

From facilitated to independent Tourism Learning Networks:

Connecting the Dots

Dr Felicity Kelliher

Waterford Institute of Technology

Cork Road, Waterford, Ireland

Ph. +353 51 845602; Fax +353 51 302688; email fkelliher@wit.ie

Leana Reinl, MBS

Waterford Institute of Technology

Cork Road, Waterford, Ireland

Ph +353 51 845645; Fax +353 51 302688; email lreinl@wit.ie

Word Count: 6000 all inclusive.

The authors would like to acknowledge Fáilte Ireland's support in this research study.

ABSTRACT

Facilitated networks are regularly cited in tourism literature as a means to promote sustainable competitive advantage in small tourism firms. These networks function for a variety of reasons including marketing, innovation and research and development; however learning networks specifically seek to encourage learning among tourism entrepreneurs. Once established, the question remains whether such networks can transition from facilitated cooperative learning strategies to become independent learning communities in the longer term. Little is known about the formation, maintenance or success of these types of learning relationships after facilitated learning structures and supports reach a conclusion. What is known is that these networks, labeled 'Evolving Learning Communities' (ELCs) by the authors, are devoid of formal structures, thus autonomy in their structural and relational reasoning is required. In this paper, the authors explore a facilitated tourism learning network (TLN) environment operating in Ireland, and discuss the potential to transition from a facilitated TLN to an independent learning network environment. Following a comprehensive literature review, the authors propose an ELC model for the purposes of mapping the tourism entrepreneur's learning development, from the autonomous business setting to the facilitated learning network environment and on to the independent learning network arena, illustrating the evolution of a learning community. The overriding research objective is: *to explore the elements and relationships that influence entrepreneurial learning in tourism learning networks*. Future research will inform and validate the proposed model through the completion of a longitudinal interpretive case study incorporating sub-studies for the purposes of cross-validation.

Key Words: Tourism, Facilitated Learning Networks, Evolving Learning Communities

INTRODUCTION

Facilitated networks are regularly cited in tourism literature (Ahmad, 2005; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Wing Yan Man, 2007), as a means to promote sustainable competitive advantage in small firms (Lesser and Everest, 2001; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007). These networks function for a variety of reasons including marketing, innovation and research and development; however the networks discussed in this paper specifically seek to encourage learning among tourism entrepreneurs. Here, facilitated learning networks can form an important part of the individual learning process (Ahmad, 2005; Florén and Tell, 2004; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Wing Yan Man, 2007), wherein interacting with like-minded individuals in a learning network can *“help foster an environment in which knowledge can be created and shared and, most importantly, used to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation”* (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p.46). When established, a set of co-ordinated actors, whose connections are based on social exchange and collaborative relationship ties, show varying degrees of formality (Weber and Khademian, 2008). The concept of a facilitated learning network falls within this frame, and is described as *‘a network formally set up for the primary purpose of increasing knowledge’* (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001, p88). It is this definition that is applied in this paper. In context, tourism learning networks (TLNs) provide: *“a socially constructed and socially supported learning environment which enables the development of network relationships, wherein individual learning is enhanced through cooperative learning strategies disseminated through the structures, supports and ethos of the network, thereby releasing learning barriers and enhancing learning competence and business development”* (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010).

Once established, the question remains whether such networks can transition from facilitated cooperative learning strategies to become independent learning communities in the longer term. Little is known about the formation, maintenance or success of these types of learning relationships after facilitated learning structures and supports reach a conclusion (Bessant and Francis, 1999; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). What is known is that these networks, labeled 'Evolving Learning Communities' (ELCs) by the authors, are devoid of formal structures, necessitating autonomy in their structural and relational reasoning, while effective management and maintenance of such learning structures and relationships requires a level of learning competence among community members (Florén and Tell, 2004; Toiviainen, 2007; Wing Yan Man, 2007). In this paper, the authors explore a facilitated TLN environment operating in Ireland, and discuss the potential to transition from a facilitated TLN to an ELC. Following a comprehensive literature review, the authors propose a model of evolving learning communities which draws on the social learning perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) for the purposes of mapping the tourism entrepreneur's learning development, from autonomous business setting to facilitated TLN and on to an ELC arena, illustrating the evolution of the learning community. The overriding research objective is: *to explore the elements and relationships that influence entrepreneurial learning in tourism learning networks*; as such the various stages of network evolution will be dealt with in the natural succession that they occur. Future research will inform and validate the proposed ELC model through the completion of a substantial longitudinal interpretive case study incorporating sub-studies for the purposes of cross-validation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to explore the elements and relationships that influence entrepreneurial learning in a TLN environment, the various stages of learning network evolution will be reviewed in the natural succession that they occur – from the tourism entrepreneur’s learning development in an autonomous business setting to their interactions in a facilitated TLN and on to an ELC arena.

