

Collective Learning Processes in a Coworking Space for Entrepreneurs: Construction of an Entrepreneurial Community of Practice

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Résumé :

The way entrepreneurs learn remains largely uncharted territory. Literature on entrepreneurial learning has focused on organisational learning dynamics that have been little studied in entrepreneurship and rarely through empirical qualitative studies. In this article, we explore dynamics of collective learning in an entrepreneurial context, based on an exploratory study of a French coworking space reserved to social entrepreneurs. We describe and characterize three learning situations and the nature of learning at work in these situations: transmission of pre-existing knowledge through doing in a group, creation of new knowledge by combination of knowledge dispersed among members, and emergence of shared knowledge about the 'domain' that brought them together through compilation and synthesis of information held by the different participants. On this basis, we explain how groups are formed in which these collective learning dynamics can develop. We thus propose to speak of an 'entrepreneurial community of practice' to underline the specific conditions under which collective learning processes similar to those highlighted by the literature on communities of practice may emerge in an entrepreneurial context: a physical space, a coordinating team, comparability and complementarity between the hosted members engaged in different ventures.

Mots-clés : coworking space, entrepreneurial learning, organisational learning, social entrepreneur, community of practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Research work emphasising the role of entrepreneurs' learning processes have recently developed in the field of entrepreneurship, particularly since the 2000s. Entrepreneurial support (Messeghem and Sammut 2014) which covers a broad range of practices aimed at supporting entrepreneurs (Paul, 2002), have been analysed as contributing to individual learning for the entrepreneur (Cuzin and Fayolle 2004; Sammut 2003). On the other hand, the field of the entrepreneurial learning (Wang and Chugh 2014) has developed at the interface of the literature on entrepreneurship and on organisational learning (Harrison and Leitch 2005), and underlines collective learning processes beyond individual ones. Identifying and studying these collective learning dynamics raises the question of the groups in which they develop. Indeed, the entrepreneurial dynamic often rests primarily on an individual — the entrepreneur — who is not alone, of course, but who belong to various different networks. Thus, collective learning has received less attention in the entrepreneurship literature. It is also linked to the need to adapt the notion of community of practice in order to use it for groups of entrepreneurs, as several work focusing on organisational learning are based on this notion. The 'community of practice' concept (Brown and Duguid 1991; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002; Wenger 1998) stresses the role of groups of people involved in the same practice who regularly communicate with each other about their activities in order to develop their skills in that practice. Therefore, we wish to determine the type of situation(s) where collective learning can develop for and among entrepreneurs, and how groups are formed in which these collective learning dynamics can develop. We investigate the nature and characteristics of mechanisms whose aim is to support collective learning and to favour the development of entrepreneurial projects.

In order to answer these questions, we adopted a qualitative approach (Dumez 2013) and carried out a single case study combining interviews and direct on-site observation (Yin

2009). We studied the case of a coworking space for social entrepreneurs, called 'La Ruche', founded in Paris (France) in 2008. La Ruche's activity is twofold: (1) it rents workstations in a coworking space to entrepreneurs involved in distinct entrepreneurial projects and (2) it organises events, in different formats on a variety of topics, in relation to the challenge of starting a business and the specificities of social entrepreneurship. Thus La Ruche is one of the pioneer coworking spaces in France; it is dedicated to an emerging class of entrepreneurs and claims that interactions between the hosted entrepreneurs are a priority in the place. Having made a systematic analysis of the entrepreneurs' statements regarding events, we will focus on the situations that the interviewees link to collective learning dynamics, paying particular attention to the events they attend most regularly and about which they talk the most. We will characterise the dynamics of collective learning, and differentiate kinds of learning in an entrepreneurial context. We also try to explain how groups are formed in which these learning processes develop.

In the first section, we will present theoretical issues related to individual/collective learning processes highlighted in the Entrepreneurial Support (ES) and Entrepreneurial Learning (EL) fields of research. In the second section, we will outline the methodology used to study the La Ruche case. In the third section, we analyse collective learning processes that developed at La Ruche and examine factors that foster the formation of these collectives within which mutual learning is stimulated thanks to regular, repeated interaction and to the physical and social environment. In the last section, we discuss our findings and present conclusions on the main contributions of this article.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The way entrepreneurs learn remains largely uncharted territory (Holcomb et al. 2009; Wang and Chugh 2014). We will begin by presenting the research on ES that has characterised the different types of structures that support entrepreneurs in the development of their business and the individual learning dynamics they enhance. Second, we will situate the EL research that has stressed collective learning dynamics in entrepreneurial contexts.

1.1. ENTREPRENEURIAL SUPPORT AND INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

The ES literature emphasises the role of structures that entrepreneurs may join to develop their project (Messeghem and Sammut 2014) such as business incubators, start-up

accelerators, etc. In this article we will use the term 'incubator' indiscriminately for all facilitating environments (Lindholm-Dahlstrand and Klofsten 2002) whose aim is to support entrepreneurs in the development of their projects (Aernoudt 2004; Chabaud, Ehlinger, and Perret 2004).

For Carayannis and Von Zedtwitz (2005), an entrepreneurial support structure must offer at least four of the following five services to qualify as an incubator: access to physical resources, secretarial services, financial resources, networks, and entrepreneurial development support programmes. Hackett and Dilts (2004) define an incubator first of all as a physical place that welcomes and gathers entrepreneurs together — understood as an ensemble of individuals and organisations. They add that the incubator's mission is to support the hosted entrepreneurial ventures by helping them to launch and develop their entrepreneurial activities. This support mission has been termed 'entrepreneurial support' in the entrepreneurship literature since the 2000s.

