

Informal Social Learning Dynamics and Entrepreneurial Knowledge Acquisition in a Micro Food Learning Network

Abstract

This paper expands and contextualises social perspectives on entrepreneurial learning by considering the informal learning dynamics and outcomes in a facilitated learning network targeting micro-entrepreneurs within the local food sector. This research builds new theoretical and empirical knowledge on the contributions of facilitated learning networks as a community of inquiry (CoI) to support entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition. Our research strategy was a single embedded case study with the units of analysis consisting of 12 micro-firms within the local meat industry in Norway. In retrospective in-depth interviews, founder-managers reflected on their learning from others from participation in a local-food learning network. Three main themes emerged from our analysis, reflecting the informal regulating mechanisms for knowledge sharing and how entrepreneurs acquired new entrepreneurial knowledge: (1) *cultural norms stabilising the community of inquiry*, (2) *engagement in the practices of others regulates access to community knowledge* and (3) *from community inquiry to individual entrepreneurial knowledge*. Based on these themes, we built a conceptual framework showing informal knowledge-sharing mechanisms and the individual micro-entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition in a CoI. Our study contributes to the research stream on social entrepreneurial learning and how learning from others in a CoI enhances entrepreneurial learning.

Keywords: Community of inquiry, Facilitated learning network, Entrepreneurial learning, Knowledge acquisition, Informal learning dynamics, Food micro-entrepreneur

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

This paper expands and contextualises social perspectives on entrepreneurial learning by considering informal social learning¹ dynamics and knowledge acquisition in a facilitated learning network (FLN) targeting food micro-entrepreneurs within the local food sector. Several reviews have scrutinised how entrepreneurial learning positively affects performance and success (e.g. Pittaway and Thorpe, 2012; Wang and Chugh, 2014). As entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition is a function of experience evolving over time (Minniti and Bygrave, 2001; Politis, 2005), entrepreneurial learning is acknowledged as a resource-demanding task with an inherent high risk of failure and a high cost for entrepreneurs, both personally and financially (Cope, 2011; Erikson, 2002; Lans et al., 2011; Mueller and Shepherd, 2016). Evidently, learning from others to improve entrepreneurial performance has gained increased attention in the micro-firm context and industries (Abecassis-Moedas et al., 2016; Cope, 2003; Rigg et al., 2021; Soetanto, 2017; Soetanto and Jack, 2011). Hence, there is an urgent need to move beyond the focus on individual experiences in entrepreneurial learning research towards a more social perspective (Shepherd, 2015; Toutain et al., 2017). This is particularly interesting given the fact that micro-entrepreneurs in the same industry often have a reciprocal interest in sharing knowledge and supporting each other (Davis and Mason-Jones, 2017; Kuhn and Galloway, 2015).

In this respect, FLNs have emerged as intriguing research objects, as they enhance the entrepreneur's knowledge acquisition and learning opportunities (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Lefebvre et al., 2015; Man 2007; Nieminen and Hytti, 2016; Power et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2014; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010, 2014; Reinl et al., 2015). We identified two important gaps in the literature on entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition in FLNs. First, what is missing from this body of research is an empirical in-depth understanding of the contribution of the network community to an entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition process for the competence building of single entrepreneurs taking part in the network (Lans et al., 2008; 2011). Second, studies on FLNs have largely focused on knowledge exchange criteria (Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Reinl et al., 2015; Quinn et al., 2014) or various knowledge exchange practices within the network (McAdam et al., 2015; Power et al., 2014; Rigg et al., 2021) and network level characteristics and how the network itself is evolving (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Lefebvre et al., 2015; Tell, 2000). Scant research exists on the more informal mechanisms that evidently regulate individual entrepreneurs' access to knowledge from others in a learning network. How entrepreneurs engage the network community members to acquire knowledge is therefore a focal point of interest in this research. Building on social learning theory and learning through interactions with others, Shepherd et al. (2020) introduced the community of inquiry (CoI) concept to develop a social model of opportunity development. A CoI is a group of people who 'critically inquire into areas of common interest,' and this community is represented by an 'environment where participants come together to explore an idea or resolve a dilemma, feel free to express their ideas, provide mutual support and constructive feedback' (Garrison, 2015: 8). More precisely, in a CoI of entrepreneurs within

