

Relational Paradigm Approach to Sustainability Education: Business Models for Rural Ecosystems

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Additional 250-word summary accompanying this extended abstract.

Ecosystems thinking and 'three bodies of knowledge' approach connected by way of prescriptive assumptions of Relational Paradigm applied to adult education within Sustainability Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems is a complex but complete way of understanding how ecosystem-building and capacity-building efforts converge. Mainstreaming of sustainability entrepreneurship skills through adult education programs directed at groups with fewer opportunities, such as Rural Entrepreneurs, may be achieved through engaging in design-practice-theory. This submission details preliminary results of the multiple case-study undertaken under the re:GREEN project. The case-study answers the question of how capacity-building efforts implemented through Sustainability Education programs produce synergy with ecosystem-building when directed at groups with fewer opportunities, such as Rural Entrepreneurs in Germany, Lithuania and Sweden? Preliminary results of the research demonstrate that business model design-

practice-theory is at the heart of more complete understanding of the underlying social phenomenon in the field of Entrepreneurial Education. Relational Paradigm helps us see that the elements and dimensions of any system affect the processes and the state of the entire system (Walsh et al., 2020); thus, highlighting the transformative properties of Sustainability Education programs on the entire ecosystem through their effects on the learners and their relations with other stakeholders.

Introduction

This extended abstract presents the state of art of a research project that is currently underway following re:GREEN project partially funded by Erasmus+ program under “KA210-ADU – Small-scale partnerships in adult education”: “Green and Digital Skills for Rural Entrepreneurs” (2022-1-LT01-KA210-ADU-000084225). We chose to submit this extended article for the New Business Models 2024 “Conference Track: 1.2 Ecosystems in support of Sustainability” because (i) lifelong learning processes are part of Sustainability processes and because (ii) ecosystems approaches “focus on the environment surrounding entrepreneurs, including social and contextual factors” (Theodoraki et al., 2022, p. 347). This submission shows that our case-study how Rural Entrepreneurs in Germany, Lithuania and Sweden acquire and improve their skills through business model design, inclusion of best and good CE business practices and knowledge for boosting Rural Entrepreneurs’ entrepreneurship competence, shows promise more complete understanding of underlying social phenomenon (Piekkari & Welch, 2018), in the fields of Business, Entrepreneurial Education and Management.

Rural Entrepreneurs (REs) are a section of the European population with fewer opportunities to engage in lifelong learning and develop skills than entrepreneurs in other geographical locations (European Commissions, 2022). Under the Quadruple Helix view of the Sustainability Entrepreneurship and Innovation Ecosystems (SEIEs; Žebrytė, *forthcoming*; Žebrytė, 2022; Žebrytė et al., 2022), the REs are ecosystem actors just as the rest of the private sector, the government, civic society, the academia or the education sector. The dynamics and interactions within SEIEs are a source of lifelong learning for the REs. However, formal and non-formal programs, as well as informal adult education are still very important (European Commission, 2023). Especially relevant are the opportunities to engage in lifelong learning because Entrepreneurial Competence Skills acquired or honed through business model design and good business practices based on solid theoretical knowledge tend to have a long-standing effect of sustainability of ecosystems (Muñoz & Dimov, 2015; Theodoraki et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurship is one of the key competences in lifelong learning with green and digital skills being essential to complement this competence in entrepreneurial attempts at innovation (European Commission, 2019). To support continued skills development, a

variety of organizations employ and host adult education specialists (certified and otherwise) as part of their full-time or part-time staff to satisfy the needs of adult lifelong learners. We posit that if these educators adopt the ‘three-body of knowledge’ (design-practice-theory; Berglund et al., 2018) and ‘systems theory’ (entrepreneurial ecosystems; Žebrytė, *forthcoming*) approaches to developing and implementing coaching, teaching and training programmes for adult learners, then we will see value and impact being created by REs accompanied by fruitful lifelong learning endeavors (Walsh et al., 2020).

Hence the research question at the center of this research: ***how capacity-building efforts implemented through Sustainability Education programs directed at groups with fewer opportunities, such as Rural Entrepreneurs in Germany, Lithuania and Sweden, produce synergy with ecosystem-building?***

Research Design, Strategy and Site

We are currently engaged in a single in-depth case study of young innovative companies in the rural setting (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Colombelli et al., 2020), in short Rural Entrepreneurs, who are part of the re:GREEN project funded by the Erasmus+ program. We have completed the exploration stage whereby six business models across three countries (Germany, Lithuania and Sweden) analyzed in detail. Further, in the in-depth stage we will follow up on 30 business models embedded in rural places. REs whose business model design and practice we will follow up on are the re:GREEN project learners with fewer opportunities to engage in lifelong learning. Finally, expected results include better understanding of (i) the **design** artifacts and principles for business model development-produced learning, (ii) the perceived applicability and usefulness of the **theory** taught to the REs during re:GREEN project, and (iii) the best or good **practice** focus as to sustainable marketing or other sustainability entrepreneurial practices (still to be explored as per parameters set out in Žebrytė, 2022).

Preliminary Findings

In rural entrepreneurial ecosystems the ‘creative organising’ takes place under the guise of sustainable development paradigm which supposes that business must generate environmental, societal and economic value (Mair et al., 2006; Korsgaard et al., 2015; Johannisson, 2011, 2018; Portales, 2019; Colombelli et al., 2020; Dentoni et al., 2021).

Anticipated Contribution of the Applied Research Effort

Ecosystems thinking and ‘three bodies of knowledge’ approach connected by way of prescriptive assumptions of Relational Paradigm applied to lifelong learning by adult learners within SEIEs is a complex but complete way of understanding how ecosystem-building efforts ensure mainstreaming of skills related to the Entrepreneurial Competence into the adult education programs directed at groups with fewer opportunities, such as Rural Entrepreneurs. Thus, expected contribution of this research effort enabled by the

Relational Paradigm would be to the Sustainability Education field of study through substantiating the following assumptions:

1. Three-bodies of knowledge (Berglund et al., 2018) collectively and simultaneously are relevant to the ecosystem-building and capacity-building.
2. Synergies between capacity-building and ecosystem-building within Sustainability Education processes hinge on:
 - (i) adult learners being engaged in design, practice and theory of rural ecosystems-specific business models;
 - (ii) coaches, instructors or trainers engaged in Sustainability Transitions adopt Relational Paradigm approaches through design, practice and knowledge production processes.

If conducting lifelong learning processes of Sustainability Education via coaching, teaching and training programs involved (i) clear and thoughtful business model design instruction, (ii) consideration of the potential for 'best practices' to reflect in REs' business practices and (iii) solid theoretical knowledge of the ecosystem processes, then REs would develop skills required for Sustainability Transitions.

In summary, the new knowledge contributed by the research described in this extended abstract is to the field of Sustainability Education, specifically adult lifelong learning.

Keywords

Relational Paradigm, Sustainability Education, Business Models, Rural Ecosystems.

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