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Entrepreneurial learning among different industries: A case study research of four sectors in the UK

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial activity has been an element of economic and social enhancement. However, managing a startup is a difficult and risky activity that strongly depends on the entrepreneur's characteristics and skills. While much attention has been given recently to entrepreneurial learning, less has been studied about the learning dynamics in different industries. This study aims to understand and explore types of learning in different industries and find their similarities and differences. For this purpose, an exploratory comparative case study composed of four cases has been considered. Findings reveal that the main types of entrepreneurial learning are similar in all the industries analysed and are linked to social and experiential learning. The main dissimilarities are related to searching for customer information, employees' feedback, and solving issues. Lastly, some entrepreneurs reflect on the actions or decisions taken, while others do not reflect as much as they would like to.

Keywords: entrepreneurial learning; exploratory and exploitative learning; social learning; experiential learning

1. Introduction

The last decades have marked a growing valorisation of the entrepreneurial culture and a recognition of this activity as an element that has contributed to the creation of new jobs and economic growth (Ahlstrom, Chang and Cheung, 2019; Galindo and Méndez, 2014). Entrepreneurship takes on diverse facets in multiple fields, such as the production of health services, education, social security, and sustainability, among others. However, despite all the potential benefits, this is an uncertain and arduous process, considering that a large part of the companies created end-up failing within the first five years of activity (Jones, 2009). Therefore, it is critical that entrepreneurs anticipate the risks of their organisations and make quick adaptations to new contexts that may potentially strengthen their organisation. The entrepreneur is a key individual throughout this process, and his knowledge and ability to deal with different situations become essential for the survival of startups (Krieger et al., 2021). In this sense, the success of a startup is linked to the personal characteristics of its entrepreneurs.

Lattacher and Wdowiak (2020) look to entrepreneurial learning as a nascent movement in entrepreneurship that has attracted more consideration in recent times. It is understood as a relevant factor for entrepreneurs to develop their startups. This perspective assumes that entrepreneurship is not innate and can be encouraged through educational programs and developed by entrepreneurs throughout the process of implementing and developing their organisations (Sancho, Ramos-Rodríguez and Vega, 2022). The literature has analysed entrepreneurial learning at the individual level or at the enterprise level. The focus of the literature has been on the cognitive development related to the entrepreneurs' methods of gathering, managing, and evaluating information (Karataş-Özkan, 2011). This emphasis limits their contribution to the literature. Consequently, there is a need to focus on different learning dynamics in multiple entrepreneurial contexts to have a more in-depth comprehension of the learning process. At this level, Honig and Hopp (2018) develop a theoretical structure that is based on the different learning orientations of entrepreneurs. The learning element that they studied explains when and for whom specific learning types can improve new business inventions by contrasting abstract conceptualisation and concrete experience conduits. It was discovered that certain individuals are more likely to learn better by acquiring knowledge through mistakes and facing the consequences of their decisions. In contrast, other self-employed individuals favour learning by planning and engaging in straightforward knowledge acquisition.

The functions of centrality and peripherality associated with the progress of entrepreneurial learning are addressed by Rae (2017), who discovered that the concepts developed at the periphery are less likely to be translated into developed and profitable business enterprises. However, even if the term centrality tends to be favoured as a normative significance, useful visions can be found at the periphery that are less likely to be accessed at the centre. Furthermore, it was found that combining the central connection with the peripheral ones by engaging the isolated experiences with social network industry information results in an increased rapidity of learning. Secundo, Schiuma and Passiante (2017) also analyse the entrepreneurial learning process by examining diverse learning dynamics, specifically in knowledge-intensive firms. They discovered that permanent learning processes influence individuals to develop and advance their understanding while permitting businesses to be involved in organised novel activities. Nevertheless, they did not analyse how different types of entrepreneurs tend to learn within their businesses. Thus, the gaps in the study determine the research aim of this work, which intends to analyse how diverse learning types come into play in different entrepreneurial contexts by examining various entrepreneurs. The objectives of this study are: (i) explore the theoretical understanding of entrepreneurial learning to build knowledge of

the critical learning dynamics.; (ii) investigate which learning dynamics come into play when analysing experiences of entrepreneurs; and (iii) critically analyse key differences of learning types by comparing different industries using primary and secondary data.

