

# Fostering entrepreneurial education in Agribusiness through experiential learning

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## Introduction

This work examines the relationship between experiential learning and entrepreneurial education in the Agribusiness field.

After having outlined the challenges that higher education has to meet business and students' needs, the work outlines emerging insights from research that contribute to underline how effective could be an academic approach focused on experience. An overview of the latest development in the methodological field is presented; the paper, finally introduces the measures and initiative undertaken at the European level for promoting entrepreneurial education and initiatives by implementing experiential learning methods.

## Background context: wicked problems and the role of Higher Education Institutions

Partnerships among communities and local stakeholders in rural areas can represent powerful engines for the development process. Nevertheless, their heterogeneity requires both time and significant effort: in fact, according to Holmes (2002), ruralities are marked by uncertain, complex and often contradictory modes of decision making, swayed by multiple interest-groups, each with its own distinctive set of values and ideologies. This context has been defined by several authors (Friedmann 1987; Rittel and Webber 1972) as a 'wicked' problem and recently two special issues of IFAMR have been dedicated to this topic.

As it has been recently evidenced by Cavicchi et al. (2013), universities are nowadays called to play a greater role as stimulators and facilitators of knowledge transfer within business and society. These functions are not new in the USA where the Land Grant tradition of providing practical assistance to communities is very long (established after the Morrill Act of 1862) and full of virtuous examples (Stephenson, 2011). The Land Grant model embraces both of Gibbons et al's (1994) Mode 1 (basic research) and Mode 2 (applied problem solving).

Furthermore, a new function has been gradually recognized to universities: the co-creation for sustainability. "Essentially, this is due to a fundamental difference in focus: that of contributing to economic development versus that of actually creating societal transformations in pursuit of realising sustainable development" (Trencher et al, 2013).

Universities and Higher Education Institutions are powerful generator of both technological and social innovation as well as being able to function on local, national and international scales and link vast areas of activities and expertise across society (Arbo and Benneworth, 2007).

*Insert fig.1 about here*

Thus, academicians' mission has progressively been reshaped. Today professors are asked not only to provide valuable research and teaching, but also to find the right methodology to meet both business and students needs. University researchers in agribusiness have a great responsibility: on one side they formulate their research questions to meet practitioners needs; on the other, they have to take into account what business requires from their perspective graduate students.

So far, it is extremely important to promote academicians personal involvement in order to stimulate a dialogue with the business and experience-based methodologies (experiential learning theory, participatory action research, etc...) can be successfully employed to pursue this aim.

### **The importance of experience in Agribusiness**

Within the context outlined above, during the last years a debate on traditional and newer teaching approaches has emerged: traditional teaching centred approaches give a primary role to textbooks learning that provides knowledge to be later used toward practice (Gilinsky, 2013).

Thus, importance gained by experience in promoting knowledge acquisition has reinforced among academicians the idea that learning could be a product of action (Revans, 1986). Dewey (1983) observes that all learning is experiential, but the point is that not all the experiences can have positive impact on learning (Roberts, 2006).

In the Agribusiness many Universities have employed experiential learning when planning their courses: some master courses (Simon et al., 2004) have been planned in order to emphasize experience. Thus, many agricultural education programs have been conceived for including internships and field trips, both at graduate and undergraduate levels (Morgan et al., 2004), and supervised occupational experience (Dyer & Williams, 1997). Furthermore, many Universities have realized that experiential learning covers a primary role also in teachers education (Roberts, 2006).

Some academic journals such as the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, *Agricultural Education Magazine* and *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, have given much space to Experiential Learning in Educational Programs and provides cases and suggestions for the development of University programs and new teaching tools.

### **Benefits of filling the knowledge gap between Academicians & Practitioners**

A recent work by Cavicchi et al. (2014) has shown that action research can be successfully adopted by researchers with a twofold aim: on one hand it can be used for facilitating knowledge dissemination among entrepreneurs who are actively and critically involved in the training process; on the other hand it contributes to reduce the gap between theory and practice. In particular academicians' experience and personal involvement during the entire process (see fig.2) help to focus on business research needs and, then, insights emerging from research can be implemented for multiple purposes (including professional courses and agribusiness educational programs). Given the recognized importance of experience, both in research and teaching, some tools such as field trips or study visits have gained popularities among educators.

The real point remains, anyway the problem of transforming an "experience" into a "valuable experience" (Roberts, 2006). In our view a circular process of rethinking as the one suggested by action research (see fig. 2) is the key for

achieving, through a critical reflection upon the experience, insights that can be further employed in knowledge generation.

*Insert Fig 2 About here*

Thus, planning full immersion and intensive field trips in rural area/agrifood districts according to specific protocols and combining visits to firms, entrepreneurs reciprocal knowledge and sharing of experience, participation in workshops facilitated by researchers and tasting sessions to understand the intrinsic characteristics of food and beverage products can help to:

- transferring know-how in the management/strategic approach to business;
- fostering management skills;
- building business networks among agricultural related businesses;
- collecting data on entrepreneurial behaviour and on the usefulness of experiential learning approaches

### **EU Commission commitment and funding opportunities**

The new programming period for EU Structural Funds provides different opportunities to create cross-sectorial and multidisciplinary networks addressing the activities outlined above.

For instance the Erasmus+ program, in its Key Action 2 “Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices” supports different actions such as:

- Strategic Partnerships in the field of education, training and youth;
- Knowledge Alliances
- Sector Skills Alliances
- Capacity Building in the field of higher education;
- Capacity Building in the field of youth

The expected results of this program are related to the development, transfer and/or implementation of innovative practices at different levels (organisational, local, national or European).

