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Setting University Education on its Head – Social Entrepreneurship in the University Curriculum

Many people already bring with them skills pertinent for social entrepreneurship. However, their abilities are often compromised by conventional education patterns. Through an unorthodox 'Learning Journey' these can be rediscovered.

by Carolin Gebel, Claudia Neusüß and Wolfgang Stark

The concept of 'social entrepreneurship' stands for a creative approach to social innovation addressing societal problems. At the same time social entrepreneurship can lead to a new, socially responsible business model that focuses beyond market liberalism and profit maximization (Bornstein 2004; Yunus 2008). Social entrepreneurs are the democratic engines of society: They combine entrepreneurial engagement and innovative pragmatism with a desire for revolutionary social change. In the sense of Schumpeter's general definition of entrepreneurship (Schumpeter 1993), the challenge is to identify societal bottlenecks and to finding creative solutions. Social entrepreneurs challenge societies to focus on the real social benefits that are created by economic systems (Dees 2002). If we do not want to wait for the spontaneous emergence of people with this special entrepreneurial approach, then we should ask whether it is possible to teach and promote the skills required for social responsibility and innovation.

Monodimensional specialization

Political, social and cultural hierarchies are an obstacle to social innovation as its economic behavior exclusively focuses on profit maximisation. These patterns of specialization and a lack of connectivity can be found on all levels of the educational structure. In particular the German university system, which never was reformed radically, produces more and more specialists and future market leaders with a monodimensional focus, but a lack of serious 'professional capacity'. Social responsibility and community engagement seem to be given credit only as temporary marketing concepts. Innovative ideas for future

societal challenges require, however, the exact opposite: the active and systematic cooperation between all social actors from business, social, ecological, cultural initiatives and institutions, from state and local authority.

Developing entrepreneurial attitudes

If we consider the skills of well-known social entrepreneurs, it becomes clear that many of them did not have much business knowledge (Faltin 2008). What is it then, that characterizes a social entrepreneur? And what is the implication for education and training? Education for social entrepreneurship has to meet three requirements:

- The development of an entrepreneurial ability that is capable of identifying potentials and imbalances of society.
- A keen sense of identifying opportunities for entrepreneurial action within societal challenges.
- The ability to connect diverse points of views and cultures in teamwork.

Regarding the very different target groups who can profit from social entrepreneurship, specific priorities have to be developed. Students of all disciplines especially need practical experience. People who act in an intuitive entrepreneurial way need better methodological tools based on scientific knowledge to focus more strongly on their strategy. Many people already bring with them a particular skill-set in social entrepreneurship. However their abilities are often compromised by conventional education patterns. Therefore it is not so much necessary to teach these skills, but to provide opportunity for their rediscovery. The approach of a corporate ‘Learning Journey’ encourages the development and training of the necessary competences for social entrepreneurship in a community and as part of a shared learning experience.

Learning social entrepreneurship?

To act on this assumption, as well as considering the fact that many university graduates do not acquire these key skills - or not to any satisfactory level - we developed the interdisciplinary research project ‘Enterprise Learning Journey,’ which took place in 2007/2008 at the organizational development lab of the University of Duisburg-Essen. The aim of this enterprise was to develop and test a prototype of a practical training for social entrepreneurship. This enterprise was inspired by the *Team Academy Finland*, which is following a similar principle. Since 1993, more than 900 students attended the *Academy* and founded at least 90 companies. This model has inspired others in England,

France and Spain. The participating actors understand themselves as part of a lively and dynamic European network. They all share a deep dissatisfaction with the development of university education due to the Bologna process in Europe. Despite all rhetoric in the debate of education policy, the university education is increasingly moving away from the ideal of a reflexive training for more social responsibility. During the academic year 2007/2008, we inverted the current idea of university and set its educational approach on its head (Käufer/Scharmer 2000). Above all this means:

- Learning to value one's own and the ideas of others and testing them promptly
- Promoting creativity, entrepreneurial and interdisciplinary action as well as the ability to reflect
- Learning not only from theory, but also questioning the theory from a practical point of view

The metaphor of 'journey' is an important theme in our work. It expresses the core element of entrepreneurial action: staying 'en route' - in our personal perceptions, in our individual development and in our actions. Within this 'Learning Journey' we jointly developed an entrepreneurial mindset, as individuals and as a team, by using creative and experientially based teaching and learning methods. Furthermore the invention of a social entrepreneurial innovation has been prepared within the team. The central focus for the design of this field study has been provided by the principle of the learning organization and the 'U'-model of Scharmer (Scharmer 2007; Senge 1996).

