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A Holistic Social Constructionist perspective to Enterprise Education

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the Gestalt approach this article proposes a holistic framework for enterprise education (EE) research based on Social Constructionism, illustrating how the latter supports research into experiential learning in EE in 7 UK Higher Education (HE) pharmacy schools.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach – This paper is based on a qualitative empirical study involving educators in UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) pharmacy schools in semi-structured interviews, and investigates the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches. Social Constructionism is proposed as a suitable underlying philosophical paradigm.

Findings – A Social Constructionism paradigm, which adopts relative realism ontology, transactional epistemology, and Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology, offers a relevant, multi-perspectival philosophical foundation for EE research, supporting transactional relationships within contexts of multiple possibilities.

Research limitations/implications – Social Constructionism does not necessarily support the individualistic paradigm, as advocated by Constructivists; and the values associated with the former encourage a more collaborative and cooperative approach different from the latter.

Practical implications –The paper supports the understanding that applying experiential learning through inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning is regarded as an approach beneficial for educators, institutions and learners, within the context of EE.

Originality/ value – This paper offers a holistic conceptual framework of Social Constructionism that draws on the ‘Gestalt Approach’, and highlights the harmony between the ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings of Social Constructionism. The paper demonstrates the relevance of the proposed framework in EE research within the context of an empirical study, which is different in that it focuses on the delivery aspect of EE by considering the views of the providers (educators), an hitherto under-researched area.

Paper type – Research paper

Key words: Enterprise education, research philosophy, Social Constructionism, relative realism ontology, transactional epistemology, Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Gestalt approach.

Introduction:

This article is intended to balance, what we perceive of, as the dominance of positivistic approaches in entrepreneurship research. As such, the aim of this article is to develop a holistic, multi-perspectival Social Constructionist framework for enterprise education (EE) research, and show its relevance by drawing on an empirical study about experiential learning, conducted in 7 UK HE pharmacy schools. The relationship between the paradigm adopted in research and researchers' views of the world is an area that is subject to on-going debate in social sciences, where adopting and discussing any research paradigm would be incomplete without addressing these debates. Taking this on board, the authors aim to provide a holistic representation of the Social Constructionist paradigm and its epistemological, ontological and methodological dimensions, and how such a multi-perspectival perspective underpins EE research. A number of authors have looked at the link between Social Constructionism, enterprise and entrepreneurship such as, for instance, Bouchikhi (1993) who presented, through a constructivist framework, the importance of considering time and space factors, besides the personality of an entrepreneur, in order to determine the outcomes of the entrepreneurial process. Chell (2000) emphasised the need to place entrepreneurs in their social contexts in order to explain the social construction of their personalities; Pittaway (2000) investigated the social construction of entrepreneurial behaviour in relation to business owners' behaviours and their reasons for being in business; and Lindgren and Packendorff (2009) examined the appropriateness of Social Constructionism in entrepreneurship research. In addition, Klapper (2008) explored the relevance of Social Constructionism within the context of social capital in entrepreneurial networks. Some studies have considered the epistemological dimension of Social Constructionism and the extent to which knowledge can be determined (e.g. Cunliffe, 2008; Jha, 2012), while others have explored the ontological views of this philosophical paradigm in relation to what knowledge is (Slife and Richardson, 2011). Cope (2005) discussed the value that phenomenological inquiry can add to entrepreneurship research, and reflected on important methodological issues based on an empirical study; and Devins and Gold (2002) highlighted the usefulness of Social Constructionism as a theoretical framework for small business research.

However, the originality of this paper lies in providing a holistic understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Social Constructionism, and how these relate to EE research, drawing on the findings of a qualitative study that investigated the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches at pharmacy schools in 7 UK HEIs. The paper proposes an original model that shows the interdependencies between EE and a range of different factors, thus highlighting how EE

influences and is influenced by different aspects such as the context of where the teaching is taking place, but also the personality and teaching styles of the educators. In doing so, the paper highlights the consistency between the proposed Social Constructionist perspective and the Gestalt approach, whereby the latter emphasises a holistic approach to EE research, advocating the investigating of EE in its totality instead of isolated parts.

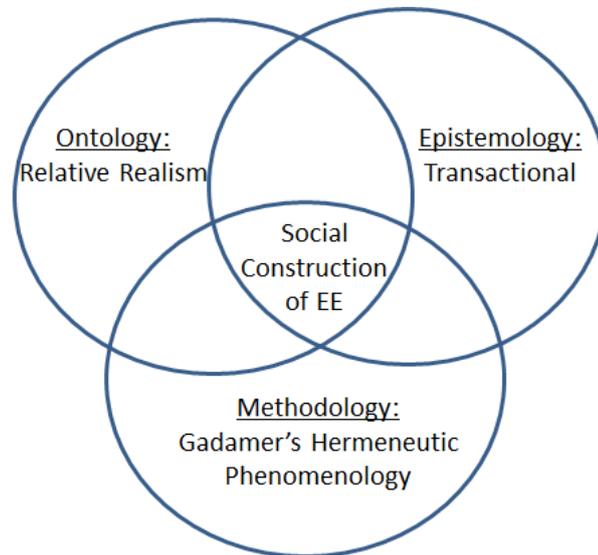
The empirical study reported in this paper was, in particular, informed by the background and practical experience of one of the researchers in pharmacy (industry and practice). While some recent research in EE has investigated the value of student-centred learning approaches, including experiential learning, the main focus of this research was on entrepreneurship and the development of entrepreneurial skills, rather than enterprise and the development of enterprise skills (e.g. Rae, 2000, 2003; 2007). Experiential learning approaches were investigated as a tool for embedding enterprise 'into' pharmacy curricula, in order to support the development of a range of generic transferable enterprise skills among graduates, a research focus that has not yet been adequately addressed in pharmacy education (Bradley *et al.*, 2011). The aim of this research was to investigate the various approaches that pharmacy schools and their staff apply to develop their graduates' enterprise skills, and how these academics influence the delivery approaches. As a result, the research only focused on academics since they are the ones involved in delivering EE. Arguably, academics are the ones capable of providing the most appropriate views about their teaching approaches, and identify those factors which influences them in their choice of pedagogy

Whereas Inegbenebor (2007) emphasised the need for pharmacy programmes that enhance the locus of control of pharmacy students Jungnickel *et al.* (2009) called for research that integrates a range of entrepreneurial competencies in the future professional pharmacy curriculum, and advocated that such a curriculum should involve more experiential learning approaches. Most of the available research in EE to date investigates EE from the perspectives of learners (i.e. students) (e.g. Glover *et al.*, 2002; Hammel *et al.*, 1999; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Novak *et al.*, 2006); this study, however, is different in that it focuses on the delivery aspect of EE by considering the views of the providers (educators), which is an hitherto under-researched area.