Entrepreneurial support covers a variety of practices such as coaching, tutoring, and on-the-job training (Paul 2002). It is based on a dyadic relationship maintained over the long term between a support provider and an entrepreneur (Rice 2002). As per Cuzin and Fayolle (2004), it entails improving the entrepreneurs' skills or facilitating their access to resources that are useful in building their entrepreneurial project. In these studies, entrepreneurial support is mainly seen as a learning dynamic (Cuzin and Fayolle 2004; Sammut 2003), where the support provider determines what type of knowledge is relevant and transmits it prescriptively to the entrepreneur. (Hatchuel 1994). However, some studies have pointed out that the support provider can also benefit from this relationship, as is the case for example in a sponsorship or peer support relationship, characterised by mechanisms of mutual trust (Jaouen, Loup, and Sammut 2006). The supported party thus becomes active in the support process, which is co-constructed by the two parties (Ben Mahmoud-Jouini, Paris, and Bureau 2011; Chabaud, Messeghem, and Sammut 2010; Mione 2006).

Following these recent research works, we aim at shedding light on collaborative and collective learning processes among entrepreneurs and their link with entrepreneurial support.

1.2. ENTREPRENEURIAL LEARNING AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

EL studies consider it occurs when entrepreneurs interact to initiate, organise and manage their projects (Rae 2005). Thus EL is as much concerned with the type of knowledge created and shared (know-what) as the way the production and diffusion of knowledge take shape

(know-how), or the individuals, teams and organisations concerned (know-who) (Wang and Chugh 2014). In a recent literature review, Wang and Chugh (2014) identified three pairs of key learning types that help to understand entrepreneurial behaviours in EL: individual and collective learning, exploratory and exploitative learning, and intuitive and sensing learning. In this article, we will focus on the first learning pair, seeking to determine which conditions are conducive to promoting individual and collective learning in entrepreneurial contexts.

Since the late 1980s, the literature on organisational learning has highlighted collective learning processes (Charue-Duboc 1995; Charue-Duboc 2005; Midler 2003). Organisational learning is not therefore merely the sum of individual learning processes and it is situated at a level distinct from that of the individual. It has given rise to various studies that, although they did not specifically focus on small businesses or start-ups, did examine the questions of skill transfer and building the relevant knowledge needed to act in a changing environment. The complexity of phenomena at play has led to various stream of research that draw on diverse conceptions of these phenomena. While the cognitive conception of learning (Simon 1991) emphasises the individual processes that lead to the acquisition of knowledge, its construction and transformation, the socio-constructivist perspective, on the other hand, emphasises the profoundly social, situated and rooted character of learning and its processual dimension. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) maintain that individuals are engaged in 'communities' — understood as a specific environment in which individuals interact, build relationships and learn around a 'practice', which is a set of explicit and tacit elements that may take the form of interests, ideas, tools and documents shared by the members of this community and anchored in a 'domain' that forms the basis of their common identity. In his early studies, Wenger (1998) characterises a community of practice by the existence of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and the members' shared repertoire. In later writings (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), he emphasises the interactions between the three dimensions — domain, community and practice — allowing the development and sharing of knowledge within a community of practice, thus favouring innovation. For Cohendet, Créplet, and Dupouët (Cohendet, Créplet, et Dupouët 2003) a community of practice offers a framework in which both individual and organisational learning are reconciled, especially if the members are located in the same physical space, which increases opportunities for communication. The way a community of practice functions is characterised by self-management and a participative rather than hierarchical approach (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), which depends on the amount of participation of its members, who can be

divided into three categories: the 'hard core', active members and peripheral members (who make up the majority of the community). Finally, according to these scholars, a community of practice helps to create value, both short and long term, for the members of the community and for the organisation it is rooted in.

The first studies to explore the collective learning dynamics within communities of practice looked at professional communities within large organisations, such as the photocopier service techs at Xerox. Several studies analysed the characteristics of such groups of professionals and the conditions that were conducive to learning. Other researchers looked at communities that cut across an organisation's boundaries, mostly studying scientific communities, also termed 'epistemic communities'(Cowan et Foray 1997; Cohendet, Dupouët, et Creplet 2001). Finally, the development of information and communication technologies led to the emergence of 'virtual communities' and to the development of research, once again, on the learning dynamics in these groups. However, very few studies use the notion of community of practice in the case of populations of entrepreneurs.

We have seen that the literature on business incubators and entrepreneurial support has mainly been based on an individual learning model, whereas the literature on entrepreneurial learning highlights collective organisational learning processes. This type of learning has received less attention in the entrepreneurship literature, mainly owing to the need to adapt the notion of community of practice in order to use it for groups of entrepreneurs. We therefore wish to determine the type of situation(s) where collective learning can develop for and among entrepreneurs, what the related mechanisms and their characteristics are, and finally how groups are formed in which these collective learning dynamics can develop.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

In order to shed light on collective learning dynamics in an entrepreneurial context, we carried out an exploratory case study. An empirical and interpretative qualitative research design (Dumez 2013) was used to show the subjective dimension of individuals' experiences in their specific context (Paillé and Mucchielli 2012). The data collection phase of our study lasted from late 2010 to early 2013.

