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Training for entrepreneurship: the dilemma of time and isolation **The case of 88 entrepreneurs of small companies in Brittany**

Introduction

"Nature always imposed upon beings this imperious dilemma: to adapt or to disappear" (Le Bon, 1920, p. 43). This proposal by a French doctor and sociologist (1841-1931) seems to echo the challenges proposed to the entrepreneur of the 21st century. It is from this idea that we will shed light on the place of the dilemma in the entrepreneurship training of 88 Breton entrepreneurs. What role does the dilemma play in the sustainability of companies? In what form does it translate into entrepreneurial learning?

According to Cristol and Muller (2013) "entrepreneurs have little time to learn because they are dedicated to developing their business first. [...] They would arbitrate their choices based on a parameter of time management and their commitment to training". In addition, Toutain and Verzat (2015) state that while it is customary to consider entrepreneurship "professionally and socially" as an "individual activity", we cannot avoid the permanent interaction between the entrepreneur and his/her environment. We can then wonder how the entrepreneur can apprehend the time between learning and activity. What would be, for him/her the expected benefits? How can he/she preserve his/her independence while learning "from" and "by" the others?

Trying to provide some answers to these different questions, we will first delimit the dilemma in its dimension to the temporalities of transformation processes (*i.e.* lack of time to think critically, to dialogue) in an entrepreneurial context. In a second step, referring to the work of Alhadeff-Jones (2014), we will look at the central aspect of new conceptions like supporting "modalities to favor the deployment of a reflexive capacity and a power to act on our relationship to time". Then, based on Eneau's framework of "educational reciprocity" (2005) and Mezirow's "transformative learning theory" (2001), we will examine the place of the disorienting dilemma in a co-development situation, grounded in an entrepreneurial context. Finally, the first results of an empirical approach will be presented to illustrate the link between these theoretical works. Based on two empirical studies, these results come from a first work conducted for a Master's degree thesis in Educational Sciences (Mégret, 2016), through a questionnaire addressed to 68 entrepreneurs in Brittany. A second study (still in progress), more qualitative, takes place in a current doctoral program; it includes the transcript of ten exploratory interviews conducted with 10 entrepreneurs and a second series of 10 more interviews conducted with a new sample.

From these first data, we will underline the importance of dilemmas of time and isolation in the entrepreneurial process, allowed by the sharing of learning experiences otherwise impossible, giving the entrepreneur a growing "power to act".

Dilemma and the temporalities of transformation process

Borrowed from the low Latin *dilemma* (1555), itself taken from the Greek as an "argument by which one poses an alternative between two contrary arguments", the masculine name dilemma, in French, refers today in its more common sense to a "difficult choice between two possibilities" (Rey, 2012, p.1034). In the entrepreneurial field, this difficulty arises as soon as the individual is involved in a business creation process, what Bruyat (1993) calls the "dilemma of competing projects", which, in his opinion, translates into the complexity of the process a choice for a recently-licensed individual with two opportunities to return to paid employment or start a

business. Fayolle & Lassas-Clerc (2005) point out that “in these potentially chaotic situations, the pressure of time (linked to the project and / or to the creator) becomes a determining factor”. Chance plays a big role insofar as the individual does not “rationally” explore different perspectives for lack of time “to dialogue or to think critically” (*idem*).

This notion of time can also, in its Latin usage, express a transition, such as a river that is crossed or a storm that passes (Gaffiot, 1934). Based on their work on transition, Balleux & Perez-Roux (2013) pose this as “a space / time of passage inscribed in the heart of a change, assumed or not, successful or not, and which requires individual implementation of coping strategies to better manage break-up elements and (re)construction of continuities”. Or to put it another way, transition is an “intermediate area of experience” (Boutinet, 2009, 226).

Drawing on the work of the sociologist Hugues (1958), Balleux & Perez-Roux (2013) summarize the three mechanisms of professional socialization as: 1) immersion in the professional culture or “passage through the mirror”, giving rise to many dilemmas related to the gaps between the dreamed job and the professional reality; 2) installation in the duality between ideal model and practical model with a progressive anticipation of desirable positions and roles; 3) personal projection into a future career by identification with a reference group (Balleux & Perez-Roux, 2013, p.103).