The rest of this manuscript is organised as follows: Initially, the literature review section looks in depth at the phenomenon of learning in entrepreneurial contexts by analysing different studies conducted throughout the years to better understand and contextualise the subject. Secondly, the methodology of the study is described, including the sample and rationale for the choice of methods. Subsequently, an analysis of the case studies' results for gathering the primary data. Finally, the paper concludes by synthesising all the sections and making appropriate recommendations necessary for a wider and more profound comprehension of the entrepreneurial learning practice.

2. Background

2.1 Exploratory and exploitative learning

The notions of exploratory and exploitative learning are defined by Cope and Watts (2000) as “single-loop learning” and “double-loop learning”. Level one of single-loop learning is defined as a type of learning where individuals assimilate factual information. Studies have shown that both exploitative and exploratory learning are crucial for firms’ performance in the market. It has been discovered that a combination of both concepts leads to a competitive advantage from which the enterprises can benefit (Li and Yeh, 2017). However, the overuse of both categories of learning can negatively impact entrepreneurs and their businesses. For example, over-dependence and focus on exploration can lead to a “failure trap” by constantly using the firm’s resources without benefitting from a proximate financial return. In contrast, over-relying on exploitation and existing knowledge can lead to a “success trap” where the quick financial reward determines firms to forget about the higher outcomes of exploration. Therefore, exploitative and exploratory learning have to correspond constantly to enhance a firm’s profitability (Li, 2020).

A further study, conducted by Wang and Rafiq (2009) remarks that adaptive and generative learning is equivalent to exploitative and exploratory learning. The adaptive process involves learning at an incremental level in the conventional scope of the activities that occur within the organisation and gathering extra information on the existing knowledge base of the enterprise (Wang and Rafiq, 2009). In this type of learning, gradual and steady change leads, and rare learning occurrences occur. Therefore, learning is noticed as being fast and attainable in a precise way (Aminow, Carter and Lundy, 2009). Contrary, generative learning comprises entrepreneurs and their ventures questioning the statements on the firms’ mission, consumers, strategy, competencies and comprehending the existing connection between the organisation and the external environment (Wang and Rafiq, 2009). This learning is mainly based on learning events and the possible benefits are less sure and distant in time from the present necessities (Aminow, Carter and Lundy, 2009). By defining both types of learning, Wang and Rafiq (2009) suggest that exploration of opportunities involves searching for information that leads to innovations and the formation of new knowledge. Their research found that how an opportunity is recognised does not have an explanation at a rational search direction.

2.2 Experiential learning

Experiential learning is described as a method in which individuals' knowledge is created by their experiences (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework indicates that there are different ways in which people learn; through experience, reflection, thoughts and experimentation. Learning experientially is seen as a repeated process where people are likely to switch between opposed approaches of reflection vs. action and feeling vs. thinking. For individuals to have an effective learning process, they must express their approaches, behaviours, and beliefs in regards to a subject so they can be verified and incorporated with new concepts (Kolb, 1984). Therefore, the study suggests that effective learning occurs when equally direct action and personal reflection are involved in the same course and this approach can be promoted in higher education (Ali and Negasi, 2021; Anwar and Abdullah, 2021). Politis and Landstrom (2002) suggest that individuals' professional occupations shape personal beliefs and views through distinct learning opportunities where people are constrained in trying new behaviours. This transformation process in individuals' attitudes is triggered by critical events that they might face (Cope, 2003). This might determine entrepreneurs to become more organised in their actions or to have a wider understanding of the economics of their business. Therefore, they are likely to change their ideas, but it can also lead to a change in how they interact within their working environment (Cope, 2003).