one particular industry, these entrepreneurs make sense of, discuss and solve common problems regarding their own practice with fellow entrepreneurs and relevant experts in order to develop their business. Moreover, they unite around a shared interest in their own industry domain (Davies and Mason-Jones, 2017). Employing the CoI framework, Shepherd et al. (2020) explored how entrepreneurs engaged stakeholders, potential customers, mentors, investors and technical experts in the opportunity development process (Shepherd, 2015). Extending the research of Shepherd et al. (2020), we are intrigued to explore how entrepreneurs who are taking part in a FLN engage other entrepreneurs to share ideas and solve common problems to learn, and to determine what comprises the “hidden” rules and boundaries for knowledge access that ultimately contribute to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisitions for the individual entrepreneur.

We conducted an embedded single case study of 12 food micro-entrepreneurs taking part in an FLN within the local meat industry. With this study, we aim to justify a threefold contribution to the research stream of social entrepreneurial learning: (1) we build new theoretical and empirical knowledge on FLNs’ contribution to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition from a social perspective; (2) we employ a CoI perspective to make sense of the “hidden” and informal dimensions that regulate knowledge access between peers in an FLN and (3) we contextualise social entrepreneurial learning in a Norwegian local food industry domain and present pioneering research that applies social-learning theory to a learning network of micro-entrepreneurs in this particular industry domain.

The paper is organised as follows. To develop a pre-understanding for our research, we introduce the CoI as a theoretical lens to explore social entrepreneurial learning and the informal mechanisms that regulate knowledge access and sharing among single entrepreneurs in an FLN. Then, we focus on the CoI’s network community contributions to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition for single entrepreneurs participating in FLNs. We further outline our methodology and chosen context, present our findings and discuss these against the theoretical framework and research questions. We conclude by outlining the contributions and implications of our research.

Theoretical framework

A community of inquiry approach to social entrepreneurial learning

Rae (2000, 2005) was the first entrepreneurial learning scholar to view entrepreneurs’ learning experiences as a constructivist form of learning that develops from social interaction through participating in multiple communities. Recently, several scholars have increasingly taken entrepreneurial learning to the social sphere, where learning is considered to be a result of social interaction and community participation (Lefebvre et al., 2015; Karataş-Özkan, 2011; Toutain et al., 2017). Several learning network researchers (Lefebvre et al., 2015; Nieminen and Hytti, 2016; Reinl et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2019; Zhang and Hamilton, 2010) have used the community of practice (CoP) perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as their lens to make sense of the learning dynamics among entrepreneurs participating in learning networks. We argue however, in line with

Davies and Mason-Jones (2017), that independent actors within an industry do not participate in or belong to a common shared practice. Instead, they belong to multiple independent practices and unite around a shared interest in developing craft-based micro-businesses to enhance their learning as independent entrepreneurs (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001), thus engaging in a learning network to acquire inspiration and new input to solve common problems within their particular industries or domains.

Several studies have contributed to deepening our understanding of how FLNs should best be structured and managed to facilitate social learning and open knowledge sharing among entrepreneurs (Reinl et al., 2015; Nieminen and Hytti, 2016; Rigg et al., 2021). For example, a willingness to commit to an FLN and share experiences can be linked to mutual respect, trust and emotional support in the network (Bergh et al., 2011; Nieminen and Hytti, 2016; Zhang and Hamilton, 2010; Smith et al., 2019). This suggests that a learning network can move beyond a place for simple information seeking and extend into a CoI recognised by an open environment surrounding a shared interest (Davies and Mason-Jones 2017; Garrison, 2015), bringing entrepreneurs together in a more informal manner that can lead to future companions and the exchange of knowledge that benefits all (Pittaway et al., 2009). The informal conditions of a learning network supporting and regulating such an environment have received little attention in the literature so far, and this represents the focus of our study. Evidently, there exist cultural aspects and social regulation mechanisms that influence the knowledge acquisition process yet are still not fully understood. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: Which informal mechanisms regulate knowledge acquisition in a community of inquiry?