This paper offers a holistic understanding of Social Constructionism with its relative realism ontology, transactional epistemology, and Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology as methodology. Applying this multi-perspectival framework of Social Constructionism in research on EE at pharmacy schools in UK HEIs offers the possibility to understand such education within the different contextual factors that influence and can be influenced by it. As shown in Figure 1, this

paper adds value by bringing together the philosophical underpinnings of Social Constructionism, and illustrating how they blend together to bring harmony into EE research within the chosen paradigm.

Figure 1: Social Constructionism and its ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings



The paper starts with an introduction to Social Constructionism. This is followed by three sections discussing the relationship between Social Constructionism and its relativist ontology, transactional epistemology and Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology, respectively. Next, the paper describes the empirical study reported in this paper and highlights the role of the researcher in the research process. The finding's section focuses on different aspects relating to the importance of context and the subject-object relationship. The paper then moves on to show the harmony between the proposed philosophical underpinnings of Social Constructionism and the themes which emerged from this research, and concludes with a summary of the implications of this study.

Social Constructionism and its Underlying Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology

Researchers such as Hussey and Hussey (1997) make the basic but, nevertheless, important point that the paradigm adopted for research is critical for all aspects of its conduct. Similarly, Fletcher (2006) highlights that issues of epistemology and ontology should be in line with the research investigation. As the authors suggest, an inquiry paradigm can be elicited by the responses to three fundamental interconnected questions which are of ontological, epistemological and methodological nature. Whereas the first is about the form and nature of reality and what there is that can be known about it, the second relates to the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known (Denzin and

Lincoln, 2008). As Guba and Lincoln (1994) underline, the response to the latter is, to some extent, already pre-determined by the answer to the ontological question posed at the beginning. The third question refers to the methodology that refers to the processes, main beliefs, and procedures by which problems are handled and questions are answered (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975) in line with the ontological and epistemological decisions (Klapper, 2008; 2011). Even though the research paradigm does not provide detailed answers nor absolute truth (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008), it is essential for guiding and explaining the reasons behind choices taken by the researcher in any research study (Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Easton, 2002).

As Easterby Smith *et al.* (2008) suggest, there has been a trend from positivism towards Constructionism since the early 1980s and Houston (2001) argues that the latter has been a response to critiques of positivism and its loss of power as 'the driving force' behind the natural and human sciences (Klapper, 2008). Indeed it has been claimed that Constructionism has the potential to bridge the gap between the objectivist and subjectivist perspectives as it suggests that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty 1998). The Social Constructionist paradigm postulates that a researcher in social research should not simply collect facts and information to calculate frequencies and patterns, but should go beyond that to value meanings and constructions to make sense of what people convey about their experiences (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). Social Constructionism is one of the perspectives in qualitative research which acknowledges that a single universal reality does not exist because understanding the world depends on peoples' perceptions, connotations, emotions and motives about the world they live in (Dyson and Brown, 2005). Accordingly, the concept of ultimate truth does not exist in Social Constructionism since every person could construct meanings in different ways, even when they are related to a single phenomenon (Crotty, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Polit and Beck, 2004; Golafshani, 2003; Streubert, 1995; Lyotard, 1984). Burr (2003) agreed with this, and mentioned that the meanings that people associate with their realities are related to historical and cultural dimensions; i.e. they are context and epoch-specific, and added that this should not imply that one reality is better than another.

In the 18th century, however, a new thinking started to emerge which suggested that, despite the distinctiveness of individuals, people do share realities, which they develop through socialising, common experiences and voluntarism (Golafshani, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Snape and Spencer, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, researchers like Garfinkel (1967) and Silverman (1972) became interested in studying how people construct their social realities in practice in order to make sense of their world. These shared realities, through which actions and interactions are built, generate common

meanings that people link to their realities, which lead to common conventional behaviours (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997).

This paper adopts Crotty's (2003) definition of Social Constructionism as *'all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context'* (p.6).

The Social Constructionism paradigm was considered appropriate and relevant for the study reported in this paper as it opens up the possibility of multiple realities, which impact the methodology and, potentially, the findings of EE research. According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), a Social Constructionism paradigm is consistent with relativist ontology, transactional epistemology, and hermeneutic methodology, which were adopted in the research reported in this paper. The next section will highlight the harmony among these philosophical underpinnings within Social Constructionism.

Social Constructionism and the relativist ontology

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), the Social Constructionism paradigm is consistent with a relativist ontology (relativism) that rejects the views of naïve realism ontology adopted by positivists, and the views of critical realism ontology adopted by post-positivists regarding reality and its understanding. Relativist ontology suggests that multiple truths exist, and that data generated in research cannot uncover an objective universal truth about the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). Accordingly, relativism is consistent with Social Constructionism as it suggests that data can uncover one of many behaviours or approaches experienced by people (Crotty, 2003).

Social Constructionism and the transactional epistemology

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), the Social Constructionism paradigm is consistent with the transactional/subjectivist epistemology as the latter came to oppose objectivism, which argues that reality exists whether or not people are aware of it, and sees that objective truth can be reached by asking the right questions (Crotty, 2003). Constructionists, however, view reality as socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Crotty, 2003; Golafshani, 2003; Ward, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and believe that truth and understanding emerge when people engage with their realities in transactional relationships (Crotty, 2003).

