

Teaching Risk, Assessing Certainty: The Hidden Paradigm in Entrepreneurship Education

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Abstract: An entrepreneurship education module teaches risk, iteration, opportunity. Then it assesses through caution, the complete dossier, the five-year forecast. Students notice the difference, and they adjust what they submit to what the grade rewards. Over two decades, entrepreneurship education has moved its discourse from planning toward a way of acting under uncertainty. This reform reshaped what is taught. It has reached assessment more slowly, and the instruments that grade students still ask largely for plans and forecasts. Yet assessment, as much as discourse, shapes what students do and the entrepreneurial disposition they develop. The point where a programme grants its grades is also where it signals what it truly values. Drawing on a reflexive thematic analysis of open-ended responses from 58 students across a range of disciplines in Moroccan universities, this exploratory study examines how students perceive the gap between what entrepreneurship education espouses and what its assessment rewards, how they make sense of it, and how they respond to it. The gap is consistent. Assessment that speaks of risk rewards certainty. Assessment that speaks of iteration rewards the finished dossier and the multi-year forecast. The polished presentation scores. Students adjust to what the grade rewards. They de-risk their idea. Some keep their innovation to themselves, others fabricate market data, many disengage while producing the expected compliance. Where assessment matches what was taught, coherence and engagement return. The trigger is the match itself. Assessment then appears as a carrier of the predictive logic, where pedagogy has already moved toward an entrepreneurial one. The business plan and the forecast keep a causal paradigm inside reformed programmes, and can slow the entrepreneurial turn at the very point where it is measured. Impact studies built on these instruments may measure compliance as much as entrepreneurial learning. What an aligned assessment would instead reward remains to be named, and entrepreneurial marketing offers the horizon, an assessment built for uncertainty and for the value students can actually create.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Assessment Design, Causation and Effectuation, Entrepreneurial Marketing, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

An entrepreneurship education module teaches risk, iteration and opportunity. Then it assesses through caution, the complete dossier and the five-year forecast. Students notice the gap, and they adjust to it.

Over the past two decades, entrepreneurship education has moved its discourse from planning a venture toward acting under uncertainty (Neck and Greene, 2011; Sarasvathy, 2001). The field increasingly presents entrepreneurship as a method rather than a plan, and it questions the central place long held by the business plan (Honig, 2004). This shift has reached what educators teach and how they teach it. What students are rewarded for has followed more slowly.

Assessment is not a neutral endpoint of this reform. By the logic of constructive alignment, assessment shapes how students engage and what they come to value, often more than the stated aims of a course (Biggs, 1996; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). The point at which a programme grants its grades is also the point at which it signals what it treats as valuable. An entrepreneurial disposition, then, is formed as much by the conditions of assessment as by the content of teaching.

This study examines that overlooked point. It treats assessment as one of the conditions under which an entrepreneurial mindset can form, and asks how students perceive the gap between what entrepreneurship education espouses and what its assessment rewards, and how they respond to it. Drawing on a reflexive thematic analysis of open-ended responses from 58 students across a range of disciplines in Moroccan universities, this exploratory study maps that gap from the students' point of view.

The analysis suggests that the gap is consistent, and that it runs in one direction. Assessment that speaks of risk rewards certainty. Assessment that speaks of iteration rewards the finished dossier. Students adjust to what the grade rewards. They de-risk their idea, they align their project with what the marking favours, and some disengage while producing the expected form. Where assessment matches what was taught, coherence and engagement return.

The paper makes three contributions. It repositions assessment as a carrier of the predictive and planning logic that the field's pedagogy has begun to leave behind, a paradigm that persists at the point of measurement. It

offers a typology of the perceived divergence between what is espoused and what is rewarded, together with the adaptive responses it produces. It then names, through the lens of entrepreneurial marketing, what an assessment aligned with uncertainty might instead reward. In doing so, it raises a further concern. If assessment carries the older paradigm, impact studies built on these instruments may capture compliance as much as entrepreneurial learning.

2. From Plan to Method: a Shift That Stops at Assessment

2.1 Entrepreneurship Education and its National Framing

Entrepreneurship education covers a wide range of provision, and definitions shift with what a programme is asked to achieve. A common distinction separates learning about entrepreneurship, learning for it, and learning through it, the first transmitting knowledge of the phenomenon, the second preparing students to start a venture, and the third developing entrepreneurial capabilities through action (QAA, 2018). Competence frameworks take the third route furthest. EntreComp defines entrepreneurship as acting upon opportunities and ideas to create value for others, and builds the competence around ideas and opportunities, resources, and action (Bacigalupo et al, 2016). This study adopts that broad understanding. Entrepreneurship education is treated here as provision intended to develop a capacity to act under uncertainty, whether or not students go on to found a venture.

