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Legitimizing new constructivist practice for entrepreneurship educators: Legitimacy as a framework to examine educators' new practice in China

Abstract

Purpose

This work makes a case for legitimacy as a framework with which to examine how educators made decisions about implementing entrepreneurship education in higher education institutions to better understand the educator within the educational ecosystem. It then uses a new legitimacy framework that includes self-legitimacy to examine the issues a group of educators in China encountered when implementing new constructivist entrepreneurship modules in their non-entrepreneurship curricula.

Methodology

The researchers utilized focus groups to collect data from twenty-four groups of educators at higher education institutions in four regions of China. The researchers used a bottom-up thematic analysis process to identify themes, then used legitimacy as a lens to analyze the data.

Findings

The results are presented in three main categories: Theorization, or how the practice aligns with existing practice; diffusion, or how the practice is perceived by stakeholders; and self-legitimacy, or how the practice impacts the educator's image of the self. The data shows that legitimization of their constructivist entrepreneurship education practice has not occurred at each of these stages, leaving educators struggling to rationalize how the new practice fits into their existing ecosystem.

Originality

Using legitimacy as an approach, the research adds to an understanding of how and why entrepreneurship educators adopt practice and how they are empowered to change practice

within their existing institutional structures. It brings different legitimacy theories into one framework to examine changes to entrepreneurship education practice and it applies self-legitimacy to education, an area previously only examined in high power distance situations like law enforcement, but which is appropriate for high power distance educational cultures like China.

Keywords

Legitimacy; Constructivist Education; Entrepreneurship Educators; Entrepreneurship Education; China

Introduction

The field of entrepreneurship education (EE) has proliferated globally over the last generation, often supported by national policy. The introduction of a new field brings questions as to how to embed it within existing institutions, how to implement it, i.e., what teaching practices are most effective, and who should implement it. Whether entrepreneurship can be taught is increasingly a moot point with its widening inclusion making the question not, "should we" or "can we" but "how can we best" develop an EE program at the higher education institution (HEI) level (Balan and Metcalfe, 2012; Bell and Bell, 2020). As policy supports and sometimes requires institutions to produce entrepreneurial graduates (O'Connor, 2013), there has been an increase in a "university-wide" approach to EE, expanding the focus outside of business schools (Morris *et al*., 2014). Mei and Symaco (2022) identified support for university-wide EE programs in the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, ASEAN countries, and China.

The university-wide approach to EE, is argued to benefit an HEI's entrepreneurial competence, research objectives, and third mission objectives (Lundqvist and Williams-Middleton, 2024). It also creates a university-wide need for entrepreneurship educators. The need for more entrepreneurship educators at an HEI level has led to entrepreneurship educators being one of some combination of: practitioners of entrepreneurship wading into academia, academics focused on researching entrepreneurship who teach because it's part of the job, entrepreneurship academics focused on best teaching practice, and academics from other fields who are tasked with teaching a new subject, sometimes with new teaching methods (Foliard *et* al., 2018; Wraae *et al*., 2021). The last in this list is especially relevant in China, where many university-wide entrepreneurship programs exist due to government mandates from their Ministry of Education (MoE) (Zhou and Xu, 2012), putting many educators in China in a

position of teaching entrepreneurship for the first time within an institution that has never had an entrepreneurship program.

Alongside the inclusion of EE programs came pedagogic developments and research on how to best teach entrepreneurship at the HE level (Matlay, 2018), with support for constructivist approaches to take teaching beyond the traditional behaviorist methods that teach the "about" entrepreneurship, to focus on "for" and "through" approaches (Gibb, 1987) that include practice experience and reflection (e.g., Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Mezirow 1997). Constructivist learning approaches focus on an individual creating their own meaning from knowledge, which will be different for each learner based on their context and experience (Mueller and Anderson, 2014).

One form of constructivist active learning, experiential learning, is participatory in nature and takes learners through a range of cognitive processes within an active immersive environment to synthesize and integrate information (Feinstein *et al*., 2002). It's applicability to EE can be seen as engaging learners in entrepreneurial activities and processes, argued by Lackéus and Williams-Middleton (2018) as key to education and to prepare learners for future entrepreneurship practice (Fayolle and Gailly, 2008) with favourable outcomes in results and learner satisfaction (Piercy, 2013).

Although the debate continues both on the most effective EE teaching methods and the best approaches, institutions increasingly encourage or even require educators to take on new, constructivist teaching approaches, which may be unfamiliar to an educator. Entrepreneurship educators thus can be any level of enthusiastic about teaching, any level of versed in entrepreneurship or pedagogy, and any level of familiar or comfortable with constructivist teaching practice. "For many academics, being an educator is something that they have neither aspired towards nor been educated for" (Nevgi and Löfström, 2015, p. 53). An educator's

practice is inevitably influenced by their view of the legitimacy of their practice, that is, how they feel their stakeholders respond to and validate their practice.

Previous research has examined the development of educator identity (e.g. Wraae *et al*., 2021; Van Lankveld *et al*., 2017; Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017) and agency (e.g. Priestley *et al*., 2015). Less focus has been placed on research into the role of legitimacy, that is, how the educator feels their stakeholders affirm or legitimize their educational practice, whether the educators feel able to implement the practice, and how different practice aligns with current practice (Suchman, 1995). Such an approach may be particularly useful in China, where educators are viewed as part of a collective who operate with an anthropocosmic approach to education, putting themselves as individuals at the center of a series of relationships (Tu, 1985), meaning stakeholder perceptions would hold importance.

The purpose of the paper is to look at how educators view their new EE practice being legitimized as they implement new, constructivist EE practice in higher education institutions. The research will first outline how legitimization of new practice for educators fits into the discourse on entrepreneurship educators. It then utilizes focus group studies to examine legitimization of new, constructivist EE practice implemented in HEIs in China from the educator's point of view.