The main focus of the transactional perspective is on likelihood, apprehension, and meaning through various approaches of inquiry other than scientific certainty and encapsulation of reality (Cornell, 1995). Thus, this perspective emphasises the human factor and subjectivity as an integral part of investigation (Madden, 1991). This view suggests that subjects and objects cannot be separated and neither of them exists independent of the other; it also sees both as part of the life situation they exist in, thus, making it pointless to discuss either apart from the context in which it is happening (Ittelson, 1973). Supporters of the transactional view advocate that meaningful behaviour of people forms the context in which reality exists, so instead of emphasising separate subjectivity it emphasises transactional subjectivity.

Social Constructionism and the hermeneutic/dialectical methodology

In light of the growing debates about research paradigms, a number of research methodologies have grown in importance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), the Social Constructionism paradigm is consistent with hermeneutic/dialectic methodology. Here, both the hermeneutic and dialectic methods have phenomenological traits; in hermeneutics the meanings revealed are basically what has been interpreted, and in a dialectic method reality is viewed 'as being in movement, thus as living' (p.2), where this movement will encompass different ways that may change in time (Landman, 1990). Therefore, a hermeneutic/dialectic methodology is also often referred to as a hermeneutic phenomenology. The roots of hermeneutic phenomenology originated from phenomenology; the following paragraphs discuss this further.

Edmund Husserl and Transcendental Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of experiences as lived by human beings, or the study of '*the life world*' (Van Manen, 1997, p.184). The roots of phenomenology were first set by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Cohen, 1987; Koch, 1996; Scruton, 1995), whose views grew with time to become dominated by subjectivity (Cohen, 1987; Reeder, 1987).

Husserl rejected the concept of applying scientific methods for studying human matters in psychology since human beings live in a world where they do not simply react to what happens (Walters, 1995). He saw that the human consciousness and perceptions interfere with their understanding of external stimuli (Jones, 1975), and viewed phenomenology as an approach for digging into reality to reach true absolute meanings about human experiences (Jones, 1975; Koch, 1995).

Husserl's Phenomenology was mainly focused on studying phenomena as they appear to the consciousness (Koch, 1995), and believed that the person and world together make up this consciousness (Valle *et al.*, 1989). From here, Husserl introduced the concept of phenomenological reduction or bracketing (Jones, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1983; Osborne, 1994), where he proposed that in order to establish successful contact with essences and see phenomena as they really exist, a person has to detach, set aside or 'bracket' the outside world as well as personal biases. In doing so, Husserl saw that the consciousness can be purified from any attitudes or influences that interrupt human experiences and force different meanings and understandings on them (Crotty, 1996).

Martin Heidegger and Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Further developing Husserl's ideas Heidegger introduced Hermeneutic Phenomenology. As in Husserl's Phenomenology, Heidegger's Phenomenology also focused on studying the 'life world' and details about human experiences that may be seen as common sense or taken for granted (Wilson and Hutchinson, 1991). However, unlike Husserl, Heidegger's interest was on 'Dasein' (existence i.e. the being here) which is '*the situated meaning of a human in the world*' (Lavery, 2003, p.24), which emphasises his principle of being part of the world and not separate from it. Heidegger had an existentialist viewpoint, which advocates that understanding the human world is an inseparable part of understanding humans (Jones, 1975). Therefore, Heidegger (1927/1962) rejected bracketing (Lavery, 2003), and acknowledged that an individual's background includes historical, social and cultural factors which impact on him/her during their childhood and later adulthood and are reflected in the different ways the individual gives meanings to the world (Koch, 1995). Such pre-understandings (Gummesson, 2000), which are influenced by human backgrounds, were seen as 'a priori' concepts since they exist as part of humans (Dreyfus, 1991).

Hans-George Gadamer's Support and Changes to Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Gadamer was one of Heidegger's students who became influenced by Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies. Gadamer agreed that understanding happens through interpretation, and that language is the means through which understanding happens and, thus, cannot be separated from understanding in 'life world' (1960/1998). Gadamer rejected the concept of bracketing introduced by Husserl, but he also put aside Heidegger's negative meaning of prejudice (Gadamer, 1975). Instead, Gadamer (1975) introduced the concept of 'fusion of horizons', which he viewed as a basis for interpretation, and believed that it is difficult for a person to put aside