Autonomous business setting

Considering the majority of tourism operators are classified as small and micro-firms¹ in a European context, there is little separation of ownership and power and as such the owner/entrepreneur is central to the, potentially unconscious, learning process. This review is therefore constructed reflecting an individual unit of analysis, wherein business ownership can be viewed as a learning experiment in and of itself (Choueke and Armstrong, 1998), resulting in a predisposition to learning when coupled with the enactment of the learning process (Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, these firms tend to have simple structures and management processes (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), and the owner, who is often the sole decision maker (Reijonen and Komppula, 2007), applies a rapid response to issues that impact the business (Aragon-Sanchez and Sanches-Marn, 2005). This environment presents opportunities for greater flexibility and the rapid application of learning and development in the business (Kelliher and Reinl, 2009; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1998), providing the entrepreneur with a relatively unique competitive tool when interacting with the open market. While this approach has obvious benefits, it can potentially cause learning restrictions if too much emphasis is placed on

¹ The terms micro and small-firm relate to businesses that employ less than ten [micro] and less than 50 [small] for the purposes of this study. This definition is consistent with that provided by the European Union (EU, 2003)

immediately applicable learning to the detriment of long-term learning (Patton et al., 2000; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009). Thus, while a significant pool of knowledge may already be present in the tourism firm, external impulses are sometimes required to trigger internal development (Lundberg and Tell, 1998), and stimulate the learning dynamic within the tourism firm. The learning orientation most pertinent in this context is the social learning perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991), thereby promoting a move towards facilitated learning networks.

Facilitated Tourism Learning Networks

Based on the preceding discussion, it is clear that cooperative learning strategies form an important part of the individual learning process (Ahmad, 2005), however membership does not automatically guarantee that effective learning will occur; success is dependent on a number of influencing factors; including the entrepreneur's characteristics (Sullivan, 2000), individual competence (Wing Yan Man, 2007; Witt, 2004), the firm's incumbent resource criteria (Ahmad, 2005; Kelliher and Reinl, 2009) and the entrepreneur's 'readiness to learn' (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). Despite these caveats, facilitated TLNs can provide a dynamic, resource rich learning environment for owner/entrepreneurs, where business development can '*mirror the dynamics of learning*' (Dobbs and Hamilton, 2007, p.299), providing otherwise unavailable information and resources (Ahmad, 2005; Witt, 2004). This goal is pursued through nurturing learning relationships, and utilising learning strategies to leverage relational capital through peer reflection learning techniques (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), in pursuit of learner autonomy (Cope and Watts, 2000), reflective practice (Florén and Tell, 2004; Sullivan, 2000) and learning competency development.

In facilitated LN settings, learning relationships are nurtured through a variety of learning interventions, these are usually managed by an academic/management support hub (Haugen Gausdal, 2008; Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004) who fulfils the role of '*learning broker*' by nurturing learning relationships through individual and collective learning strategies, guiding pro-active behaviour (Johannisson, 2000), and assisting participants in identifying opportunities to leverage LN knowledge. These strategies may include the establishment of network resources, symbols and events - for example through peer and individual learning interventions, an interactive website, or residential workshops. These interventions are enhanced through the application of 'learning sets' (Devins et al., 2005; Lynch and Morrison, 2007; Kelliher et al., 2009), where network members are paired with experienced facilitators, and are encouraged to share their learning expectations, building the foundations of trustful learning relationships. Ultimately, the goal is for learners to think more strategically about their learning needs (Devins et al., 2005; Hannon et al., 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), in order to enable and enhance individual learning (Gregory, 1994) through the social structures and relationships of the learning community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The TLN equates to a psychological contract² of sorts, where the participant expects a learning environment where resources can be leveraged to assist individual learning and development and providers of such programmes expect that participants will contribute to the wider social learning process and demonstrate a degree of learning and business development in return. Having discussed individual

² In its simplest terms a psychological contact refers to the time resources and effort put in to a task and what is expected in return (Reagans and McEvily, 2003). It is a two way process of expectations in the facilitated learning network environment.

entrepreneur's learning inclinations and the facilitated TLN environment; the key themes identified are summarised in table 1.