Literature highlights concerns when using progressive educational approaches in EE (Foliard *et al*., 2018; Warhuus *et al*., 2018) and limited cohesion between different views within EE (Landström *et al*, 2022). Mei and Symaco (2022) looked at the legitimacy of EE in China from the point of view of introducing entrepreneurship as a subject and called for further research examining legitimacy issues for EE programs in China. The expansion and political prominence of EE makes it a valuable discipline to research (Zaring *et al*., 2021), in this case into constructivist, specifically experiential, pedagogical methods in EE within China from the

perspective of the educator, who is the most important agent at the HEI level (Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

This study addresses the calls for research highlighted above and brings together the many facets of legitimization of a new practice put forth by other authors (e.g., Cheng and Tam, 1997; Greenwood *et al*., 2002; Griffin *et al*., 2005; Tankebe, 2014; Zhang *et al*., 2020). It considers the role of different types of legitimacy to better understand how these aspects underlie concerns put forth by a cohort of HE educators in a Chinese higher-education and high power-distance context who were directed to adopt constructivist EE, a teaching method and subject area with which they were unfamiliar.

Literature Review

Legitimacy

Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." He draws from earlier definitions that are evaluative in nature, like Maurer (1971) that define it as a process whereby an institution justifies its right to exist to peer or superordinate systems. Parsons' (1960) definition looked at the systems as cultural, defining legitimacy as " 'the appraisal of action in terms of shared or common values in the context of the involvement of the action in the social system" (1960, p. 175). Thompson (1967) supported this, saying that within formal organizations, institutional-level employees legitimate the organization within its respective social system. This paper will use Suchman's (1995) definition, as it can underpin the different types of legitimacy to be discussed in this work. Legitimacy is important because it means an organization may be seen as trustworthy, persistent, worthy of resources, and may help an organization weather the storm resulting from a mistake or a poor response to a decision (Parsons, 1960; Suchman, 1995).

Suchman (1995) argues that an organization's legitimacy has been largely viewed as either strategic or institutional by the literature: Legitimacy is viewed as an operational resource that an organization can actively manage within its cultural environment to pursue its goals in the strategic legitimacy viewpoint (Suchman, 1988). Institutional legitimacy researchers view legitimacy as a set of beliefs that have the power to give rise to an organization and looks at how those beliefs thus become embedded within the organization, meaning legitimacy is not just a matter of strategic decisions by an institution, the organization is also shaped by its surrounding context (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008).

Suchman (1995) divides strategic legitimacy into three main types: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive. Pragmatic legitimacy involves a kind of exchange, with the entity using its influence among stakeholders to get support for an intervention or policy based on the expected value to stakeholders and stakeholders granting it when they believe the organization effectively meets their needs. One specific type of pragmatic legitimacy is dispositional legitimacy, which comes from a belief that an entity shares one's values and/or is trustworthy. Moral legitimacy comes from a "positive normative evaluation (Suchman, 1995, p. 579) by stakeholders that concludes that the intervention or activity is the right thing to do. The judgments are thus argued to reflect beliefs about how the activity or intervention fits into stakeholders' value system, which itself is socially constructed. Cognitive legitimacy is based on perception and cognition that imparts a taken-for-grantedness (Zucker, 1987) or normalcy of an entity or organization, such that things being otherwise becomes "literally unthinkable (Suchman, 1995, p. 583).

As new practice is introduced, it may need to be legitimized to stakeholders. The legitimization process is argued to be a social construction, dependent on context and convergence of multiple different actors, both internal and external to an organization (Suddaby *et al.*, 2017; Maguire and Hardy, 2009). Change within an institution has been described and conceptualized in the literature using so many lenses that there now exists, according to Micelotta *et al.* (2017, p.2)

"a bewildering array of empirical accounts and theoretical claims." When looking at theory around change that is presented to an institution as an innovation to existing practice and not expected to breed conflict, Micelotta *et al.* (2017) identify theories, including that of theorization by (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002), that focus on enhancing understanding how an organization gains legitimacy and persuades others to endorse the change. It is by no means the only way to view organizational change, but its placement within the aforementioned parameters means it provides a useful lens through which to view an institution undergoing a non-disruptive change that is not characterized by social movements or social change agents. Because this study looks at mature organizations, the model is also argued to be suitable for a university or other HEI (Bruton et al., 2010).

Greenwood *et al*. (2002) postulated a six-stage institutional change model that leads to legitimized new practices, which starts with changes being necessitated by an authority. In stage two, the existing practice is 'deinstitutionalized;' that is, the consensus is disrupted on how to implement the practice to allow for change. In the third stage, 'pre-institutionalization,' an organization seeks solutions internally or by involving outside parties. Once the organization has found a proposed solution, the next stage is to parse the new practice into formats that are recognizable and attainable by the implementers, i.e., theorization. In this stage, the organization calls out an organizational failing and introduces the innovation, either by aligning the new practice with existing practices, 'moral legitimacy,' (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996), or by proclaiming the innovation as superior, granting it 'pragmatic' legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). In the fifth stage, diffusion, the new practice is disseminated, wherein it is legitimized by repetition and increased usage and may be viewed as beneficial. In the final stage, the practice is fully institutionalized and has 'cognitive' legitimacy, in which the practitioners then take the practice for granted as a "natural and appropriate arrangement" (Greenwood *et al*., 2002, p. 61). It should be noted here that Greenwood *et al.'s* model uses the

term, 'moral legitimacy' based on Tolbert and Zucker (1996) and mentions it being based on alignment with existing practice, differing from Suchman's (1995) definition, which focuses more on the alignment with (macro) societal standards. Greenwood *et al*'s (2002) model focuses more on micro standards, meaning its alignment with an institution's existing practice. *Greenwood et al's* (2002) use of pragmatic legitimacy is an interpretation but not an exact replica of Suchman's (1995) definition. The Greenwood *et al* (2002) model aligns 'pragmatic' with 'superior,' and providing more benefit than before, whereas Suchman's (1995) definition focuses on the institution's ability to deliver benefits or value to its stakeholders.