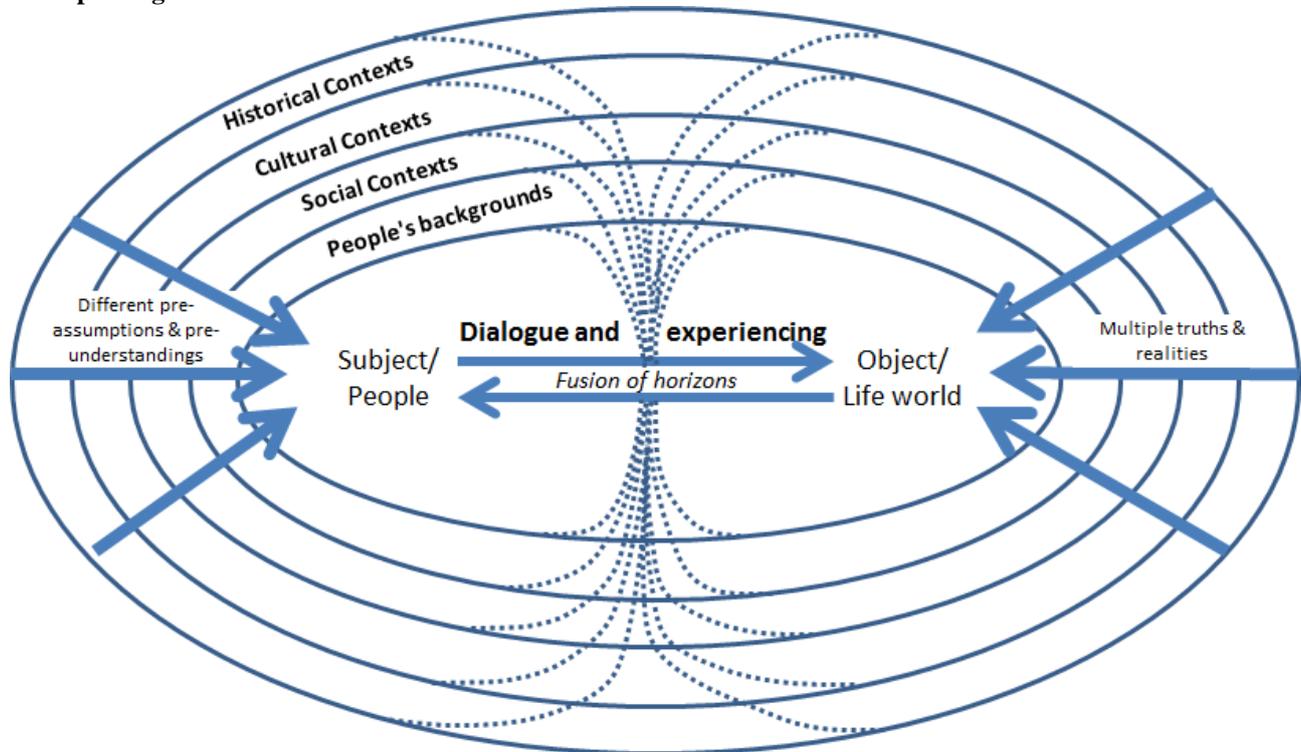
his/her own pre-assumptions in order to interpret a text (Draper, 1997). Gadamer's Hermeneutic philosophy supported the notion of developing new horizons and possible new meanings through questioning, which he saw as an important tool to reaching understanding in points of 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1975).

Having clarified the philosophical standpoints of the relativist ontology, transactional epistemology and hermeneutic phenomenology it is now possible to show the harmony between Social Constructionism and latter's philosophical underpinnings. The ontological dimension of Social Constructionism fits within the relativist ontology since Social Constructionists view reality as being socially constructed and determined in a subjective manner that is relevant to the context, time and place (Lafont, 2005; Etherington, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Ward, 2003; Natoli, 1997; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996), which makes the objective determination of an absolute truth misleading (Lafont, 2005). The epistemological dimension of Social Constructionism is consistent with the transactional epistemology since Social Constructionists do not separate between the meaning and mind, nor between the subject and object (Crotty, 2003). They accept that the subject-object relationship exists within a context with historical as well as social and cultural variables, which can potentially impact knowledge (Madden, 1991). As for the methodological dimension of Social Constructionism, it goes in line with Gadamer's Hermeneutic phenomenology since Social Constructionism supports the notion that people share realities, despite their distinctiveness, through socialising, common experiences and voluntarism (Golafshani, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Snape and Spencer, 2003; Cohen *et al.*, 2000). As a result, even though subjects and objects live within the limits of their own horizons, which are decided by their own contextual factors, understanding is reached through inclusive, mutual horizons that combine the limited horizons of subjects and objects in a transactional relationship to reach common views that concern both (Draper, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1983).

This harmony between Social Constructionism and its proposed philosophical underpinnings is presented in the conceptual framework of this paper (Figure 2), which offers a holistic view of this harmony. Figure 2 shows how the object/life-world and the subjects/people living in it are inseparably related within contextual factors that influence and are influenced by, for instance, peoples' backgrounds, as well as their social, historical and cultural contexts (Munhall, 1989). These contextual factors influence people's determination of what is 'real' (Laverty, 2003), through the multiple possibilities of truths and realities of the object/life world. Similarly, Figure 2 shows that people build different pre-assumptions and pre-understandings by constructing the world in different ways that are influenced by their contextual factors, thus, leading to different, and sometimes shared, meanings (Munhall, 1989). These shared meanings are highlighted in Figure 2 as points of joint understandings

where the horizons of different people and different realities fuse despite being influenced by different factors.

Figure 2: The harmony between Social Constructionism and its relativist, transactional and hermeneutic philosophical underpinnings



This holistic view to investigating Social Constructionism, as proposed in the conceptual framework in Figure 2, draws on the ‘Gestalt Approach’. As Bluckert (2012) notes, the German word ‘Gestalt’ approximates to pattern, shape, configuration or meaningful organised whole; it is a ‘needs-based approach to understanding human functioning and behaviour’ (Bluckert, 2012, p.81). Early Gestalt psychologists, such as Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Koehler and Kurt Koffka, sought to understand how humans make sense of their experience, moment by moment, ‘against the background of the field which includes current mental models and historical experience’ (Bluckert 2012). A further theoretical element was Kurt Lewin’s work on interconnectedness, which proposed that human beings are part of an environmental field, and that their behaviour can only be understood in relation to that field (Bluckert, 2012). As part of this field, humans actively look to impose order and perceive meaningful wholes in what they see and experience.

This comprehensive and holistic nature of the ‘Gestalt Approach’ is consistent with the Social Constructionists’ views about the existence of multiple, complementary and interconnected truths or realities, and their rejection of one single ultimate truth. Hence, this also concurs with the underpinnings of the relativist ontology, the transactional epistemology and Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