2.1. CASE SELECTION

Using a single case study approach (Yin 2009; Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), we identified the most relevant case possible to observe entrepreneurs in their

interactions within networks. We chose to study the case of a French coworking space for entrepreneurs, called La Ruche. Launched in May 2008, La Ruche was one of two pioneer coworking spaces in France. Its primary activity is to operate the workspace: a 600m² open space containing eighty workstations. The business model is to provide shared services and workspaces through a full-time ('residents') or part-time membership. Its second activity consists in organising workshops, conferences, and exhibitions for La Ruche members and also for external stakeholders.

La Ruche is a not-for-profit organization¹ conceived as an experiment to promote social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurs are an emerging class of entrepreneurs, which differ from traditional entrepreneurs by their desire to produce social value in addition to economic value (Smith-Hunter 2011; Yunus, Moingeon, and Lehmann-Ortega 2010; Zahra et al. 2009). Zahra et al (2009) define social entrepreneurship broadly as 'the activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner'. La Ruche members work on developing an innovative response to a significant challenge — either social or environmental — that affects a large number of people, while respecting shared values. These entrepreneurial ventures are mapped out by La Ruche in three categories: (1) Towards a less unequal world — the promotion of diversity, fighting poverty, etc. (2) Towards the organisations of tomorrow — entrepreneurial support, responsible investment, etc. (3) Towards new ways of life — responsible consumption, natural resource management, etc. There is a vast diversity of social entrepreneurial projects at La Ruche. There is also a wide variety of entrepreneurial profiles and statuses: members come from different cultures (various nationalities) and professional backgrounds. Some are serial entrepreneurs whereas others are beginners. Limited liability companies as well as freelancers may be hosted at La Ruche. Members range from roughly 18 to 65 years of age. There appears to be a balance of female and male members. They go to La Ruche to work independently on their own projects, but in a collective atmosphere.

¹ It is a not-for-profit organisation that only received public subsidies to renovate the premises. Founded as a social business, La Ruche must maintain a balanced budget. Any surplus revenue will be used to improve the organisation's outreach and services.

2.2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Our research design draws upon a variety of data sources including: (1) participant-observation at La Ruche; (2) interviews with La Ruche's management team; (3) interviews with La Ruche members; (4) secondary data and La Ruche's internal documents.

We started our investigation by participant observation. (1) We used workstations there sporadically (two 10-day observation periods, three months apart: in December 2010 and again in March 2011). We also attended dozens of events organised by La Ruche and interacted conversationally with various people in the workspace: entrepreneurs, guests, coordinating team, and people passing through.

We conducted (3) a series of semi-structured interviews with some of the entrepreneurs. An announcement was placed in the weekly newsletter sent to all the entrepreneurs hosted at La Ruche along with a call for volunteers to be interviewed. We formally interviewed 19 entrepreneurs, currently or formerly hosted at La Ruche, making sure that the diversity of venture profiles was represented. The interviewees were between 25 and 55 years old, and seven of them were female. Coming from different backgrounds, they either worked in social businesses (E.g. reintegration of the unemployed in the workforce, fighting poverty, etc.) or environmental businesses (E.g. green energy, recycling, sustainable housing, etc.). Most of the interviewees were resident members as they are the permanent heart of La Ruche, but we also met three part-time members to be sure that their experiences were not too different from those of the residents. We mainly interviewed current members, but also one former member of La Ruche and four people who were about to leave, in order to compare their points of view. The interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Quotes have been translated from French to English for this paper.

The protocol was to ask the subject about their reasons for locating their business at La Ruche and what they got out of it. A thematic content analysis of the entrepreneur interviews was conducted using NVivo software (version 8). In this way, we identified situations where the entrepreneurs felt in a learning situation, although it was difficult for them to explicitly state the content of this learning. Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs linked these situations to the development of their companies. These situations were specific events they took part. Given our research questions on collective learning dynamics and interviews with entrepreneurs who emphasised the importance of a certain number of events held at La Ruche as a locus of learning, we focused our analysis of the data collected on events, following the inductive qualitative method (Thiétart, 2000).

3. CASE ANALYSIS

In this section we will use the La Ruche case study to shed light on collective learning dynamics in an entrepreneurial context. Having made a systematic analysis of the entrepreneurs' statements regarding events, we will focus on the situations that the interviewees link to collective learning dynamics, paying particular attention to the events they attend most regularly and about which they talk the most. The decision to address the question of learning through situations rather than through content is consistent with the situated perspective of learning that we have adopted.

We will begin by presenting these events, how they operate and what the entrepreneurs claim to get out of them.

3.1. SITUATIONS THAT THE ENTREPRENEURS LINK TO LEARNING

Some ten events are organised per month at La Ruche, in a variety of formats (from 30 minutes to 3 hours) and topics (management, entrepreneurial, environmental and social issues). La Ruche distinguishes between two types of event: those reserved to members (whatever their status at La Ruche, their stage of development, their field) and those that are open to everyone.

We will describe three recurring events that are well attended and well identified by the entrepreneurs, who mentioned them often: the 'Buzz', the 'Toolbox' and the 'Hold-up'. We will also present an event that is open to non-members: the 'Happy Ruche'. Although mentioned less frequently, it is still valued by a certain number of entrepreneurs. Finally, we will present other situations that the entrepreneurs considered to be sources of learning.

3.1.1. Situation 1: The Buzz

When we questioned the entrepreneurs about events at La Ruche they all spoke of the 'Buzz'. Some of them recalled the ground rules of the event:

'You ring the bell when you want to speak. The others don't hesitate to respond, to confront ideas and ask questions, but always in a positive way, always to help.'