The Moroccan setting gives this a particular shape. National pedagogical norms governing degree accreditation allow programmes to offer entrepreneurship as a complementary module alongside their disciplinary core, which is how students in engineering, law or science come to take an entrepreneurship module at all. The current national reform, PACTE ESRI 2030, makes entrepreneurship and employability an explicit priority, funding student entrepreneurship support centres and career centres across universities (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, 2023). These texts set out what should be offered and what students should develop. They remain silent on what assessment should reward, and that decision is left to individual programmes.

2.2 The Shift From Planning to Method in Entrepreneurship Education

Entrepreneurship education has long carried two competing logics. The first is causal. It treats the venture as a goal to be reached through prediction and planning, with resources assembled in advance (Sarasvathy, 2001). The business plan is its central artefact, and for many years it defined both the content and the outcome of entrepreneurship courses (Honig, 2004). The second logic is effectual. It treats the future as something shaped through action, where the entrepreneur begins with available means, accepts affordable loss and adapts as circumstances unfold (Sarasvathy, 2001; Chandler et al, 2011).

Over time, the field has moved toward the second logic, a shift documented across four decades of pedagogical research (Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020). Scholars have argued that entrepreneurship is better taught as a method than as a body of content, a practice to be enacted rather than a plan to be written (Neck and Greene, 2011). Honig (2004) questioned the dominance of the business plan and proposed a contingency-based approach to venture education. This movement reshaped what entrepreneurship educators say they want to develop. The stated aim became a capacity to act under uncertainty, and to treat experimentation as part of learning rather than a deviation from it.

2.3 Assessment as the Driver of Student Learning

While the discourse of teaching has shifted, a separate body of work explains why teaching alone does not determine what students learn. Constructive alignment holds that learning is shaped by the alignment between intended outcomes, teaching activities and assessment (Biggs, 1996). Within this view, assessment operates as more than a measure applied at the end. It is the signal that tells students what a course truly values, and it steers the way they work.

Assessment shapes learning most strongly through what students perceive it to reward. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) show that the conditions of assessment, more than its stated purpose, determine whether students engage deeply or strategically. When students read assessment as rewarding recall or compliance, they adopt surface approaches, whatever the aims written into the syllabus. Assessment, in this sense, carries a hidden message about what counts.

2.4 The Blind Spot at the Point of Measurement

These two bodies of work meet at a point that has drawn little attention. Research on assessment practice in entrepreneurship education remains scarce, and existing work shows that conventional instruments continue to dominate (Pittaway and Edwards, 2012). Recent work has begun to examine how assessment aligns with intended learning outcomes in experiential settings (Kenny, Venkatesh and Mc Guirk, 2026). The question of which paradigm assessment carries, however, remains open. If assessment sends the message about what a course values, what message does entrepreneurship assessment actually send?

The instruments that dominate entrepreneurship assessment remain those of the causal paradigm. The written business plan, the multi-year financial forecast and the graded final pitch reward prediction, completeness and polish (Honig, 2004; Pittaway and Edwards, 2012). A programme may teach iteration and risk while assessing through instruments that reward planning and certainty. The pedagogy may have moved, yet the point of measurement may hold the older logic in place. This study takes that possibility as its starting point, and examines it from the perspective of the students who experience it.

3. Analytical Framing: Assessment as a Paradigm Carrier

This study works abductively. It moves between the data and existing theory to build a provisional frame, rather than testing hypotheses derived in advance (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The frame rests on one mechanism and one distinction, and it borrows a normative reference that is held back until the discussion.

The mechanism comes from constructive alignment. Assessment signals what a course values, and students steer their work by that signal (Biggs, 1996; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). The distinction comes from entrepreneurship theory. Causal reasoning starts from a defined goal and works backward through prediction and planning. Effectual reasoning starts from available means and works forward through action, partnership and affordable loss (Sarvasvathy, 2001). Entrepreneurship education claims to have moved from the first logic toward the second (Neck and Greene, 2011; Hägg and Gabrielsson, 2020).