Table 1 about here

Considering the facilitated network objective is ultimately learner autonomy, TLN facilitators need to find an optimum intervention level where the balance between learning broker reliance and autonomous learning can be maintained (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010), in order to minimise the risk of 'learned helplessness' in these networks. If this occurs, the learning momentum may be lost as soon as the facilitation ends, and responsibility for this risk must be equally understood by both parties (providers and participants) and facilitated through the network support structure so that provider-learning dependencies do not solidify. Thus, the authors' believe that facilitated TLNs are not an end in their own right, but rather a means through which individual and collective learning competencies can be developed, with the goal being a learning evolution, ideally resulting in a self-led community of practice.

Communities of Practice

Encapsulating the view that learning is something more than individual learning by doing (experiential learning), Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated model of learning places individual learning within social relationships. This perspective entails that learning involves a deepening process of participation within a 'community of practice' (CoP) wherein learning occurs through the shared pursuit of an activity/knowledge that encompasses an '*evolving and continuously renewed set of relations*' (Wenger; 1998, p.50) that are incumbent in that learning process. Newcomers initially join the community gaining access to '*arenas of mature practice*', learning at the borders of the community and as they become more involved in the community and more competent at carrying out their role, they gain legitimacy within the community. Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that learning to perform new tasks and master new understandings are merely a partial representation of learning, these tasks and understandings are also part of systems of relations that the individual (learner) defines and is defined by. Learning is therefore an evolving form of social participation within a community of practice wherein learners move (in centripetal direction) to a field of mature practice, and as learning identities are engaged and developed the learner moves into full participation, resulting in competent CoP expertise that can be shared with newcomers creating cycles of evolution within the learning community.

Over the evolution of a CoP the repertoire (stories, rules, routines and ways of doing things) of the community becomes a resource to negotiate meaning. This shared repertoire does not merely represent shared beliefs, to the contrary, differences in interpretation become opportunities for negotiation that produce new meanings. A learning curriculum develops through situated opportunities for improvisational development of new practice within the community, while Wenger (1998) contends that at various times the community will demonstrate different levels of

learning through the extent of reflection, with informal discussions often providing the opportunity to engage in reflection and discuss learning needs. It can be argued that in the absence of support for the learning process, the danger is that action focused short-term goals like that described by Noel and Latham (2006) overtake learning goals and push the learning agenda to the side. This is precisely why learning competency development is dependent on all community members' dedication to the learning network's long-term objectives.

PROPOSED EVOLVING LEARNING COMMUNITY MODEL

The authors draw on the CoP perspective in considering the ELC context, whilst also taking cognisance of facilitated TLN themes and their function as a catalyst for autonomous learning (Table 1). As ELCs are devoid of formal learning structures and are without facilitated TLN resources, members must self-organise, design and manage their own learning structures and strategy. As evidenced in the CoP overview, these structures should function at a competent level (Johannisson, 2000), which may take some time to develop (Halme, 2001). Notably, Wing Yan Man (2007) contends that learning competence is measurable and observable through learning skills, attributes and behaviours that demonstrate effectiveness in the learning role. As the learner acts on experience accumulated in prior learning situations (for example: learning competency development and the building of social capital resulting from facilitated TLN participation) and turns it in to a desirable outcome (through the promotion, formation and management of an ELC), the learner creates the context that provides the opportunity to facilitate learning behaviours that develop or make use of learning competencies. This perspective contributes to the view that a learning broker [one with visible learning competencies] should be selected from within by the learning community to assist with the development and management of the ELC

(Wing Yan Man, 2007) so that learning ownership rests within the heart of the community. Notably, it is likely that this role will be vacant at the very early stages of ELC formation (Wenger, 1998), as these individuals may have to gain legitimacy over time (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Finally, where a competence shortfall arises; there is also a need to reach outside the boundaries of the core learning community to providers of specialist knowledge (Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