'It's very informal. It's a time for sharing information, for exchanging ideas. A Buzz may last a few seconds or several minutes.'

During this discussion time — to which members can invite one or two outsiders — the members share a variety of information (E.g., news, current events, rants and raves, job searches, or skill sharing).

'I have probably attended the Buzz thirty or forty times,² to collect plastic bottles for a workshop, to get in touch with corporate foundations, etc.';

'I like to challenge the people who present things at the Buzz. There are two sides to it: challenging people and helping them. I speak up when I feel it's legitimate, but also to understand better.'

However, one entrepreneur laments, 'At the Buzz, people express themselves, but there isn't a lot of sharing.' The Buzz gives visibility to the multitude of actions carried out by the members: 'It's an informal and friendly way for you to find out what the others are doing.'; 'That's why I go to the Buzz — to learn other methodologies.' The Buzz is also a way of building ties with members: 'I go once a month on average and each time I meet someone.'; 'We bring our food and we sit next to someone. That starts a conversation very easily.' New members introduce themselves to the group at a Buzz when they join La Ruche and may also announce their departure from La Ruche in the same way. Some members complain however about the kitchen being commandeered for the occasion (they are forced either to go and eat outside if they don't want to participate in the Buzz or else eat in silence in the kitchen) or about the time slot chosen (some need to take a break from their business activity at noon).

The Buzz is the only weekly event at La Ruche. On average, forty people gather in the kitchen every Friday at lunchtime. Most of the entrepreneurs interviewed said they did not have time to attend all the events, but made the effort to go to the Buzz. Former members even participate occasionally to keep in touch with the organisation and its members. The Buzz helps to bring La Ruche entrepreneurs together into a collective:

'The Buzz sets the pace at La Ruche.'

'I really like the Buzz; it's one of the expressions of the community.'

'It's like a breath of fresh air. Every day you're trying to find customers and you're struggling to keep the project alive... At the Buzz you feel less alone. It gives you ideas.'

The Buzz is an event that fosters learning situations and transforms a group of entrepreneurs into a collective.

3.1.2. Situation 2: Toolbox sessions

Events addressing more narrowly defined topics are also regularly organised by and for members. The aim of these 'Toolbox' events is to share skills and good practices in a pragmatic way (E.g. how Google statistical tools work, how to manage volunteers, how to

² This entrepreneur had been at La Ruche for two and a half years.

prevent and recognise deafness, etc.) Lasting roughly 90 minutes and attended by about ten people, these workshops are usually run by La Ruche members who provide the group with some of their know-how. 'For me, Toolbox is about extending goodwill, giving of yourself, getting down to work.' For example, the founder of 'Dureo', whose business is mainly to provide assistance to property owners during construction, conversion and renovation projects in the areas of urban planning and sustainable housing, held a workshop on public tenders (E.g. where to find calls for tender, how to prepare a bid). The team from a magazine focusing on sustainable development shared advice about publishing compelling press releases and press kits. The La Ruche team also invites outside speakers to come and give a talk or to propose sessions if the topic may interest the group or respond to its needs. During a Toolbox session on springboard jobs, for example, an elected official from the greater Paris region came to answer questions from entrepreneurs about the new RFP system and in general about financial aid from the region.

3.1.3. Situation 3: Hold-ups

Finally, many entrepreneurs mentioned the group creativity sessions called 'Hold-ups', whose aim is to find possible solutions and answers to the entrepreneurs' concrete business problems (E.g. what's a good name for my SCOP³? How to sell carbon credits directly to individuals?).

'I love the Hold-ups. If an organisation has a specific problem and can't solve it alone, we get twelve or fifteen people around a table and we help them. There is a particular methodology for producing ideas. You're not allowed to judge other people's ideas during the process. Everybody speaks freely. What's really great is when you get an email from that organisation three days later that says, "We have received all the feedback. Thank you very much for your participation.

We've found a solution." That doesn't happen in a traditional company.'

Participants voluntarily help other members on an ad hoc basis to find possible solutions to their entrepreneurial challenges. Hold-ups may also be proposed by La Ruche's coordinating team to find ideas and solutions that will benefit entrepreneurs/members (E.g. which collaborative platform for the community? What media should be used for a collective publication?). Some people point out that this type of event requires a significant investment that may not be repeated if the beneficiaries do not make good use of it. 'When the entrepreneur does not capitalise on the ideas produced at Hold-ups, it gets tiresome...'

³ SCOP stands for *Sociétés coopératives et participatives*, which is one of the legal forms for a commercial business in France.

Sessions are usually run jointly by an expert and a novice so that anyone who wishes to learn this methodology can do so and then reuse it later in their business activity.

3.1.4. Situation 4: Happy Ruche

In addition to these three events, La Ruche and its entrepreneurs also hold other events, open to non-members, of which the entrepreneurs we interviewed spoke little.

The 'Happy Ruche' for example, takes the form of a networking 'happy hour', held one Tuesday per month, focusing on a social innovation topic proposed either by an entrepreneur or by the La Ruche coordinating team. La Ruche entrepreneurs and outside participants can thus interact in a convivial ambiance at an organic bar. Two La Ruche organisations, assisted by a third non-member organisation, held a Happy Ruche on the subject of 'Socially Responsible Investing (SRI) for complete dummies' to show what SRI and its tools/methods are all about, with the screening of a film titled *Moi, la finance et le développement durable* (Me, Finance and Sustainable Development). Another entrepreneur organised a party/debate on innovations that can transform agricultural practices without harming the soil, water, climate... (E.g. urban agriculture, permaculture⁴). Upon publication of their book *Entrepreneuriat social, innover pour l'intérêt général* (Social Entrepreneurship: innovating in the public interest), the authors were invited by La Ruche to address concrete questions about social entrepreneurship linked to business models, to measuring social impacts, etc.