Research Design and justification of methodological choices

The research study reported in this paper was conducted in the pharmacy education context in the UK HEIs. The study adopted relativist ontology, transactional epistemology, and Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology as underlying philosophical framework; which were deemed appropriate as they allowed the consideration of multiple realities and views sought from research participants involved in the delivery of EE in pharmacy schools. Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data as described by (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Qualitative methods were considered appropriate for this study as qualitative research aims to describe human experiences, and develop better understanding of them (Polit and Hungler, 1997; Ellis and Crookes, 1998). Stake (2000) also supported using qualitative research methods to explore phenomena related to the understanding of relationships, which would allow to uncover how people make sense of their social realities. Semi-structured interviews were selected as an appropriate method of data collection in line with Denzin and Lincoln (2003) who advocate that various experiences are best understood through qualitative approaches that bring the researcher closer to research participants. This is in line with transactional epistemology that supports learning through methods of inquiry other than science and calculation (Cornell, 1995), and emphasises the human factor and subjectivity in inquiry (Madden, 1991). Furthermore, face-to-face interviews assist in considering the different views and contextual factors of participants to identify areas of 'fusion of horizons', which are an essential aspect of Gadamer's Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty pharmacy academics at their workplaces. These academics taught various undergraduate pharmacy courses, and were selected from pharmacy schools at 7 different HEIs in different regions across the UK. Taking into consideration that the total number of UK HEIs offering undergraduate pharmacy programmes is only 29 institutions, it is argued that a representative sample (25%) were involved in this study. This first round of interviews was further enhanced through a second set of interviews with four academics selected from the original participants. The latter interviews allowed further reflection on the views of other participants in the research, and made it possible to discover and/or identify points of joint understandings and common realities.

The modules that the selected pharmacy academics taught included a mixture of science and practice-related pharmacy modules, as shown in Table 1. Additionally, all respondents assumed different academic roles related, for example, to curricula development and research.

Table 1: Key characteristics of academic respondents in this study

HEIs	Academic respondents	Currently teaching science-/ or practice- related modules
1	Academic 1	science-related
1	Academic 2	practice-related
1	Academic 3	science-related
1	Academic 4	science-related
2	Academic 5	practice-related
2	Academic 6	practice-related
2	Academic 7	science-related
2	Academic 8	science-related
3	Academic 9	practice-related
3	Academic 10	practice-related
3	Academic 11	practice-related
4	Academic 12	practice-related
4	Academic 13	practice-related
5	Academic 14	practice-related
5	Academic 15	science-related
6	Academic 16	practice-related
6	Academic 17	science-related
6	Academic 18	practice-related
6	Academic 19	practice-related (taught science-related modules in the past)
7	Academic 20	science-related

The aim of this research was to investigate the various approaches that pharmacy schools and their staff apply to develop their graduates' enterprise skills, and how these academics influence the delivery approaches. As a result, the research only focused on academics since they are the ones involved in delivering EE. Arguably, academics are the ones capable of providing the most appropriate views about their teaching approaches, and identify those factors which influence them in their choice of pedagogy. The researchers acknowledge that students' views would be valuable to shed light on the learners' perspectives, including investigating how students learn and develop their enterprise skills, as well as the influencing factors that impact such learning (e.g. Hammel *et al.*, 1999; Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Novak *et al.*, 2006). However, despite being an interesting area to investigate, this was not the focus of this particular research.

The role of the reflexive researcher

Contrary to Positivism where the researcher must be independent and distanced, in Social Constructionism the observer cannot be divorced from the sense-making process. As a result, the researcher is part of what is being observed. Easterby Smith *et al.* (2008) go, however, further by suggesting that the researcher needs to assume a reflexive approach to methodology, which means that (s)he needs to realise that theories which apply to the subjects of the research must also be relevant to him/herself. Savin-Baaden (2003) underlines that it is important to discuss the role of the reflexive researcher in qualitative research and acknowledge his/her prejudices and perceptions as well as those of

the participants', and how they can impact the overall research process (). This is important since assumptions, thoughts and prejudices can influence the researcher's position and views about truth through close engagement in data collection and interpretation (Silverman, 2006; Etherington, 2004). The researchers' opinions and views alongside the context of the study contribute to this reflexivity (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 1985; Mauthner and Doucet, 1998; Edward and Ribbens, 1998), and enrich the process and results of a study (Etherington, 2004).

In accordance with Easterby Smith et al. (2008), Savin-Baaden (2003) and Patton (2000), this study acknowledged the researcher's background, qualifications and experiences as given the latter's role in both data collection and interpretation. The data in this research were collected by one researcher only, who comes from a pharmacy background and has considerable experience in both pharmacy and academia. Arguably, this closeness to the subject matter has benefited the research design process, enhanced engagement in the research process, and made it possible to empathise with the respondents, and ultimately lead to a much better understanding of the research context, its limitations and potential obstacles to the delivery of EE.

The application of Social Constructionism in EE – a practical example

This paper has proposed a multi-perspectival framework for Social Constructionism and its philosophical underpinnings, which is now discussed within the framework of the actual research reported in this paper. Given the study's focus on the delivery of EE, with a specific focus on the contribution of experiential learning approaches within pharmacy schools in the UK HEIs, we shed light on the dynamics of EE research within this particular context, as proposed in Figure 2.

In order to embrace the dynamics of EE, it is important to place it within the subjects' pre-understandings and the objects' multiple realities since the subject-object relationship is transactional and cannot be separated, as neither of them exists independent of the other. Such considerations are essential in Social Constructionism in order to reflect on the multiple realities and possible shared experiences.

The subjects/people in the study reported in this paper were the pharmacy educators, who had different pre-understandings that influenced their approaches to delivering EE. The delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches represents the object/life world, which is part of multiple realities that involve different ways of delivering EE, and is in a transactional relationship with the educators. Based on the themes that emerged from the research reported in this paper (Refai, 2012), the following discussion will illustrate the contextual factors of the research, and the multiple possibilities and realities

that emerged from investigating the subjects' (i.e. educators') relationships with the object/real-world (i.e. delivering EE through experiential learning), before moving on to explaining how joint understandings emerged under the 'fusion of horizons' dimension.

The importance of Context

Researchers such as Welter (2011) have more recently emphasised the importance of considering the context in entrepreneurship research, an aspect to date under-researched in EE despite earliest work by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Lave (2009) on situated learning. Houston (2001) underlined that one of the key characteristics of Social Constructionism lies in its emphasis that our understanding of the social world is historically and culturally specific, which suggests that it is, to a certain extent, dependent on the context in which we are based. This is also in line with Reed (2005) who underlines that the discursive practices and formations that are part of the Social Constructionist worldview will depend on historical and structural differences in the varying temporal and spatial contexts in which they are embedded.