The proposed ELC Model is based on the application of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated model of learning, which has been adapted to reflect the research finding encapsulated in this paper. The resultant Model assumes that identities and practice emerge as learning develops over time while the dynamics of voluntary trusting relationships (Florén and Tell, 2004; Sharif et al., 2005) and the evolution of shared practice (Ahlström-Söderling, 2003) also require time to embed in the ELC environment. In addition, Figure 1 incorporates the ELC requirement for autonomy in its structural and relational reasoning wherein community members are the designers of their learning structures, and therefore manage incumbent relationships and analyse their own learning requirements. Furthermore, the ELC forms and maintains boundaries with the external environment and as such cannot be considered in isolation. Although the external environment is broadly speaking outside the remit of this research, a number of issues in this external context do require exploration including; inclusion/exclusion through membership,

learning symbols and resources that cross boundaries, the learning broker that introduces seeding structures from one community of learning to another and new membership regeneration. The resultant ELC definition: *a community that groups together for the purpose of learning and business development after formal learning network support ends, thereby taking control of their own learning development through membership of learning relationships, strategies and symbols*, considers these underlying criteria.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research consists of a longitudinal interpretive case study conducted over a four-year period, within a single sector's network – that of the Irish Tourism Learning Network (TLN) initiative. Although there is no standard definition, Yin (1994: 13) defines the scope of a case study as “*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly evident*”, while Florén (2003) argues for length as well as depth in this context, as learning is a dynamic process, developed on the basis of an element of continuity (Pettigrew, 1990) on which knowledge rests while time passes. Patton et al. (2000) and Romano (1989) each endorse the longitudinal interpretive case method when studying learning in the small firm environment, as this approach gives the researcher time to develop case analyses that can consider the dynamic process of learning and development, within the social context of the small firm experience. Justification for the suitability of the longitudinal interpretive case study is further enhanced by Hill and McGowan's (1999) suggestion that small company research may be best done using a qualitative approach that includes participant observation, case studies, in-depth interviewing and the use of documentation (a view supported by Gibb, 1997 and Romano, 1989).

The case study in this instance is a TLN initiative which was established by Fáilte Ireland (the Irish tourism development agency) in 2006 in order to provide tourism-related firms with a year-long business development programme, and to cluster tourism owner/entrepreneurs in the hopes of future cooperative activity and effective learning. This research study focuses on the South/South East TLN, which has been developed by an educational institute in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland and has had over 400 participants come through the four cycles completed since its inception, with business interests ranging from accommodation providers, food and beverage businesses, cultural and heritage attractions, and leisure activities. The authors, each of whom had direct unbridled access to the case environment, observed and documented the implementation and operationalisation of the TLN from 2006-9, and are currently tracking the evolutionary network activities of selected past-participants of the facilitated TLN programme.

A number of data collection techniques were applied to build 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of both the facilitated TLN and post-participants' learning interactions, in pursuit of a theoretical basis for addressing future events. Benefitting from unbridled open access to the TLN and participant environments, the authors observed the TLN support office and TLN activity during each programme cycle; performed interim focus group sessions, and reviewed participant, facilitator and public documentation relating to the TLN in order to capture a range of owner/entrepreneur experiences, attitudes, opinions, and preferences (as recommended by: Patton, 1990; Devins et al., 2005). The authors are also documenting post-TLN learning interactions in a case ELC in a similar manner, the advantage of which is the capture of general

relations ‘*in vivo*’, as alluded to by Glaser & Strauss (1967). By spending a prolonged period in the field, the researchers have gained true insight into the workings of tourism learning networks in the context of the research question (as suggested by: Gomm et al., 2000), resulting in a visual of learning evolution, an outcome alluded to by: Pettigrew (1990) and Patton et al. (2000), among others.

The focus group sessions (carried out with sample entrepreneur/participant groups towards the end of each TLN formal programme and currently with the selected learning community) concentrated on the meaning and value of learning as expressed by participants, enhancing understanding of the TLN impact on individual and collective learning. The authors’ have also maintained reflective logs since the beginning of the study (as advised by: Ghaye and Lillyman, 1997) and these provided an additional layer of insight into the participant/entrepreneurs’ (and researchers’) learning evolution in interaction with the facilitated TLN and beyond. As the research objective was to: *explore the elements and relationships that influence entrepreneurial learning in tourism learning networks*, the underlying goal was to discover, understand and perhaps improve on existing patterns and order (Ghaye & Lillyman, 1997), and to attempt to identify the optimum means for promoting learning competence and network development in and among small tourism firms. In the longer term, this research seeks to identify ways and means of embedding the cooperative learning network ethos in individual mindsets and potentially enable an autonomous cooperative TLN environment, in pursuit of improved competitiveness in small tourism firms.

