

Articoli

Focus on Education. Entrepreneurship, soft skills and the ancient world¹

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Abstract. The need for education aimed increasingly not only at technical skills, when at adopting a holistic approach with the goal of developing entrepreneurial competence. The focus on soft skills training as an attribute of an entrepreneurial worldview results in the search for training methodologies aimed at critical thinking. The use of an Example from the ancient world, the behavior of Marcus Aurelius who of duty and profession knew how to make the good of his empire.

Keywords. entrepreneurship education - mind-set - entrepreneurship - stoicism - Marcus Aurelius

1. Entrepreneurial mind-set

Higher education must increasingly respond to the need to specialise, to train not only cognitive, technical-specialist skills, but also using a humanistic approach re-focused on the holistic evaluation of people, intrapersonal skills, soft skills. Although cognitive and non-cognitive skills are intrinsically linked and have been shown to predict meaningful life outcomes, the latter are not prevalent in traditional classroom pedagogy². In this article, we use the terms soft skills and entrepreneurial mindset to understand transferable skills related to experiential education that are increasingly emphasised by teachers and experimentally transferable.

¹ Contributions equally shared: Valeria Caggiano paragraphs 1 and 2; Cosimo Costa paragraphs 3 and 4

² T. Kautz *et al.*, *Fostering and measuring skills: Improving cognitive and non-cognitive skills to promote lifetime success*, 2014.

Since the European Parliament placed the ‘spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship’ among the eight key competences for lifelong learning³ in 2006, entrepreneurship education has not only found its place among the different forms through which the educational event takes place, it has also found a particular definition that conveys it as “a tool to help develop the skills and mindset necessary for [young people] to turn creative ideas into entrepreneurial actions”.

Already in 2012, a communication entitled *Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes stated*: ‘Member States should promote entrepreneurial skills through new and creative teaching and learning methods from primary school [...]. education’⁴.

But the focus can also turn to the *Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan (2013)*⁵, the *Council Recommendation (2014)*⁶ the *European Parliament Resolution (2015)*⁷, in 2018, a Syllabus was introduced within Italian high school curricula⁸.

In summary, these are ‘indications’ that place entrepreneurship in an educational dimension aimed at defining an ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ that is open not so much.

Summarized, these are “directions” that place entrepreneurship in a formative dimension aimed at defining an “entrepreneurial spirit” open not so much to success and money as to an improvement in the individual’s private and social life. Furthermore, although the Every Student Succeeds Act in the United States has promoted the achieve-

³ The eight competences also include ‘communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; cultural awareness and expression’, Annex to *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning*. OJ 30.12.2006 L 394/14. T

⁴ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *Rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes COM2012/0669 final*. This indication is also supported by recent research that demonstrates the significant impact of introducing entrepreneurship education from the earliest level, i.e. primary school, see L. Rosendahl Huber, R. Sloof, M. Vaan Plag, *The Effect of Early Entrepreneurship Education: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment*, in “*European Economic Review*” 72 (2014), pp. 76-97.

⁵ The three areas of focus are “1. education and training for entrepreneurship so as to support growth and business creation; 2. strengthening framework conditions for entrepreneurs by removing current structural barriers and providing them with support at crucial stages of the business life cycle; and 3. dynamizing the culture of entrepreneurship in Europe: nurturing the next generation of entrepreneurs,” European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. *Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan, Reviving the Entrepreneurial Spirit in Europe*. COM/2012/0795 final.

⁶ Council conclusions on entrepreneurship in education and training, OJ C 17/2, 20.01.2015, pp. 2-3.

⁷ European Parliament resolution of September 8, 2015, on promoting entrepreneurship in young people through education and training (2015/2006 INI). It also recalls the 2003 *Green Paper on Entrepreneurship in Europe* which included education as a key factor in making progress; the 2006 Oslo Agenda for Entrepreneurship Education in Europe in which some proposals were defined through which progress in entrepreneurship education could be supported through systematic and effective actions to be implemented at the European, national, regional and institutional levels; also recalls *Towards Greater Coherence in Entrepreneurship Education (2010)*, A research on the introduction of systematic strategies in entrepreneurship education, including the presentation of the advancement model (“Progression Model”).

⁸ Through a dedicated Syllabus, schools will be accompanied in the construction of structured pathways to give students the ability to transform ideas into action through creativity, innovation, risk assessment and risk-taking, and the ability to plan and manage entrepreneurial projects.

ment of 21st century skills and qualified responsibility as more than just the assessment of performance test scores, without the learning depth, self-motivation and involvement of students, such acts cannot achieve the expected goals⁹.

