

The Entrepreneurial Learner, Persistence and Motivation in the Distance Environment

Connie Reimers-Hild
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

James W. King
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Abstract

Successful distance learners may be similar to entrepreneurs in that they seek out educational opportunities and marshal resources to achieve their goals. This paper will present empirical results of a study that examined the relationships between variables associated with the framework of the entrepreneurial learner (locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity), persistence (credit hour completion) and motivation to participate in education in a population of adult distance learners ($N = 342$). The complexity of the findings suggests that motivation influences many of the relationships between the variables examined in this study. Findings further suggest that additional research is necessary to explore the framework of the "entrepreneurial" learner in greater detail. Implications for intuitions, administrators, instructors and learners are presented and discussed.

Introduction

The term "entrepreneurial" is used to describe people or employees who are innovative, creative and have the ability to keep up with change in a society that is evolving at an increasingly rapid pace (O'Connor & Fiol, 2002). Research indicates that entrepreneurial individuals are even more important in the current knowledge economy, which is characterized by continuously evolving technologies and change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998). Individuals must be able to adapt to these rapid changes in order to advance themselves, their places of employment and their own societies and cultures. Further, previous research suggests that countries, individual businesses and managers will benefit by being able to identify individuals possessing entrepreneurial characteristics (Koh, 1996).

To better understand the basic concepts associated with the entrepreneurial personality, researchers must study entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in a variety of settings (Brazecal & Herbert, 1999). Many researchers have examined the relationship between personality traits associated with entrepreneurship in the context of business and new venture creation; however, few studies have empirically examined the relationship between personality and entrepreneurial individuals in nonbusiness settings, such as academia. Institutions of education as well as instructors, advisors and individual learners may also benefit by being able to identify, develop and better understand how the entrepreneurial characteristics of students influence success and persistence in the academic environment. As a result, there is a pressing need to better understand entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs and what it actually means to be "entrepreneurial" in the academic environment.

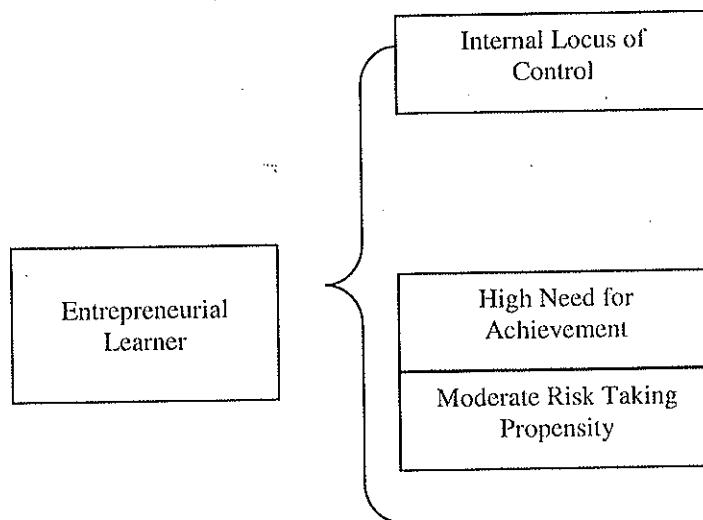
The rapid changes currently occurring in higher education make it an ideal area in which to examine entrepreneurial personality traits. One area in particular, distance education, continues to transform and change at a rapid pace. Institutions of higher education are developing and offering more distance-delivered courses and programs, and a growing number of adult learners are enrolling in distance courses and programs on a part-time basis. Further, many of the characteristics associated with entrepreneurs can be used to describe successful distance learners.

Entrepreneurs recognize and capitalize on opportunities, marshal resources to achieve their goals and are creative and innovative (Stevenson & Gumpert, 1983). Many distance learners encounter either real or perceived barriers (Evans, 1995; Kramarae, 2001; Pym 1992; Sullivan, 2001) when pursuing their educational endeavors, so they must find creative and innovative ways to pursue their educational endeavors, irrespective of available resources (time, money, technology, and personal support), help or guidance. Therefore, successful distance learners may be similar to entrepreneurs in that they seek out educational opportunities and marshal resources to achieve their goals.

Researchers have examined several characteristics typically associated with entrepreneurial inclinations (Koh, 1996), and three personality constructs have emerged as “classic” characteristics associated with the entrepreneurial personality: internal locus of control, high need for achievement and a moderate risk taking propensity (Korunka, Frank, Lueger & Mugler, 2003). Reimers-Hild, King, Foster, Fritz, Waller, & Wheeler (2005) identified locus of control, need for achievement, and risk taking propensity as the three key variables that can be used to examine the entrepreneurial actions and behaviors of learners within the context of the distance education environment. These “classic” entrepreneurial personality characteristics form the framework of the “entrepreneurial learner” (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The theoretical framework of the entrepreneurial learner (adapted from Reimers-Hild, et al., 2005, p.5)



Individuals with a more internal locus of control take responsibility for their actions, and individuals who are more external tend to feel that their lives are controlled by forces such as luck, fate or powerful others. Need for achievement assesses an individual’s propensity to create and take advantage of new opportunities. Risk taking propensity measures an individual’s comfort with risk. The proposed framework suggests a relationship between entrepreneurial personality, determined by the combined score of locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity (Entrialgo, Fernández & Vázquez, 2000) and persistence (number of credit hours completed) in the academic environment.