Honig and Hopp (2018) found that entrepreneurs with concrete or abstract learning have distinctive strengths. Individuals who rely on concrete experience learning can notice people and examine situations through the alertness of connotations and principles. It has been remarked that these entrepreneurs are involved in divergent learning and have "people-orientation" abilities to ease a match between the marketplace and the opportunity encountered. On the contrary, individuals who emphasise abstract learning gather the information they need by constantly organising and planning their actions. With regard to benefiting from social networks, both types of learning have different implications. The study has shown that concrete learners tend to request guidance from their acquaintances, whereas abstract learners are more engaged with the information easily analysed by themselves (Honig and Hopp, 2018; Scarmozzino, Corvello and Grimaldi, 2017). The crucial idea drawn from these facts is addressed in studies like Haneberg (2019), Wasim (2019) and Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch (2022) that concluded that interaction with their social contacts offers them a high possibility of access and power over the intangible assets.

2.3 Social learning

Social learning has been linked with contextual learning, which takes place through involvement in external environments and other networks in which people's knowledge is shared and associated with others. The research highlighted that throughout these participations and contacts, entrepreneurs improve their perceptions and become proficient in recognising opportunities (Rae, 2005). It has also been found that this type of learning is practical as individuals can discover through participation and social collaboration how decisions are being taken and establish habits that can be applied in any setting (Hackel et al., 2022). A vital concept in the social learning process is social capital, which is defined as a basis of established capitals inserted in the connections with other individuals and the assets accessible to people through their social networks (Kim and Aldrich, 2005). Anderson and Miller (2002) claim that entrepreneurs act upon the social capital in different dualistic means. Firstly, entrepreneurs are an outcome of the social environment they inhabit. Therefore, they are conditioned by their surroundings and may recognise new business chances in a way that is informed by their social experience. Secondly, each new venture is part of a social network of collaboration within which the financial features are directed. Hence, the study highlights that the absence or presence of social capital influences the type of firm.

In summary, entrepreneurship is seen as a socio-economic practice. The impact of the social framework characteristics is essential. Thus, the research shows that entrepreneurship is supported mainly by social relationships, social networks and social collaboration (Stirzaker et al., 2021). After considering such factors, the multiple types of learning examined and studied are critical in comprehending the entrepreneurial learning process. Research highlights that entrepreneurs might combine the learning types over time depending on the people, collective, and environmental scenarios (Rae, 2017). Literature reveals that entrepreneurs tend to learn primarily from their experiences or social surroundings. Therefore, the focus of this study will be on how individuals interact with social and experiential learning in different contexts. The review of the literature has determined the creation of research questions that explore the learning dynamics in different entrepreneurial contexts. The following three research questions have been established:

RQ1: Which types of entrepreneurial learning come into play for entrepreneurs in different contexts?

RQ2: Which are the similarities and differences of entrepreneurial learning among industries?

RQ3: What determines the differences in learning types among industries?

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist approach to analyse different learning types, such as experiential and social learning in multiple industries, using an exploratory comparative case study approach. The interpretivist paradigm comprises the dynamic and compound value of the social world. Therefore, it permits the researchers to observe this social issue holistically. This allows the researcher to get close to the individuals, access their environments and gain their insights properly (Dean, 2018). The main purpose of interpretivist research is to emerge theories present in a business environment and relate them to existent studies, creating a better and wider understanding of the whole research. Social constructivism is selected as the theoretical framework for the study. Its aim and objectives require the exploration of variances between learning types that are interpreted by considering the social context and the environment within which they occur (Wasim, 2019). Therefore, an interpretivist ontology aligns perfectly with social constructivism here. The exploratory nature of this research requires a qualitative approach to data collection to understand diverse perspectives that are being analysed on a particular phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018), in this case, the contextual importance of entrepreneurial learning.

A purposive sampling method was selected for this study. Initially, Social Media and business support services were used to get in touch with businesses from different sectors in the UK. Four were selected from a list of ten businesses to represent a diverse sector range for a richer comparison. This multi-case comparative research is built on dynamic data that lead to exploring different learning types and the thematic elements in different industries. Case studies were chosen as a strategy as this allows the researcher to comprehend the compound social phenomena of experiential and social learning. The purpose of using multiple case studies is to reproduce comparable or leading outcomes across cases (Yin, 2014).

