

Entrepreneurial learning: new insights and emerging debates

What would entrepreneurship be without learning[1]? In an early and widely cited study, [Minniti and Bygrave \(2001\)](#) argued that “entrepreneurship is a process of learning, and a theory of entrepreneurship requires a theory of learning” (p. 7). Building on this insight, entrepreneurial learning (EL) has established itself as an important concept within entrepreneurship research. This development has been catalyzed by conceptual contributions ([Cope, 2005](#); [Corbett, 2005](#); [Politis, 2005](#)), reviews of EL literature ([Wang and Chugh, 2014](#)) and special issues devoted to understand EL ([Harrison and Leitch, 2005](#); [Secundo et al., 2017](#)). Despite these and other important contributions, it is still somewhat unclear what the conceptual domain of EL is.

This is principally because of our evolving understanding of the terms “learning” and “entrepreneurial.” There is considerable debate over the nature of learning and how learning should be conceptualized in psychology, management and organization studies; a debate that invokes learning at multiple levels – individual, team/group and organizational ([Örtenblad, 2001, 2015, 2018](#); [Wang and Ahmed, 2003](#)). There is a similar debate in entrepreneurship, where “entrepreneurial” has different meanings to many researchers and fields of research, including individuals starting new ventures ([Gartner, 1989](#)), firms introducing new innovations ([Lumpkin and Dess, 1996](#)), identification and exploitation of opportunities ([Shane and Venkataraman, 2000](#)) and action under conditions of uncertainty ([McMullen and Shepherd, 2006](#)). Similar to learning, “entrepreneurial” is examined at multiple levels – individual, team and organizational.

Merging “entrepreneurial” and “learning” together results in a new construct – “entrepreneurial learning”. Therefore, it becomes important to critically reflect over its nature, conceptual domain and clarity. To date, EL as a field of research has mainly used existing learning theories to study what is considered “entrepreneurial” – predominantly new venture creation ([Wang and Chugh, 2014](#)). This has been a successful undertaking. We now know a lot more about the role of learning in entrepreneurial processes ([Wang and Chugh, 2014](#)). This knowledge is key to the study of entrepreneurship ([Minniti and Bygrave, 2001](#)). At the same time, one cannot help but wonder what new insights one may get if one pursues other approaches to advance theorizing and research on EL. Thus, without downplaying the importance of the traditional approach, this special issue of *The Learning Organization* was inspired by the need to look at EL in new ways. This inspiration led us to invite papers providing “new insights” about EL, particularly research that:

- *Opens up new insights about the nature of EL* – Scholars have had a strong tendency to apply existing (learning) theories from other fields when studying EL. However, looking at EL through known theoretical lenses may preempt and constrain our understanding. Thus, we called for research that examined the nature of EL from new angles.
- *Applies the concept of EL to teams and organizations* – EL has been primarily studied at the individual level, especially during new venture creation ([Wang and Chugh, 2014](#)). Therefore, we called for research that examined how EL manifests among collective units of analysis, such as teams and organizations. We also hoped that such research could help spawn new insights into the relationship between EL and organizational learning (OL).



- *Connects EL with new concepts and new scholarly developments* – EL is a concept that many scholars find both interesting and useful. There is, however, a need to broaden the focus and learn more about how EL relates to other concepts. Relating EL to other concepts is also a way to learn more about (the nature of) EL itself.

We got what we asked for. The six articles chosen for this special issue provide new insights about EL, each in their own distinct way. However, it is possible to group them into three topical areas.

Learning situations

Two articles in the special issue focus on distinct types of learning situations and extend our understanding of EL within both domains. The article by [Politis et al. \(2019\)](#) advances our understanding of experiential learning theory in the specific setting of venture acceleration programs. The authors find that entrepreneurial learning is triggered in this setting by three catalysts – affective motivation, constructive feedback and peer atmosphere. These catalysts influence how entrepreneurs grasp and transform experiences into knowledge. They find that this experiential learning process is mitigated by two critical states: entrepreneurial exposure and program–venture fit. An implication of their study is that the learning in new and small organizations and their members are (strongly) shaped by their interaction with external actors within a distinct community. Thus, a clear implication is that the learning and knowledge capabilities of new and small organizations is shaped by the interaction between entrepreneurs and external actors in their context. Therefore, their study not only provides new insights into experiential learning in the setting of venture acceleration but also highlights the role of collective learning in entrepreneurial processes.