Using the same format, 'Wiser Tuesdays' attract people who wish to explore new ways of using Web 2.0 technologies to support social solidarity initiatives (E.g. a workshop on creating and maintaining a blog, or how to write for the web with a laptop to create or enrich your blog on social entrepreneurship). One entrepreneur commented, 'Wiser Tuesdays at La Ruche encourage people to share ideas with each other. People come in a spirit of openness and goodwill to learn from others and share their experience.'

These events are open to everyone, free of charge, just by signing up. Although members do not participate much in these kinds of events (except when they initiate them or the few who participate in almost everything), they do generally value the openness of La Ruche beyond its membership: 'Anyone who thinks that pursuing a gratifying professional activity also means being open to the outside, should also join in the game being offered here.'

⁴ Permaculture is a set of practices and principles aiming to create sustainable agricultural production by reproducing the diversity, stability and resilience of natural ecosystems.

Second, we will characterise the mechanisms that support collective learning dynamics and characterise these learning processes.

3.2. MECHANISMS THAT SUPPORT COLLECTIVE LEARNING SITUATIONS

Here we will focus on three events (Buzz, Hold-up, and Toolbox) in order to identify the characteristics of the learning processes that occur there and the collectives that contribute to it.

3.2.1. Sharing good practices

Certain events are a vector for the transfer of pre-existing knowledge, through an original modality based on both the collective and on practical application. This is the case of Toolbox, and Hold-up events in terms of their methodological aspect.

During a Toolbox event, the main speaker arrives with established knowledge that he/she will try to transmit to the group. This speaker positions him/herself as a facilitator of discussions between participants rather than as an expert. One entrepreneur who showed a documentary on sustainable fishing and then offered the participants some advice to make sense of the various food labels, declared: 'I appreciate the freedom of being able to bring what I know to others. It helped build my self-confidence to say that I could transmit something and that at my level I could bring something to the others.' One characteristic of these events is that they give much more weight to practical application, both in the way they are run and in their goals. 'For the Toolbox event on Prezi software, for example, everybody brought their laptop so they could learn to do it hands-on and then everybody made a presentation for the open house day at La Ruche. We make something that we use afterward. It's very concrete.' Entrepreneurs belonging to 'La Nouvelle PME', a social network of social entrepreneurs from working class neighbourhoods, who are La Ruche members and regular coordinators of Toolbox events, often ask participants to bring their laptops or mobile phones to facilitate their adoption of the tools presented (E.g. improve their Google PageRank, defend their positioning in professional social networks, etc.).

Other events, particularly the Hold-ups, contribute to familiarising entrepreneurs with new tools and new methodologies that can later help them to develop their entrepreneurial venture.

Regarding Hold-ups, some entrepreneurs made the following comments:

'I helped to run one and now I use it for my group meetings in my business';

'I re-used the concept of resolution in my service offering.'

'What is interesting at La Ruche is they show you a technique a couple of times and then you can apply it. A Hold-up is learning through doing.'

In both cases, it appears to be important for the events to be about realities on the ground and the reality of the entrepreneurs' business: 'I go when the topics interest me, such as responsible finance or business transparency. I'm also interested in things that I can put into practice afterward.' Through these mechanisms, the members who attend the sessions can develop their own skills by putting into practice the expert knowledge given by the workshop leader.

3.2.2. Building new practices

Certain events facilitate the building of new knowledge, either by compiling and synthesising information held by different entrepreneurs or by combining knowledge distributed among participants. This occurs at the Buzz and Hold-ups.

The Buzz contributes to building collective knowledge shared by La Ruche members, given that it is a time and place for exchanging information. Information on the social entrepreneurship sector is ordered hierarchically, compared, and synthesised. Indeed, some of the entrepreneurs use the Buzz as a business intelligence tool:

'We live in an information society. The hardest thing is to be able to pick up useful information to use later. The Buzz is interesting because you always learn new things. It makes you feel like you're at the cutting edge, that you are aware of things very early on.'

It's also seen as a continuing education tool, especially for young members, and as a motivational tool:

'The Buzz is very interesting, including for the people who are doing an internship with us. It's a real plus. [...] It also makes them aware of all the concerns of social entrepreneurship';

'Not only is it fun, but it's also useful to attend the Buzz because I often find out in advance about nascent projects and innovations. It motivates me to continue with my project.'

This mechanism enables La Ruche members, and La Ruche itself, to develop better knowledge of the social entrepreneurship sector by pooling information held by different individuals and by opening it up to debate, which contributes to ordering information hierarchically and compiling dispersed information that produces/creates/articulates knowledge that the workshop leader did not possess

Nevertheless, according to two of the entrepreneurs interviewed, the Buzz suffers from a certain number of limitations: 'For me, the Buzz is useless. No truly important subject is

addressed there. I don't feel as though I learn anything there.' The two entrepreneurs who are evoking the need to go beyond the events are among the most experienced and already have good general knowledge of social entrepreneurship. In addition to what the Buzz and Hold-up events provide, they would like to see the development of other formats for transmitting and building knowledge, to move beyond the discovery stage and to explore topics in depth, collectively, but in small groups.