When applying a new idea to within an educational setting, Griffin *et al*. (2005) maintains that legitimacy of a new practice comes with time and acceptance, which then implies credibility, trustworthiness, and reliability of the idea. Cheng and Tam (1997) put forth that the legitimacy of an HEI is a product of the institution's position or reputation, which can be guaranteed by a central authority, but the institution still must be accountable to its stakeholders, particularly the students, parents, and government bodies overseeing their performance and accreditation. Cheng and Tam (1997) argue that to maintain the legitimacy needed to survive, the institution must be seen as a critical resource to a community that is providing a high-quality product and demonstrate accountability thereto. Thus, to gain legitimacy at an institutional level, HEIs need to implement activities that align with its community's moral and ethical norms. Although educators are not administrators who are directly responsible for the legitimacy of the institution, it is reasonable to assume that educators would feel pressure to keep their institution 'legitimate' and aligned with norms and expectations of its stakeholders, whether because of value-congruence or self-preservation purposes.

Besides the overall legitimacy of an institution, legitimacy may be seen through the lens of the educator's confidence in their claim to power, known as self-legitimacy (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012). The educator is typically positioned as a crucial agent (Biesta and Tedder, 2007) in the

educational ecosystem (Wraae and Walmsley, 2020), implying their belief in their claim to power is a key element of legitimization.

Tankebe (2014) argues that self-legitimacy examines the confidence powerholders have in the moral validity of their power, which can be seen as 'dialogical' in nature, between someone in a position of power has with a subordinate (Bottoms and Tankebe, 2012). However, Debbaut and De Kimpe (2023) argue that self-legitimacy is more endogenous, with an individual in power attributing the characteristics of their power-based position to themselves with validation possibly coming from a small peer group. An endogenous view is argued to be differentiated from social identity in that the holder of power believes that they deserve their power regardless of their performance (Barker, 2001).

Self-legitimacy analysis has been largely used in western situations with high power distance like law enforcement officers (e.g., Debbaut and De Kimpe, 2023; Nix and Wolfe, 2017; Bradford and Quinton, 2014), but not applied to other more moderate power-distance scenarios or eastern high-power distance scenarios (Zhang *et al*., 2020). In an HEI setting, there is naturally some level of power distance between student and their educator, and an educator must believe in their claim to any level of power to be legitimate in a classroom. Given the high level of power distance between educators and students in China (Zhang *et al*., 2020), this confidence in validity of claim to power becomes more salient. Self-legitimacy will be further explored later in the literature review.

The role of legitimacy for an educator implementing new practice, particularly EE practice, can thus be seen as how their stakeholders receive and validate the new practice, how does the practice align with what they are already doing, and how they feel their claim to power is impacted by the change in practice.

The next sections will now examine EE and respective teaching methods in the Chinese context before examining legitimacy research in the Chinese context.

Entrepreneurship Education and Constructivist Teaching in the Chinese Context

China's HEIs are argued to be a product of both a Confucian society and imported European university models, which Lu and Jover (2019) argue necessitates taking an anthropocosmic view. Unlike anthropocentric views that emphasize the importance of the individual, the anthropocosmic view, a key value in Confucianism, considers an individual to exist within a series of relationships; the individual is part of a continuum that includes the family, community, country, and even beyond the physical earth (Tu, 1985). Lu and Jover (2019) argue that, while an individual is independent and autonomous in this view, they are inextricably interconnected to the wider continuum, a form of 'implicit mutuality' of the entire world order. Education in China is, based on this principle, said to focus less on fostering individuals in favor of the education's practical application in society (Di and McEwan, 2016).

China's focus on entrepreneurship is intended to aid economic growth (Kriz, 2010) and address the structural unemployment stemming from more college graduates seeking work (Anderson and Zhang, 2015; Zhou and Xu, 2012), taking on the Western view that entrepreneurial action is mutually beneficial to the entrepreneur and the common good of society (Wadhwani and Viebig, 2021). The "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" agenda that China introduced in 2014 highlighted the role of Entrepreneurship for China's development (Mei and Symaco, 2022), and a directive in 2015 required all HEIs to provide compulsory and optional courses on innovation and entrepreneurship for all students, which should include performance in the assessment process (Bell, 2022; Cui *et al*., 2021). The 'Made in China 2025' ten-year national plan (2015) highlights plans for reforming and widening the availability of China's EE.

In addition to a new subject area, EE in China has been directed to incorporate pedagogical reforms identified in a 2001 MoE directive that included approaches to teaching that were considered constructivist (Tan, 2017), wherein individuals create their own meaning from information within their own context (Mueller and Anderson, 2014) and construct their

knowledge by interpreting their interactions and experiences with their surroundings (Mathews, 2007). Despite this 'refocus', the introduction of constructivist pedagogy in EE demonstrates a clash between the traditional approach and progressive constructivist pedagogy in China (Bell and Liu, 2019; Liguori *et al.*, 2019). Most educators and students in Chinese HE have had more experience with traditional lecturing and assessments based largely on an answer key, meaning that they are being asked to undertake practice with which they may be unfamiliar and unconfident (Bell, 2020; Tan, 2016).

Lyu *et al.* (2021) argue that mandates by the government for integration of EE and constructivist methods have resulted in the direct 'importation' of methods that are not amenable to traditional Chinese teaching standards. This has led to a fusion of progressive and traditional teaching methods within Chinese EE (Bell and Cui, 2023). Wright *et al.* (2022) argue that, as a result, some Chinese universities have not fully embraced the educational initiatives, implementing the mandates only superficially, or combining different teaching methods within the same institution resulting in different classes being taught differently and lacking in cohesion to an underlying teaching philosophy. It should be noted that teaching classes differently or lacking in cohesion to an underlying teaching philosophy is in itself not necessarily an indictment of China's approach to EE. While there is great support for constructivist approaches, there is no one universally accepted 'magic bullet' in the literature to foster entrepreneurialism in students, nor is a country with so many HEIs necessarily going to find a 'one-size-fits-all' approach as they enact mandated changes that allow for minutiae. It may be that an 'ideal' approach to EE for such a large country will never be neatly homogenized but rather bespoke to the HEI's needs.

