From the Guest Editors: Educating Social Entrepreneurs and Social Innovators

Our goal in editing this special issue of AMLE was to respond to the challenges facing educators stemming from the dramatically increasing demand for courses that effectively develop social entrepreneurs and social innovators. Our motivation was rooted partly in the challenges we ourselves faced as social entrepreneurship educators. First and foremost, we have struggled to understand precisely what social entrepreneurs and innovators actually do, and therefore, what they need to know. There is much ambiguity about how social entrepreneurship differs from traditional notions of entrepreneurship and, similarly, how social innovation differs from other sorts of innovation. Without a clear idea of what constitutes these new forms of activity it is difficult if not impossible to develop appropriate courses and programs.

Second, even once the nature of social entrepreneurship and social innovation are clearly understood, the impact on how we design courses and course materials remains an important challenge for educators. While there is an emerging body of teaching material on social entrepreneurship and social innovation, much of it is fragmented, and so it is not obvious how best to organize courses and what to include in terms of course content. Furthermore, some material and approaches from existing courses might be appropriate, but how should they be adapted and used? These questions are crucial for the development of effective educational experiences for budding social entrepreneurs and social innovators.

In speaking with colleagues at other institutions, it became clear that many other business school educators shared our concerns. Based on our own experiences and the feedback from others, we therefore decided that a special issue focusing on the nature of social entrepreneurship and social innovation, the impact of a clearer understanding of these ideas for the design of courses and course material, and reviews of existing material would be of use to a large and growing group of educators.

In assembling this collection of papers, we sought to address all these issues in order to help business school faculty who teach social entrepreneurship and innovation base their decisions about course design and execution on informed evidence from experts in the field. We also hope this special issue will raise awareness of social entrepreneurship and social innovation throughout the business school community, and thus encourage faculty from all disciplines to consider incorporating some of the ideas into their teaching. As various papers in this issue make clear, the concepts that underpin these subjects have relevance to a wide range of organizational activity in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL INNOVATION AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

A critical issue for educators in this area concerns the nature of social entrepreneurship and its relationship to social innovation. The term social entrepreneurship has been used widely and gained significant recognition over the past decade. Tracey and Phillips (2007: 265) noted that “two overlapping conceptions of social entrepreneurship can be identified in the literature.” The first was concerned with actors that reconfigure resources in order to achieve some kind of social change or societal transformation, but who do not necessarily rely on commercial means to do so. The second was concerned specifically with “enterprise for a social purpose,” and required social entrepreneurs “to identify and exploit market opportunities in order to develop products and services that can be reinvested in a social project.” More recently, scholars have sought to draw a distinction between social innovation and social entrepreneurship (Lawrence, Dover, & Gallagher, in press), with the former corresponding to Tracey and Phillips’ first mode of social entrepreneurship, and the notion of social entrepreneurship increasingly defined more narrowly along the lines of Tracey and Phillips’ second mode of social entrepreneurship.

Clearly, the distinctions are ones of emphasis rather than hard edges. When we speak or think of social entrepreneurs, we focus on the ways in which actors leverage market mechanisms to ensure the financial sustainability of their efforts to address a social problem or effect social change (Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011). We also often associate social entrepreneurs with the formation of new enterprises, although like entrepreneurship more broadly, this may represent a typical social entrepreneur but in no way captures the heterogeneous strategies that social entrepreneurs use to enact their strategies.
When we speak of social innovators, we highlight both the creation of novel solutions to social problems and their potentially transformative effects (Leadbeater, 2008; Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2007). Social innovation is also more closely associated with interorganizational and intersectoral collaboration, although again the structures that social innovators employ vary dramatically (Murray, Caulier-Grice, & Mulgan, 2010; Wolfe, 2009). Both sets of actors often work across field boundaries, and often draw on both for-profit and not-for-profit logics as they develop their initiatives to address a particular social problem.

One of the hurdles which has held back the development of teaching social entrepreneurship and social innovation in business schools has been the ambiguity regarding the organizational forms in which they take place. Early writing on social entrepreneurship and social innovation located these concepts in the nonprofit sector, leaving business schools unclear as to their relevance and, perhaps more critically, unclear about the financial viability of courses and programs in these areas. In the past decade, however, there has been a significant broadening of the range of organizations involved in social innovation and social entrepreneurship. Alongside nonprofits and social movement organizations, there is now a growing diversity of organizations working to tackle social problems, including social entrepreneurs (Light, 2008); social enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2006); and philanthro-capitalists (Edwards, 2008). These new approaches to solving social problems are epitomized by individuals such as Muhammad Yunus, winner of the Nobel Prize for his invention of microcredit, Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka, an organization that promotes and funds social entrepreneurship, and the billion dollar philanthropy of the Gates and Clinton Foundations.

Governments and businesses are also getting involved: U.S. President Barack Obama established an “Office of Social Innovation” (Light, 2008); European leaders are seeking to connect innovation to social goals (Leadbeater, 2008); and corporations are encouraged to see the social sector as a “beta site” for innovation where partnerships can produce “profitable and sustainable change for both sides” (Moss Kanter, 1999: 124).

While excited by these developments, we are acutely aware, as Dey (2006) points out, that the rhetoric associated with social entrepreneurship and innovation appears to have led to a somewhat rose-tinted view of these forms of activity among academics, the media, and policy makers. Indeed, the academic discourse is often guilty of emphasi-
within their ventures because social outcomes and commercial performance may need to be traded off against one another. Third, social entrepreneurs need to manage a series of complex identity issues that involve presenting the organization in different ways in order to appear legitimate to actors in both the for-profit and non-profit domains.