The emerging themes from the data analysis supported the importance of context and three dimensions of the latter emerged: a) context as a national phenomenon, b) context as institutional, and c) context as a discipline.

a) EE is delivered within the national framework context of the UK. Here, the framework for HE qualifications (FHEQ) sets qualification descriptors of the generic outcomes and attributes that should be acquired through qualifications, where such descriptors are referred to in institutional audits and reviews. Delivery of pharmacy courses in the UK should also comply with the medicines' management and patient care standards of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS), which is the formal professional body for pharmacists in the UK. Most of the academics involved in this research pointed out that pharmacy schools design the way in which courses are delivered, but the subject guidelines are determined by the RPS. For quite some time, these guidelines have been very knowledge-intensive; recently, however, the society has moved more towards emphasising the development of skills. Take for instance Academic 5 who argued: *"I think teaching is all changing with the new standards for pharmacy education, and it will definitely be much more around skills and competencies. This has encouraged the application of more EE; yet, there are still limitations considering the large amount of knowledge that needs to be delivered within a limited time"*.

b) EE is delivered in the context of different institutions, which offer different levels of support for EE. Some universities encourage their lecturers to attend conferences and workshops to enhance their

enterprise teaching approaches, which was emphasised by e.g. Academic 17: “*We do have a very proactive teaching training and organisation within the university who are trying to encourage the lecturers to make it more interactive*”. This view contrasts with Academic 1 who critically highlighted: “*I think it’s more of a personal effort... The school sends us on teaching courses where you get ideas, but there is no enforcement to apply these*”. In the latter case academics are not pushed by their institutions to enhance their teaching skills although some support, i.e. course attendance, is encouraged. The individual has to make the effort and has to be interested in improving his/her skills.

c) EE delivery is also influenced by the disciplinary context, which in this case is pharmacy, which comprises two main aspects, i.e. the science and practice of pharmacy. Interview participants critically noted that practice-related subjects lend themselves more flexibly and easily to experiential learning approaches than science-related ones. Academic 2 pointed out: “*You can’t take the whole curriculum and provide it through experiential learning... some parts of the curriculum lend themselves very well to that, and others have to be taught*”, and Academic 4 who argued: “*If you are leaving the hard facts of science up to PBL then you can’t be sure they’re getting everything that they need*”.

The three dimensions of context, which were an integral part of this research, reflect the notion that EE is full of different perspectives and possibilities. This is recognised, for instance, by researchers such as Price (2004) who suggested that ‘*enterprise is an inclusive concept*’, involving the contexts where disciplines are delivered, and the learning approaches applied. This makes EE relevant for many different disciplines and different teaching and learning contexts. In fact, Iredale (1993, 2002) and Ofsted (2004) underlined the versatility and flexibility of EE, and stressed that it should not be viewed as subject-specific, but rather incorporated across the curriculum, i.e. in many different contexts. The downside of this, however, is that it creates more pressures on HEIs when having to meet the aims and objectives of EE, while meeting the national requirements of the contexts in which they are provided (Hytti and O’Gorman, 2004). Arguably, this pressure to meet the national requirements impacts HEIs, and was already commented upon as a significant obstacle for the implementation of EE across curricula in the Survey of Entrepreneurship in HEIs in Europe (2008).. Conversely, such pressures could represent an invigorating challenge for educators, who would like to experiment with experiential learning styles in new contexts.

The subject– object relationship

The subject– object relationship in this study investigated the relationship between educators and the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches. In particular, the background and affiliation of the subjects, i.e. the educators, as well as their teaching experiences were relevant to

this work. Such an understanding is necessary in order to put experiences and reflections of the interview participants in context, and explore agreements and/or possible contradictions in the data. As a result, comments by interview participants represent several realities that are full of different interpretations, meanings, and experiences of EE, often influenced by various contextual factors, such as those mentioned earlier. Investigating the educators' relationship with the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches, the authors identified a series of emerging themes from the data analysis. On the one hand, these themes highlighted the importance of the background and pre-understanding of educators, on the other hand, these themes highlighted the importance of the likely multiple realities that are part of delivering EE through experiential learning approaches. The themes could be grouped into a) educator and b) learner specific categories. For the former, these themes highlighted the importance of the background and pre-understanding of educators included a) their different levels of awareness of EE, b) the educators' different personalities and teaching styles and c) individual preferences relating to teaching and learning. For the latter, the data analysis suggested that the different levels of students across the discipline, the number of students and the time and resources available to deliver EE were the key themes.

Educator-specific themes

Regarding the levels of awareness of EE, the research showed that most academics were not familiar with the concept of EE although, in many instances, they embed learning activities that support the development of enterprise skills. Academic 9, for instance, made this very clear: *"I'm not familiar with the concept of enterprise; usually we relate it to business and entrepreneurship"*.

With regard to personalities and teaching styles the research highlighted that some academics were more excited about trying more innovative and interactive teaching approaches than others who preferred more traditional styles. Academic 6's comment shed some light on this situation : *"It's largely down to the individual members of staff and how passionate they are about using alternative learning methods... some prefer to stick to the traditional teaching approaches, and there are others who, with a little bit of help, would implement these innovative changes"*.

Examining the academic's preferences when applying teaching and learning activities, different activities were discussed such as presentations, workshops, posters, case studies...etc., but the application of these activities varied across academics and modules. This was illustrated by e.g. Academic 2: *"Students do a poster and a presentation and these are repeated throughout the course"*, and contrasts with Academic 14's view: *"...we are trying to develop students who are better self-learners and we try to involve different teaching methods like PBL and case methods..."*.

Learner-specific themes

The research also identified learner-specific themes that highlighted the importance of the likely multiple realities, which are part of delivering EE through experiential learning approaches. An important theme related to the different levels, i.e. year one up to year four students across a discipline, where the need for more interactive teaching and learning approaches may vary as the students progress in their studies. Academic 2, for instance, expanded further on this: ‘...*developing skills is obviously more important in the higher years where the learning outcomes are about critical evaluation and setting priorities*’. This comment suggests that the demands are changing depending on the stage of programme where the learner is situated.