The knowledge building process at the Hold-ups is more focused than what occurs at the Buzz as it is triggered by the formulation of a specific problem posed by an entrepreneur. This knowledge did not exist as such before the session. The Hold-up events lead to a reformulation of the problem, the identification of skills to be acquired or the creation of new knowledge:

'The Hold-up helped us to resolve a very concrete problem, which was to find a name for the coloured part of the Gobi.⁵ Now it's called a "tag". It is really thanks to La Ruche that we found the name. We had been struggling with this for months and it became urgent to name the part, which didn't have a name, because we were about to launch the sales campaign.'

Entrepreneurs who want to organise a Hold-up usually mention it during a Buzz in order to 'recruit' volunteers for their session. The entrepreneurs who agree to participate in a Hold-up do not usually do so with the aim of using the knowledge that will be produced collectively during the event, but rather in the spirit of give-and-take — so they in turn will be able to call on the La Ruche entrepreneurs later, for example. Moreover, it is possible to identify a hard core of members among the residents who regularly attend the Hold-up.

This analysis of the Buzz, Toolbox and Hold-up events, leads us to consider them as learning situations and to characterise the nature of the learning processes occurring in these three situations. It is worth noting that the role of the Buzz goes beyond the identified learning situations. The Buzz is a time and place for exchanging information that makes it possible to set up other events such as Toolbox and Hold-ups. During the Buzz, topics of common interest may emerge, potential speakers for a Toolbox may be identified, calls for people willing to participate in a Hold-up may be announced, etc. The regular attendance of La Ruche members at the Buzz (or at least reading the notice board in the kitchen or the bulletin sent by email) thus appears to be an important element in the learning dynamic at La Ruche. The Buzz may be seen as the starting point for the collective learning process at La Ruche.

⁵ 'Gobi' is the name of a product developed by three social entrepreneurs who were members at La Ruche for nearly two years that they define as an ecological flask, i.e. an eco-designed reusable bottle.

Third, we will explain how groups are formed in which these collective learning dynamics can develop.

3.3. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COLLECTIVE FORMED BY LA RUCHE ENTREPRENEURS

The learning situations identified here seem to be made possible by two dimensions particular to the characteristics of the entrepreneurial projects hosted at La Ruche: comparability and complementarity.

3.3.1. Comparability between members

It is important to point out first of all that La Ruche entrepreneurs are operating in a social entrepreneurship milieu that is still inchoate:

'Being at La Ruche, the feeling that you belong to a community that upholds shared values and is moving in the same direction — that keeps you from getting discouraged by the thought of pounding the pavement on your own, heading into battle by yourself. Being surrounded by people who share the same desire to promote alternatives also helps to validate what you're doing and not just leave you to follow your instincts.'

At La Ruche, they are exposed to a multitude of different initiatives, run by members or by social innovation organisations:

'It's a space that represents the diversity of entrepreneurial approaches where the interdependence of subjects allows you to cross into other areas, to move beyond your own work habits. It generates creativity. In that sense, it is beneficial to connect with others every day. Through listening to them, I have discovered a lot of new things outside of my line of business.'

By talking to and sharing with these people, they can gain access to a much larger store of knowledge about social entrepreneurship:

'I'm delighted to know so many other people with innovative projects. I draw inspiration from their way of reading the world and solving problems.'

'Being in a nice place and rubbing shoulders with other people who work in the same sector, you get inspiration or you open up to other things. Informally or sometimes even unconsciously, you learn a lot from listening to others. And it's stimulating to be with people who promote social innovation. It's personally enriching to be at the crossroads of all this information.'

The entrepreneurs interviewed consider that being located in this coworking space with people who share the entrepreneurial challenge and especially that of starting a business in the field of social innovation is helpful for them and their project, or at least more beneficial than working in isolation: 'Moving from solitary development to joining a network of people and

knowledge, La Ruche helped us to make a qualitative leap while we were in the start-up phase.'

3.3.2. Compatibility between members

While there is comparability between their businesses, there is little direct competition between La Ruche entrepreneurs. Instead, there is complementarity between project entrepreneurs that should be identified:

'I find that La Ruche fosters informal exchanges in an operational, concrete and convivial way. It is a non-hostile environment: we are all there to develop our business with a collaborative attitude. [...] Helping each other is part of the game.'

'La Ruche is a place for encounters, the transmission of information and potentially for collaboration. [...] We are in a rapidly expanding sector and we wager that there is more to be gained by cooperating than by being in a spirit of competition with your neighbour.'

This realisation may lead to the creation of new shared competences that can generate more business or a new business. The means used by the La Ruche entrepreneurs to achieve this outcome mostly consist of exchanging customer/supplier data bases, for example, or responding jointly to calls for tender:

'At La Ruche we meet people that we wouldn't have been able to make contact with elsewhere; which means that we share contacts and information easily. [...] We do each other favours and we get used to consulting others.'

'We communicate with the same people. After working alongside each other for a while, we realised that we were duplicating some of the work, each on our own. In the end, we exchanged our press contacts. Today, whenever we see some info or a good idea, we call the others and say "Have you seen that?" We save time and we are more efficient. By sharing our contacts, we have each obtained benefits in the press that we would not have had otherwise.'

