. The competencies that sustain and support employability, the Protean Career and the Boundaryless Career are therefore foremost individual level, rather than firm level.

Thus, individual level enterprising competencies are important also in contexts outside of narrowly defined notions of entrepreneurship, such as starting a business. Entrepreneurship and employability are closely linked with both requiring skills such as flexibility, creativity, and problem solving (Onstenk, 2003). Whatever the work context, we more and more live in a society where we have to cope with and enjoy an enterprising way of life (Gibb, 2002a, 2002b). This way of life is characterized by uncertainty, change, and complexity on the one hand, but by autonomy, freedom, individual responsibility, and being able to reap the fruits of one's own

labor on the other hand (Gibb, 2002a, 2002b). Hence, there have been many calls for *transferable* enterprising skills (Fallows and Stevens, 2000; Galloway, Anderson, Brown and Wilson, 2005). Possession of enterprising competencies empowers individuals to successfully participate in the enterprising way of life.

Individual level competencies are defined in the current approach as *abilities and skills that manifest in behavior*. Individual level enterprising competencies are competencies that are related to starting, or running a small or new business. However, enterprising competencies can also be manifested outside of these settings (Onstenk 2003). Examples of these competencies are generating ideas for opportunities, taking action, persevering, networking, persuasion, courage, improvisation, making decisions under conditions of uncertainty, planning and goal setting under conditions of uncertainty, managing time and stress, creative problem solving, negotiating, managing relationships, team building, and communication skills such as listening, perspective taking, expressiveness, and social adaptation. These competencies underlie functional areas in small business management and entrepreneurship such as marketing and production.

Beyond individual competencies, several authors use similar terminology with regard to firm-level functional areas (e.g., Capaldo, Iandoli, and Ponsiglione, 2004; Chandler and Jansen, 1992; Chandler and Hanks, 1994; Onstenk, 2003). Some are labeled as *managerial competencies*, such as planning, financial management, allocating resources, and control. Others are labeled as *entrepreneurial competencies*, such as assembling and acquiring resources, and managing for growth. Here the competency concerns the firm, although the unit of analysis is the individual. The approach in this paper limits itself to individual competencies that can also manifest outside of the context of a firm, hence the use of the term *enterprising*. Also

disregarded are firm level competencies such as the core competencies of the firm (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990).

THREE DIFFERENT COMPETENCY APPROACHES

McClelland's (1973) article, 'Testing for competence rather than for intelligence', is often seen as a starting point for the competency approach, although Mulder, Weigel and Collins (2007) trace the use of the concept back to Plato and even the *Code of Hammurabi* (1792-1750 BC). In recent decades, the construct has been applied in various ways. In a clear discussion, Hoffmann (1999) establishes that there are three distinct approaches to competencies: *input*, *behavior*, and *output*. The input approach is favored in the United States of America (USA) (Grzeda, 2005). Here, Boyatzis (1982) sees competency as an underlying characteristic of a person, which may be a motive, trait, skill, social role, self-image, or knowledge. Spencer and Spencer (1993) define competency as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to successful performance at work. Successful people are assessed as to what knowledge, traits, skills and other attributes allow them to be successful. Other people can then be subsequently trained in order to emulate or imitate their successful counterparts. Sandberg (2001) notes that this approach essentially goes back to Taylor's ideas of scientific management.

The output approach is favored in the United Kingdom (UK) (Grzeda 2005). This approach sees competencies as a standard or as outcomes. If someone achieves beyond a certain standard, that person is said to be 'competent'. Output can also refer to very high levels of success. Similarly, Bird (1995) distinguishes between competency as a minimum standard – baseline or threshold – and competency as contributing to excellence. Grzeda (2005) refers to the

input and output approaches respectively as competency as an independent (US), or dependent (UK) variable.

A third approach looks at the behavior that is displayed. Behavior is informed by inputs and leads to outputs. This is the approach that is favored in this enterprising competencies course. There are a number of reasons to opt for the behavioral frame. They are best presented in contrast to the other approaches. Firstly, a comparison with the input approach. In this course competencies are not just studied, but also practised, and the behavioral approach corresponds well with experiential formats. This is in opposition to the input approach, which includes knowledge, traits, motives, and attitudes, and can therefore be taught without a behavioral component. Moreover, someone can have appropriate personality traits with regard to entrepreneurship, but these need to become manifest in behavior (Gartner, 1989, McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). Furthermore, both management and entrepreneurship are characterized by ambiguity and complexity – there is no simple causal link between input and success (Grzeda, 2005). Finally, the behavioral approach assumes that behavior is malleable. This is in contrast to the relatively stable personality traits which figure in the input approach. Indeed, Lau, Chan and Ho (2004) found that competencies of Hong Kong entrepreneurs changed when they were exposed to the emerging mainland Chinese market. In sum, although behavior is informed by inputs, such as knowledge and personality variables, it is beneficial to focus on behavior.