In addition, the interview data suggested that the number of students across modules and institutions was important. In some cases large numbers of students in a cohort were mentioned as an impediment to the application of teaching and learning activities that support the development of students’ enterprise skills, as pointed out by Academic 8: “*The number plays a role; we haven’t got enough small group teaching as much as we wish to have really, just because of the large numbers...*”.

A third, learner-specific theme that emerged relate to time and other resources offered to educators to deliver EE; here, academics mentioned that embedding teaching and learning activities, such as experiential learning approaches, that support the development of enterprise skills requires more time and financial support, which are not always available. Academic 10 critically observed: “*We don’t have the resources to do proper PBL because, for that, you need one facilitator for each group of 10 students, they have to meet twice a week, and it’s not possible resource wise*”.

Fusion of horizons

It is believed that commonalities exist between peoples’ worlds, through socialising and common experiences, resulting in similar meanings attached to some of their shared experiences (Lafont, 2005; Rosenblatt, 2002), thus, making their interpretations, to some extent, generalisable within similar contexts. We find echoes of these shared experiences in e.g. Golafshani (2003), Holstein and Gubrium (2003), Snape and Spencer (2003), Cohen *et al.* (2000), as well as Hughes and Sharrock (1997), where the latter viewed a similar occupation as a common driver that influences shared realities of people. Similar ideas are also reflected in Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice.

The qualitative data analysis and its emerging themes supported the notion of shared experiences, as postulated by social constructionists. These themes also suggested a further ‘fusion of horizons’, with

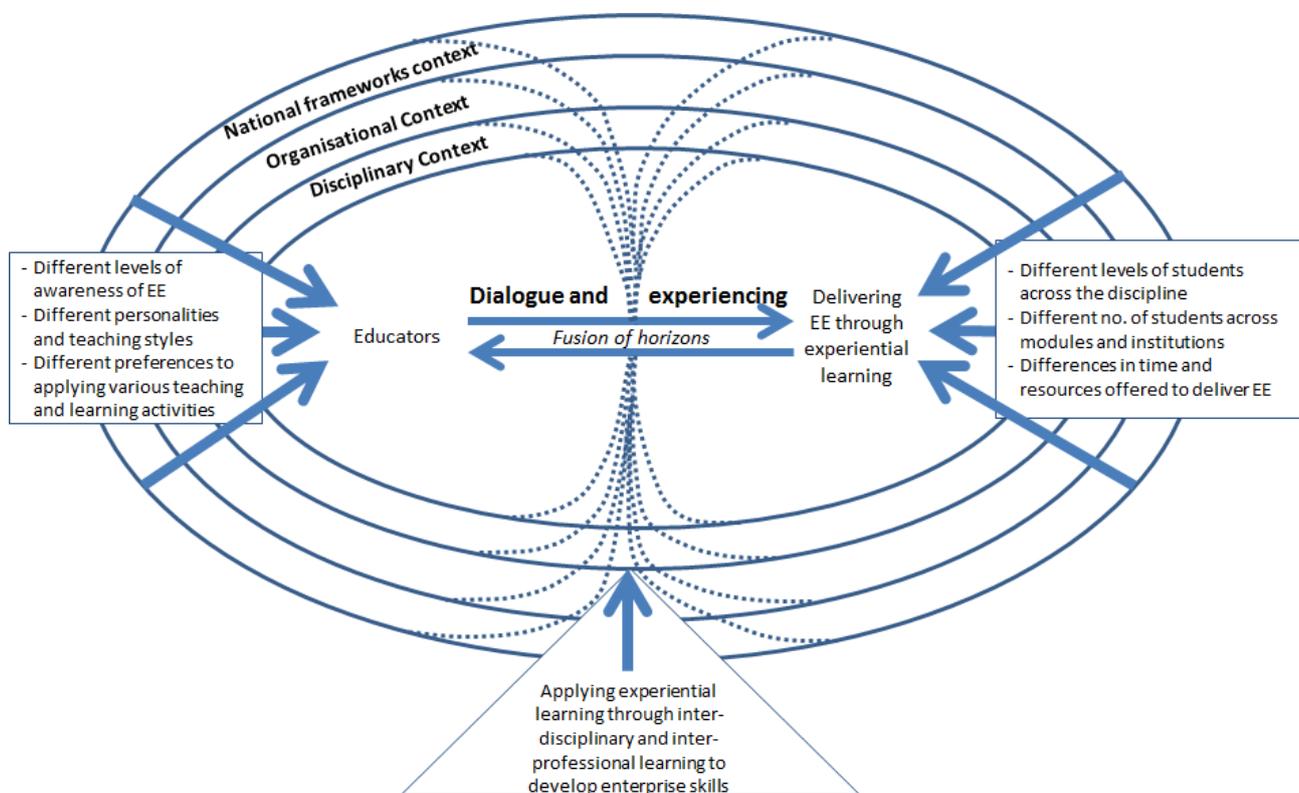
regard to shared experiences and joint understandings among the educators. Here, all educators believed that inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning could be applied across different disciplines, institutions and educators in such ways that the development of enterprise skills becomes embedded across a wider range of contexts. Educators saw these approaches as ways of overcoming potential obstacles to applying EE. In particular, academics highlighted the value of inter-disciplinary and inter-professional education in overcoming the fact that it is not possible to deliver the whole curriculum in an interactive way, simply because certain parts of the curriculum lend themselves to interactive teaching and learning approaches better than others. In the case of pharmacy curricula, this was seen as an effective approach to bring the science-related subjects together with the practice-related subjects in an interactive inter-disciplinary or inter-professional approach. This was seen as a means to embed interactive learning into science subjects, which, unlike practice subjects, do not lend themselves very well to experiential learning approaches, as illustrated by Academic 2, for example, “... *we succeed more in integrating the science courses in the practice ones, rather than applying innovative approaches in pure science courses*”.