There is a dearth of research on the link between an anthropocosmic view and teaching methods, with Ratten and Usmanij (2021) arguing for EE research to incorporate this world view. China's focus on entrepreneurship as a lever for societal advancement can be viewed

through an anthropocosmic lens. This is not to say that a more growth-oriented/capitalist lens does not also align with government-level support for entrepreneurship; indeed, much literature has focused on the intersection of the two (Di and McEwan, 2016). This study will look at how educators, who have been in a system that prioritizes harmony and fitting into a bigger system, feel after being trained for unfamiliar methods. Thus, the role of how the educator's practice is affirmed by stakeholders and how it impacts their self-ascribed right to hold power in the classroom ecosystem becomes an appropriate lens for this study. 'Stakeholders' in this study refers largely to HEI leadership, HEI educator peers, students and their parents.

Legitimacy in Chinese Higher Education Institutions

Zhang *et al*. (2020) referred to 'educational legitimacy' in Chinese HEIs, as a state of affirmation of the education provided for students by students, parents, and the government, and they argue that the government plays an oversized role as a legitimizer in China, where it defines the desirability of practice and is the ultimate judge of appropriateness of the educational content and delivery.

For Chinese HEIs implementing new constructivist teaching methods to new entrepreneurship courses, the governmental directives fulfil Greenwood *et al*.'s (2002) first step of necessitating changes in practice. While Greenwood *et al*. (2002) found the role of the government to be largely confined to the first step, the findings of Zhang *et al*. (2020) would argue that government directives also act as the de jure granter of 'pragmatic legitimacy' by declaring a new practice superior. Suchman's (1995) view would see this as a type of strategic legitimacy, leveraging the government's policy to show they are aligned with a bigger picture that reflects society in some way, as the government would be seen as a granter of institutional legitimacy. Within some HEIs, external trainers help educators and are brought in to assist with the 'pre-institutionalization' stage by training the educators to implement the new teaching style. The

parties that impart legitimacy, enabling stage six, are the state, educator peers, students, and parents of students (Zhang *et al*., 2020).

Greenwood *et al.'s* (2002) six-stage model can be argued to, depending on the context and country, underestimate the role of the government in legitimizing new teaching practice in an HEI at the working level.

Zhang *et al*. (2020) examined the role of the Chinese government in the legitimization of Chinese business schools, finding that the government, as a regulator, plays an active role in business schools' legitimization process. It grants institutional legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). However, their research was concluded before China's directive to include compulsory EE and its incorporation with new constructivist teaching methods in China, with the research not examining teaching practice.

Existing classroom culture and tradition can make the transitioning and engagement in new learning approaches uncomfortable for both students and faculty (Neergaard and Christensen, 2017). In a Chinese HEI setting, cultural roots in power distance and collectivism have led to clearly defined roles of learner and educator, with decisions on how learning happens stemming from the instructor and students being passive receivers of information (Zhang, 2013). Murphy (1987) attributed students' expecting educators to be an 'oracle' of knowledge to the Confucian principle of filial piety, in which it is considered a virtue to exhibit love and respect for parents, elders, and ancestors, and Bond (1992) made the connection between filial piety and respect for older, higher-ranking individuals like educators. Self-legitimacy of an educator in this role may be another effective lens through which to view, as the efficacy of the educator as an 'oracle' of knowledge must be embodied in the instructor's belief that they deserve to hold that power within an HEI setting (Tankebe, 2014).

The linkages between self-legitimacy and Chinese educational practice are not explored in the literature in the way organizational legitimacy has been examined, yet an educator is a key

agent and implementer of practice within the HEI. Because perceptions about legitimacy of the educator's practice have received limited attention in the literature, the following research is designed to identify how the concerns of the educators integrating new constructivist EE practice at HEIs in China reflect concerns about legitimacy. The Chinese government had been able to implement systemic and incremental educational system change, imparting legitimacy in education by use of directives. The following study will highlight the challenges to legitimacy from the point of view of the educators implementing the new practice.

Methodology

Focus Group Data Collection

Focus groups were adopted to collect qualitative data by generating discussion between participants (Kitzinger, 1995). Increasingly used in social science research since the 1990s (Braun and Clarke, 2013), Morgan (1988) argued that focus groups are valuable for eliciting participants' thoughts regarding a topic and excel at unearthing the reasoning behind it. A strength of focus groups is that they support participants to develop ideas collectively from participant experiences (Du Bois, 1983). Focus groups can accordingly explore and investigate narratives of shared and common views (Hughes and Dumont, 1993). Importantly, as legitimacy is a social construct, focus groups are particularly suited for new ideas participants have formed within a social context, and they may produce better results than just speaking to a researcher, as participants are more likely to be more comfortable amongst people like themselves using 'their language' (Liamputtong, 2007, Braun and Clarke, 2014). In line with guidance from Fuller *et al.* (2003), focus groups were used to gain insight into educator quality concerns with implementing constructivist EE methods and their connection to deeper issues of legitimacy and identity to increase the efficacy of future guidance for educators in the Chinese context.

Sample and Focus Groups Composition

Data was collected from twenty-four focus groups at four HEIs located within four Chinese provinces in central, eastern, and southwest regions. Whilst the HEIs all had different specialisms, they were all adopting constructivist EE and had received training from a Sino-British organization in designing and implementing constructivist entrepreneurship curricula using experiential teaching methods. All participants had completed the training and were interviewed after they had implemented it into their entrepreneurship modules. The educators came from different disciplines, none of which were entrepreneurship, and delivered the education over a semester in classes ranging from twenty to eighty students, depending on the discipline. All the educators' jobs were teaching-intensive rather than focused on research.