A FACILITATED TLN IN ACTION

The observed TLN and its incumbent learning approach is based on an action learning ethos, involving over 400 small tourism firms, an anchor learning facilitator and relevant support organisations including an educational institute and Fáilte Ireland. The TLN incorporates a series of learning interventions (Table 1) - including an initial learning needs analysis (LNA) document completed by each participant and analysed by the anchor team and relevant experts, and a series of workshops and two residential events relating to direct business learning needs, along with the anchor-provision of a learning support hub and an interactive web community environment. Each participant is assigned to a learning-set (Gibb, 1997) comprising up to 12 entrepreneurs, which meets 6-8 times throughout the year of the programme, the purpose of which is to ensure that the recommended cooperative network ethos is embedded in the programme (as advised by: Ahmad, 2005; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). A trained facilitator is matched to each learning-set which is either geographically allocated or themed by product orientation. Finally, participants are supported in achieving self-directed learning objectives through a number of complementary cooperative learning interventions and strategies, which ultimately inform individual tourism business development plans (TBDP). The design, development and implementation of these interventions were not without challenge as the learning needs of this diverse cohort proved to be highly differentiated (as anticipated by: Mainemelis et al., 2002), and the challenges also varied between each programme cycle. Feedback, although primarily positive, was relatively wide-ranging regarding the effectiveness of the learning relationships built within the network, whether between facilitator and participant and among participants themselves.

MAPPING THE POTENTIAL FOR EVOLVING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

With reference to the TLN impact on individual entrepreneur's learning competence, there was notably affiliation to prior knowledge, where participants showed a strong preference for drawing on previous experience having attended the '*university of life*' from their perspective (reinforcing the views of: Gibb, 1997 and Sullivan, 2000). Notably, in the TLN learning sets, the quality and accuracy of the group's own information and experience was not always conducive to effective learning and business development (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010), indicating the importance of an 'outside inside' view (Jack et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007) when honing post-TLN learning competencies. This may present a challenge in an ELC environment, as members may not recognise a competence shortfall; and/or the need to reach outside the boundaries of the core learning community to providers of specialist knowledge (Figure 1). The value of a reflective cycle [including the LNA - TBDP interventions] that was purposefully incorporated into the TLN programme was only considered useful in hindsight, as participants felt it was keeping them from direct business activities when first implemented. Furthermore, while there are several examples where changes were introduced to participant businesses with immediate results, this immediacy was considered a strong indicator of success by the participant even when less-immediate learning implementations could produce greater commercial effectiveness and business efficiency in the longer-term. This finding reinforces the concern raised by Noel and Latham (2006) in the literature review that action focused short-term goals may overtake learning goals and push the learning agenda to the side if the ELC learning process is not fully supported by its members (Figure 1). Furthermore, even when reflection took place, it did not necessarily equate to action among TLN participants suggesting that a push is required by the TLN facilitator (and ultimately the ELC learning broker) to assist the individual member's learning process cycle completion (Kolb, 1984) in the network environment.

Notably, focus group feedback suggests that peer interaction and reflection boosted the confidence of TLN participants resulting in; open discussions in relation to learning shortcomings, what had been learned during the network cycle, and how the group could continue to learn from each other after formal support reached a conclusion. Participants also felt that they were now “*thinking more [strategically] about their learning needs*” (as anticipated by: Morrison and Teixeira, 2004), in interaction with their peers. As a result of this finding, cooperative learning strategies such as peer discussion and reflection were incorporated into various TLN interventions in cycle 3-4, and a greater emphasis was placed on group activities that allow participants to collaboratively work through the learning content, while reinforcing the required move towards learner autonomy (Table 1). The hope was that this graduated independence track will reflect in the establishment of ELCs in due course – and the current ELC case study may prove to be testament to the value of promoting this kind of progressive participant independence in facilitated TLNs. Finally, retrospective sessions revealed that participants were surprised at how much had been learned and that they now analyse their learning needs very differently. Again, this points to the need for a learning broker role in the ELC environment, as champion of the learning cause in the earlier and mid stages of the learning community evolution.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