In its focus, we highlight entrepreneurship education, also referred to as enterprise education or entrepreneurship education, which draws on experiential learning to develop soft skills and promote career readiness through the study of entrepreneurship¹⁰. The European Union has been a major promoter of entrepreneurship education and the development of soft skills. It has established entrepreneurship as one of the eight key competences essential for a knowledge-based society and has released measurement tools on entrepreneurship education across Europe¹¹. However, research examining the links between entrepreneurship education and soft skills learning in third education remains scarce. There are many reasons to teach entrepreneurship in the curriculum¹². Developing a mindset that embraces, elaborates and operates on the ideas of entrepreneurship demands education and guidance. The skills to cope with new situations, to work in collaboration with others, to be resilient in situations of failure, and to network people and ideas to create new insights are fundamental to being both competitive and effective in the global economy.

While the mindset can be acquired by experience, literature also supports the assumption that it is more Effective for people to learn to develop entrepreneurial mindsets through education. We argue that students will more effectively develop an entrepreneurial mindset if they are engaged in opportunities to think and apply the concepts of the mindsets in a wide variety of settings and towards a variety of outcomes.

Consequently, it is legitimate to teach students to actually become entrepreneurs if there is a desire for them to be entrepreneurs. When entrepreneurship skills are taught, the potential for success increases significantly, even in the face of extremely difficult situations.¹³ Nevertheless, in the absence of the potential benefits for all learners of developing an entrepreneurial mindset, the debate remains as to how much undergraduate lecturers implicitly or explicitly teach content or processes that foster the development of entrepreneurial mindsets.

2. Entrepreneurship education for soft skills training

Entrepreneurship education, at all educational levels, educates students how to manage real-world problems; specifically in the UK, Entrepreneurship and Entrepre-

⁹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2015). White House Report: Every Student Succeeds Act [Press Release].

¹⁰ R. Bell-H. Bell, *Applying educational theory to develop a framework to support the delivery of experiential entrepreneurship education*, in "Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development", 27 (6), 2020, pp. 987-1004.

¹¹ M. Bacigalupo et al., *EntreComp: The entrepreneurship competence framework*. Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

¹² F. Sirelkhatim, Y. Gangi, *Entrepreneurship education: A systematic literature review of curricula contents and teaching methods*, in "Cogent Business & Management", 2, 1 (2015), pp.78-93.

¹³ V. Caggiano et al., *Entrepreneurship education: A global evaluation of entrepreneurial attitudes and values (a transcultural study)*, in "Journal of Educational, Cultural and Psychological Studies (ECPS Journal)", 1, 14 (2016), pp. 57-81.

neurial Education focuses on mindset, personal development and preparing students to respond to changes in the environment¹⁴.

Neck et al. (2011) observe that students as early as high school age grow more engaged and committed when they experience that their environment supports autonomy and mastery attainment, as opposed to the competitive assessment that is a hallmark of high-stakes testing.

The emphasis on soft skills in entrepreneurship education offers a new view; students are often usually taught either how to act entrepreneurially or how to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses¹⁵. Hayes, and Richmond, pointed out that it is significant that entrepreneurship education programmes are so designed as to emphasise both cognitive and soft aspects of entrepreneurship start-up¹⁶.

Dhliwayo describes soft skills emphasised in classrooms today, including “critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, social skills, persistence, creativity and self-control”¹⁷. Following West et al. (2016), the term soft skills refers to skills traditionally not traditionally apprehended by assessments of cognitive skills and knowledge, which include self-control and assertiveness. It is also associated at certain times with social and emotional learning, which includes traits such as empathy and social awareness.

Since it was shown that soft skills predict academic success researchers and others agree that they have an obvious place in the classroom as an adjunct to cognitive skills. While the inclusion of soft skills in the classroom is a recent development¹⁸, it is now accepted that optimal learning occurs through the mind set activation of both cognitive and soft skills¹⁹.

Entrepreneurship can have various meanings and therefore distinct meanings and consequently several definitions in the many disciplines. As a result of the multidisciplinary nature of work, an Entrepreneur may practise content, theories and insights to define entrepreneurship, and these may have been borrowed from various fields such as marketing, accounting, finance, management, sociology, psychology, engineering, etc. However, according to Morris, entrepreneurs generate value by assembling innovative assets and processes to exploit their opportunities. In a similar vein, Kuratko argue that the combining of vision, changing and developing leads to new ideas and solutions²⁰. Kuratko and Hodgetts also argue that the entrepreneurs take risks by acting on “opport-

¹⁴ Quality Assurance Agency, *Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: Guidance for UK higher education providers*, 2018.

https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/enhancement-and-development/enterprise-and-entrepreneurship-education-2018.pdf?sfvrsn=15f1f981_8

¹⁵ P. Handayati et al., *Does entrepreneurship education promote vocational students' entrepreneurial mindset?*, in “Hliyon”, 6, 11 (2020), pp.121-139.