The study by [Bonfanti et al. \(2019\)](#) advances our understanding of how organizations learn by participating in factory tours, a specific type of learning event. They find that the key dimensions of EL in this setting are “learning from critical reflection”, “learning from experience” and “learning from external sources.” Moreover, the authors find that the process of EL in this setting is accelerated by variables at individual, team and institutional levels.

Apart from advancing our understanding of EL in distinct and important learning situations, the articles by [Politis et al.](#) and [Bonfanti et al.](#) also suggest important moderators/mediators at different levels of analysis that influence the process of EL.

Learning in emerging organizations and new venture teams

The articles by [Haneberg \(2019\)](#) and [El-Awad \(2019\)](#) deepen and broaden our insight into the multilevel nature of EL. This is done by focusing on new organizations started by a team of founders, also referred to as new venture teams (NVTs).

The article by [Haneberg \(2019\)](#) focuses on emerging organizations where the new venture team (NVT) is the organization. Importantly, he argues that the separation between EL and OL is rather artificial in this setting. What is key, however, for such organizations and their members is entrepreneurial action and learning under conditions of uncertainty. Drawing on the theory of effectuation, which highlights how individuals make decisions and act under conditions of uncertainty ([Saravathy, 2001](#)), he develops an understanding of EL as a process of effectuation. In doing so, the article not only provides an interesting link between EL and effectuation but also suggests how EL and OL may have a common origin in effectual learning processes that take place in the earliest days of the emerging organization.

[El-Awad \(2019\)](#) links individual and organizational levels of learning. Based on a detailed case study of an NVT and theorizing using transactive memory system (TMS), he identifies a set of mechanisms that show how knowledge flows from individuals to the organization. The identified mechanisms are integrated in a process model that provides new insight into

EL with implications for OL. In particular, the model shows how EL emerges at multiple levels in the organization and shapes its routines and procedures. Thus, the articles show how EL (of individuals) relates to how (new) organizations learn.

The articles by [Haneberg \(2019\)](#) and [El-Awad \(2019\)](#) illustrate the benefits of integrating new scholarly development, such as the focus on new entities (e.g. teams) and new theories/concepts (e.g. TMS and uncertainty) into EL research. In particular, the two articles show how the learning of new organizations is fundamentally influenced by the learning of entities at lower levels, like teams and individuals. Moreover, EL of collective units (teams and organizations) is far more than simple aggregates of individual learning. An important implication of these two articles is the importance of focusing on NVTs as an important unit when studying the learning in new organizations.

The conceptual domain of entrepreneurial learning

Two articles in the special issue have a strong conceptual nature. Each is devoted to discussing the very concept of EL, including its conceptual domain.

[Nogueira \(2019\)](#) provides a systematic review of the EL literature. His review analyzes the unique characteristics of EL as a concept. Using criteria developed by [Gerring \(2012\)](#), he critically assesses the concept of EL as it has been used in the literature. He concludes that the literature has not (yet) offered a clear articulation of what is unique about EL as a concept. The reason is that most research has used EL as a synonym for entrepreneurs' learning. A clear implication of his analysis is the need to clearly delineate the conceptual domain of EL as a concept. Nogueira suggests that EL research can advance by clearly articulating what is "entrepreneurial" about the learning behaviors of entrepreneurs. This is a valuable suggestion, as action is key to entrepreneurship which manifests in behavior, among individuals, teams and organizations.