Additionally, this approach helps us understand how learning types shape individuals' behaviours and how they are influenced and influence the context in which they operate. Semi-structured interviews were used for this research as they allow richer data collected for an exploratory study allowing the participants to explain their responses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Each interview lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, with

a transcription length of four to six thousand words each. Table 1 provides an overview of the profile of the interviewed companies. The interviews were performed with entrepreneurs from four different industries (i.e., hospitality, fitness, manufacturing, and agricultural) between February 3rd 2019 and March 30th, 2019.

<Insert Table 1 here>

Conducting case studies by interviewing different entrepreneurs can bring some risks in terms of validity and reliability, as indicated by Quintão, Andrade and Almeida (2021), because of the interpretive nature and predetermined biases. Therefore, they should be considered and acknowledged when completing the research. To minimise this, an approach similar to Wasim, Cunningham, Maxwell-Cole and Taylor (2018) was used where available secondary documentary evidence related to learning activities and logs from the companies involved in the research was taken into account to complement the interviews. Furthermore, researchers conducted observations in conjunction with interviews to record the data.

The interpretation of data was performed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis is described as a technique for recognising, examining, and reporting themes or patterns within facts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This type of examination is seen as a beneficial research tool and offers a compound and comprehensive account of information (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The abstraction of relevant information is done through coding the data, which is the recognised term for categorising the data. In order to be able to do this, certain amounts of text are taken and labelled as falling into particular categories in a method that permits the researcher to analyse the information. The main purpose of coding the collected data is that it sets up the possibility of an organised comparison between the set of texts that the researcher is analysing (Mars and Yardley, 2004). After the data is put into codes and categorised, the codes are grouped together, and for the researchers to find and explore the main themes from the data collected to develop the cases. Four case studies are presented separately, followed by an integrated cross-case discussion with the existing body of scholarly knowledge to address the research questions.

4. Results

4.1 Case study I – Hospitality industry

In the hospitality industry, the entrepreneurs' main roles include the titles of directors or business owners; being in charge of the daily running of the business, and the organisation's motivators. The founders of the firms recognised that there is constant interaction with the employees in the hospitality industry, as it is an industry where customers tend to be more open and honest with the staff members regarding their overall experience at the restaurant. As a consequence of the multiple tasks that the entrepreneurs have to complete, their learning is constant in different aspects of the business. The main sources of learning in the hospitality industry tend to be communicating with customers or suppliers and also looking at different magazines or having monthly subscriptions where future trends of the industry can be understood more in-depth. One of the entrepreneurs suggests that "I speak to my customers at the end of their eating experience and this is the most powerful indicator if things are good or not" (EH1). It is indicated by another entrepreneur that "learning is understanding the development of the business, of people's wants and expectations" (EH2). Therefore, the entrepreneurs in the hospitality industry highlight that being in an industry where they have daily direct interaction with their customers, they tend to find out what they need or want by socialising with them.

Another reason why the interaction of entrepreneurs with their employees is crucial is the staff's familiarity with the business. Regarding experiential learning, the entrepreneurs recognised that they take a different approach now, compared with the past, when they solve problems. At the beginning of the businesses, they tended to be more reactive. However, after years of running their organisations, they diversified their method of dealing with issues due to their accumulated experience. They try to reflect on the actions or decisions they are constantly taking, mostly during busy times or after events, that can offer them an idea of how to improve in the future. They recognise how to identify new opportunities to diversify businesses, such as participating in collaborations and introducing new ideas and products to adapt to the times and trends. This idea has been reinforced by one of the entrepreneurs that mentioned "always diversifying, I think that is the entrepreneur in you" (EH1).

The entrepreneurs also highlighted that mentors are vital in offering the right mindset and support and that they always looked up to someone from whom they could learn, either an external person or family members that started the businesses. They considered that it is beneficial to have a role model as an entrepreneur to be inspired by the way they achieved success, but meanwhile, it is also vital to keep the essence of their own personalities and core values.