As such, the application of inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning means that educators will neither impose nor completely exclude their pre-understandings, but rather combine their efforts to bring together the different disciplines, objectives, students, levels of support and other different realities, to create a ‘Gestalt approach’ to EE, in line with Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ perspective. Although inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning have, to date, not been given much attention in the EE literature, previous studies have supported the value of these learning approaches in developing a wide range of skills. For instance, Ward and Lee (2002) agreed that interdisciplinary learning supports the development of a range of skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity, which cannot be developed through disciplinary ways of learning.

Figure 3 integrates the findings of the research, as discussed in this paper, in relation to the conceptual framework proposed in Figure 2. Figure 3 emphasises the harmony between the philosophical underpinnings proposed under Social Constructionism, and the themes emerging from the study reported in this paper. On the one hand, the study concluded that educators involved in EE are inseparable from their contexts, which influence and are influenced by the national framework context, organisational context, and disciplinary context. Educators come with different pre-understandings about EE; these pre-understandings can manifest themselves in the form of different levels of awareness of EE, different personalities and teaching styles, as well as different preferences to applying various teaching and learning activities. On the other hand, Figure 3 highlights the emerging themes that support the multiple realities attached to delivering EE through

experiential learning approaches. The study also critically highlighted the different levels of students across the discipline, the potentially high numbers of students across modules and institutions, and differences in the time and resources offered to deliver EE, as impacting factors. Furthermore, Figure 3 also shows the transactional subject-object relationship between educators and the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches, which involves multiple realities, but at the same time, allows for possible joint understandings where horizons fuse. The research reported in this paper supported an understanding that applying experiential learning through inter-disciplinary and inter-professional learning would be a beneficial approach for delivering EE.

Figure 3: Establishing EE research within a holistic philosophical paradigm of Social Constructionism – A practical example.



Conclusions:

In this article, the authors set out to develop a holistic theoretical framework for Social Constructionism, which draws on the ‘Gestalt approach’, by bringing together the ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings of Social Constructionism (Figure 2). This holistic framework was applied in an empirical study that investigated the delivery of EE through experiential learning approaches at pharmacy schools across 7 UK HEIs. The study, for which findings are presented in Figure 3, explored the opinions and views of pharmacy educators about EE, and thematically analysed the findings in order to explore the various contextual factors, the

subject-object relationship, and the likely factors that might influence the pre-understandings and multiple realities, before moving on to explore joint understandings and shared experiences.

Adopting the Social Constructionist paradigm and its proposed philosophical underpinnings, as suggested in the conceptual framework (Figure 2) in EE research, makes researchers aware of the significance of the different variables potentially impacting their pedagogical work and research in EE. This is in line with the notion that EE is a continuously emerging topic, where any research study has the potential to reveal more and different realities and practices related to EE. In practice, the proposed model (Figure 2) is expected to encourage HE educators in EE to seek possibilities for collaboration, thus enhancing mutual understanding of pedagogical activities in different institutions, schools and ultimately across disciplines. Such understanding is expected to lead to a richer teaching and learning experience to students, as it is expected to generate a more enterprising educational environment that exposes students to colleagues and environments from different horizons, while, at the same time, allowing them to join together at points of mutual understanding.

Arguably, it is not the intention of the authors to advise the necessity of exploring *all* realities related to EE, nor suggest a single best practice for applying EE. In fact, the authors believe that there are no right or wrong philosophical assumptions underlying EE research, and propose Social Constructionism as an appropriate, yet underused, philosophical paradigm for exploring aspects of EE. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge the limitations of the Social Constructionist perspective. This perspective has not been readily embraced by every theorist as its ideas are feared to have the potential to contribute to a collapse of the individualistic paradigm, as advocated by Constructivists (Rudes and Guterman, 2007). The latter critically remark that the paradigm shift to Social Constructionism may be difficult to assume as, in particular, Western culture values aspects such as autonomy, independence and other conceptions of the self that may be very opposed to the relational processes of the constructionist perspective. Yet, the authors of this article have documented how the proposed philosophical underpinnings of Social Constructionism can support and guide EE research by adding more clarity about the multiple possibilities that can be explored in light of different contextual factors and relationality. Consequently, the proposed approach supports building theoretical knowledge that covers wider aspects in the area of EE, while offering a contribution to good educational practices that supports the delivery of EE.

This paper makes two major contributions to the existing literature. First, it offers a holistic, multi-perspectival ‘Gestalt approach’ to applying the Social Constructionism paradigm in EE research, and illustrates the relevance of the Social Constructionism’s ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings. The ‘Gestalt approach’ suggests that a holistic view of the whole is actually greater than

the sum of isolated parts, thus, suggesting the need to uncover hidden elements when studying a phenomenon. Second, this paper fills a gap in the literature as it focusses, different from other research, on the educator's views and opinions within the framework of EE in the context of UK HEI's pharmacy schools.

The paper sets ground for future research that explores the multiple realities of different subjects that influence, and/or are influenced by, the educational process in HEIs, such as students, employers, and governing bodies in HE. The paper also recommends research that investigates how the multiple realities of the different subjects meet at points of mutual understandings in order to provide a more enterprising educational experience, which might uncover new approaches to the delivery of EE.

The application of Social Constructionism and its described philosophical underpinnings in further research has the potential to sharpen the researcher's awareness of how their own pre-understandings and their potential bias and prejudices can influence their ways of perceiving and delivering EE as well as how they engage with learners. Investigating their own thought schemata in relation to their habitus and their delivery of EE would make an interesting topic for further research, also internationally. Clearly, working within the Social Constructionist paradigm allows researchers the flexibility to be open to others' experiences and interpretations, and makes it possible to assign different meanings to the same phenomena within different contexts, without assuming that one meaning/way is better or more appropriate than another. This freedom and independence is essential in EE, given that the entrepreneurial persona is a multi-faceted phenomenon found in many walks of life.

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