A purposeful judgement sampling technique was adopted, whereby those judged to be positioned most effectively to provide information to achieve the purpose of the research were selected. The approach enabled a selection of information-rich participants to be included in the focus groups (Patton, 2002). One hundred sixty participants were selected, based on their successful completion of the training, implementation of the teaching methods, and willingness to discuss their concerns about adopting constructivist EE. Table 1 shows the composition of the focus groups by study areas and geographical location. The number of participants in each group was between six and eight, consistent with focus group literature (Tritter and Landstad, 2020). All participation was voluntary, and participants were assured they had the option to discontinue participation in the focus group at any time and to have their contribution discarded. The participants had taught entrepreneurship classes to students studying humanities, science, sports, agriculture, telecommunications, education, and engineering. Table 1 provides details of the location of the sample included in this research.

Table 1: Location and Breakdown of the Sample

Province	Region	Number of Focus Groups	Focus Group Sizes	Coding for in-text Quotes
Sichuan	Southwest	6	6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 7	SW1 – SW6
Hubei	Central	6	6, 7, 7, 7, 8, 8	C1– C6
Jiangsu	Eastern	6	6, 6, 7, 7, 8, 8	E1 – E6
Shandong	Eastern	6	6, 6, 6, 6, 7, 7	E7 – E12

Each focus group consisted of six to eight participants of mixed gender and drawn from a mix of subjects, based on the recommendation that the optimum number of participants in a focus group is six to ten (MacIntosh, 1993). One hundred and sixty participants, both male and female, ranging in age from twenty-five to sixty were involved within the twenty-four focus groups.

It has been suggested that hierarchies within focus groups might adversely influence the data collected (Kitzinger, 1995) or present ethical issues (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). The participants held similar job roles, albeit in different subject areas, to prevent existing roles and hierarchies from dominating or limiting the discussion. The respective subject areas of participants were mixed to enable a more open and honest discussion to support the reliability and trustworthiness of the data collected (Barbour, 2005). Within each focus group, there were at least four of the seven subject areas, and the educators were not working together on a day-to-day basis, which is argued by some to increase self-censorship or create pressure for consensus (Morgan *et al*, 1998). Social desirability bias is a consideration in focus groups, as the participants may have wished to present themselves in a socially acceptable way to their peers, even if that way does not reflect the participants' reality (Bergen and Labonté, 2020). To mitigate these impacts, the researchers used respectful language to establish rapport with the participants and ensured they understood that the information would not be associated with them or their institution in the final research products, nor would it be shared with their HEI leadership (Bergen and Labonté, 2020). Additionally, the focus group participants all had very

limited experience delivering constructivist EE, ensuring that all participants were in a similar position and had similar knowledge and experience, in line with recommendations that focus group participants should have shared knowledge and experiences to support shared discussion, whilst having enough diversity to offer different views (Kitzinger, 1995). While these focus groups are not meant to represent all Chinese educators, they provide a useful snapshot of the many educators in China being asked to use new teaching methods based in constructivism to teach a new subject, EE.

Conducting the Focus Groups

The focus groups were led by a moderator, who was not part of the participants' chain of command or involved with their teaching. The moderator began by introducing the topics of constructivist education and EE to engage and focus participants on the discussion topic, which was part of a 'warm up' time not spent directly on eliciting any answers to research questions, but rather on framing the context and getting participants comfortable with the moderator and with speaking with one another (Breen, 2006). Group discussions were initiated by the moderator, who asked the participants about their concerns with the integration of the constructivist education in their curricula and classes. The participants were not given prompts beyond this to allow for free-flowing communication. Chairs were arranged in a circle and participants were allowed to sit in any order. As is to be expected, some participants were more forthcoming, but as more people shared, participants felt increasingly comfortable and began sharing their experiences.

When participants put concerns forward, the moderator asked participants why they perceived this as a concern, if it had not already been covered in the discussion, before asking the other group members for their views. When the conversation flagged, the moderator would open the conversation by asking if there were any other perceived issues and why those concerns existed.

The moderator was cognizant of 'silencing' (Wilkinson, 1998) and strived to ensure no ideas were immediately silenced, which did not prove to be an issue overall. The discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English. Finally, a second translator back translated the translated texts to check for conceptual equivalency (Bhalla and Lin, 1987).

Data Analysis

When analysing qualitative data collected from focus groups, certain comments take on more importance than others as the groups arrive at a consensus, some comments are refuted by others, thus placing importance on the social interaction itself that takes place during the focus groups (Breen, 2006).

As the data was prepared for analysis, more importance was placed on contributions on which there was general agreement both among and between groups, in line with guidance from Breen (2006). The researchers adopted a bottom-up thematic analysis process to identify themes, following the guidelines offered by Braun and Clarke (2013). In the first step, the researchers analyzed the data to identity relevant sections of the text and to attach labels associated with surface-level concerns such as 'assessment,' 'learning,' 'fairness,' etc. Two researchers developed their themes and came together to discuss and examine the themes for congruences among the codes. It was at this time that the researcher realized the strong role of legitimacy underlying the comments, and another round of coding was carried out to focus on areas of legitimacy, looking for phrases that aligned with any of the different areas of legitimacy outlined in the literature review.