The entrepreneur thus finds him/herself (from the beginning of his/her project) in a process leading him/her to consider transition as “a space-time of co-construction of individual and social change” (Dupuy & Le Blanc, 2001, p. 74) in which socioprofessional trajectories are linked both to socioeconomic and cultural contexts, but also to singular strategies integrating representations, values, roles and modes of professional involvement (Balleux & Perez-Roux, 2013, p.106). These successive phases of transition accompany the entrepreneur throughout his activity (development of the project, creation, launch, development and sustainability), creating different spaces delimited by time opening a reflexive path where “to learn” becomes “to learn something and something about oneself”, which to say make “the test of oneself” (*idem*, p. 109). The entrepreneur is thus evolving in a climate punctuated by destabilizing storms and constructive lulls sowing today seeds that will not bear fruit until tomorrow. “Temporary, often emancipatory, the time of transition must be put in perspective of the past and the future, as a unique moment of encounter in which the individual is part of multiple interactions with the organizational and human environment” (*idem*, p.110).

Emancipation, critical education and relationship to time

Otherwise, Alhadeff-Jones (2014, p. 2) recalls that any emancipating project is to be conceived in relation to a critical project. Questioning the emancipatory scope inherent to an educational project therefore involves questioning the presuppositions that define its critical scope. This process is based on the following seven propositions that we will use in our research to question the link to the notion of “time”, for the entrepreneur, in order to “explore the emancipatory scope of a critical education and training from the relationship to time, from the ends that can be lent to them” (*idem*):

1. “Learning to question the relation to time as the foundation of a critical pedagogy” supposes to encourage the entrepreneur to take the time to “breathe”, to “take a step back” on his practice by developing his critical capacity by “(re)awareness, (re)empowerment and (position)” in order to “increase its power to act” (Alhadeff-Jones, 2014, p. 3) and thereby even his/her control over the development and sustainability of his/her business.

2. “Learning to discriminate the complexity of temporalities and rhythms” invites the entrepreneur to develop an “ability to feel, to recognize and to identify the influence and the specificity of the rhythms that shape the daily experience” (work organization, commercial relationships, etc.) and “the presence of synchronies and asynchronies” without waiting to understand “the experience of

interruptions, disruptions or constraints suffered (illness, accident, etc.)” (*idem*, p. 4)), or even bankruptcy in some cases.

3. “Learning to keep track and evaluate temporalities and rhythms” can allow the entrepreneur to think about the tools he/she has “to keep track and evaluate the times and rhythms experienced or observed (*idem*, p. 5), e.g. implementation of schedules, back-schedules, attendance sheets, etc.

4. “Learning to interpret the complexity of temporalities and rhythms” assumes for the entrepreneur “to learn to access, express and formulate as much his/her own life story as the collective history to which it is attached, so as to be able to interpret possible futures” (*ibid.*). This learning should allow him/her to better understand the contours of his/her position as an entrepreneur and increase his/her ability to project his/her company towards the future for the purpose of development and sustainability.

5. “Learning to argue and negotiate the importance of temporalities and rhythms” implies the entrepreneur in the management of “temporal constraints”, the search for “forms of flexibility”, the negotiation of “time for oneself” and “time for others”, as well as the re-evaluation of his/her priorities. This is a pragmatic point of view for the entrepreneur to negotiate “the programs and work schedules, but also the rhythms and cycles that punctuate the activity or the cultural norms that determine the individual, collective and organizational structures” (*idem*, p. 6).

6. “Learning to formulate a judgment on temporalities and rhythms” is, in the case of an entrepreneur, “from reflexive and narrative processes, to articulate and contain entangled temporalities, thus contributing to the creation of his/her own temporal environment”. The creation of this space-time requires for the entrepreneur “to be able to establish a form of authority from which we are allowed to privilege specific rhythms or temporalities, insofar as they appear to be just balanced and legitimate in a given context” (*idem*, p. 7).

7. “Learning to put in crisis the temporalities and rhythms recognized as illegitimate” suggests that the entrepreneur can develop new strategies, favoring alternative life and work rhythms (*idem*, p. 8), breaking the codes and representations of “a relationship to the predetermined time, and not necessarily adapted to the development of his/her business and his/her own autonomy.