4.2 Case study II – The fitness industry

The entrepreneurs in the fitness industry are in charge of different tasks aside from the title of 'owner', such as handling the marketing side of the business, managing the team of trainers and different staff training procedures. Managing the whole business offers them the possibility to be close to their employees and clients. Therefore, there is continuous learning of the different aspects of the business on a daily basis. The principal methods of learning in their businesses tend to be through direct interactions with clients, attending different courses to develop their business skills, interacting with other individuals who own similar businesses, and work experiences. One of the entrepreneur's remarks that "It is all about hands-on experience, it is experience accumulated over the years" (EF3), while another entrepreneur suggests that "You are learning all the time in business" (EF1).

When it comes to using their social network to find out more about their customers' needs, they highlight that they learn about their clients by interacting with them in social meetings. They tend to use different online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to present their content to customers but also Monkey Survey, where they ask for feedback from their clients. One of the entrepreneurs remarked that word of mouth is vital for gaining clients as a small business. One entrepreneur stated, "our social media makes a huge impact on our business, but the major one is word of mouth for us as a small business" (EF3). Another entrepreneur comments that "We have Facebook groups and ask clients specific questions so we can learn a bit more about them" (EF2).

With respect to experiential learning, entrepreneurs tend to solve the issues or problems encountered with their customers by applying the same approach and same principle to everyone. They suggest that it is mostly about figuring out what the problem is and the best way to solve it is by direct communication with the customer or by e-mail. One of the entrepreneurs notes that "it's self-learning and understanding where you actually have gone wrong, so you learn from it, learn from your mistakes" (EF1). It is common that there is a continuous reflection upon their decisions, such as reflecting on the marketing campaigns, staff training, or staff discipline. The reason for doing so is that it helps them in being productive and organised. One fitness entrepreneur indicates, "it is something that I have picked up and I have learned from other

business people and from being a little bit disorganised myself in the past” (EF2). Hence, the social interactions with other business people and their past experiences determine them to reflect on their decisions.

4.3 Case study III – Manufacturing industry

The entrepreneurs in the manufacturing industry have various roles, such as being in charge of sales, marketing, focusing on key clients, implementing the business strategy, and mentoring the performance of the companies they run. The key sources of learning that help them manage their enterprises' developments consist of learning from other people, such as experienced staff members, using the suppliers as technical advisors, and using the internet as a source of information. One of the entrepreneurs specifies, “learning from trial and error, keep doing experiments and seeing what works and what does not” (EM2).

Business owners tend to learn a lot about their customers through their social network circle. They specify that it is vital to communicate with “other colleagues” (EM3) or with other “similar companies” (EM2) to reach and to identify new customers. Entrepreneurs are likely to take advice from their social network concerning their business activities. In terms of experiential learning, entrepreneurs tend to solve their problems with customers using the same approach as in the past. They are doing this by being “polite and helpful” (EM3) and by “engaging with them and saying a mistake was made” (EM1). It is being suggested that their experience in the field helps them turn the “negative situations into positive ones” (EM1). It is revealed that the entrepreneurs are reflective of their decisions as much as they can. One of them notes that “I reflect to improve what I have done in the past” (EM3). Another entrepreneur specifies that it is important to “work on the business as opposed in the business” (EM1). Hence, reflecting helps them not to repeat the bad decisions and to evolve their businesses in the right way. They assert that diversifying their businesses is a key aspect for them as it helps reduce the level of competition and enter whole new markets. Therefore, it is all about improving and expanding their businesses to make a profit.

4.4 Case study IV – Agricultural industry

The entrepreneurs in the agriculture industry have different key roles such as dealing with the supervision of the overall business, the strategy tactics and being responsible for the general production of the products from top to bottom. The key sources of learning about their businesses consist of networking with other businesses, using social media or even local university libraries for scientific papers to get high-quality and detailed information that can be used within the firms. In the agricultural industry, entrepreneurs tend to look at the bigger picture of the market and find the right customers by themselves. Some have prior experience and already know the customer base for their products, while others use social media to target the customers specifically.