Persistence in the academic environment can be influenced by a number of different factors, including motivation. Adults participate in education for many reasons; however, some of the most important factors associated with participation are related to career advancement, earning college or advanced degrees and personal fulfillment (Kramarae, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Adults also enroll in educational activities to carry on family traditions or to please people other than themselves, such as relatives or employers (Houle, 1961; Morstain & Smart, 1974).

This purpose of this study was to empirically test the theoretical framework of the “entrepreneurial learner” (Reimers-Hild et al., 2005) with the variable of persistence (credit hour completion) in an academic setting. The interaction effects of the three moderating variables associated with participants’ motivation to continue their educational endeavors (personal fulfillment, professional/career advancement and pleasing someone other than myself) were also examined.

Methods

All data were gathered through the use of a web-based survey, which was e-mailed to a total of 863 learners enrolled in graduate-level distance courses at a large Midwestern University. This study utilized the scales of Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement (Rotter, 1996) to measure locus of control, Achievement (Jackson, 1999) to determine need for achievement, and Risk Taking Propensity (Jackson, 1994) to assess participants’ comfort with

risk. Data on credit hour completion were gathered through the use of a demographic/academic questionnaire. The three moderating variables of personal fulfillment, professional/career advancement and pleasing someone other than myself were included in the demographic/academic questionnaire and measured using a five-point Likert Scale. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

A total of 392 participants (45.42%) responded to the web-based survey during the 3-week data collection period. Of the 392 responses, 342 (87.2%) were usable for the scales of locus of control, need for achievement, risk taking propensity, credit hour completion and the three moderating variables of personal fulfillment, professional/career advancement and pleasing someone other than myself.

Findings

Simple linear regression revealed that there was not a statistically significant relationship between entrepreneurial personality and persistence ($N = 342$) in this sample of adult distance learners. Additional multiple regression analysis determined that the independent variables of locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity did not have statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable of persistence (credit hour completion).

However, multiple regression analysis did reveal that personal fulfillment had a statistically significant relationship with credit hour completion after controlling for entrepreneurial personality ($\beta = -3.791$; $p = .002$), locus of control ($\beta = -3.877$; $p = .002$), need for achievement ($\beta = -3.838$; $p = .004$) and risk taking propensity ($\beta = -3.659$; $p = .003$). In each case, the analysis demonstrated that as learner motivation associated with personal fulfillment strengthened, credit hour completion increased.

Multiple regression analysis also determined that there was a statistically significant relationship between participants' need for achievement ($\beta = .814$; $p = .041$) and risk taking propensity ($\beta = .444$; $p = .023$) scores when predicting the dependent variable of credit hour completion. As need for achievement and risk taking propensity scores strengthened, credit hour completion increased when holding personal fulfillment constant.

No statistically significant relationships were discovered when examining the relationships between the independent variable of entrepreneurial personality, the dependent variable of credit hour completion and the moderating variable of professional/career advancement. However, the interaction effect of locus of control and professional/career advancement ($\beta = -.556$; $p = .020$) was statistically significant. The relationship between locus of control and credit hour completion became weaker as participants' motivation associated professional/career advancement lessened.

Professional/career advancement had the opposite effect on need for achievement and credit hour completion. The interaction effect of need for achievement and professional/career advancement was statistically significant ($\beta = .880$; $p = .017$). The less participants were motivated by professional/career advancement, the stronger the relationship between need for achievement and credit hour completion. The main effect of need for achievement also had a statistically significant relationship with credit hour completion after controlling for professional/career advancement ($\beta = .924$; $p = .018$). Need for achievement strengthened as credit hour completion increased. The same type of relationship was found when examining the main effect of risk taking propensity. Risk taking propensity had a statistically significant relationship with credit hour completion after controlling for professional/career advancement ($\beta = .474$; $p = .017$). Risk taking propensity strengthened as credit hour completion increased.

Models examining the relationships between the independent variables of entrepreneurial personality and locus of control with the dependent variable of credit hour completion and the moderator of pleasing someone other than myself did not yield any significant results. However, the independent variables of need for achievement ($\beta = 1.017$; $p = .008$) and risk taking propensity ($\beta = .455$; $p = .022$) had statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable of credit hour completion after controlling for pleasing someone other than myself. In both cases, credit hour completion increased as need for achievement and risk taking propensity scores strengthened.