Placed together, the mechanism and the distinction produce the frame of this study. Every assessment instrument rewards something. What it rewards can be read as belonging to one of the two logics. A business plan graded on completeness and the credibility of its forecasts rewards causal reasoning. An instrument that rewarded tested assumptions, documented pivots or value created with limited means would reward effectual reasoning. When the teaching espouses one logic and the assessment rewards the other, the instrument becomes a carrier. It transports the older paradigm into a reformed programme, and it does so quietly, because assessment is rarely examined at the level of paradigm.

This frame remains provisional. It guided the reading of the data, and the data were allowed to push back against it. The study does not measure dispositions or outcomes. It examines how students perceive what assessment rewards, and what they do in response. Entrepreneurial marketing, which describes marketing behaviour under uncertainty through opportunity orientation, customer intensity, resource leveraging and value creation (Morris, Schindehutte and LaForge, 2002; Read et al, 2009), enters later in the paper. It serves in the discussion as a way of naming what an assessment aligned with uncertainty might reward. It plays no part in the coding of the data.

4. Method

4.1 Design and Context

The study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design, suited to a question about perception that existing theory frames only partially (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Data were collected through an open-ended written questionnaire administered online. Respondents had completed at least one module falling within the understanding of entrepreneurship education set out above, whether delivered as a dedicated entrepreneurship module or as a complementary module within another programme. They were enrolled across undergraduate, master and engineering cycles, and came from management and finance as well as from engineering, science, law and humanities programmes. The questionnaire asked students to recount their experience of these modules in their own words, including moments where the discourse of the module and its requirements appeared to diverge, how they reacted, and what they perceived the module to value.

Sixty-three responses were collected in two waves. Five were excluded for insufficient length or duplication, leaving fifty-eight retained responses. The exact number of institutions represented is not known. The questionnaire recorded institution type, public or private, rather than institution name, so that no response could be traced to a specific programme or teacher, and respondents spanned several such institutions in both categories. Because the study examines what assessment rewards, the analysis anchors its claims on respondents from management and finance programmes, who can be expected to read business-oriented instruments with ease. Responses from other disciplines serve as secondary support, and disciplinary distance is held outside the scope of this paper.

4.2 Analysis

The material was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding proceeded abductively, moving between the corpus and the analytical frame set out in section 3 (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). A codebook was developed for this study around four axes, the assessment instrument named by the student, the perceived divergence between what the module espoused and what its assessment rewarded, the student's adaptive response, and the logic the instrument was perceived to reward. Coding remained open to responses that contradicted the frame, and perceived coherence between teaching and assessment was coded on the same footing as perceived divergence. Thematic saturation was reached before the end of the corpus, with later responses confirming the themes without adding new categories.

The analysis was conducted from an insider position within the Moroccan higher education system, in which the researcher teaches marketing and entrepreneurship. This position gave access and interpretive depth, and it carried a risk of confirmation that was addressed through the trustworthiness criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility through sustained engagement with the corpus, transferability through thick description of context, dependability through an explicit codebook and audit trail, and confirmability through systematic anchoring of every claim in quoted material. Quotations were translated from French with the support of an AI-based translation tool, and each translation was checked against the original wording to preserve register and nuance.

The study reports perceptions. It makes no claim about the actual quality of the modules concerned, about educators' intentions, or about measured learning outcomes.

5. Findings

5.1 A Consistent Divergence Between What is Espoused and What is Rewarded

Forty-three of the fifty-eight retained responses describe at least one moment where the module espoused one thing and its assessment rewarded another. Fifteen describe coherence between the two. The divergence takes recurring forms, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Perceived divergence between espoused discourse and rewarded behaviour

Form	The Discourse Espouses	Assessment is Perceived to Reward	Illustrative Case
Risk to certainty	Risk-taking, accepting failure	Certainty of the figures	R19, audit
Novelty to conformity	Innovation, originality	The safe, well-presented idea	R45, finance
Iteration to completeness	Agility, testing, pivoting	The finished, linear dossier	R28, engineering
Substance to form	Practical reasoning	Polish, slides, delivery	R22, management
Real to fictional	Real venture creation	A simulated exercise	R61, agronomy

The first form runs deepest, because it touches the logic the reform claims to have left. A student in audit and management control recounts a jury that criticised his team's idea for lacking disruption while their financing plan was the strongest in the room. His reading is direct. "They grade the dream, not the mathematical viability. Risk is asked for in the discourse, but the grade goes to the absolute certainty of the numbers" (R19). A student in financial engineering describes the same trade made in advance. "If you propose a very new idea, the forecasts are called unrealistic. We chose a moderately innovative idea so we could justify our numbers and secure a sixteen" (R55).