Experiential learning is seen as a vital approach for entrepreneurs in the agricultural industry. The problems encountered with their customers are being resolved by communicating with the customers directly. The approach is slightly different each time. One of the entrepreneurs specifies that “we take a different approach to different customers because customers would have different wants and needs” (EA3). Another entrepreneur remarks that “I guess we have changed. I think we are better at it now than we were ten years ago” (EA2). Hence, the method in which the issues are being solved is always different depending on the customer, and because the business owners learned how to deal better with the problems encountered throughout their years of experience. It is apparent that the business owners tend to reflect on their actions

to a limited extent due to the constraints of time, and the nature of their businesses keeps them moving fast in their decisions.

The entrepreneurs acknowledge that they have diversified their businesses throughout the years and keep doing it to have additional sources of income to keep their businesses growing. EA2 mentioned that they “are diversifying within each group because the life stock side is becoming more and more difficult” because of a declined trend in the industry. The entrepreneurs notice that they currently have, or have had, different mentors or contacts who helped and guided them in their businesses. They sought mentors with vast amounts of experience from which the entrepreneurs could learn and apply the information gathered in their own firms. Regarding having a role model, they remark that it is beneficial to aspire to be like someone else, to see how they run their businesses and learn from it.

5. Discussion

From the primary data gathered, all the entrepreneurs from the four different industries have similar learning sources for their businesses. The main sources of learning involve social interactions and learning from their experiences, such as communicating with customers or suppliers, learning from the experienced staff or interacting with other businesses. These results reinforce the previous research on the literature that remarks that entrepreneurial learning should be perceived as a social aspect (Pittaway et al., 2010; Royo, Sarip and Shaari, 2015; Wasim et al., 2022). Additionally, it strengthens the idea that entrepreneurs are action-oriented and that considerable amounts of their learning are experiential (Lackeus and Williams Middleton, 2015).

All four industries use different instruments or methods to find information about their customers, but their approaches are closely correlated with social learning. The literature confirms these findings as social learning, which is described as a process that occurs through participation in other networks and in the external environment (Rae, 2005). Within the social learning framework, it is remarked that in the hospitality and fitness industries, the entrepreneurs tend to listen and act upon the feedback given by their employees. This result relates back to previous research where assimilation learning is created when the entrepreneurs communicate with employees constantly (Jones et al., 2014). This approach is facilitated in small organisations and in the early stages of a startup's development in which the separation of roles between entrepreneurs and employees is not so evident. Regarding receiving advice on their business activities from the social network, it is remarked by all twelve entrepreneurs interviewed that they tend to consider different opinions given by the people from their social circle. There seems to be a feeling of uncertainty among entrepreneurs about their own approaches and the way they do things. Hence, they try to learn from others about the new developments in the field as much as possible. This confirms the literature and determines the entrepreneurs to be categorised as concrete learners that tend to interact and receive advice from their social networks about their companies. This offers them an advantage of assessing intangible assets as they have more contacts in the market (Honig and Hopp, 2019).

In terms of exploitative and explorative learning, entrepreneurs in the hospitality and agricultural industry incline to adopt a different approach to solve the issues encountered in their businesses. The outcome of this part of primary research relates to the literature as high-level learning where individuals approach new actions in their organisations (Appelbaum and Goransson, 1997). This is not the case with the manufacturing or fitness industries. There the individuals are likely to have the same approach to dealing with problems as in the past. Appelbaum and Goransson (1997) define this method as low-level learning

that determines entrepreneurs to act within the organisational procedures without implementing changes. Therefore, the entrepreneurs' learning processes in the hospitality and agricultural industry are more exploratory. In contrast, the ones in the manufacturing and fitness industries tend to have an exploitative learning dimension while dealing with issues.