Conclusions

The moderating variables (personal fulfillment, professional/career advancement and pleasing someone other than myself) associated with participants' motivation to continue their educational endeavors influenced many of the relationships between the independent variables of entrepreneurial personality, locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity and the dependent variable of persistence in this study. The complexity of these interactions suggests that motivation influences many of the relationships between these variables. Additional research is needed to explore these relationships in greater detail.

Discussion and Implications

Previous research has shown a relationship between locus of control (Altmann & Arambasich, 1982; Cook, 1997; Dille & Mezack, 1991; Findley & Cooper, 1983; Liu, Lavelle & Andris, 2002; Parker, 1995, 1999, 2003) and persistence (Cooke, Sims & Peyrefitte, 1995) in the academic environment. Further, risk taking propensity has been identified as a characteristic of successful distance learners (Latanich, Nonis & Hudson, 2001; Reimers-Hild, et al., 2005). None of the independent variables in this study (entrepreneurial personality, locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity) were significant predictors of credit hour completion; therefore, the findings of this study suggest that the relationships between locus of control, need for achievement and persistence may be more complicated than previous research has suggested. The findings of this study also demonstrated that the relationships between locus of control, need for achievement, risk taking propensity and credit hour completion may be influenced by other factors, such as learner motivation.

Administrators and instructors involved with distance-delivered courses and programs should consider using the findings of this study to enhance their recruitment and retention efforts. For example, this study revealed that personal fulfillment was a statistically significant moderating variable that influenced a number of relationships. Statistical analysis demonstrated that as learner motivation associated with personal fulfillment strengthened, credit hour completion increased after controlling for entrepreneurial personality, locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity. These findings indicate that many learners are pursuing additional education for their own fulfillment. Further, persistence is influenced by motivation associated with personal fulfillment. Therefore, marketing, recruitment and retention efforts should focus on learners' motivation to participate. Recruitment and retention efforts should focus on motivation associated with personal fulfillment and development; additionally, these efforts should focus on sources of motivation that support personal fulfillment such as professional/career advancement.

Findings of this study further suggest that marketing, recruitment and retention efforts should focus on personal fulfillment as well as flexibility, convenience and customization. Tools that offer these considerations, such as entrance counseling and personalized advising, may be important components of recruitment and retention processes. Institutions utilizing entrance counseling have the potential to help learners better determine how courses and programs fulfill individual needs and desires. Knowledgeable advisors and e-advising centers, if designed correctly, may be able to offer the personalized advising services throughout learners' programs. If learners' life circumstances change, these tools will allow institutions to better serve learners and potentially increase rates of retention. By supplying these essential tools, organizations are showing that they care about each learner's individual needs. Institutions of higher education have the opportunity to put their best foot forward by showing potential and current students that they care about the success of learners who choose their schools. These types of opportunities will become increasingly important as the competition between institutions of higher education to attract and retain students intensifies.

A continuous approach to the advising process has the potential to benefit institutions, administrators and instructors as well as learners. The ability to deliver convenient, flexible and individualized advising and programming may help fulfill learners on an individual level, keep them motivated and ultimately increase rates of retention. Data were collected from a sample of convenience; therefore, the findings are limited to the adult learners who participated in this study. However, the findings confirm that the relationships between the variables examined in this study are very complex and intertwined. Motivation to participate in education appears to have a significant influence on the three key variables (locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity) associated with the framework of the entrepreneurial learner and persistence in the academic environment.

It is suggested that this line of research be continued in order to explore and develop the concept of the entrepreneurial learner in greater detail. Future research should examine the framework of the entrepreneurial learner in a variety of settings. This type of research has the potential to increase our understanding of what it means to be entrepreneurial in a number of different contexts. For example, this study could be replicated in small and large businesses, in various educational settings (workshops, seminars, undergraduate and graduate courses) and in populations of individuals who have started their own business ventures. Additionally, examining the factors of age and gender in all of these studies would increase our understanding of both the similarities and differences that exist between individuals in a variety of settings.

Although statistically significant relationships were not found between the three characteristics associated with entrepreneurial learner (locus of control, need for achievement and risk taking propensity) and persistence in this study, the findings associated with motivation to participate in education confirm that the relationships between the variables examined in this study are very complex. Further, the results of this study demonstrate that motivation to participate in education appears to have a significant influence on the framework of the entrepreneurial learner and persistence in the academic environment.

Successful distance learners still may be similar to entrepreneurs in that they seek out educational opportunities (undergraduate and graduate level courses, workshops, seminars, degree programs, etc.) and marshal resources to achieve their educational goals. Many distance learners must find creative and innovative ways to pursue their educational endeavors, irrespective of available resources (time, money, technology, and personal support), help or guidance. The findings of this study suggest that additional research is necessary to develop and explore the framework of the entrepreneurial learner in more detail.

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*Connie Reimers-Hild, PhD, is an Extension Educator at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Ithaca, NE.
Email: creimers2@unl.edu*

James W. King, EdD, is an Associate Professor for the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE. Email: jking1@unl.edu