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Can entrepreneurship be taught?

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Instilling an entrepreneurial spirit in young people has become a popular idea in EU policy circles, but some businesspeople say initiative is something that comes from within and cannot be taught.

Background

Europe is often seen as being less entrepreneurial than the US, where it is popularly believed that people are more willing to take risks.

Entrepreneurs can tap into national and European funds to help them get their businesses off the ground ([EurActiv 25/02/10](#)), although some would prefer governments simply to leave them to it ([EurActiv 27/08/10](#)).

This week is the second European SME Week, where the focus is very much on entrepreneurship – an issue which has climbed up the political agenda, helped by the appointment of the European Commission's first commissioner for industry and entrepreneurship, Antonio Tajani.

Entrepreneurs and policymakers weighed up the merits of inserting entrepreneurship into educational curricula at a debate organised on 25 May by the Generation Europe Foundation and European Confederation to mark SME Week.

In addition, EurActiv asked members of the official LinkedIn [European SME Week group](#) for their views, and also sought opinions via a post on the [Blogactiv](#) platform.

There is a sharp philosophical divide between those who see entrepreneurship as an innate drive that not all are blessed with, and those who believe educational reforms could bring a shift in mindsets.

Similarly, some businesspeople generally think governments should stop meddling in their affairs, while others are pleading for state intervention to promote small business and shelter start-ups from the crisis.

Echoes of 'creativity' debate

The question of whether a specific subject called "entrepreneurship" could be introduced is reminiscent of the debate on how to teach creativity, which dominated part of the European Year of Creativity and Innovation ([EYCI](#)) in 2009.

The notion of designating time to entrepreneurship, creativity or initiative has been put forward as one option. Another possibility is a more fundamental reworking of all subjects to make them more relevant and to encourage students to "think outside the box".

The role of teachers

One of the more fundamental challenges in helping people develop their creative side is

whether teachers are willing and able to get involved. Entrepreneurs have been quick to point out that teachers are civil servants who have chosen secure employment rather than to enter the risk-prone world of launching a new business venture.

There is a degree of consensus that the role of teachers should evolve into a "coach" or "facilitator" for young people's experimentation with entrepreneurship.

In addition, there is broad support for encouraging schools and universities to bring in role models who can explain the benefits and pitfalls of running your own business. This, it is agreed, would help students to see entrepreneurship as a career option.

Barriers remain

Still, some major challenges remain, including limits to the EU's competence in the area of education. Brussels can help share best practice but it is national governments that control what children learn and how they learn it.

Finally, the debate on using education to make Europe more entrepreneurial is not taking place in a vacuum. In parallel, there are experts talking about how to use the education system to improve appreciation of science, maths, the European Union, art and design, financial literacy, languages and many other competing interests.

Education ministers will be quick to note that they must implement school curricula designed for students with all aptitudes and interests. Similarly, parents and teachers will wonder whether adding entrepreneurship will mean reducing the time spent on maths and languages.

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Positions

Simone Baldassari, responsible for entrepreneurship education at the **European Commission's** enterprise directorate, said Europe needs a change of mindset in how it encourages people to consider entrepreneurship as a career option.

"We agree that entrepreneurship is about more than just starting a business. We must completely change how we teach primary school students," he said.

However, he said this did not necessarily mean having a subject called "entrepreneurship". "We could have a new way of thinking about all subjects," he said, adding that teachers should evolve into coaches or facilitators.

Baldassari suggested some schools or universities could be allowed to use a special entrepreneurial label if they could demonstrate a track record in entrepreneurship.

Jeroen Meens, owner of **Cynex**, a financial services and consulting firm, said the school system does not always help people interested in using their own initiative. He said he did not go to school for six months when he was a teenager and he spent that time making business connections.

The experience helped him see the value of learning when he returned to school, because it made some subjects seem more relevant than before, Meens said.

"In school you get a lesson, and then you get a test. In life, you get a test and then a lesson," he said, adding that people outside the education system, such as entrepreneurs, play a key role in reforming the system.

Lorenzo Mule Stagno, a **Maltese entrepreneur** and former teacher, said people need to be taught that making money is a good thing. He said wealth is one of the motivations for entrepreneurs and that this should not be denied.

Stagno, as a former educator, said teachers are under a great deal of pressure and do not always have time to allow students to use their initiative or to be creative. He was also critical of teachers who ask students to write creative essays but then penalise students for poor spelling.

Madi Sharma of the **European Economic and Social Committee** said education must become more relevant to young people. A whole generation of people are leaving formal education without a qualification that is relevant to the workplace, she said.

Sharma also said education syllabuses are written by civil servants who typically do not have entrepreneurial experience. She said India, China, Brazil and others are ahead of Europe when it comes to tapping into young potential entrepreneurs and that the West will fall behind emerging economies if it doesn't change its ways.

Catie Thorburn, president of the **Generation Europe Foundation**, said it is possible to teach entrepreneurship. She said an entrepreneurial spirit can be stimulated and people can be empowered. Teachers, said Thorburn, can be a central part of this if they are given the means and support to play an active role.

Ana Bovan, president of the **Central European Development Forum**, said the media has a central role to play in communicating with the public about entrepreneurship. "Social networking media are particularly important for kids. They are online all the time rather than reading newspapers or watching television. We have to look at how we can influence kids through the Internet," she said.

Responding to a blog post on [Blogactiv](#), **Piotr Pogorzelski** of the **Eureka Network** said the question is whether or not you can teach in theory "something that is to apply in a very practical manner".