Take the example of an entrepreneur who runs a consulting and assistance business for sustainable housing property owners and who is seeking to acquire new competences and perhaps new sources of business by forming partnerships through La Ruche:

'I was able to find contacts for my business because there are complementary organisations [at La Ruche] which had networks that might interest me, not necessarily to find customers but partners. We answered a call for tender with two other La Ruche organisations. As there were three of us, we were able to put in a bid and be good. It was with a training specialist on environmental quality in construction and a specialist on running effective meetings and collaborative tools. [...] I am also going to sign a partnership with another organisation that

offers professional training on the environmental quality of buildings. We work on exactly the same subjects. They are interested in being more operational on concrete projects, and I am interested in having a link with training.'

The collective of La Ruche entrepreneurs is formed and nourished by relationships of comparability and complementarity between members, even though they are engaged in different ventures and practices (in the sense of economic activity). In the next section, we will see if this collective can be defined or not as a community of practice.

4. DISCUSSION

Considering entrepreneurial support (ES) as a learning process (Sammut 2003; Cuzin and Fayolle 2004), we have pointed out that the majority of support practices rest on individual learning processes, usually in a prescriptive mode from the support provider to the supported party. Inversely, the research on entrepreneurial learning (EL) emphasises the role of collective learning in an entrepreneurial context. We have attempted to shed light on these collective learning dynamics in an entrepreneurial context by analysing the La Ruche case. We sought to identify and characterise situations in which collective learning develops. Finally, we examine the dynamics that foster the formation of these collectives. We will now turn to the question of whether La Ruche entrepreneurs can be considered a community of practice, given the three learning situations we have characterised,

The entrepreneurs at La Ruche form a group of peers in which they share their experiences of the entrepreneurial challenge, reconciling economic and social objectives. We propose to compare and contrast the characteristics of this group of entrepreneurs to the notion of community of practice as per Wenger (1998), mainly because it fulfils Wenger's conditions, namely: a joint enterprise, a mutual engagement, and a repertoire shared.

4.1. A JOINT ENTERPRISE IN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

La Ruche's specialisation in social entrepreneurship constitutes a joint enterprise, which goes beyond the sharing of practices. All the more so since these practices may in reality be quite diverse at La Ruche, ranging from an entrepreneur working on social issues, such as helping people re-enter the job market, on one hand, to an entrepreneur involved in environmental problems, such as not wasting natural resources (compared to the community of practice at Xerox where all the members repaired photocopiers). Moreover, the 'domain' of social

entrepreneurship is still in its formative stages. Numerous different initiatives in this field are gathered together at La Ruche and the La Ruche team regularly invites other social entrepreneurship organisations for events that are open to non-members. It thus contributes to raising the profile of the domain, and likewise that of the entrepreneurs who are developing it:

'We feel valued as a social entrepreneur. We tell ourselves that there are plenty of people getting into it, that it's a concept that is proving itself. That creates a movement [...] We are still in evangelisation mode vis-à-vis the traditional market economy sector, where the La Ruche name is beginning to be recognised.'

In addition to methodologies that the entrepreneurs may share and apply in their various businesses, the collective learning processes highlighted here are original because they are situated at the level of the group's field, in this case social entrepreneurship, and not at the level of their practice or business.

Such a specialisation is relatively original for a coworking space or for an entrepreneurial support organisation; the majority of them are generalists (i.e. open to entrepreneurs and non-entrepreneurs, operating in different types of business). Because of this specialisation, La Ruche carries out an entrepreneur selection process which establishes a sort of entry barrier to distinguish potential members from non-members: 'What I appreciate is that we share the same concerns. I learn from the others.' This specialisation also fosters the construction of an identity shared by the entrepreneurs who locate their business at La Ruche, although some of them struggle to recognise themselves under the still ill-defined label of 'social entrepreneur'.

4.2. A MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT ACHIEVED THROUGH EVENTS

The mutual engagement at work at La Ruche is based, in an original way, on the social processes set up by the La Ruche team, mainly through events. Other rituals observed at La Ruche attest to the mutual engagement within the group of entrepreneurs, linked to the place's self-management mode of operating. The fact that each individual may be called upon to welcome visitors for another company (there is no reception desk at La Ruche), that washing the dishes or putting paper in the printers or toilets, etc. is the responsibility of everyone, that everyone can open and lock the premises (24/7 access). It is unlikely that groups of entrepreneurs would spontaneously form to help an entrepreneur solve a problem, as happens at the Hold-up, without the intervention of the coordinators. Compliance with the house rules for collective living (enacted by the La Ruche team and posted on the intranet or directly in

the space) and members' regular attendance of events, especially the Buzz, are important dimensions of the mutual engagement observed at La Ruche.

Mutual engagement takes shape in the form of mutual aid, such as in the Hold-up events, where mobilising the respective knowledge of the participants to address a specific need does not necessarily aim to improve the practice or benefit all the contributors. La Ruche thus helps to create value for its members even though this may not have been a motive for them to join La Ruche initially:

'When I arrived I wasn't expecting such an events programme and I didn't imagine that I could contribute anything to the others. I hadn't imagined that I would do things with other organisations at La Ruche. The network, yes, I was aware of that, but working together — not at all. I hadn't realised the power of all that.'

4.3. A SHARED REPERTOIRE

The La Ruche repertoire evolves along with exchanges between members and acquires specific vocabulary (E.g. the specific names of events, of membership, of meeting rooms, etc.), routines (E.g. the Buzz), and tools (E.g. the Hold-up methodology), which become an integral part of their practice.

But above all, it is the La Ruche entrepreneurs' give-and-take attitude that allows the group to function as a community of practice, which is quite far from what Wenger called a shared repertoire:

'La Ruche made me autonomous. I do that and I use it in my work. It makes me want to give something back.'