The contribution of a community of inquiry to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition

Learning from others might ultimately improve the entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition of a single micro-entrepreneur (Abecassis-Moedas et al., 2016; Lans et al., 2008, 2011; Lévesque et al., 2009; Rigg et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020; Soetanto, 2017; Soetanto and Jack, 2011). The degree of involvement in an FLN and participation in interventions such as courses and one-on-one mentoring will likely evolve from an initial seek-and-take practice of simple participation, answering the more basic knowledge need, to a peer-exploration practice as people get to know each other, extending knowledge and sharing new ways of doing things, and eventually to a critical-reflection practice (Rigg et al., 2021) constituting a CoI (Garrison, 2015) that goes beyond simple participation. In the micro-food context, Rigg et al. (2021) explored how doing, learning and innovation are interwoven, presenting a model for knowledge-creating practices that support entrepreneurs' learning and innovation. Moreover, micro-entrepreneurs benefit from cooperation and learning in the specific domain of their business (Kelliher and Reinl, 2011; Kuhn and Galloway, 2015; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014); by sharing their experiences and knowledge with similar peers, they are likelier to engage themselves to improve their innovativeness and overcome

knowledge resource constraints (Reinl and Kelliher, 2010). Therefore, acknowledging the socially situated and contextual experiences of individuals who participate in a learning network is likely to influence entrepreneurial learning outcomes for the individual entrepreneur (Karataş-Özkan, 2011).

Politis (2005) identified two distinctive learning outcomes for new entrepreneurial knowledge that represent the focus of our research: increased effectiveness in opportunity recognition and increased effectiveness in coping with the liabilities of newness. The first learning outcome refers to the entrepreneur's overall ability to discover new business opportunities and develop them into innovations. Here, innovation is broadly defined to include new products, new processes, new services, new forms of organisation, new markets and the development of new skills and human capital (Zhao, 2005). The second learning outcome assumes that new and small businesses face a greater risk of failure than established firms because they lack legitimacy, knowledge resources and networks. In this respect, Shepherd et al. (2020) found that entrepreneurs who had multiple, informal and open engagements with their CoI from early on in the entrepreneurial process were more open to others' perspectives, generated more alternative opportunities due to their ability to discard their own assumptions, and ultimately experienced better progress toward market launch than the more focused entrepreneurs with less engagements with their CoI, who were simply looking for specific information to confirm their own beliefs.

Politis (2005) pointed to two possible transformations of experience: exploitation (an adaptive learning method that builds on existing knowledge) and exploration (experimenting with new possibilities). In this research, we are interested in the transformation of knowledge residing in the CoI into new opportunities through individual entrepreneurs' exploitation and exploration. Inspired by the recent study by Shepherd et al. (2020) and the study by Rigg et al. (2021), we focus on the network community contributions to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition for the entrepreneurs who take part in the FLN, leading us to put forward the second research question:

RQ2: How does a community of inquiry contribute to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition for the individual entrepreneur?

This study theorises that taking part in a learning network can serve as a CoI recognised by an open environment surrounding a shared interest in the context of key learning activities in a FLN (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001), which in turn enhance knowledge acquisition for the individual entrepreneur, as shown in Figure 1.