Moreover, following Alhadeff-Jones, “the relation to time, like the relation to space, is the foundation of our relationship to the world, to oneself and to others”. The entrepreneur must therefore become aware of how he/she “experiences” it, because “learning to question one's relationship to time is therefore a potentially transformative and emancipatory process that requires the questioning, even the transgression, of patterns and perspectives of meaning developed throughout life that determine our identity, our skills and our knowledge” (Alhadeff-Jones 2014, p. 9).

Dilemma and transformative learning in an entrepreneurial context

According to Mezirow (2001)¹, “these schemas and perspectives of meaning” form our border structures “beyond which new data are neither perceived nor understood” (p. 24). Mezirow adds that for the adult, “learning involves above all a process of justification or validation of the ideas expressed in the communicative field and presuppositions included in the initial and internalized learning at that time” (*idem*, p. 25). Also, in the field of entrepreneurship, transformative learning implies, for the entrepreneur “a more acute awareness of the context of his/her beliefs and feelings”, such as the reasons that led him to create his/her business, to opt for such a development strategy or to act in such a way with its employees or partners. It also involves “a critique of presumptions, in particular premises, on which these beliefs and feelings rest”, such as putting into

¹ The following quotes are translated from French edition of Mezirow (2001) and maybe do not follow the original expressions of Mezirow himself, in their former version.

perspective different alternatives redrawing the contours of one's own objectives, or the renunciation of such a strategic option originally elaborated for redirect its activity (*idem*, p.178). For Mezirow, transformative perspective involves: 1) a reinforcement of the sense of self; b) a more critical understanding of how individual social relationship and culture have shaped their feelings and beliefs; and 3) more functional and more active strategies and resources to begin action. Then “acting is an integral part of transformative learning” (*ibid.*).

Therefore, it is necessary to think about how we can initiate the process, to invite the entrepreneur to act, by embarking on a path of which he/she does not yet know the entry. For Mezirow, “transformative perspective can occur in two ways: either as a result of an accumulation of transformations of meaning patterns caused by a series of dilemmas; or in response to a marked externally imposed dilemma: death, illness, separation or divorce, departure of children, etc.” (*idem*, p.184).

In an entrepreneurial context, we can evoke what some professionals of the accompaniment call in French the rule of “three D”: Defection (business failure), Divorce and Depression. This perspective is likely to reflect the expression of a series of dilemmas or a “marked” dilemma. However, following Mezirow a “first confrontation to a dilemma can be self-induced”. In this case, it is “the learner who, at the end of learning, is able to create”. But it can also be induced by the circumstances of life or by the trainer (2001, p. 189).

Thus, engaging the entrepreneur in a transformative perspective involves a sequence of learning activity that begins with a “disruptive dilemma” (*idem*, p. 209). This first phase of learning results in a disorientation, “an internal imbalance that disturbs the harmony of the self without the problem being understood or named satisfactorily” (*idem*, p. 194). Mezirow states that the sequence of transformative learning activities is not composed of invariable developmental stages. These activities should rather be understood as sequential moments of “elucidation of meaning”. This sequence ends with a different concept of self that allows reintegration into one's life context on the basis of conditions dictated by a new perspective (*idem*, p. 209). It is therefore with the rhythm of the difficulties that he/she encounters that the entrepreneur must “put order in his/her lived world”, when he/she is faces situations where the recipes he/she inherited to solve the problems do not carry out anymore their duties (*idem*, p. 211). However, the entrepreneur and the trainer must keep in mind that transformative perspective is only an adult “learning mode” and that they have neither the power of anticipate or arouse it at will, because this “learning mode” serves a crucial adaptation function by helping the learner to solve a dilemma by further differentiating and integrating the experience (*idem*, p. 217).

Lastly, it seems that transformative perspective is a social process often involving points of view expressed by others. And while it is customary to consider entrepreneurship as an individual activity, the “points of view” that the apprenticeship entrepreneur has begun with finding discordant, unpleasant and threatening may be admitted because they will be indispensable to him/her to shape his/her experiences. Mezirow adds that “we expect others to communicate alternative perspectives that may explain our dilemmas” (*idem*, p. 201); in the case of a group of entrepreneurs, for example, “identification” may be a very effective path to reinforce a new way of seeing one's own dilemma.