'I wanted to hold a workshop on the topic of "energy". For me it's a way of slipping in what I do, while imparting knowledge to people.'

4.4. THE ROLE OF LA RUCHE AS AN ORGANISATION

However, the literature on communities of practice generally considers them as emerging spontaneously. In groups of entrepreneurs, we consider that a community of practice has very little chance of emerging spontaneously as mutual engagement and joint enterprise are seldom observed thus inhibiting the emergence of a shared repertoire.

Our empirical data highlights that La Ruche, as an organisation, plays an important role in the learning dynamics at work among the entrepreneurs, in the sense that it organises social processes in the form of events and its coordinating team initiates some of the interpersonal

interactions and proposes methodologies to favour and support them. The exchanges between entrepreneurs attending events may be considered spontaneous, but the impetus which made them possible was given upstream by the La Ruche coordinating team who decided to set up a certain number of rules and processes.

As an organisation, La Ruche performs certain functions — selecting members, defining social processes, ensuring compliance with house rules — that contribute to the mutual engagement of members, to the perception of a joint enterprise in which their entrepreneurial project takes part. Interestingly this organisation is rooted in the physical space it provides. The importance of the physical space shared by a community of practice was present in the early research work on this notion. However, this dimension has been less emphasized and even some times forgotten in more recent studies on the subject.

We thus propose to speak of an 'entrepreneurial community of practice' to underline the specific conditions under which collective learning processes similar to those highlighted by the literature on communities of practice may emerge in an entrepreneurial context : a physical space, a coordinating team, comparability and complementarity between the hosted members engaged in different ventures.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article we show the importance to entrepreneurial learning of inter-individual learning with other entrepreneurs, based on an exploratory study of a French coworking space reserved to a population of social entrepreneurs: La Ruche in Paris. We have shed light on and characterised the mechanisms that can support collective learning dynamics. On this basis, we have also tried to explain how groups are formed in which these collective learning dynamics can develop.

We have described in detail the collective learning processes of entrepreneurs and, drawing on our empirical material, have highlighted three specific types of situation. We have also characterised the nature of learning at work in these three situations. In the first type of situation, where it is a matter of transmitting a specific skill, we observe a dynamic of knowledge integrated through doing, in a group. In the second situation, it is a matter of resolving a problem collectively without previously established knowledge of how to tackle it, which engenders a process where a solution is found through the combination of knowledge dispersed among members and the creation of new knowledge. In the third

situation, members of the same collective regularly meet to discuss their current situation and needs freely and informally, following a precise ritual, which builds shared knowledge about the field that brought them together, through the compilation and synthesis of information held by the different participants without a person identified the knowledgeable one from which the other should learn. In this study we shed light on links between learning dynamics and entrepreneurial dynamics, a phenomenon that we consider important to better understand whereas it is insufficiently analysed in the literature.

Through an in-depth empirical study, we contribute to the field of entrepreneurial learning, focused on entrepreneurs' learning processes by highlighting a specific form of learning that helps entrepreneurs to develop their practices. Bringing to the fore these forms of learning — which go beyond individual mechanisms and benefiting from the group to which the entrepreneur belongs — constitutes a rich source of learning for entrepreneurship training. The entrepreneurs who achieved the most success at La Ruche are those who were able to forge ties with the other entrepreneurs. The type of learning supported and enhanced at La Ruche cannot however be replaced by traditional training. To what extent are these learning processes complementary to more traditional learning modes? To take this even further, it would be necessary to explore which contexts and moments of entrepreneurial development are the ones where it would be most beneficial to have access to this type of learning.

We also contribute to the research on communities of practice, which examines learning processes situated in intra-organisational collectives, by adapting the notion to an entrepreneurial context. We propose the term 'entrepreneurial community of practice' to refer to a group of entrepreneurs, belonging to different companies and with differentiated practices, that develops situated collective learning dynamics. We reiterate the importance of the members of a community of practice being located in the same physical space — a dimension which has been neglected in recent studies on the subject — by presenting a new type of collective and collaborative space, coworking spaces, as a potential breeding ground favourable to the emergence of such a community. We also criticise the 'spontaneous and emerging' characterisation of communities of practice usually found in the literature by emphasising the role of this coworking space as an organisation, which conceives and puts in place a certain number of mechanisms that are the impetus behind the creation and support of these communities.

Empirically, we contribute to a better understanding of the coworking phenomenon by explaining why more and more entrepreneurs are moving their business into this type of

workspace. Locating their business in this type of place has a positive impact on their personal development and the development of their project, because they acquire and build knowledge in relation to their practice. Still, it is important to point out that this finding was observed in a particular type of coworking space — a space reserved to an entrepreneurial population rather than a generalist one, and a space that specialises in a specific field: social entrepreneurship. There are other specialised coworking spaces for entrepreneurs in Paris, especially in the fields of culture and digital technology, with which it could be useful to compare the dynamics observed at La Ruche, as well as at the international level, in order to improve the generality of our findings. Our findings may have interesting managerial significance for the managers of coworking spaces in highlighting the role of the team in charge of operating and coordinating the space. Indeed, we have shown that learning dynamics struggle to emerge spontaneously without their intervention and the development of a certain number of social mechanisms favourable to a collective learning dynamic between entrepreneurs. The pioneering mechanism of events programming appears to be a valid alternative or complement to more prescriptive modes of learning.

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