From a research perspective, this study addresses the relatively neglected area of tourism networks (Kelliher et al., 2009; Morrison et al., 2004; Tinsley and Lynch, 2007), and builds on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) social learning perspective for the purposes of mapping the tourism

entrepreneur's learning development, from autonomous business setting to facilitated TLN and on to an ELC arena, illustrating the evolution of learning in this environment. Findings suggest that tourism entrepreneurs require specific supports at different phases of the learning process to engage successfully in collective learning and to embed that learning in the business. It could be argued, in light of the findings that facilitated TLNs provide a learning environment which encourages, supports and enhances the development of analytical skills and learning competencies whilst also providing a knowledge intensive resource for its members in the first instance. However, the pursuit of independent learning networks, where tourism entrepreneurs co-exist in a self-led learning community is a matter of combining discourse and selected interventions during the transition period between the two environments (TLN to ELC). While other researchers have modified models of learning in response to the growing prevalence of small firm network learning and inter-organisational learning (see Knight and Pye, 2004; Beeby and Booth, 2000 for example), none to date have mapped learning competency development from an entrepreneur's small firm environment into the formal learning network milieu and onto the ELC setting to the best of the authors' knowledge. This is the key contribution of this research. Future research will inform and validate the ELC model through the completion of a longitudinal interpretive case study incorporating sub-studies for the purposes of cross-validation.

REFERENCES

- Ahlström-Söderling, R. (2003) SME strategic business networks seen as learning organisations, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 10(4), pp. 444-54.
- Ahmad, G. (2005) Small-firm Owner/managers networks in Tourism and Hospitality, *International Journal of Business and Society*, 6(2), pp. 37.
- Aragon-Sanchez, A. and Sanchez-Marin, G. (2005) Strategic orientation, management characteristics, and performance: A study of Spanish SMEs, *Journal of Small Business Management*, 43(3), pp. 287-308.
- Beeby, C. and Booth, C. (2000) Networks and inter-organizational learning: a critical review, *The Learning Organisation*, 7(2), pp. 75-88.
- Bessant, J. and Francis, D. (1999) Using learning networks to help improve manufacturing competitiveness, *Technovation*, 19, pp. 373-38.
- Bessant, J. and Tsekouras, G. (2001) Developing Learning Networks *AI and Society*, 15(1-2), pp. 82-98.
- Choueke, R. and Armstrong, R. (1998) The learning organisation in small and medium-sized enterprises – a destination or a journey? *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 4(2), pp. 129-40.
- Cope, J. and Watts, G. (2000) Learning by doing - an exploration of experience, critical incidents and reflection in entrepreneurial learning, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 6(3), pp. 104-24.

- Devins, D., Gold, J., Johnson, S., Holden, R. (2005) Conceptual model of management learning in micro businesses – implications for research and policy, *Education & Training*, 47(8/9), pp. 540-51.
- Dobbs, M. and Hamilton, R.T. (2006) Small business growth: recent evidence and new directions, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 13(5), pp. 296-322.
- EU (2003) Commission adopts a new definition of micro, small and medium sized enterprises in Europe, IP/03/652, Brussels, 8th May.
- Florén, H. (2003) Collaborative approaches to management learning in small firms, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 15(5), pp. 203-16.
- Florén, H. and Tell, J. (2004) The emergent prerequisites of managerial learning in small firm networks, *The Leadership and Organisational Development Journal*, 25(3), pp. 292-307.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books).
- Ghaye, T. and Lillyman, S. (1997) *Learning journals and critical incidents: reflective practice for health care professionals* (UK: Quay Books).
- Gibb, A.A. (1997) Small-firms training and competitiveness: building upon the small-firm as a learning organisation, *International Small Business Journal*, 15(3), pp. 13-29.
- Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory* (Chicago: Aldine).
- Gomm, E., Hammersley, M., Foster, P. (2000) *Case Study Method* (Surrey: Sage Publications).