The data agrees with the literature that entrepreneurs experience social learning when they interact with mentors who guide them in their enterprises (Jones et al., 2014; Kubberod and Ladegard, 2021). In all the industries, the entrepreneurs specified that having a role model is beneficial from their point of view. These responses illustrate that the same idea was sustained across all case studies. Furthermore, most of the learning that occurs in entrepreneurial contexts is experiential. The complex process of how entrepreneurs learn from experiences is of great importance for understanding how entrepreneurial learning is achieved. Entrepreneurial learning is a continuous process that facilitates the development of knowledge needed to launch new ventures and to manage them. This view is confirmed by Van der Lingen et al. (2020) when they state that experience is important for entrepreneurial learning because knowledge comes from these experiences and influences the strategic choices made by entrepreneurs in their new businesses. Learning is therefore composed of several elements that are always being built and renewed. It is subjective because each person learns differently, and it happens in the social interaction between individuals. Consequently, the data gathered from the empirical research supports the literature that entrepreneurs tend to learn mainly through social and experiential learning.

5.1 Theoretical implication

The main theoretical implication of this study is to offer a cross-industry comparison of entrepreneurial learning to the literature. We contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial learning by providing an empirical contextual assessment of the previously unexplored segment of entrepreneurial learning. This is especially important here, considering that the nature of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning is social and contextual (Wasim, 2019), yet the literature lacked such comparative work. Most of the work on entrepreneurial learning is either conceptual or involves contexts other than the sector of a business.

Secondly, entrepreneurship literature is dominated by positivist theoretical approaches (McDonald et al., 2015). However, the process of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning requires constructivist and exploratory lenses to interpret the underlined complex phenomena of social and contextual importance.

5.2 Implications for policy and practice

This study provides wider comprehension of how the different learning types come into play when analysing different entrepreneurial contexts. Knowledge of the various entrepreneurial learning contexts brings theoretical and practical contributions to knowledge about this phenomenon for current and future entrepreneurs. It is suggested that entrepreneurial learning be conceived as a complex phenomenon and that different aspects that make up this process must be considered: individual, social and environmental. This involves seeking an understanding of entrepreneurial learning as a process that occurs even before the entrepreneurial actions are carried out, as individuals become involved in different social practices and contexts. In the practical dimension, understanding entrepreneurial learning as a phenomenon is directly linked to entrepreneurship and business management. Therefore, entrepreneurial learning can provide

greater conditions for the development of new businesses, as well as the application of entrepreneurial competencies in business management.

5.3 Study limitations and further research opportunities

While this research aimed to examine the contextual importance of learning, this study is not comprehensive for all the contexts as it provides a deeper insight just in the four case studies (i.e., hospitality, fitness, agricultural and manufacturing industries). Future research should include a multi-mixed method by combining interviews with questionnaires or surveys to provide a broader understanding of the learning dynamics involved in entrepreneurial contexts. Furthermore, this study purposely focuses on social and experiential learning after analysing the existing literature on entrepreneurial learning. However, there are different types of learning that entrepreneurs' encounter. Future studies can explore and focus on other types of learning that could be regarded as key learning dynamics for entrepreneurs. The results in this paper are methodologically narrow as the nature of the study is cross-sectional due to time constraints. Therefore, upcoming work may focus on more longitudinal studies by approaching different data collection methods such as in-depth ethnography in the enterprises examined and have a broader real-life understanding of how entrepreneurs learn through entrepreneurship.

6. Conclusions

Focusing on analysing how different entrepreneurs learn in their businesses while using a qualitative phenomenon-driven investigation permits this research to contribute to the literature in two ways. Firstly, the results are clear in answering one of the objectives of the research of how entrepreneurs learn in their businesses. This appears to be primarily through social learning, where entrepreneurs' sources of learning that are mostly determined by interactions with other businesses or by using social media. The majority of the entrepreneurs are likely to interact constantly with their employees, but with different outcomes across the four industries examined. Some entrepreneurs tend to act upon the feedback given by the employees, whereas others only acknowledge the employees' opinions but do not act upon it. Having a mentor is seen as a social base of learning for most entrepreneurs as they consider it as an additional asset to their existing knowledge.