¹⁶ D. Hayes, W. B Richmond, *Using an online assessment to examine entrepreneurship student traits and to measure and improve the impact of entrepreneurship education*, in “Journal of Entrepreneurship Education”, 20, 1 (2017), pp. 80-107.

¹⁷ S. Dhliwayo, *Experiential learning in entrepreneurship education*, in “Education + Training”, 50, 4 (2008), pp. 329-340.

¹⁸ Z. M. Sadq, *The role of leadership soft skills in promoting the learning entrepreneurship*, in “Journal of process management and new technologies”, 7, 1 (2019).

¹⁹ A. Bauman-C. Lucy, *Enhancing entrepreneurial education: Developing competencies for success*, in “The International Journal of Management Education”, 19, 1 (2021).

²⁰ D. F. Kuratko, *Entrepreneurial leadership in the 21st century: Guest editor's perspective*, in “Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies”, 13, 4 (2007), pp. 1-11.

tunities where others see chaos, contradiction and confusion”²¹. We consider that entrepreneurship is not limited to being associated with business ownership. On the contrary, we view entrepreneurship as a way of “thinking” to address problems, to implement innovations, to provide solutions, to take part in the sharing of ideas and to implement change. While entrepreneurial mindset can be applied to the start-up of a new business, to diversifying into an existing business, and to the assessment and development of new product lines, we believe that entrepreneurship should be conceived more broadly, as a mindset that individuals can apply in their approach to life. People who embrace entrepreneurial thinking are agents of change or disruptors, think beyond the status quo and are motivated to make things happen. Therefore, entrepreneurs can be professionals who seek to advance their fields (e.g., artists exploring new ways of producing their art, teachers developing new approaches to engage their students in learning, etc.). Since entrepreneurial thinking can be applied broadly, it is justified to consider the construct broadly and seek to be inclusive and flexible to encompass a wide range of possible cases of entrepreneurship.

3. From the ancient world: Marcus Aurelius

Therefore, anyone considering the idea who is not disturbed by the habitual and profit-making results may understand that the classical world may provide a ‘lesson’, particularly in view of the previously proposed view, in order to re-think what has previously been ‘narrowly’ defined as ‘skills and mindset development’.

An ancient Maestro, a ‘Master of Romanity’ who has spoken for a very long time: to generations that are completely dissimilar to each other, and to generations that are totally ignorant of each other. Marcus Aurelius, who as Emperor was able to introduce the abundance of the stoic word, which was never dull and ordinary, and which was able to address the human being’s man.

Marcus Aurelius appears as relevant as few. He explores the human and places himself as educator and *logos* slave on the perspective of both the ancient and the modern world. Certainly, it will appear bizarre to compare the emperor’s reflections to the many modern entrepreneurial theories. And the point is to make him serve it rightly and not to make him become a servant to it through the eagerness to accumulate ever increasing fortunes and the constant fear of falling into poverty, sickness and death. Marcus Aurelius therefore reverts back because he is the ‘successful human being’ and not the victorious or winning man. He is the man in harmony with himself and others, capable of inspiring those around him.

And with regard to the needs from which to start, the ‘sense of duty’ seems to me to be one of the thoughts that most touches those training in entrepreneurship today. The way Marcus Aurelius acts is quite original: he feels the weight of the empire but also tries to see all its beauty ²².

²¹ D. F. Kuratko-R. M. Hodgetts, *Entrepreneurship*, Harcourt College, 1997, p. 30.

²² Man’s nature is rational and social and is common to all beings (cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Memories*, transl. E. Turolla, Milan, BUR, 2004. VI, 44; VII, 68, 72), to care for all men is to live in harmony with nature (cf. *ibi*, II, 1; V, 6; VI, 7; VII, 74; XI, 4).

He says to himself in a well-known passage: “Look well; you must not ‘incesarate’ yourself; beware of the messiness. It is a thing that may happen”.

It is an invocation, a necessary and pressing goal: do not assume the part of Caesar without being nothing within. Instead, ‘preserve yourself’ as a man who is ‘simple, good, integer, dignified, sincere, a friend of the just, religious, benign, benevolent, affectionate, tenacious in the fulfilment of your duty’. So as a man who retains those ‘traits’ that make him human through the care and proper discharge of his ‘office’. As a man who preserves according to the dictates of ‘philosophy’ as well as being ready to serve others, to be an energy of saving and restoring others. *“In everything show yourself a disciple of Antoninus”*.

An ‘intentionality’ from which a robust conduct emerges; in which inner excellences are united with the virtues of the task: ‘effective and secure firmness’ as well as stability in what one thinks; ‘doing things according to reason’; having an ‘equal mood on every occasion’ in order to live well together. And then a series of simple but important traits: “serenity of countenance and gentleness of manner”, “disdain for glory and enthusiasm to scrutinise events”, “tolerate unjust criticism without retaliation”, “never do anything hastily”, “welcome no delusion”, “be a careful and scrupulous judge of actions and characters without being backbiting or fearful, or suspicious or sophistical”, “be content with little”, “endure and love work”, “be longsuffering”, “bear opinions sincerely and openly expressed but contrary to one’s own”, be “deeply religious without superstition”.