Educational reciprocity and codevelopment in an entrepreneurial context

We find in Eneau's work (2012) on “social dimensions of autonomy in adult learning” and more particularly on “educational reciprocity”, following Labelle (1996), the important place given to the experience in adult learning as well as “the role of the group and peer exchange for learning”. He also emphasizes “the very specific place of the trainer, who is both a coach and a facilitator, but also a passer-by and echo, the guarantor of the whole process”. Finally, he states that the

contract is “at the center of the model of reciprocity” proposed by Labelle (1996), and even represents according to Carré (2003) quoted by Eneau: “the keystone of any autonomizing training systems” (Eneau, 2012, p. 27).

In the continuity of his research, Eneau (2012) proposes a synthesis of studies carried out on reciprocity in the fields of philosophy, anthropology, sociology and economics shedding light on the “social” and “political” scope of reciprocity. Based on this proposal, we will try to see what would be the conditions, dimensions and expected effects of educational reciprocity in a context of entrepreneurship training:

1. “The prerequisites for reciprocity”. They reside in “taking into account the autonomy of individuals” (in our case, the entrepreneur must be able to “take initiatives, make choices, take risks and responsibility for the consequences, as exposing others to the dilemmas that are problematic) and at the same time encouraging at the collective and individual level a certain number of social values concerning the other (such as listening to other entrepreneurs, dialogue, “respect for others and the difference, trust or even cooperation or even co-responsibility in terms of a collective set”) (Eneau, 2012, p. 50).

2. “The operational dimensions of reciprocity”. In this expression, reciprocity “rests on asymmetric roles and situations (recognizes, takes into account and uses the autonomy of each person, their singularity and their differences) and, at the same time, imposes a reversibility in these roles and situations (between alternation and alterity, each person must give and receive in turn”) (*ibid.*). This implies for example, in the case of the entrepreneur, “the obligation to give-receive-give back” (in a context of entrepreneurship training, we must encourage entrepreneurs “to take the gamble of cooperation, give first before waiting for something in return”) and to give without counting on an exchange of equal value in return (“reciprocity is based on incalculable gifts”) within a time frame that is not known in advance and whose together can not be calculated in terms of interest” (*ibid.*). This engages the entrepreneur on a path opposed to the reality and requirements of his/her entrepreneurial “profession” or activity, where the optimization of time and profitability are at the heart of his/her daily concerns, creating gaps between dreamed business and professional reality, giving rise to new dilemmas to solve. “Thus, reciprocity promotes cooperation between actors for long-term collective benefits, possibly to the detriment of short-term individual interests (the collective interest takes precedence over individual interests and the logic of cooperation prevails over the logic of the competition)”. Such an educational approach forces the entrepreneur to “take a risk by committing to give”, but it is also the “ultimate sign of autonomy” inviting him/her to “ask the question of alliances (with whom to cooperate? Under what conditions, for what purpose?” (*ibid.*).

3. “The expected effects of reciprocity” suggest a regulation and a balancing of social bonds within a community that allows “as and when exchanges, to reverse the asymmetrical situations so that everyone can in turn give, receive and give back”. This progressive transformation of the collective interest into individual benefits brings, through the “game of reciprocity”, a real “added value” for everyone, potentially bringing apprentice entrepreneurs in training to a “greater individual autonomy” (*idem*, p. 51).

Thus, entering into an educational process through reciprocity could allow the entrepreneur to break his isolation while creating new dilemmas necessary for a transformation of perspective inscribed in a relationship to time reconsidered.

Empirical study and first results

One can then wonder, for the 88 Breton entrepreneurs interviewed as part of our empirical study, how the dilemmas of time and isolation are reflected in their daily lives and impact their learning.

From a methodological point of view, a survey to identify the characteristics, factors or levers of action, in qualitative (experienced entrepreneurs) and quantitative (variables influencing the success or failure of entrepreneurial projects), will try to shed light on the importance of time dilemmas and isolation in the entrepreneurial process.

From a quantitative point of view, a questionnaire containing 25 items was submitted, in the first step of the study, to 68 Breton entrepreneurs. The main results useful for our reflection are the following:

- 69.1% of entrepreneurs feel overwhelmed by time;
- 38.2% of entrepreneurs feel overwhelmed by loneliness;
- 47.1% of entrepreneurs belong to one or more entrepreneur networks (75% of which have been for more than three years);
- 52.9% do not belong to any network;
- 81% do not wish to follow additional training other than that followed at the time of the creation of their company.

