



Creating Bridges: The Vision of the UCLA-Oxford Empirical Research in Entrepreneurship Conference

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1. Introduction

During the past few decades, we have witnessed the beginnings of rise of many spectacularly successful entrepreneurial firms and perhaps even more spectacularly successful entrepreneurial failures. We have watched in awe the rise of Microsoft, Dell, Amgen, E-Bay, Amazon.com, Starbucks, and Virgin. We have seen the meteoric rise and flameout of People Express, Osborne Computer, and Global Crossing.

This leads too many unanswered questions: Who are the entrepreneurs? Are they different from people who inhabit large, established organizations like Nestle and Nippon Steel, Reuters and Roche, Toyota and Total, GE and General Motors? Is there an “entrepreneurial personality”? Are entrepreneurs different in Shanghai than in San Francisco; in Los Angeles and in Lucerne? How do they get the funds to create new ventures? Are established “ties” and connections more important than ideas and business plans? Why are some entrepreneurial companies successful over the long term while others experience difficulties or even failure after promising starts? Is it necessary for entrepreneurs to make a transformation or metamorphosis to something else over time? If so, it is simply a function of size and complexity? How do organizations make the transition from entrepreneurship to professional management without losing the entrepreneurial spirit?

How do large established companies, which no longer have their founder in place, continue the spirit of entrepreneurship?

We have also seen the development of entrepreneurship as a field of study in business schools and the emergence of entrepreneurship as an area for research. Those of us who embraced entrepreneurship as an area of research understand the promise of the field and recognize that it has not yet reached the critical mass of other scholarly disciplines.

2. The UCLA/Oxford Empirical Research Conference

The papers in this special issue of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship Education* (“IJEE”) are from the UCLA/Oxford Empirical Research Conference. This conference was designed to bring together scholars from around the world who are doing leading edge empirical research in entrepreneurship (broadly defined).¹ As the term is used here, the field of entrepreneurship includes the classic notion of new ventures or start ups; but it also includes issues of organizational scale up, the transformation from entrepreneurship to professional management as well as “corporate entrepreneurship” or creating new ventures within large, established organizations.

Overall the strategic intent of the conference was to stimulate empirical research in entrepreneurship and serve as a catalyst to the development of the field of “entrepreneurial research.” Our intent was to contribute to the development the field at multiple levels: 1) the development of entrepreneurial research studies by scholars per se, 2) the development of research in entrepreneurship to the point where there is “critical mass” in the field, 3) to help further the development of the recognition of this fields as a legitimate and respected area of academic inquiry, and 4) to create bridges between scholars around the world, between scholars in different disciplines with different perspectives, and between scholars and practicing managers in entrepreneurial companies.

Since the aims of this conference fit perfectly with the central mission and aims of the International Journal of Entrepreneurship Education (IJEE), we established a strategic alliance between the three entitles; UCLA’s Anderson School, Oxford’ Said School of business, and the IJEE.²

3. Entrepreneurial Research Studies

A major objective was to stimulate individual research studies in the areas of entrepreneurship research, as defined above. Our strategy was to do this in two ways: 1) by having the conference per se, and 2) by offering awards for notable Contributions to the literature of Empirical Research in Entrepreneurship Research.

During the preparation for the event, there was explicit discussion of offering a substantial “prize’ for a Notable Contribution to the literature. The amount of the prize was ultimately set at \$5,000 for a Faculty paper and \$1,000 for a paper by a doctoral student. Our hope was to attach not only current scholars in

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1. The conference was jointly sponsored by the price Center for Entrepreneurial studies in the Anderson School at UCLA, and the Said School at Oxford University and held on the UCLA campus on June 22-24, 2005.
 2. I am grateful to Andrew Burke for his willingness to devote issues of the IJEE to conference’s papers. He agreed at an early stage based upon the potential of the conference. This is the approach of a true entrepreneur!

entrepreneurship but also those in adjacent fields to focus upon topics of interest to the core of entrepreneurship research.³

4. Creating Critical Mass and Legitimacy as an Academic Field

The field of entrepreneurial research is in its infancy or early adolescence. Significant current interest in entrepreneurship as a field of research and education began less than 30 years ago, a drop in the bucket of academic time.

Entrepreneurship is not a mature, accepted academic field like other traditional areas such as accounting, finance, marketing, or even international business. At UCLA, although there are many students enrolled in courses in entrepreneurship and managing entrepreneurial organizations, there is not a formal academic area with an area chair, designated faculty and a PHD program.⁴ The situation is the same at many other academic institutions. Although the reasons are complex, the core reason is that the field is not perceived as being on par with other areas from an academic standpoint.

In brief, the field faces the same problem that others before it faced. It needs to achieve a critical mass of respected research before it is provided the legitimacy, position and resources required for its continued growth and development. One of our major objectives was to help overcome this barrier.