Secondly, a comparison with the output approach. This approach can either see competency as a standard (if you pass that standard you are regarded as being competent), or as success (the more successful you are, the more competent you are deemed to be). The behavioral approach, however, looks at performance in terms of what people *do*, but it does not see the *results* of performing as competence. One may wonder what the use is of training behavior if its

effectiveness is not the measure. But in my opinion, that is exactly the advantage of practicing behavior instead of success in an educational setting. Students learn to manifest enterprising competencies, regardless of whether they are successful or not. The primary purpose of the exercise is to gain confidence and to raise self-efficacy. For example, students perform networking exercises and learn how to build relationships. Whether that translates to tangible results is less relevant at this stage. In addition, by assessing behavior rather than success one allows for mistake-making. A student can make a great networking effort but in the end it may amount to nothing. Within entrepreneurship, mistake-making is vital and essential, and what counts is exposure to behavior and learning from mistakes (Gibb, 1993). In sum, effectiveness is the ultimate aim, as this program aims to empower, but in the educational setting it is appropriate to focus on behavioral aspects.

As stated above, one advantage of the behavioral approach to competency is that it resonates well with experiential forms of education. The rationale is that entrepreneurship should not just be talked or read about – it should also be *practiced*. Entrepreneurship is something that is learned by doing and not merely by studying (Cope & Watts, 2000; Fiet, 2001b, Man, 2006). Moreover, many people have a preference for experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), and it can be argued that adults learn best when they direct their own learning and relate concepts to their own personal experience (Bird, 2002; Van Gelderen 2010).

Currently, many entrepreneurship educators are devising experiential and action approaches. This is indicated by various publications in the training and development literature. In Bird's (2002) competency course, students identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and outline developmental exercises within the framework of a learning contract. In Tasmania, Jones and English (2004) also use methods of student centered learning by 'reversing the process and

responsibility of learning'. Jones-Evans, Williams, and Deacons (2000) employ an action learning approach by developing enterprising competencies through consultancy assignments. Examples of other innovative experiential methods in entrepreneurship education are reported by Collins, Smith, and Hannon (2006), Cooper, Bottomley and Hildebrand (2004), Heinonen and Poikkijoki (2006), Klapper (2005), Laukkanen (2000), Mueller, Wyatt, Klandt, and Tan (2006), and Tan and Ng (2006).

THE GENERIC VS. SITUATION-SPECIFIC COMPETENCIES DEBATE

A hotly contested issue with regard to teaching competencies is whether there is any value in students acquiring generic competencies (Grzeda, 2005). One argument is that if students are all taught the same generic competencies, it does not result in a competitive advantage for the organization that will utilize their services (Grzeda, 2005). From the perspective of achieving a competitive advantage, it only makes sense to train competencies that are specific to the firm (or organization). On the other hand, the theory of the Boundaryless Career, mentioned above, calls for generic competencies that can be applied in various contexts (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). People lend their competencies to different firms at varying times, sometimes being an entrepreneur themselves. Competencies that are strongly tied to a particular organization may in fact put them at a disadvantage (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

More fundamentally, McKenna (2004) argues that competencies cannot be abstracted from either the person or the context. Ultimately it is the individual's personality as well as the situation that determine behavior. McKenna (2002) and Ruth (2006) posit that any notion of high performance is constructed within the particular situation that a person operates. Thus, there are no general competencies, only context-specific ones. This is unfortunate for business training for

younger people, where the work or entrepreneurial situation is, in most cases, not yet present. The student can only be supplied with generic competencies, which need to be applied in specific contexts later.