Another valuable initiative is the one carried out by the Joint Research Centre with the Smart Specialisation Platform established by the European Commission to provide professional advice to EU countries and regions.

Through several activities and services, its aims are to identifying competitive advantage and maximise the knowledge-based development potential of any region.

## Conclusions

There is no doubt that Academicians are taking in serious consideration the needs emerging from practitioners; the attention given by institutions to the development of new programs that emphasize experiential learning methods shows that the interest towards this issue is growing.

In an article recently published on the Chronicle of Higher Education, the main difficulties that Education has to face, are summarized: "It's not that students aren't being taught what they need to know. It's that the learning isn't organized in a useful way. Students need help tying together what they are learning inside the classroom and out of it".

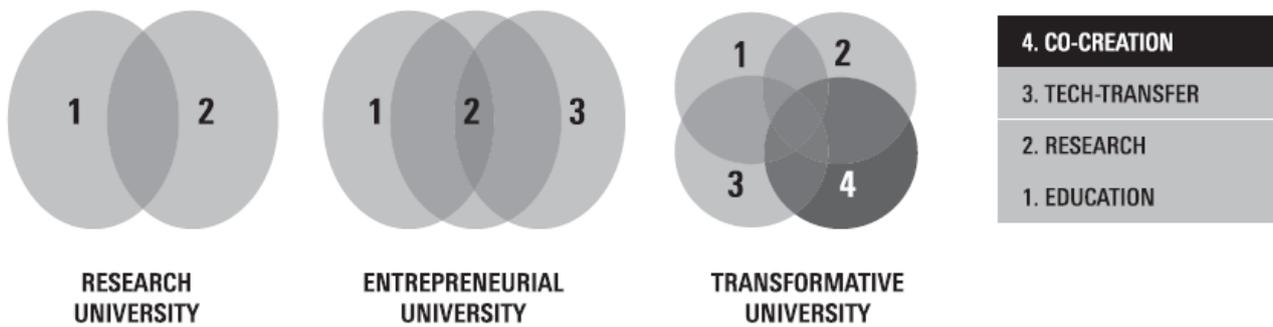
Background research shows that experience based methods can be effectively employed for reducing the gap between theory and practice; hopefully, the ongoing programs of the European Commission would provide further inputs for investigating the efficacy of experience-based programs in the Agribusiness, together with global insights emerging in the field of higher education.

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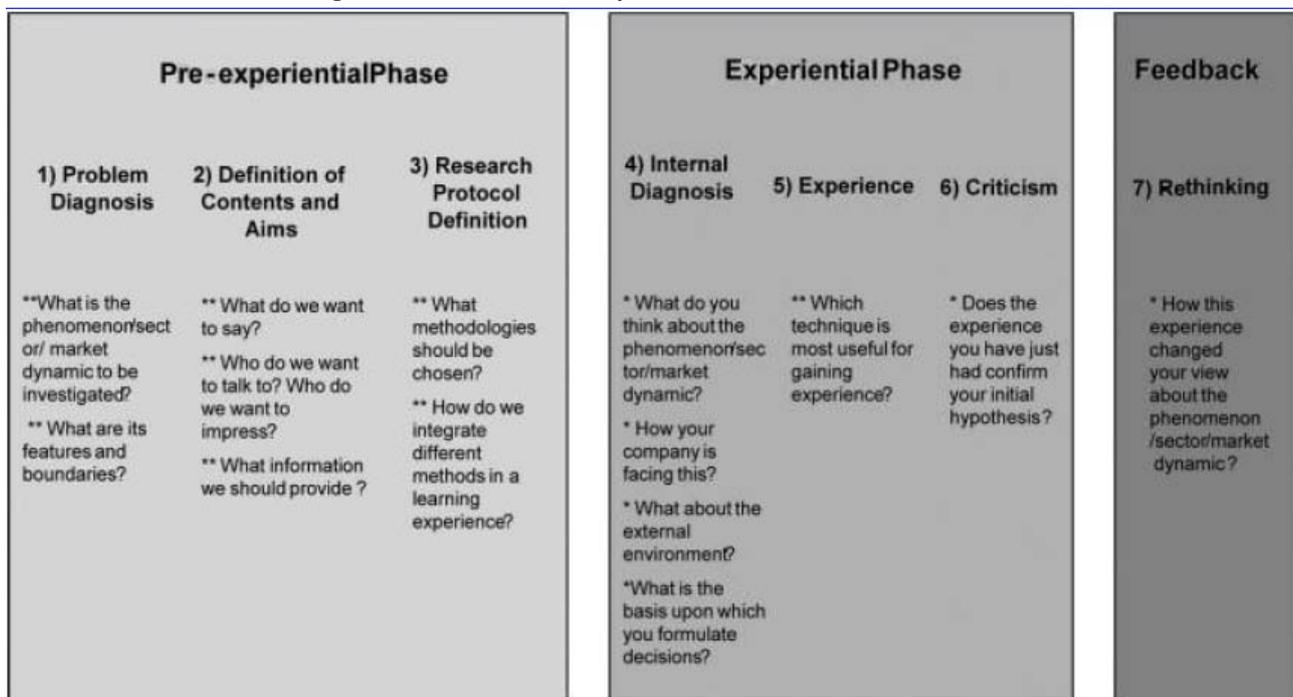
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Figure 1 “Co-existence and potential synergies of the four missions”



Source: Trencher (2013)

Figure 2 “The Academician-practitioner collaboration model”



Source: Cavicchi et al. (2014)