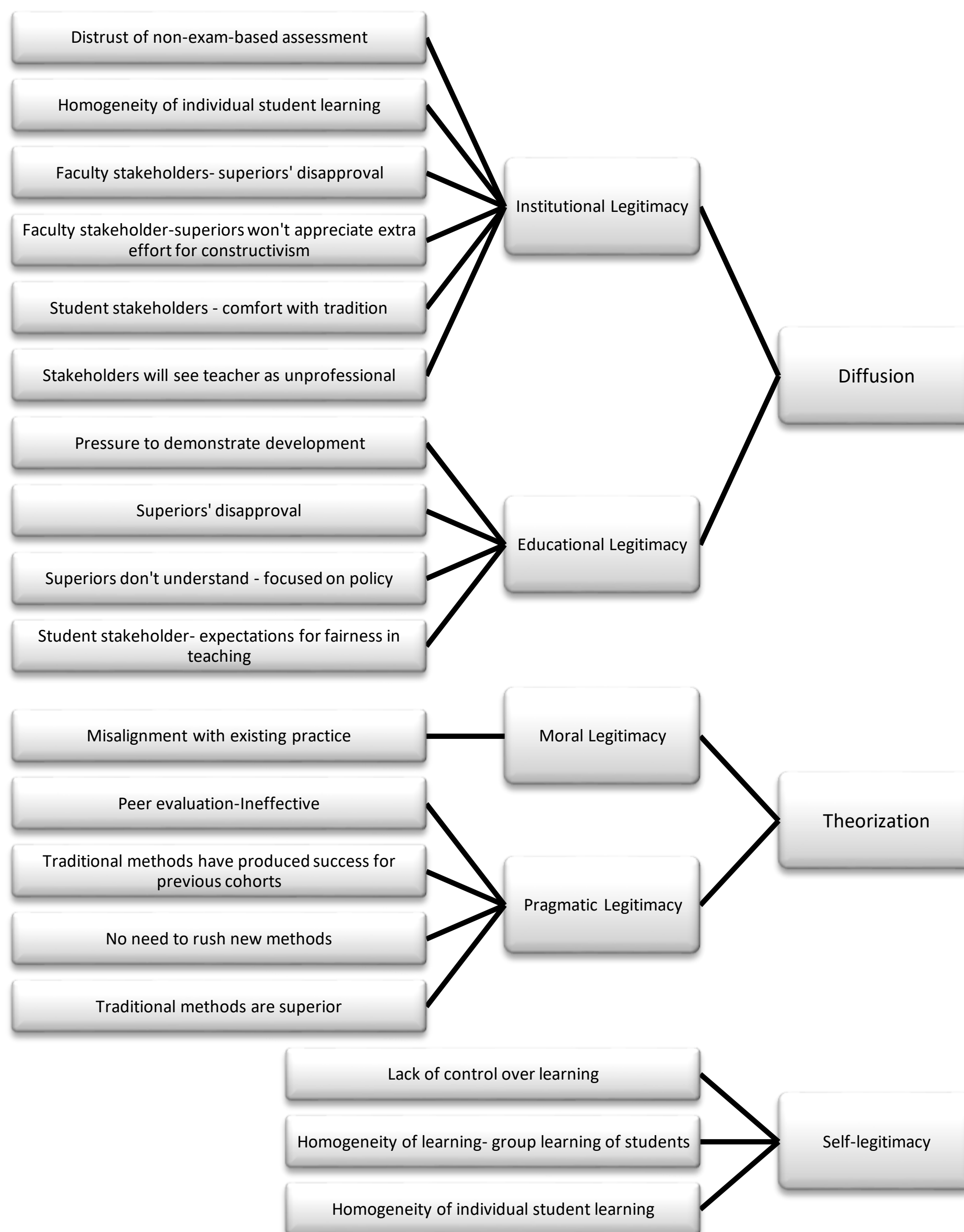
The labels were collated, separated into separate spreadsheets by code, and analyzed to identify where the surface-level concerns aligned with the deeper-level codes to develop themes. This was achieved by bringing together fragments of views and experiences, which alone would have been meaningless in isolation (Aronson, 1995). These themes were then reviewed

separately by the researchers for coherency to ensure each theme accurately reflected the meanings within each theme and in the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Consensus within the focus groups and between the focus groups was found in terms of the themes developed; this has been identified as a way of cross validating themes (Kitzinger, 1995). A peer de-briefer who was familiar with the topic, but not directly engaged in the research, was used to support the interpretation, and enhance the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2014). The results are presented and then discussed in the next sections.

Results and Discussion

Using legitimacy as a lens through which to examine these concerns, the results fell into three main categories: Theorization, or how the practice aligns with existing practice; Diffusion, or how the practice is perceived by stakeholders; and Self-legitimacy, or how the practice impacts the educator's image of the self. The last category also included some elements that were reflective of social identity. These social identity elements were left out of the results presented here to keep the study coherent and focused. Theorization and diffusion were then broken down into sub-themes based on the literature. Theorization concerns were interpreted according to Greenwood *et al's* (2002) model's definitions and divided into concerns about a lack of moral legitimacy and pragmatic legitimacy. Diffusion concerns were divided into concerns about educational legitimacy and educational institutional legitimacy. Identity concerns were limited to concerns about self-legitimacy for the purpose of this study. The coding elements associated with the subthemes and themes are given in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Coding Relationship to Subthemes and Themes



In some groups, participants felt the need to begin by using defensive terms indicating they understood *how* and *why* to conduct constructivist EE before they stated their concerns. These statements usually occurred early on in the discussion and took on the pattern of, "I understand how to do it, but…" (SW3) "I understand it is important for the students to be engaged, but…" (E1) and "Teaching innovation is important, but…" (E8) These statements were then followed

by reasons why they did not feel comfortable using the new teaching methods. This indicated some participants wanted to be sure their peers in the group knew that concerns were not grounded in their ignorance of the process. They also made sure to mention that they believed in the need for entrepreneurship as an academic subject and for society, referring initially to entrepreneurs as great service providers before highlighting their concerns with the teaching methods. These comments showed they were not yet comfortable with sharing their insecurities with the wider group and/or with the moderator. However, these statements decreased as the conversation flowed between participants who realized they shared a sense of community in their discomfort with such a fundamental change to their established practice.

Diffusion: How is the practice perceived by my stakeholders? Educational and Educational Institutional Legitimacy

Educational legitimacy Educators expressed concern that their stakeholders would disapprove of their new practice. Although they were directed by their institution's leadership to implement new constructivist methods to deliver EE and provided training thereto, the data showed that the educators felt unsure about securing their superiors' approval for it in daily practice, in line with educational legitimacy, which occurs when the utility of the education that the educator provides is affirmed by stakeholders (Zhang *et al*., 2020).