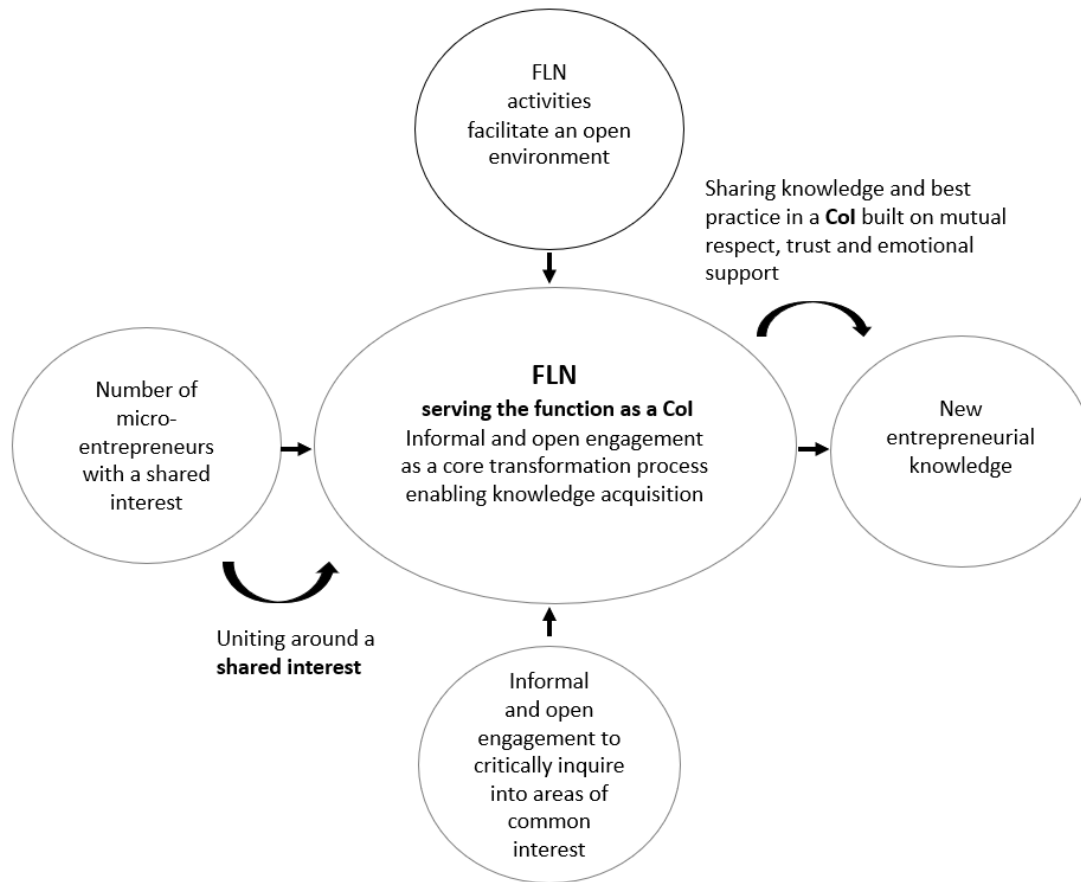


Figure 1. Key elements in a learning network (modified from Bessant and Tsakouras, 2001) influenced by a shared interest in a specific industry domain (Davies and Mason-Jones, 2017) serving the function of a CoI (Shepherd et al., 2020).

Methodology

Study context

Acknowledging the need for a closer-to-practice learning environment for micro-firms (Kelliher et al., 2009) has led to the establishment of FLNs that focus on experimental or action-based problem solving integrated with theoretical knowledge (Reinl and Kelliher, 2015; Rigg et al., 2021; Pittaway et al., 2009). FLNs can be defined as ‘networks formally set up for the purpose of increasing knowledge, expressed as increased capacity to do something’ (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001: 88). FLNs typically involve academic institutions or other external facilitators that contribute to establishing relevant arenas in which entrepreneurs also obtain informal access to other entrepreneurs’ knowledge and experiences (Bergh, 2009).

The study context for the research involves a Norwegian government-funded FLN, the competence network for local food production. For more than 20 years, this learning network,

facilitated by academic institutions, has provided knowledge on food technology to support farm-based food entrepreneurs entering the local food sector. This FLN recognises that the transition from traditional farming to managing a food micro-business can be challenging (Alsos et al., 2003). To compensate for the knowledge gap between traditional farming and food production and business knowledge, the FLN offers industry-related tailor-made courses, one-on-one mentoring and advisory services to professionalise food micro-entrepreneurs. The advisory service is based on open access and free of charge, with a focus on defining the competence needs and solving specific challenges through telephone or in-person meetings with a network facilitator. As in the case of meat production, courses centre around specific topics like sausage making, meat deboning, the fermentation processes, product development, packaging, and food safety. All courses are both theoretically and practically oriented, and last from one or two days up to seven days depending on the topic. The network is organised in five independent regions in Norway (North, Middle, West, South and East), and it is hosted and administrated by professional food and agricultural research institutes or educational institutions.