In a manly direction, if the latest pedagogical-didactic waves on entrepreneurial training deliver techniques through which to act, the emperor’s words express an important principle for the profession: the inside is to be cared for as the inside and the outside is qualified by the inside. Antoninus’ excellences were after all efflorescences of an inner root poured outward for the common good.²³

Constant also is Marcus Aurelius’ reminder of other needs that often characterize entrepreneurship today. It is with one’s own will that the educational challenge needs to be played out here. A will that the emperor succeeds in taking from Epictetus, dear master of Stoicism. And the will lies in establishing that ἐφ’ ἡμῖν καὶ οὐκ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν that demarcates the divide between the dependence of one’s will on nature or on one’s own free determination. It is to understand the example set by predecessors. Which of them belongs to me and which does not belong to me? And Marcus Aurelius gives thanks and, in the example, grasps what belongs to him from his grandfather, his mother, his great-grandfather, his preceptor...²⁴

This is one of the most interesting readings for training in entrepreneurship. From it one will be able to observe the emperor’s willingness to understand his own excellences not through induced presentations but through lived realities. And here, consequently, are some practical suggestions for becoming “*successful humanity*” such as learning to listen, never allowing oneself to be blinded by anger, being an example, not measuring one’s actions only by the yardstick of others’ judgment, trying to understand what the other person is thinking, speaking to people politely and clearly, welcoming suggestions from those who can be helpful, and remembering that those who offend only offend themselves.

²³ *Ibidem*; cfr. Ivi, II, V; III, 12; IV, 12; V, 3; VI, 1, 2, 11, 18, 22, 30.

²⁴ *Ibi*, I, 1-16.

4. Conclusions

It is well known that some of the needs characterizing entrepreneurship involve concepts such as cooperation, coexistence, and relationship with each other. In this regard, the emperor writes, “We are in the world for mutual help as feet, as hands, as eyelids, as the top and bottom teeth in a row; in consequence it is against nature to do any action of mutual contrast. And it is contrast to anger and mutual aversion”²⁵. Everyone is responsible for others. It is against nature to take any action of mutual contrast, and the greatest contrast is to give the wrong sense of what is good and what is bad. The sense of coexistence, the good and the useful in common, and last but not least the professionalism that gives the sense of individual participating in the quality of coexistence is noted.

However, to training in entrepreneurship is also to bring about an understanding that it is to be caught immediately and on a daily basis, such that it can be “cared for” and made part of all events in human life. Marcus Aurelius addotts on this issue by perspective it as a component of human potential. Time is that which is lived in the present; it represents the present and nothing can about the past or the future. It is action, it is life. And life “is war, a pilgrim’s journey”²⁶.

To bear in the great length of time would be an impossible thing; to bear as the nature of being requires is something that is part of man instead. And the nature of his being Marcus Aurelius finds in his interiority. In this regard he writes: “Some seek solitary places, dwellings among the fields, on the shores of the sea, on the mountains [...]. But all this is sheer foolishness, inasmuch as it is possible to withdraw into oneself at any moment when one wishes [...]. Particularly then those who have within them such prized things that only a glance at them gives peace of heart, and by this peace I mean disposition of perfect order”²⁷.

Therefore, Marcus Aurelius continues, «from this day forward you must remember that there is a small farm, a small country mansion, ready refuge to your sorrow, farm and mansion that have a name: inwardness your own »²⁸. Marcus Aurelius invites one to focus on oneself and become aware of the infinite value of the present moment, but he also opens to the need to place the moment in the perspective of the other. Indeed, where man loses contact with the other, he also loses himself. The other is thus the infinite horizon of life, the enigma of existence, the *horror et divina voluta*. That of the emperor is a thought that presupposes a common effort, a community of seeking, of mutual help, of admirable support.

This is the lesson of Marcus Aurelius, and of that classical world to that new world of entrepreneurship. A simple invitation to “transform oneself.” Spinoza writes: “If, now, the way I have shown lead to this goal seems most difficult, nevertheless it can be found. And no doubt it must be difficult what is so rarely found. For how could it happen, if salvation were within reach, and could be found without great effort, that it was neglected by almost everyone? But all “sublime things are as difficult as they are rare”²⁹.

²⁵ *Ibi*, II, 1.

²⁶ *Ibi*, II, 17

²⁷ *Ibi*, IV, 3.

²⁸ *Ibidem*

²⁹ B. Spinoza, *Etica e trattato teologico-politico*, Torino, Utet, 1997, pp. 650-651.

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