- Gregory, M. (1994) Accrediting work based learning: action learning- a model of empowerment, *Journal of Management Development*, 13(4), pp. 14-52.
- Halme, M. (2001) Learning for sustainable development in tourism networks, *Business Strategy and The Environment*, 10, pp. 100-14.
- Hannon, P.D., Patton, D., Marlow, S. (2000) Transactional learning relationships: developing management competencies for effective small-firm-stakeholder interactions', *Education and Training*, 42(4/5), pp. 237-46.
- Haugen Gausdal, A. (2008) Developing regional communities of practice by network refection: the case of the electronics industry, *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, May, pp. 209-35.
- Hill, J., and McGowan, P. (1999) Small business and enterprise development: questions about research methodology, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 5(1), pp. 5.
- Jack, S., Drakopoulou Dodd, S., Anderson, A. (2004) Social structures and entrepreneurial networks: the strength of strong ties, *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 5(2), pp. 107.
- Johannisson, B. (2000) Competitiveness. Localized Learning and Regional Development. Specialization and Prosperity in Small Open Economies (Book Review), *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 12(3), pp. 267-270.
- Kelliher, F., and Reinl, L. (2009) A resource-based view of micro-firm management practice, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 16(3), pp. 521-32.

- Kelliher, F., Foley, A., Frampton, AM. (2009) Facilitating small firm learning networks in the Irish Tourism Sector, *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 9(1), pp. 80-95.
- Knight, L. and Pye, A. (2004) Exploring the relationship between network change and network learning, *Management Learning*, 35(4), pp. 473-490.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall).
- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press).
- Lesser, E., and Everest, K. (2001) Using Communities of Practice to Manage Intellectual Capital, *Ivey Business Journal*, 65(4), pp. 37-41.
- Lundberg, M. and Tell, J. (1998) Networks as a way of improving small and medium sized manufacturing enterprises, *Thesis*, Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg and Department of Work Organisation, Sweden.
- Mainemelis, C., Boyatzis, R.E., Kolb, D.A. (2002) Learning styles and adaptive flexibility: testing experiential learning theory, *Management Learning*, 33(1), pp. 5-34.
- Morrison, A., Lynch, P.E., Johns, N. (2004) International tourism networks, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16(3), pp. 197-202.
- Morrison, A., and Teixeira, R. (2004) Small business performance: a tourism sector focus, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 11(2), pp. 166-73.

- Noel, T., and Latham, G. (2006) The importance of learning goals versus outcome goals for entrepreneurs, *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* , 7(4), pp. 213-20.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990) *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (London: Sage).
- Patton, D., Marlow, S., Hannon, P. (2000) The relationship between training and small firm performance; research frameworks and lost quests, *International Small Business Journal*, 19(1), pp. 11-27.
- Pettigrew, A.M. (1990) Longitudinal field research on change: theory and practice, *Organization Science*, 1(3), pp. 267-71.
- Reagans, R. and McEvily, B. (2003) Network structure and knowledge transfer: the effects of cohesion and range, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 48, pp. 240-67.
- Reijonen, H., and Komppula, R. (2007) Perception of success and its effect on small firm performance, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 14(4), pp. 689-701.
- Reinl, L. and Kelliher, F. (2010) Cooperative micro-firm strategies: Leveraging resources through learning networks, *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, forthcoming.
- Romano, C.A. (1989) Research strategies for small business: A case study approach, *International Small Business Journal*, 7(4), pp. 35.
- Sharif, K., Kalafatis, S, Samouel, P. (2005) Cognitive and behavioural determinants of trust in small and medium-sized enterprises, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 12(3), pp. 409-21.