The data indicated that educators had concerns about the subjective assessments they used, which included individual student reflections and peer evaluations. They were particularly concerned about how they could defend subjective assessments to stakeholders as a valid part of the educational process. The data showed that educators believed that high-quality assessments examined students objectively, meaning the educator could show that students who achieved the same score answered an assessment the same way. The educators who

expressed this belief often included statements of feeling a strong need to defend their practice to stakeholders, namely superiors, educators, students, and parents.

Viewed through the lens of educational legitimacy, assessments were often spoken about in ways that revealed insecurity about defending their applicability to the educational process and concern that the people telling them to implement these practices would not reward them for their efforts. The new assessment method was different than what they had been taught was most effective. The educators also expressed alarm that they would be unable to defend this method of assessment to external stakeholders, citing pressure to prove results. For example, SW 2 cited the need to demonstrate that they had imparted the learning expected by others, "*We need to adopt testing methods to demonstrate students learning as without this, it is not possible to demonstrate students' development*." And E7 mirrored this concern, "*I need to adopt tests to ensure students have met the required learning, as other methods cannot prove students learning."*

Educational Institutional legitimacy Institutional legitimacy indicates that the institution itself maintains its reputation by being accountable to its stakeholders, which include students and their parents, and that it aligns with their norms and standards, from whom this legitimacy comes in the form of constitutive beliefs (Suchman, 1995). The term 'educational institutional legitimacy' will look at the legitimacy of the institution itself and how the educators believe their new teaching approaches align with societal norms and expectations of the institution. While the previous section examined the data through the lens of stakeholders in the context of the educational legitimacy, this section focuses on concerns that emerged with respect to how educators thought the new practice could reflect badly on their institution and themselves via their stakeholders.

When asked about concerns of constructivist education, the issue of student comfort with a new system was often named. The data showed that student comfort was linked to their

preference for 'traditional' approaches, in line with their expectations and wider norms of the stakeholder communities. There was concern that their stakeholders would disapprove of the new methods simply because it went against expected traditional methods, for example, E1 said, *"Whilst a transition to more active teaching is encouraged in principle neither students nor leaders are comfortable with a major change."*

And C2 stated, *"Students, parents and society all understand and acknowledge the benefits of traditional teaching and assessment and therefore expect this."* While others were concerned that the homogeneity of constructivist education would be seen as an unfair way to teach students who were expecting traditional teaching methods. The word 'tradition' appeared often with the word 'expectation,' showing that the educators did not feel they were in line with societal norms when implementing this new educational approach.

Educators also voiced concern that superiors, parents, or students would view the education that was outside of their norms and standards inadequate, and thus view the educators themselves as lazy or incapable because they were not lecturing and because they did not use exams to assess students. For example, SW2 said, "*College leaders and administrators can view teachers who are not directly lecturing and providing students with knowledge as lazy."* and E9 used similar language when stating that, "*Innovations and adoption of more progressive teaching can be viewed as teachers being lazy and not wanting to teach."*

The theme of educational institutional legitimacy showed that, while voicing concern about teaching and assessment, there were larger underlying concerns about misalignment with the norms and standards of the wider community, from which they did not want to be separated. In a worldview of concentric anthropocosmic circles, the educators in this study may be indicating that they felt separated from their place within the natural order. The constructivist EE training focused on the 'nuts and bolts' of how to design and implement the new EE, and the training organizers have assumed that their training would be welcomed by the educators

seen as an improvement. The HEI leadership who organized the training had used the government policies to try to establish strategic legitimacy, presenting the new methods as aligning with government-level norms. The data indicates there is still a gap in legitimization of the new methods from the point of view of the newly minted EE educators, which could potentially undermine the future use of the methods (how these educators implement these methods in the future is beyond the scope of this paper).

Theorization: How does the practice align with what I'm already doing? Pragmatic and Moral Legitimacy

A practice achieves either moral or pragmatic legitimacy when it either aligns with existing practice or is accepted as superior to previous practice, in line with Greenwood *et al's* (2002) six-stage model's uses of the terms. The data showed that the new practice of constructivist teaching methods was viewed more as an outlier to existing practice, neither fitting in with or superseding existing practice.

Moral Legitimacy The educators expressed that the new practice did not align with their current practice. They also highlighted that their other classes (in their areas of expertise) were still being taught the 'traditional' way, SW1 observed: *"Other classes adopt traditional methods, so it does not make much sense moving too far from this."* While the educators felt that the new practice did not align with the old practice, the data showed more issues from educators with pragmatic legitimacy.

Pragmatic Legitimacy The educators were cognizant that their non-entrepreneurship modules had not changed in light of the new EE practice. The educators spoke of the new practice as a contrast to 'traditional' practice they carried out in other classes, implying the traditional methods were clearly just as good if not better, since traditional methods had a history of success, showing that to these educators, the new practice had not been proven to be superior,

as said by SW1, "*Our traditional methods have a long and successful history within education, so I believe that they can continue to support business and entrepreneurship,* " and C3, "*If what we have works and always has worked, there is no need to make big changes.*"

There is certainly discourse in China about the best teaching methods, as evidenced by the state-level policies providing the impetus for the new EE teaching methods these educators implemented. However, as many educators in China, including those in the focus groups, are focused on teaching rather than research, it may call into question the distillation of this pedagogic discourse to the working level, particularly to educators focused on teaching and who do not have qualms about their current methods. How research in support of these new methods and the factors that implemented the policy change reach the practitioners could be an area of consideration by HEI leadership and policymakers to better support EE practitioners and make their practice feel legitimized.

Interestingly, this area was not spoken about in the same vignettes as concerns about the constructivism and its assessment itself, but was critical of the need for new practice, which may align with resentment about asking educators to change practice they see as both successful and effective, or even just human nature, i.e., resistance to change, not to mention in line with their own sense of what it is to be an educator. The next section will unpack how the new practice impacted the educator's sense of their authority as an educator.