5. Creating Bridges

This conference, and the papers which comprise it, was also about creating bridges: bridges between researchers who are doing work of various aspects of entrepreneurship; a bridge between theory and practice; bridges between different parts of the world, including Europe, North America, and Asia. It was also about creating a bridge or connection between the core of what today constitutes research on entrepreneurship and the traditional academic disciplines in order to create more connections between them. The creation of the conference itself was a bridge between several different players.⁵

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3. There was a great deal of discussion about the magnitude of the award. At one point Dean Anthony Hopwood was very close to establishing a much more substantial award. The concept was to create a "Nobel Prize of Entrepreneurship".
 4. I personally find myself in the HR/OB area at UCLA (another area of interest) as my "academic home" because there is no formal academic area of entrepreneurship.
 5. The Price Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at UCLA and Dean Anthony Hopwood of the Said Business School Provided the initial funding. Andrew Burke, Editor of *IJEE* agreed to publish the papers as a special issue. Later contributions were made by Clark Consulting, Kaufman Financial Corporation, and Bruce Willison, Dean at UCLA's Anderson School.

It was our belief that there was a great deal going on “out there” in the field of entrepreneurial research and that a catalyst was needed to bring it together. We wanted to create a forum for empirical research in entrepreneurship.

5.1. Overcoming “Academic Silos”

The academic world is organized into disciplines. This is essentially a “functional structure.” The classic problem with a functional structure is that it operates in “silos,” with relatively little interconnection across fields. Although the academic world might be better served by being organized in a matrix structure, the bridge between silos can be overcome by bringing together people from the different disciplines. This was one of the things our conference tried to do.

6. The Raison d’Etre of Empirical Research

Why empirical research? Theory is fine and relevant, but no academic field is ever recognized until there is empirical research and an empirical tradition. In addition we believed that theory without empirical research can lead to an abstract field that bears no relationship to the real world.

7. Why Include Cases from Practice?

One special component of this “academic” conference was to include cases from practice. In part, this was because of the need to anchor research in the real world and not produce another body of knowledge that borders upon “rigorous irrelevancies.” However, the reasons were deeper than this. It was because the ultimate test of the usefulness of knowledge is that it can be applied in the real world. So some of these cases were intended to be reports upon the “empirical validity” of certain constructs and frameworks in terms of their perceived utility to practicing managers, who comprise one of the “clients” of our research efforts.

7.1. Overcoming the Bias Against “The Practical”

The underlying research model proposed here is the same as that of medicine. Pure research is valuable and a worthwhile pursuit for its own sake, but its ultimately it must have something to do with reality, and ideally someone can build upon the foundation of pure research and create utility from it. For example, the study of the structure of DNA has ultimately given rise to the field of biotechnology, which, in turn, has produced useful medicines to treat certain

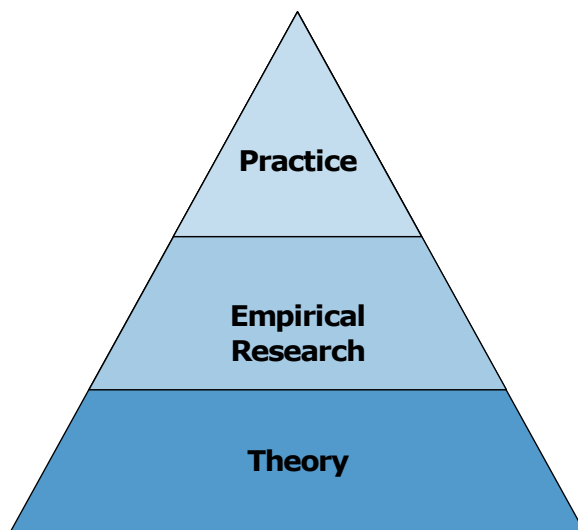
disease states. The ultimate production of useful medications does not somehow diminish or tarnish the pure research which led to it; rather, it burnishes or enhances its significance.

This runs counter to the bias in management research against research of a “practical” nature.

8. Towards a New Paradigm of Research Value

During the conference (after hearing one of the case presentations) one of the participants, Richard Lai introduced his own paper with the notion of a progression in research from theory to empirical research to practical application as the final step in the sequence of validation. Building upon his insight, I propose the following Pyramid of Research Value in Entrepreneurship, as shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: The Pyramid of Research Value



The foundation of research will always be theory. Once the theory is formulated then there are two kinds of empirical tests; 1) formal empirical research with statistical testing, and 2) the ultimate empirical test of “practice.” The test of practice is whether our ideas and concepts and models can actually be used in the real world of business, which is of course really our ‘laboratory’ as well.

9. The Beginning

Typically a paper ends with a conclusion. However, I want to end this paper with a beginning. This is hopefully the beginning of a new era in the next stage of the development of entrepreneurship research. It is our hope that this conference and the papers which it produced will contribute to this new era.

Entrepreneurship is important as a social and economic force, and research is a way of contributing to the continuing vitality of entrepreneurial organizations. Unfortunately, many entrepreneurship have failed after promising starts. Research offers a potential key to understanding this and helping overcome this “disease” in the future, just like medical research offers the promise of understanding the causes of cancer and its ultimate treatment. We are just on the threshold of the beginning of the promise of this possibility.