"The French word 'entreprendre' has the idea of 'proceeding', 'taking on' or beginning a task. Many initiatives were started over the last year with the aim of teaching topics related to entrepreneurship, especially within the European stakeholders' sphere. A lot of those initiatives involve at some point practical action," he said.

Answering a question posed by EurActiv team members on the official LinkedIn [SME Week group](#), **Fernando Garcia Finat** of the **Smecytes** project said entrepreneurship can be taught and called for more funding for businesses that produce digital content.

Marco Benazzi of **Zero Mobile** in Rome said there is an entrepreneur in everyone.

"You can build a company or your career using exactly the same means and techniques if you want to be successful. Teaching is possible and should be compulsory, so people can better understand and choose. Professional teachers together with entrepreneurs and top managers can teach this subject comparing techniques and practice with real or simulated cases. It will be a very fast and concrete kind of learning," he said.

Erik Lauwers, a **collaboration coach**, believes entrepreneurship is a set of behavioural patterns and those can be trained.

"Complex behaviour requires skills and competencies. Those in turn can be taught. The belief and value system that supports the 'entrepreneurial reflex' can be learned and much less taught. I say that entrepreneurial beliefs and values can be developed via coaching and

education (as in upbringing), rather than teaching," he said in the LinkedIn discussion. Lauwers said teaching competencies is wasted effort unless some attention is paid to the value and belief system that actually makes the person want to behave that way.

"You wouldn't think of training your kid in a sport he or she thinks is not fun and otherwise rewarding in a way. Although you can change beliefs by training certain behavior, it is more efficient to first work on the value and belief system," he said. He said it is important to identify what entrepreneurship means and the underlying values that support it.

"On top of the knowledge transfer, also transfer those values and beliefs – coach the people. 'Teach' people that knowledge has only 'TV-quiz-value' if it is not used to actually create something bigger," said Lauwers.

Entrepreneurship must be on the political agenda and parents, teachers, trainers, coaches, managers, employees and society leaders all have a role to play, he said.

Aled Finniear, CEO of **Park Place Research**, said a lot can be taught but putting this into practice requires a lot of other factors to come together. How we deal with risk is also a key element, he said.

"Life circumstances, access to finance, knowledge, networks, support, ambition, vision, mentoring and opportunity are very important elements. Risk is a very key element and everyone has different perceptions of risk. Confidence, knowledge and ambition will strongly influence an individual's perception of risk. Risk acceptance or aversion is something which may vary through life, dependant on circumstances and a risk to someone, maybe an opportunity to someone else," he said.

Finniear said it may be possible to be an entrepreneur without taking any risks but most successful entrepreneurs have gotten where they are today by taking risks, even though it can sometimes lead to failure.

"It is important not to overly encourage anyone who might ultimately fail and for most it has to be a personal decision, knowing, accepting and taking responsibility for the potential risks," he said.

Fabio Bolognini, **Linker srl**, believes that viewing entrepreneurship as a proxy for natural vision and a propensity for risk-taking is a "myth". "A lot of the small entrepreneurs that I've come across have lacked one or both of these qualities. Some evolved from very small operations in good business times, others banked on a particular product or technology - and some very successful people failed miserably when the game became too big," he said.

Bolognini says that although some elements of entrepreneurship come from within, many other aspects can be taught. "I believe there is no such subject [as entrepreneurship] in most schools. They only teach students about maths, law, and marketing, but most people coming from university have no clue what it takes to launch a new business," he says.

However, he suggests "professionals" rather than professors are best placed to talk to young people about their successes and failures. Bolognini also wants governments to offer loans to would-be entrepreneurs to pay for specific training schools.

Jiles Halling, **Mad About Bubbly**, said the objective of the current education system is to train people to become employees. "There is little, or no, emphasis on starting your own business when you leave education and indeed it is seen as rather a 'maverick' thing to do," he said.

He believes that if the concept of being an entrepreneur were introduced to young people in

school it is more likely that it would become a more mainstream option. The lack of emphasis on entrepreneurship education is a "shame" according to Halling who says that arguably the best time to start a business is when you are young: "it can be less scary because you have fewer responsibilities, little to lose, more energy and a more open mind," he says.

"Of course being an entrepreneur is not for everyone, but neither is getting a job. Until both options are regarded by society and the education system as equally worthy, we'll always be short of entrepreneurs," Halling says.

Johan Frisk, partner and senior consultant at **Monitores de Gestão Lda**, says traditional management and business training does "little or nothing" for entrepreneurs.

"The daily problems faced by businesspeople are of a much more basic nature: how to make a contract, how to hire, how to get the printer to work, how to get liquidity to pay the next salaries. Very few SME's work strategically, which makes sense since the challenge is daily survival," he says.

Frisk points to a successful Swedish experiment designed to coach entrepreneurs which he is now translating into pilot projects in Portugal and will eventually extend to Spain, Italy and Greece.

Next Steps

- **25 May-1 June**: European SME Week.

Links

European Union

- European Commission: [SME Week Channel](#)
- [European Year of Creativity and Innovation](#)
- [European Economic and Social Committee](#)
- [Eureka Network](#)

EU Actors positions

- [European Confederation of Young Entrepreneurs](#)

Business & Industry

- [Generation Europe Foundation](#)
- [Cynex](#)
- [Central European Development Forum](#)
- [Zero Mobile](#)
- [Park Place Research](#)

Blogs

- Blogactiv: [Can you teach entrepreneurship?](#) (26 May 2010)

Other

- LinkedIn: [European SME Week group](#) (25 May 2010)

Business & Industry

- The Million Entrepreneurs