Gibb's (1993, 1998, 2002a, 2002b) ideas about simulating the essences of enterprise in the learning environment may provide a way out of this debate. When students can take ownership of their learning, study on a 'need to know' basis, and participate in setting their learning goals and tasks, then generic competencies can be practiced and developed – in circumstances and conditions that are different for each individual (Van Gelderen, 2010). This line is taken in this approach.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH ON COMPETENCIES

Apart from applications in entrepreneurship education, there are two bodies of research in the field of E/SB research that involve the study of competencies. One stream has as a research question: 'Which competencies are important?' In addressing this issue, one approach is to study the literature in order to rate the importance of various entrepreneurial competencies and to arrive at a rank ordering (Bird, 1995; Capaldo, Iandoli, & Ponsiglione, 2004; Kirby, 2004; Man, Lau & Chan, 2002; Man & Lau, 2005). Another method is to ask entrepreneurs and/or experts to rate the importance of various competencies (Capaldo, Izquierdo, DeSchoolmeester, and Salazar, 2005; McLarty, 2005). Little work has been done in this area in comparison with the general field of management, where, based on meta-analyses, already a *great eight* list of work competencies has been established (Bartram, 2005).

The second stream of research relates competencies to success. It measures competencies on the one hand and firm performance on the other. Thus, this literature is related to the first

stream: by showing which competencies relate to success it points to the importance of various competencies. This has been explored by Chandler and Hanks (1994) who relate managerial competency to business volume and entrepreneurial competency to business growth. In an earlier work, Chandler and Jansen (1992) find that entrepreneurial, managerial, and technical competence are all positively related to performance. Baum and Locke (2004) observe that new resource skill, passion and tenacity all have an indirect effect on venture growth, mediated by goals, self-efficacy and communicated vision.

Both streams answer important research questions. However, for this training of enterprising competencies I am primarily interested in articles that would be helpful in establishing *how to* manifest a competency in behavior. Here I often had to borrow from other fields of social science, as will be discussed in the next section.

‘HOW TO’ ARTICLES AND BOOK CHAPTERS IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

The search is for academic ‘how to’ articles and book chapters – how to network, persuade, persevere, take calculated risks, and the like. Preferably these articles would not just report best practices of entrepreneurs but also be based on theory and contribute to theory (Fiet, 2001a). Interestingly, they are surprisingly hard to find. I can think of various reasons. For some competencies there is simply little research in the field of E/SB. For example, perseverance is obviously an important enterprising competency, but there is very little research published on perseverance in the E/SB journals (Van Gelderen, 2012).

In contrast, much has been published about various other competencies. However, reading this research with a strict ‘how to’ angle in mind, there is little useful to be found. First, research usually gives definitions, but in themselves definitions do not tell us *how to do*

something. Second, much research provides measures, but at best, the items of these measures tell us something about behaviors that can be considered as *evidence* of the competency. They do not tell us how to *perform* these behaviors. Third, there is correlational research. This tells us something about who displays the competency and the conditions under which we can expect the competency to occur, but again often it says little about how to enact the competency. Fourth, there are models in which researchers explore a particular competency, and show all the relevant related factors. Sometimes this does provide clues for how to put the competency into practice, especially if the models shows proximal antecedents that strongly influence the manifestation of the competency. In most cases, however, the antecedents are distal, and they cannot be applied to the practice of the competency.

An additional reason that the E/SB literature provides little insight into how to display enterprising competencies, is that perhaps ‘how to’ articles are difficult to publish. Assumed to be lacking in theoretical insights, they may be perceived to have less academic merit (Béchar and Gregoire, 2005). A further reason may be that researchers who do have this knowledge prefer to commercially exploit it, rather than publishing their ideas in the public domain. Finally, it has been noted that much E/SB research is not designed to generate implications for education and student development, nor is a great effort made to derive these implications when presenting and discussing the findings (Béchar and Gregoire, 2005).

Fortunately, for nearly every enterprising competency one can study other fields of research, and find relevant information there, published in respected public domain academic journals. Take for example the competency of risk taking. One part of the literature on risk taking in the field of E/SB is about how risk propensity and/or risk perception relate to decision making. Another part is about risk propensity or risk perception in relation to whether people

become entrepreneurs or how successful entrepreneurs are. This research often points at biases and heuristics, which warns us about pitfalls to avoid.

One element of risk taking, even if the risks are calculated and managed, is courage. Even if a person does not have a high risk propensity, and perceives moderate or manageable risk with regard to a business venture, courage is still required in order to proceed. The E/SB literature is silent about courage, but there is plenty of research on bomb removal experts, paratroopers, combatants, astronauts, and fire-fighters, and how they build up courage (Rachman, 2004). This research gives insight in how to be courageous, and can easily be translated into experiential exercises.