From a qualitative point of view, in the exploratory part of the study, semi-directive interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with 10 active Breton entrepreneurs. This first series of interviews was conducted between November 2016 and February 2017. These interviews were conducted with a population of 6 women and 4 men aged from 33 to 56 years. This sample was empirically constituted by solicitations in the professional and personal environment.

A second series of 10 interviews were conducted between December 2017 and February 2018, with a population of 3 women and 7 men aged 30 to 58 years. This sample was built on the same criteria as the exploratory interviews (less than five years of practice, age between 30 and 60, the same sectors of activity than for exploratory interviews). It should be noted that the same protocol was used. The only notable difference is based on the origin of the sample from Crédit Mutuel Arkea, partner bank of the doctoral research.

The first results of an analysis, still in progress, carried out with Iramuteq and Tropes softwares, bring out four interesting elements of reflection:

1. The decision to undertake is not the result of a social construct but the response to an felt “injunction” given by a “moment of life”. It is based around the following words: “envy”, “life”, “moment”, “begin”, “think”, “husband family”, “parent”, etc.
2. If the verb “to go” is the most used occurrence, the statistical analysis of active forms shows that the highest noun and adjective frequencies are “time” and “lonely”, respectively.
3. Time is mainly related to the words “work”, “entrepreneur” and “boss”.

“... I would say when you did not come out of the famous schools, to get out in entrepreneurship today it's almost impossible.... Knowing that when you're on your own, if you only sell your hours already you can't work enough to live well. When you are at 50 euros per hour you will spend a third of your time minimum to find customers a third to work and a third to do the job you see” (interview 4).

“And to have the time to ask yourself when you come home after twenty hours of work, you just have enough time to go back to eat in three minutes to go to bed to be pretty fresh the next day” (interview 14).

4. Loneliness is mainly linked to the words “entrepreneur” and “risk”. Loneliness is used here “in speaking of the situation of a single person, in a momentary or lasting way and in the Latin sense, by designating the state of abandonment, solitude or isolation where man feels towards the society” (Rey, 2012).

“But the numbers are stupid, they speak if it's more good if it's less, it's not really big that's it ... My choices behind it is the loneliness of the entrepreneur ... I know pretty much where I know I have to go there, but I do not know if it's really the right direction ... freedom costs us dear but she's there” (interview 15).

“I know what it's like to be a traditional entrepreneur, the risks that you run, the loneliness of the entrepreneur. And there, I discovered that I could continue to be an entrepreneur but more with risks or risks in another way, a way that suits me more today” (interview 7).

If the entrepreneurial process begins with the creation of a company, what Bruyat (1993) calls the “dilemma of competing projects”, the entrepreneur meets throughout his/her activity (project development, creation, launch, development and sustainability) successive phases of transitions.

The work of Alhadeff-Jones (2014) on temporalities shows us the interest of a “criticism of the relation to time” and of pedagogical methods inscribed in temporalities which are “specific to it and which vary according to the rhythms according to which men and women evolve, the institutions and ideas that organize it”, giving to the notion of time” all the place it occupies in the entrepreneurial process.

Mezirow's (2001) research on “transformative learning” and Eneau's (2012) research on “educational reciprocity” show us, among other things, the importance of the dilemma between “learning for oneself” and learning “with and through others”.

The first results of our empirical study seems to show, for their part, the importance of time and loneliness in the daily life of the entrepreneur, without the notion of dilemma clearly appearing in his concern. However, it seems that, in the light of our sample, if the commitment to entrepreneurship rests on the individual's unconscious dilemmas (“injunctions”) and successive transition phases (“to go”):

“And to say that it's worth it to undertake in this way. And maybe that can eventually lead to something more traditional, maybe can a stepping stone too” (interview 7).

The reports to time and isolation are a major concern of his/her “job” as an entrepreneur.

« Yes, isolation is true and that is why networks are important for those who are alone at the head of their business because the problems they encounter were surely met by others who came out, who have found ways » (interview 2).

Thus, among other things, for lack of time, only one entrepreneur out of two is part of a network and the majority of them do not wish to follow training courses. This paradoxical situation opens the question of raising the awareness of entrepreneurs in their critical relationship to the notion of time (and their declared “lack of time”).

Helping them to set up transformative actions through an educational reciprocity process should then continue to be interrogated. This is one of the goals of our doctoral research, aiming for its practical implications to give more concrete meaning of "what could be an emancipating process of transformative learning", for the entrepreneurs...

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