The penalty attached to novelty appears in grades themselves. A finance student compares two projects in the same cohort. "Our complex and risky idea got twelve. A neighbourhood nursery with beautiful slides got seventeen. The professor said our business plan was not reassuring" (R45). A law student describes the group's response to a dossier graded largely on legal form. "We did a classic project, with no risk of error" (R37).

Students who work in iterative environments read the instrument itself as carrying the older logic. An engineering student contrasts the module with his practice. "They ask me for a forty-page dossier before my first sale. In real life you launch your MVP on Instagram" (R28). A big data student names the two logics side by side. "The school teaches entrepreneurship in waterfall mode, but in tech we work agile, you release and you test. I pretended to follow their method for the dossier" (R56).

The remaining forms follow the same pattern. A management student who proposed a personal branding strategy on social media was told it was not real marketing. "I put radio advertising in my dossier for the grade, and continued my collaborations on Instagram" (R48). Responses from engineering programmes echo the pattern on the side of feasibility, from prototypes required without any budget, "we improvised with cardboard" (R57), to a real project judged insufficiently scalable and replaced by an invented application "that we knew would serve no purpose" (R61).

5.2 Rational Adjustment to the Signal of the Grade

Faced with this divergence, students describe adjusting rather than protesting. The most common adjustment is strategic compliance, producing what the marking values. Some responses describe self-censorship, where the risky idea is abandoned before submission (R55, R37). Others describe fabrication, from invented market data to entire invented projects (R43, R28). A student in international commerce, already running an import and export activity, summarises the exchange. "He said it was not innovative enough. We invented an eco-friendly application to pass" (R43). Disengagement appears where the exercise is read as disconnected from anything real. One case of open conflict appears, and it is the graded twelve of R45. An IT student extends the logic to the collective instrument. "The grade was a group grade, unfair to those who work more. I did the whole business plan alone to secure the seventeen" (R47).

These adjustments run in one direction. Each one moves the student's visible work toward prediction, completeness and polish, and moves the student's own initiative, where it exists, outside the module.

5.3 Where Assessment Aligns, Coherence Returns

The fifteen responses describing coherence carry the analytical weight of a contrast group. An accounting student found the final exam consistent with what had been taught. "It was very coherent with my revisions. I took the accounting part and secured eighteen out of twenty" (R42). A tourism student judged the whole module coherent, taught by practitioners, with one reservation, business plans projected over five years in a sector that changes constantly (R49).

Two responses show the instrument itself producing entrepreneurial reasoning when its demand aligns with action. An electrical engineering student describes costing his prototype inside the business plan. "I realised my idea was too expensive. I had to lower the quality for it to be profitable. I understood that this is real life" (R63). A chemistry student credits a module built on lean methodology. "I did not need a perfect lab to start validating an idea on the market" (R39). A student in water engineering recounts a jury that interrupted the presentation to ask who the target customer was, and reads the moment as formative (R44).

The contrast cases locate the mechanism. Engagement follows the match between what is taught and what is rewarded, in both directions. Where the match holds, students engage with instruments as demanding as a costed business plan. Where it breaks, students comply, censor, fabricate or withdraw.

6. Discussion

6.1 Assessment as the Carrier of a Paradigm

The findings can be read through the frame set out in section 3. The reform of entrepreneurship education has moved the discourse, and in the modules described here the discourse has largely arrived. Students hear about risk, iteration and opportunity. What they describe meeting at the point of assessment is the older logic, prediction, completeness and polish. The instrument, more than the discourse, tells students what the module

values, which is the central claim of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Read together with the direction of the divergence, this suggests a specific role for assessment in entrepreneurship education. The business plan and the forecast operate as carriers of the causal paradigm (Sarasvathy, 2001; Honig, 2004). They transport prediction and planning into programmes whose teaching has moved on, and they do so at the one point every student must pass through, the grade.