Similarly, the E/SB literature discusses structures, measures, and governance of networks (for an overview see Hoang & Antoncic, 2001), but gives little information on networking as an ability. The practice of networking, however, has been studied by social scientists (see for example Baker, 2000). For nearly every competency, with the exception of opportunity recognition for which some E/SB articles outline methods (e.g., DeTienne and Chandler, 2004; Fiet and Patel, 2008), I went to other fields of social science, and was able to find literature with theory and / or research based 'how to' prescriptions.

ASSURANCE OF LEARNING

Any educational program needs to set out its goals and assure that these goals are indeed realized. The learning goals for this program are (a) knowledge acquisition with regard to individual level enterprising competencies; and (b) insight in and the development of one's own individual level enterprising competencies. Assignments and assessment can take many forms although it should always include tests of knowledge acquisition as well as an experiential

component. Ideally, the characteristics of the experiential learning component are based on Gibb's (1993, 1996, 2002a, 2002b) ideas about simulating the essences of entrepreneurship in the classroom: uncertainty, freedom, control, responsibility, ownership, mistake making, flexibility, informality, dependency on environment, working on know-who basis, and pressure to see things through.

One approach is study and practice the competencies one by one. Here, the student studies the reading material about a particular competency first, after which the students devise plans to practice the competencies. These plans can be reviewed and if considered suitable, the students act on their plans and report back afterwards. Care should be taken that the plans allow for practice in the life-world of the student. They do not necessarily involve business aspects.

Another approach is to have assignments in which the competencies are all practiced at the same time. Organizing a major event, or starting a micro business are examples. Afterwards, students are asked for a report in which they reflect on what they have experienced in terms of the manifestation of their enterprising competencies. They are asked to involve the literature that has been studied, in order to allow for the application of behavior to theory and research, and vice versa. Here, students can take a critical approach not only to their own enterprising behavior, but also to the academic literature. A choice can be made to grade experiential assignments on the basis on effort, learning and reflection, rather the actual results of the practice. This assessment regime allows for mistake making and for courageous attempts to fail. Moreover, in a behavioral approach to competencies the emphasis is on behavior rather than its effects.

Yet another strategy is to study the behavior of enterprising others. Here, students can for example explore a biography or autobiography of an entrepreneur. In a report, the students focus

on the competencies of that entrepreneur. They are asked to describe examples of how competencies are expressed, and to apply the literature to the practices described in the text. In addition, if possible, they describe the development of the entrepreneur's competencies throughout his or her lifetime and career, and apply the literature to the entrepreneur's competency development. By means of this assignment students can apply the competency theory and research to practice, and also learn from the entrepreneurs' successes and mistakes vicariously (Rae and Carswell, 2000). The use in this program of a mix of action and vicarious learning is similar to the methods of deliberate practice as exercised by top performers in a wide variety of domains (Ericsson, 2006; Baron and Henry, 2010).

This enterprising behavior course was tested and evaluated in 2005 as a pilot program at the postgraduate level, and it was run again every year since. In 2008 it was also offered to owners of newfound high tech businesses in a business incubator. Evaluations of the course show that the students enjoyed the course to a very high degree and felt stimulated and encouraged at the same time (all averages to evaluation questions were above four on a five point scale). Yet, various issues require attention and need further development. First, although reactions to the course were positive, it is also important to assess in the longer term whether learning has actually taken place, whether the students feel more confidence with regard to enterprising competencies, and whether any behavior modification has occurred.

Second, studying and practicing a different competency each week makes it very difficult to be comprehensive. The ideal time period required to study and practice a competency has yet to be determined but will certainly vary per competency. Third, the selection of competencies can be debated. The current selection method is loosely based on Gibb (1993) and the students have no input in the selection of these competencies. Fourth, work needs to be done in

integrating this approach with the development of competencies at firm-level, whether the focus is managerial or entrepreneurial or both. This would be important if the course is to be offered to executives.

CONCLUSION

McAdam and Leitch (2005) state that there is a twofold challenge of academic entrepreneurship education: first, to find an experiential approach, and second, to apply this approach in a university setting. This paper has described one such approach and its rationale. The main benefits of this approach is that it is research-based and yet action-oriented. With an enterprising mode of delivery, learning takes place in the unique context of each individual. This type of course is becoming more common at universities, with the practice of enterprising competencies being a welcome complement to other more traditional entrepreneurship education offerings.

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