The prototype 'Enterprise Learning Journey'

In the first phase of the program, the method is based on concepts from biographical work, self-management and the analysis of potential. By formulating personal learning goals and developing a joint contract, we build the foundation for learning and action within the team. During the second phase, we work with approaches using empirical social research. Participating observation, expert interviews, supplemented by creative exercises of training awareness are the central methods here. The letting go of past assumptions and the questioning of previous judgements and contexts is an important first step.

The third phase is about building teams that critically examine and reflect the previous patterns of problem solving as well as connecting observations and experiences. On this basis they develop medium term-oriented goals and more complex projects and activities. In this phase, we create the space to generate

creative ideas in a team and open up for new enterprises.

The presentation and discussion of the teams' different experiences, especially in the fourth and fifth phases, leads to more awareness for potential as well as borders and patterns of teamwork. The aim is to increase the flexibility within the management of team activities and improve professionalism, efficiency and quality assurance. It is about becoming proactive and using these experiences for the development of enterprises. In the sixth phase, at the end of the intensive course, the students have developed their own social entrepreneurial project. The prototype of 'Enterprise Learning Journey' in Essen concluded with an event during which the students reflected on their acquired learning experiences and presented the project ideas that they had generated. Further accompaniment of activities through coaching and designed learning processes was not part of this prototype. It is however advisable for a sustainable boost of tangible social enterprises.

All six phases are supported by coaches - experts from businesses, social institutions and social initiatives. In the beginning there are individual coachings and praxis, such as joint field work, that develop initial starting-points for new business projects. After the third phase, the accompanying coaching follows for the newly formed teams with concrete business ideas. The experts provide valuable advice and support for the learners' personal and entrepreneurial development. On request, the coaches and experts arrange further contacts, e.g. to potential cooperation partners. The experience of past 'Learning Journeys' shows two dimensions to be particularly fruitful and vital: the early use of action-learning as well as learning and working in a team. According to the students, the team process and the diversity of the group (because of cultural background or differing gender and disciplinary approaches) were valuable learning experiences (3). Furthermore, the importance of an appropriate space - in time and place - was considered a necessity to promote creativity and entrepreneurial action.

Creating a new Cultural Landscape

The experiences from the pilot project show that students require new key competencies for such a program. These include the development of a reflexive attitude as well as sense of social responsibility, the ability to work in an interdisciplinary environment and taking advantage of diversity. Becoming proactive and instructing oneself are also core skills. Furthermore, the acquisition of competencies needed in teamwork, the early practical orientation and development of a thorough sensing and ability for self-reflection, also in terms of develo-

ping a culture of learning and error, are important elements. This qualification profile as well as the substantive focus on social entrepreneurship represents a major cultural challenge for current (university) curricula. In 2008 we received additional incentive and encouragement for a continuation of the 'journey' due to the 'best practice' prize for university innovation awarded jointly by the Donors' Association for German Science, and the Federal Association of German Employers.

Many factors speak in favour of a continuation of 'Enterprise Learning Journey'. These include the encouraging experiences at the University of Duisburg-Essen, including the positive responses of students via their individual and team-oriented 'lessons learned', the great commitment of volunteers in the prototype as well as substantial public interests. It requires the development of appropriate Master's courses and a vigorous re-examination of extra-occupational qualifications. Also, for the teachers in this field, it is important to open up and develop new competencies that adequately support students as a coach and 'travel guide'. It is conceivable and advisable to push a further development within the context of European co-operation with several universities and training institutes. Given the current global environmental and economic crises, we are well advised of promoting, as well as politically demanding an entrepreneurial approach, which is oriented towards our society in a socially responsible and sustainable way.

Annotation:

- (1) Regarding the qualifications of known social entrepreneurs see the fellows selected annually by the Ashoka network; www.ashoka.org
- (2) www.tiimiakatemia.fi
- (3) In 2008 we held a second pilot project at Girne American University in (North-) Cyprus. The exceptional diversity of the teams offered considerable learning impulses and emphasized the importance of intercultural competence.

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