Experiential learning is another method of learning that entrepreneurs encounter in their firms. They tend to learn most efficiently by reflecting on their actions. However, this way in which they learn contrasts with the cases presented. Some entrepreneurs being more reflective in some industries, while others are reactive. The method by which the entrepreneurs tend to solve the problems encountered in their companies varies across the industries. When it comes to taking advantage of the new opportunities encountered, all participants concluded that they are doing it for the success of their businesses, thus, this finding is common for all the entrepreneurs in all the industries examined.

Secondly, by having a diverse range of entrepreneurs, the results suggest differences between industries regarding entrepreneurial learning. The dissimilarities are minimal among industries as the entrepreneurial process has some uniformities. The distinctions exist in particular aspects of the businesses, such as finding information about customers, acting upon the feedback given by the employees, and the approach adopted when solving issues. The primary and secondary findings suggest that social and experiential learning are the main types of entrepreneurial learning across the different industries.

Future research might include a multi-mixed method by combining interviews with questionnaires or surveys to understand better the learning dynamics involved in entrepreneurial contexts. Furthermore, this study purposely focuses on social and experiential learning after analysing the existing literature on entrepreneurial learning. However, there are different types of learning that entrepreneurs encounter in their businesses. Future studies might look to explore and focus on other types of learning that could be regarded as key learning dynamics for multiple entrepreneurs. The results in this paper are methodologically narrow as the nature of the study is cross-sectional due to time constraints. Therefore, upcoming work may focus on more longitudinal studies by approaching different data collection methods such as in-depth ethnography in the enterprises examined to have a broader real-life understanding of how entrepreneurs learn in their businesses.

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Table 1. Profile of the case studies

Industry reference	Interviewee	Description
Hospitality	EH1	EH1 runs a food and beverage family business, established 36 years ago. The business aims to evolve with the times, deal with new measures such as “Zero Tolerance Alcohol” and introduce new elements and alternatives to the business to satisfy its customer needs. The main concept of the business is to attract clients that want to consume their specific type of food.
	EH2	The business was started by the father of EH2 in the food and beverage sector. The purpose of the business is to keep up to date on the new events happening in the area, attract customers and cater food.
	EH3	The entrepreneur is a problem solver and counsellor for the organisation which has been operating for 15 years in the food and beverage sector. The firm aims to offer high standard service and fine dining to its customers.
Fitness	EF1	EF1 runs a fitness studio aiming to make sure that there is continuous learning amongst members. Listening to customers’ opinions via surveys is the main way to learn about the true customer base.
	EF2	An energetic entrepreneur has created the business to help people get in shape with a unique service of offering group outdoors training sessions. The firm aims to expand while having an impact on people’s health.
	EF3	The experience and passion of EF3 in the fitness industry resulted in the creation of the firm, which is a fitness club. The organisation plans to open two new club franchises and keep attracting new customers.
Manufacturing	EM1	EM1 runs a luxurious mattress company. EM1 is constantly looking at new strategies the firm to expand geographically. Various events are held in order to ensure continuous learning and the development of new opportunities.
	EM2	The business produce beverages such as lemonades and other mixers. The firm interacts constantly with other businesses in the same sector in order to receive advice on which customers to focus upon.
	EM3	The firm’s line of business includes wholesale distribution of homemade jams and sauces. The purpose is to improve the business, making it new and exciting for the customers.
Agricultural	EA1	The firm is responsible of producing high- grade seed potatoes, being at a quality hand of potato production in Great Britain. The company is looking to diversify into other plant species, for micro-propagation because of Brexit. The purpose is to look for other ways to make up the 20% of the

European market loss.

EA2 EA2's firm is a large farmers coop, selling machinery, large stock and having hospitality division. The aim of the firm is to keep diversifying, looking for other sources of income to keep the business going.

EA3 The farming firm is looking for high value customers as opposed to commodity customers. The purpose is to get different income streams to the business while taking advice from other people within the industry.