The contrast cases sharpen this reading. Students engage with demanding instruments when the demand matches what was taught, and a costed prototype can produce exactly the reasoning the reform hopes for (R63). The mechanism, in the students' own accounts, sits in the match between the espoused and the rewarded, and the adjustments they describe follow the reward. This is what the frame anticipated, and it is also where the perceived misalignment does its quiet work. Each adjustment moves visible student work toward the causal pole, and moves real initiative outside the module.

6.2 What an Aligned Assessment Might Reward

Naming the problem calls for a language to name the alternative. Entrepreneurial marketing offers one. It describes value creation under uncertainty through opportunity orientation, customer intensity, resource leveraging and calculated risk-taking (Morris, Schindehutte and LaForge, 2002), and it converges with the effectual logic the reform espouses (Read et al, 2009). The contrast cases already contain its traces. A jury that interrupts a technical presentation to ask for the target customer is grading customer intensity (R44). A business plan used to confront a prototype with its cost of production is grading resource-constrained value creation (R63). An assessment aligned with uncertainty would reward what these moments reward, tested assumptions, documented pivots, evidence of contact with real users, and value created from limited means, rather than the completeness of a forecast. This remains a normative horizon. The data show students responding to aligned instruments, and the design of such instruments is a task the data cannot settle.

6.3 Implications

Three implications follow, each calibrated to what perception data can carry. For educators, the finding relocates a familiar problem. Reforming content and pedagogy while keeping the dossier, the forecast and the graded pitch may leave the older paradigm in charge of the signal students actually follow. Assessment design deserves the attention that pedagogy has received (Pittaway and Edwards, 2012; Kenny, McGuirk and Moylan, 2025).

In practical terms, aligning assessment with an effectual logic means grading what the reform claims to value. A brief could ask students to document one pivot and the evidence that prompted it, rather than to defend a fixed plan. It could reward proof of contact with real users, a tested assumption or a single validated hypothesis, over the completeness of a five-year forecast. It could credit value created with limited means, as one contrast case shows when a costed prototype forced a genuine trade-off (R63). None of this requires abandoning the business plan, only turning its demand toward action.

For research, the finding raises a measurement concern. If assessment rewards conformity to the causal form, then impact studies that rely on graded outcomes may capture compliance as much as entrepreneurial learning, a possibility that sits alongside longstanding concerns about the rigour of impact research in the field (Rideout and Gray, 2013). For institutions, the contrast cases suggest that alignment is achievable with existing instruments, since even a business plan can be turned toward effectual reasoning when its demand is connected to action.

6.4 Limitations

The study reports perceptions, collected retrospectively, in one national context. Because institutions were recorded by type rather than by name, the number of programmes represented in the corpus is unknown, and institutional variation cannot be examined. It says nothing about educators' intentions or about measured outcomes, and the anchoring on management and finance respondents leaves disciplinary distance outside its scope. The direction of the findings is consistent, and its generality is a question for further work, ideally through designs that pair student perception with the content of actual assessment criteria.

7. Conclusion

An entrepreneurship module can espouse risk and reward certainty, espouse iteration and reward the finished dossier. The fifty-eight accounts examined here suggest that students perceive this divergence clearly, and that they respond to the reward rather than the discourse. They de-risk, they conform, some fabricate, and some carry their real ventures outside the classroom while producing the expected form inside it. Where assessment matches what was taught, the same students engage, and the most demanding instruments become the most formative ones.

The step from perception to design is where this work now points. Future research could pair what students perceive with the actual criteria of the instruments that grade them, and could test whether assessment turned toward effectual reasoning shifts what students choose to attempt. The claim here is narrower, and it is a starting point. Before an instrument can be redesigned, the paradigm it quietly carries has to be seen.

The contribution of this paper is to name the role assessment plays in this pattern. The business plan, the forecast and the graded pitch operate as carriers of the causal paradigm, holding prediction and planning in place at the point of measurement while the pedagogy around them moves on. The entrepreneurial turn in education has reformed what is taught. Its next task may sit in the grade book. Students, the accounts suggest, worked this out before their programmes did.

Ethics Declaration

The study draws on an anonymous, voluntary, open-ended questionnaire completed by adult university students. Participation implied informed consent, responses contained no identifying information, and quotations are reported under anonymised codes. Under the regulations applicable to the institutions concerned, this type of anonymous educational survey required no formal ethical clearance.

AI Declaration

An AI-based language tool was used to translate quotations and draft text from French into English and to check consistency of formatting. All analytical decisions, coding, interpretations and conclusions are the author's own, and every translated quotation was checked against the original French wording.

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