In a conceptual article, [Breslin \(2019\)](#) suggests some answers to the difficult questions raised by [Nogueira's article \(2019\)](#). Like the previous article, Breslin argues that it is unclear how EL differs from the learning of non-entrepreneurs and from wider OL. Based on conceptual and empirical papers published over the past 20 years, Breslin provides new insight by identifying four key processual dimensions that are key to entrepreneurial learning; intuiting, scanning, internalizing and routinizing. Importantly, Breslin discusses how these dimensions differ from the well-known model of OL by [Crossan et al. \(1999\)](#). Thus, the article not only suggests what is unique with EL as a concept but also proposes how EL and OL can be different.

An important implication of the articles by [Nogueira \(2019\)](#) and [Breslin \(2019\)](#) is the need to initiate a debate over what makes EL unique. Thus, the field of EL may need to debate and clarify what is "entrepreneurial" about EL. Moreover, there seems to be a need to reflect over what is "entrepreneurial" about other important concepts used in this literature, such as cognition and learning styles, but also to delineate what is "entrepreneurial" about the learning of teams and organizations.

Toward an understanding of organizational entrepreneurial learning

The combined insight from the articles in the special issue suggests that it may be both timely and appropriate to give a distinct name to describe what is entrepreneurial about the learning of organizations. As discussed above, the research in this special issue has helped to provide a more elaborate understanding of what may be conceptually referred to as "organizational entrepreneurial learning" (OEL). Such a concept has only been hinted at in previous literature ([Kim et al., 2009](#); [Leitch and Harrison, 2008](#)). This special issue shows the need to clearly articulate and delineate such a concept.

Importantly, a (new) concept of OEL can help scholars to distinguish, as well as examine the interplay between, EL and OL. This is particularly appropriate when examining the learning of collective entities, such as teams and organizations. The conceptual article by [Breslin \(2019\)](#) represents as a promising point of departure for conducting empirical research on OEL. Moreover, the article by [Bonfanti et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that EL and OL have different enablers. Examining the enablers of OEL, and how these relate to and differ from the enablers of EL and OL, is another interesting issue. Finally, the articles by [El-Awad \(2019\)](#), [Politis et al. \(2019\)](#) and [Haneberg \(2019\)](#) remind us that OEL is a property of collective entities. Important insight from these articles is that OEL is constructed by individuals through action, such as founders, ([Haneberg, 2019](#)), formed through multilevel processes ([El-Awad, 2019](#)) and shaped by actors in the environment ([Politis et al., 2019](#)). However, this insight into OEL is only a starting point. There is potentially (much) more to learn about OEL.

Entrepreneurial learning as a multilevel umbrella construct

The six papers in this special issue also exemplify and demonstrate that EL research is rather diverse and may not share a common theoretical core, as highlighted by the articles by [Nogueira \(2019\)](#) and [Breslin \(2019\)](#). There is, however, a strongly shared interest among scholars into learning in conjunction with entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behavior of individuals, teams and organizations. A deeper implication of this shared interest is that the concept of EL may be best understood as a multilevel umbrella construct.

Umbrella concepts have been defined as “a broad concept or idea used loosely to encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena” ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#), p. 200). Typically, umbrella concepts arise in academic fields that lack theoretical consensus (e.g. EL). While umbrella concepts typically lack conceptual validity, a key benefit is that they “provide a way to organize a large body of what might otherwise seem to be unrelated findings” ([Astley, 1985](#), p. 501). They help organize academic fields ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#)). Importantly, umbrella concepts evolve by dialectic debate among researchers with a broad perspective (called “umbrella advocates”) and those with a narrower one (called “validity police”) ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#)).