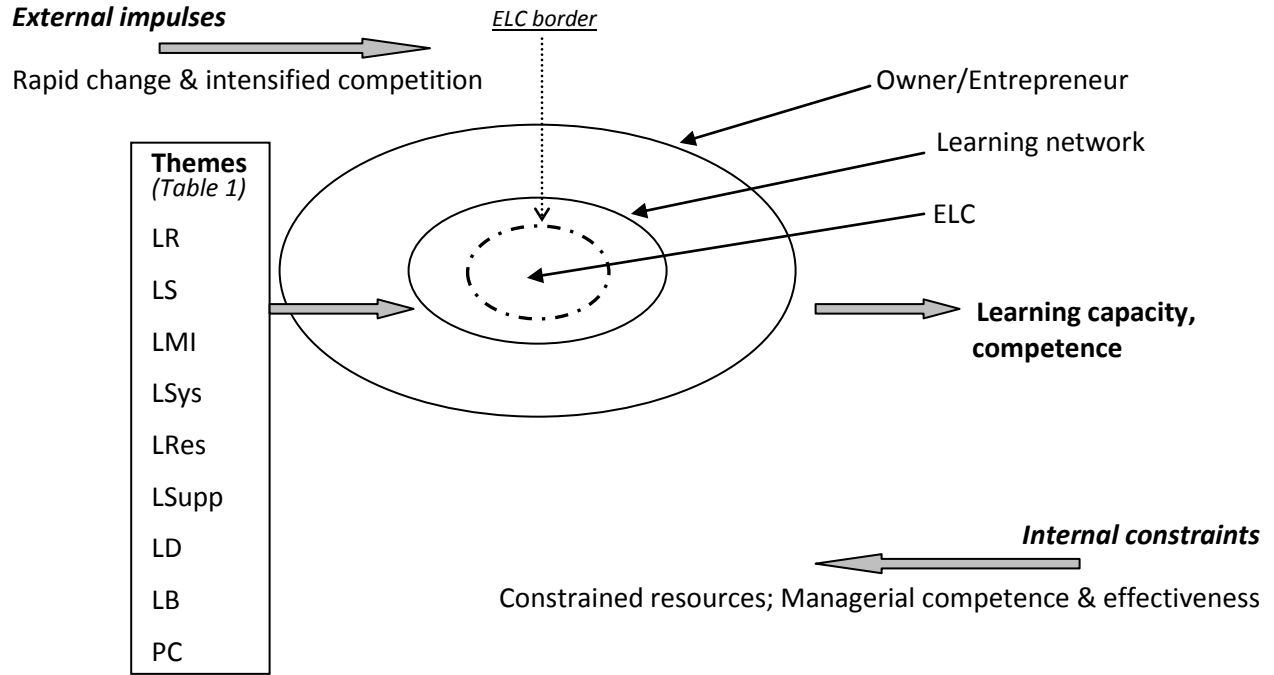
- Sullivan, R. (2000) Entrepreneurial learning and mentoring, *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 6(3), pp. 160-75.
- Taylor, D. W., and Thorpe, R. (2004) Entrepreneurial Learning: a process of co-participation, *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 11(2), pp 203-11.
- Tinsley, R., and Lynch, P. A. (2007) Small business networking and tourism destination development: A comparative perspective, *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 8(1), pp. 15-27.
- Toiviainen, H. (2007) Inter-organizational learning across levels; an object oriented approach, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 19(6), pp. 343-358.
- Van der Wiele, T., and Brown, A. (1998) Venturing down the TQM path for SMEs, *International Small Business Journal*, 16(2), pp. 50-68.
- Weber, E. P. and Khademian, A. M. (2008) Wicked Problems, Knowledge Challenges, and Collaborative Capacity Builders in Network Settings. *Public Administration Review*, 68(2), pp. 334-349.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (Cambridge: University Press).
- Wing Yan Man, T. (2007) Understanding entrepreneurial learning: A competency approach, *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 8(3), pp. 189-198.
- Witt, P. (2004) Entrepreneurs' networks and the success of start ups, *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 16(5), pp. 391-412.

Yin, R.K. (1994) *Case study research – design and methods*, *Applied social research methods series*, 5 (2nd ed.) (CA: Sage Publications).

Table 1: Literature themes - Tourism Learning Networks

Key themes	Tourism Business Learning	Learning network
Learning relationships (LR)	Predominantly weak ties which tend to be informal and potentially unreliable	Relational capital is leveraged & collaborative learning facilitated
Learning strategies (LS)	Immediately applicable learning and low identification or analysis of learning needs	Address reflective balance through facilitated peer-led interaction
Learning membership and identity (LMI)	Little sense of learning identity	Enhanced sense of community disseminated through the ethos and structures of the network
Learning symbols (LSys)	Learning is an unconscious process and there are few learning symbols	Learning identities and symbols emerge : network logo, website, learning development plans, rules and agendas
Learning resources (LRes)	Financial resource constraints equate to little investment in training and development	Network catalyst for resource improvement and participant learning
Learning support (LSupp)	External support through subsidised training and development initiatives	Learning environment and materials. Potential accreditation of learning.
Learning development (LD)	Human resource limitations – small generalist staff base with limited development options	Action based competency development; reflective practice embedded
Learning broker role (LB)	The job is the facilitator of naturally occurring learning	Monitor and evaluate learning goals. Leverages relational capital which facilitates individual and collective learning, and business development.
Psychological contract (PC)	Paternalistic management where owner perceives he/she is the only one that can make business decisions	Expectations between the individual learner and key learning stakeholders

Figure 1: Evolving Learning Community (ELC) Model



Adapted from: Lave & Wenger, 1991