For social innovators, there are also unique challenges. Social innovation involves the transformation of social systems in ways that both address social problems in a practical sense and shift our ways of thinking about these problems. This means that social innovators require a deep understanding of how social problems are rooted in institutionalized beliefs, values, and ideas, as well as in existing social practices and structures. A second challenge facing social innovators is the inherently political nature of their enterprise. Social systems, even those that underpin significant and obvious social problems, are always tied to entrenched interests and distributions of advantage and disadvantage. In the best of all worlds, social innovation may elevate the standing of all, but just as often it exposes injustice and inequity in ways that can force the redistribution of privilege.

This means that social innovators need to be both creative problem solvers and skilled politicians—overcoming resistance from residential communities, government agencies, political factions, and corporate actors can make or break many social innovations. Of course, all innovation is associated with some level of transformation and some degree of politics, but we argue that these elements of innovation are especially critical to social innovation and consequently to the education of social innovators. Thus, social innovation’s focus on new solutions to social problems brings with it a distinctive focus and requires a distinctive set of tools.

IN THIS ISSUE

The purpose of this special issue is to contribute to our understanding of the learning and educational implications of social entrepreneurship and social innovation for business schools and other educational institutions, as well as for businesses, nonprofits, and social enterprises. The articles that make up this special issue represent a wide range of approaches to these issues, but they share a certain humility in approaching the question of how to develop education and learning opportunities for social entrepreneurs and social innovators that is borne from a combination of the area’s emerging status as a focus of pedagogy and instruction, and the hands-on experience of the authors in confronting the special challenges that come with uniting business education and social change. The Exemplary Contribution; Essays, Dialogues, & Interviews; and Book & Resource Reviews sections each have their own introductions. The Research & Reviews (R&R) section of this issue features four articles introduced here.

The first paper by Kwong, Thompson, and Cheung compares the effectiveness of social business plan teaching (which involves students being mentored to prepare a business plan for a social enterprise) with the conventional case study approach to teaching social entrepreneurship. Business planning is a prominent teaching method in entrepreneurship, but appears less commonly in social entrepreneurship education. To compare the two modes of teaching, the authors interviewed postgraduate business school students who had participated in a mandatory module on social entrepreneurship. A subset of the students on the module was assigned to the social business plan stream, with a second subset assigned to the case study stream. The authors found both strategies to be valuable approaches for conveying knowledge about social entrepreneurship, increasing students’ interest in social issues, and supporting a positive disposition toward social enterprise. The authors conclude by asserting that rather than one approach being better or worse than the other, social entrepreneurship education is most effective when multiple modes of teaching are used together. Social entrepreneurship educators should therefore consider using the business planning approach alongside the case study approach.

We noted above that a core challenge facing social entrepreneurship educators was to ascertain the core elements and topic areas that should form the basis of social entrepreneurship curricula. The paper by Miller, Wesley, and Williams helps to address this issue directly. The authors drew on a sample of 150 social entrepreneurs in order to ascertain the social entrepreneurship competences deemed most important by social entrepreneurs. They then content analyzed the syllabi of 77 social entrepreneurship courses offered by instructors based at universities across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. This allowed the authors to compare the perceived skill needs of social entrepreneurs with what is actually being offered by educators. Interestingly, there was significant common ground between the two groups, suggesting that educators are doing a good job of meeting the needs of many social entrepreneurs. But there were also important areas where current social entrepreneurship education falls short from
a practitioner perspective. For example, marketing and selling, ethics, and challenging conventional thinking were three skill sets considered important by social entrepreneurs but not extensively offered by social entrepreneurship education providers. By highlighting the gaps between what social entrepreneurs feel they need to know and what social entrepreneurship educators offer, this paper makes an important contribution to the literature.

The paper by Howorth, Smith, and Parkinson examines the relevance of social theories of learning for social entrepreneurship education. The authors collected data from students on two different social entrepreneurship courses in the United Kingdom, one that comprised only social entrepreneurs and a second where social entrepreneurs were taught alongside commercial entrepreneurs. Their analysis highlights two particularly important characteristics of social entrepreneurship education. First, the authors show that reflective learning methods play a critical role in fostering self-confidence and a belief that students can be successful social entrepreneurs. Second, building psychological safety into courses is crucial for some students; social entrepreneurs often have limited formal education, and some can be intimidated by a business school setting. For students such as these, developing a supportive learning environment is at heart of an effective pedagogical experience.

The final paper in the R&R section is by Smith and Woodworth. The authors used social identity theory and self-efficacy theory to develop a novel approach to social entrepreneurship education. At the core of their approach is the idea that educators need to (1) help students to identify with and feel part of the social entrepreneurship community, and (2) stimulate a belief among students that they have the tools, ability, and resources needed to engender meaningful social change. From this perspective, effective social entrepreneurship education is not simply about imparting knowledge and information, but also emphasizes relationship building and confidence building. Smith and Woodworth outline a range of pedagogical strategies, but focus in particular on the role of group projects, which they argue are an especially powerful way for students to build a sense of identification with the social entrepreneurship community as well as the self-belief required to be successful within this community. This paper is particularly valuable because it shows clearly the relevance of organization theory to management education in general and social entrepreneurship education in particular.

REFERENCES


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