Arguably, the conceptualization of EL as an umbrella concept will advance the conversation between scholars in the field. The key reason is that such an understanding will encourage scholars to relate to a certain point(s) of view in the debate but also to acknowledge that there are other important perspectives. Using this as a lens, (at least) two points of view are visible in the field of EL research. One approach argues for the necessity of broad perspectives and the application of EL to a diverse set of learning phenomena. Arguably, this is the traditional approach in the EL literature which focuses on entrepreneurs’ learning ([Nogueira, 2019](#)). There is, on the other hand, also an emerging “validity” approach arguing that there is need to make the EL concept tighter, provide more clarity and delineate what is “entrepreneurial” about entrepreneurial learning ([Breslin, 2019](#) and [Nogueira, 2019](#)). Debates between these approaches seem vital for advancing EL as a concept. Moreover, research and theorizing within one domain may fertilize the other (and vice versa). Furthermore, both types of learning, as well as their interactions, may be key for achieving outcomes of interest, for individuals, teams and organizations.

Importantly, the research in this special issue suggests that EL as an umbrella concept has a multilevel nature. Most of the papers in this special issue have shown how EL is important for different units, such as individuals, teams and organizations, and/or is influenced by concepts, variables and processes at different levels of analysis. While the articles in this special issue have helped to illuminate this ([El-Awad, 2019](#); [Politis et al., 2019](#); and [Bonfanti et al., 2019](#)), there is clearly more research that needs to be conducted to outline,

conceptually as well as empirically, the multilevel nature of EL. To help advance the debate over this important issue, it may be helpful to operate with a distinct concept of OEL. Arguably, such a concept will improve the clarity of the debate, as it helps to avoid conceptual entanglement between concepts.

Thus, while each article in the special issue provides new insights into EL, a deeper insight from the combined research presented in the special issue is the need to raise difficult questions, such as:

- Is there a unique conceptual domain for EL as a concept? Or is it a better course of action to identify subordinate (distinct) EL concepts, such as “EL behavior,” and “EL learning styles,” and examine how these relate to each other as well as influence key outcomes of interest? The articles by [Breslin \(2019\)](#) and [Nogueira \(2019\)](#) initiate an important discussion on this issue.
- How does the meaning of (distinct) EL (or subordinate EL concepts) change as it is applied to different units of analysis and different settings ([Politis et al., 2019](#); [Bonfanti et al., 2019](#))? Importantly, applying the same concept across different units of analysis may change its meaning ([Suddaby, 2010](#)). Thus, it seems pertinent to examine this as EL is increasingly being applied to describe the learning of individuals, teams and organizations. Relatedly, what are the micro-foundations of (distinct) EL concept(s)? Discussing this issue is important to advance a multilevel insight of EL, and the article by [El-Awad \(2019\)](#) represents an important step in that direction.
- What is the relationship between EL and OL? Is there conceptual overlap? Or (when) are these two concepts distinct? Currently, these two concepts appear to be somewhat conceptually entangled, particularly when examining EL among teams and organizations. However, it seems pertinent to clearly distinguish them or understand when they diverge. Only then can research examine their relationship and clarify the nature of both concepts. Furthermore, can a concept like OEL be empirically identified, and what is its nature? The articles in this special issue, such as [Haneberg \(2019\)](#), [Breslin \(2019\)](#), [El-Awad \(2019\)](#) and [Bonfanti et al. \(2019\)](#), exemplify the importance of this discussion.

EL is a concept that has captured the interest of many scholars. Research on the life cycle of umbrella concepts suggests that after a period of “emerging excitement” ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#)), EL is now facing an emerging validity challenge. This is also exemplified by the research in this special issue, perhaps most notably by [Breslin \(2019\)](#) and [Nogueira \(2019\)](#). Importantly, debates over validity challenges may result in constructs with increased coherence or in a situation where scholars within the field simply “agree to disagree” ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#)). While validity challenges may lead to the demise of the umbrella concept under scrutiny ([Hirsch and Levin, 1999](#)), research in this special issue indicates that “improved construct coherence” or “agreeing to disagree” appears to be the most pertinent future states for EL as a concept. What appears clear though is that more debate is required. Reflecting about and building on the research in this special issue, I argue that a conversation that may advance the development of EL may be best facilitated through an understanding of EL as a multilevel umbrella concept. I hope this special issue will trigger a scholarly discussion around such a development.

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