Self-legitimacy: How does the new practice affirm my authority as an educator? Self-legitimacy

Concerns regarding the uniformity of student learning was an oft-cited concern within the focus group discussions. Educators expressed concerns about students having different learning experiences when engaging with constructivist EE. The educators often paired the concerns about different levels of learning amongst their cohorts with insecurity about losing control of

the class. The concerns spanned individual student learning and learning in groups. The concern with individual student learning was that the educator would not have control over the learning in the same way as if they were lecturing. Statements that reflected this included C1, who said, "*When I lecture the students, I can control the information and ensure the key content has been covered*" and E3, who said, "*I want to ensure all students receive the same learning, but this is hard when I am involved in only limited teaching.*" When referring to groups, the main concern was that the educator could not control the level of learning among and within different groups. For example, C3 said "*When using activities and discussions, we do not always know the students are learning the right things.*"

Control over the learning of individuals, which included terms like learning 'the right things' and concern over 'limited teaching' wherein the instructor ceded control to the students was almost always mentioned in the same sentences in which educators spoke of concerns about the quality of different levels of learning using constructivist methods.

This area complements social identity theory in that an educator's own internal belief in their claim to power is inevitably aligned with how they fit into their peer group (Stets and Burke, 2000) and how their role differentiates them from others with whom they interact (Burke and Tully, 1977). It differs from identity theories because the focus is on the claim to power being legitimized within the self (Barker, 2001), something the educators had likely taken for granted before implementing the new constructivist practice. Given the strong association between the educator's claim to power and the control over students' learning, the data shows concerns about the homogeneity of learning linking to concerns about the educator's self-legitimacy, as they view themselves as the only one who can operate the fountain of knowledge to quench student's thirst for knowledge (Murphy, 1987). When students can operate their own fountains, the (perceived) role of the educator may appear diminished. Although state- and HEI-level policies are in place and training was provided, the educators may feel the new EE teaching

methods do not align with a more inherent order of things based on filial piety (Bond, 1992) nor made them feel as though they are entitled to their expected level of power (Tankebe, 2014). The interventions appear to have made the educator not feel affirmed in their role with this new power balance.

Conclusion

The preceding work has looked at how educators' perceived legitimacy is impacted from stakeholders, from alignment with existing practice, and from their own view of their claim to power in the classroom (self-legitimacy). This is a pivotal angle from which to examine new EE methods from the educator point of view, to understand how educators implement constructivist EE practice, and, importantly, why they may not fully be embracing the new practice.

The data shows the 'final' level of legitimacy, that is, cognitive legitimacy, has not yet been achieved. The study shows that the process of legitimization has several aspects of realization for practice and is not separate from an educator's own sense of self-legitimacy. The practice of constructivist teaching methods, while mandated for entrepreneurship classes, has not been widely implemented, nor has it been accepted by the wider community as superior to previous practice, denying it both moral and pragmatic legitimacy. The educators do not feel that stakeholders, particularly management, students, and parents, have accepted the practice.

Educators find themselves in an ambiguous institutional legitimacy environment wherein what is considered 'legitimate' by the government is not yet recognized by HEI peers, students, or parents. This places educators in a no-win situation wherein they feel they are always falling short of some subset of stakeholders' expectations.

The researchers have investigated the concerns that Chinese HE educators have with the adoption of constructivist EE viewed through a legitimacy lens and have included self-

legitimacy for the first time in this approach. Given the many types of entrepreneurship educators now implementing EE at a university-wide level, understanding these viewpoints can inform decision makers looking to successfully implement constructivist education and support the needs of educators unsure about how they fit into a community of practice.

The findings support a view that development of EE educators needs to go beyond the typical recommendations of more, contextualized training to show that educators feel unsupported by their stakeholders, meaning a larger cultural or institutional change must be prioritized to legitimize practice. Educators must be enabled with buy-in from stakeholders and their practice normalized institutionally. The educators in the study are operating within a system that values answer-based test scores, and they are beholden to stakeholders who equate test results with educator and learning quality. The tension between the government's support for new curricula development and the level of agency an instructor feels in implementing the new curricula showed how the process of legitimacy has many facets that are failing to be successfully fulfilled in the HEIs implementing the new practice. While these results are limited to a Chinese context, the argument for these types of institutional support systems are not limited to one country, as many countries implementing university-wide EE programs will also face roadblocks at the institutional and stakeholder level that need to be acknowledged and addressed systemically to enable educators to act locally.

Changing the rules and providing more training may not result in a successful utilization of strategic legitimacy by an institution if the norms and standards of the educators feel disrupted. Even if educational institutional legitimacy has been granted by society, the HEI may not be able to expect to seamlessly enact fundamental change in practice when implementing constructivist EE without justifying the change to stakeholders. They may retain their institution's legitimacy *despite* the new practice, and even run the risk of the practice not being fully embraced by educators who feel set afloat away from what they expect, which, in the case

of this study, was the educator's place among a natural Confucian anthropocosmic world order that defined their role in the class. The enacting new standards may need to find ways to legitimize new (constructivist) approaches to the stakeholders identified by the educators as preferring the previous educational approach, in line with Suchman's (1995) strategic legitimacy.

This research also highlights the challenges that result from attempting to reset the expectations of an educator's belief in their level of authority as the classroom dynamic changes. The research shows issues with constructivist EE when applied to a society argued to have a Confucian anthropocosmic worldview. However, the implications can be wider in EE, with educators coming from the field as well as from other disciplines. An entrepreneur who enters the classroom to teach EE, assured of their knowledge and expecting a certain level of deference, may not remain in EE if they have not had their expectations aligned with constructivist EE classroom norms. Empowering EE practitioners so they do not feel threatened by the power dynamics within the constructivist EE practice could be an area to prioritize alongside alignment of policy, research, and practice.

Limitations and Future Research

The researchers gathered data at HEIs actively looking to integrate constructivist approaches in delivering EE across four provinces in China. The research was conducted while educators were developing new curricula. It is possible that after the delivery of the new curricula, educators' concerns may have changed. Longitudinal research could help to develop our understanding of how constructivist and progressive education and particularly progressive EE can be contextualised in China and other contexts within other developing economies with different educational traditions.

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