Courses are important arenas for social interactions and include frequent coffee breaks and social events, such as company visits. Participation in food micro-entrepreneurs is open without any formal registration or membership. Participants sign up for courses on the FLNs' web page and can subscribe to newsletters and social media to learn about future course activities. Keeping a low threshold for contacting the learning network and signing up for activities is regarded as one of the most important success factors enabling socialisation that can lead to a learning community grounded in the participants' own experiences from their own sites of practice (Smith et al., 2019).

Research design and data collection

We chose a case study research design because it effectively investigates phenomena in a real-life context (Yin, 2014). This study is a single embedded case study, and the units of analysis are 12 food micro-entrepreneurs who have all participated in the FLN.

The study participants were purposefully chosen from among food micro-entrepreneurs (<10 employees) with different experiences and frequencies of interaction with the FLN. All participants were selected from the East region due to the first author's in-depth knowledge as the administrator of this region since 2008. This familiarity provided a rich contextual understanding of the participants and the FLNs' history and development. Selection from the same region and sector also provided the best basis for comparison. The sample criteria for selection are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the selection criteria

| Selection criteria | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Sector | Local food production within the meat industry |
| Size | Micro-firm, <10 employees |
| Main contact person | Founder-manager |
| Relationship to the FLN | |
| - New member (NM) | <1 year of experience, participant in 1–2 courses and 1 mentoring activity |
| - Experienced member (EM) | >1 year or experience, participant in >2 courses and >1 mentoring activity |

Out of 22 food micro-entrepreneurs matching the selection criteria, 12 were willing to participate. To account for variations in prior experience in the FLN and the individual entrepreneurs' learning needs, the participants were assigned to two groups. Five companies were new to the network and are therefore called new members (NM), while the other seven are referred to as experienced members (EM). To ensure anonymity, the participants will be further addressed as NM 1–NM 5 and EM 1–EM 7 when quoted. Table 2 introduces the participants' background and prior experience in meat production and provides an overview of the interactions with each participant.

Table 2. Participant background and data collection interactions

| Participant code * | Age | Gender | Founder-manager background | Prior experience in meat production | Length of interview | On-site visit |
|--------------------|-----|--------|---|---|---------------------|---------------|
| NM1 | 44 | F | Traditional pig-farmer running the meat business and catering together with her brother who is a trained chef. | None | 42 min | Yes |
| NM2 | 50 | M | Traditional farmer raising cattle for meat production. | None | 55 min | Yes |
| NM3 | 49 | F | Married couple running a traditional farm with a livestock of both lamb, pigs and cattle. | None | 71 min | Yes |
| NM4 | 52 | F | In the early stage of starting a meat business. The farm livestock consists of alpacas mainly used for wool production. | None | 76 min | Yes |
| NM5 | 55 | M | Married couple in their early stages of starting a meat business. They are traditional farmers raising venison. | None | 54 min | Yes |
| EM1 | 50 | M | Married couple running a dairy farm with both cheese and meat production. Partner is a trained chef. | None | 62 min | No |
| EM2 | 55 | F | Traditional farmer with both a meat production and a catering business. | Experience as a chef | 56 min | Yes |
| EM3 | 55 | M | Meat producer cooperating with local farmers to buy meat from pigs, moose etc. | Experience as a butcher | 70 min | Yes |
| EM4 | 45 | F | Married couple running a traditional farm that raises mutton. | Food scientist and work experience from the Food Safety Authority | 64 min | Yes |
| EM5 | 39 | M | Not a farmer but cooperates with farmers to buy meat. | Educated butcher and some experience in meat production | 46 min | Yes |
| EM6 | 54 | M | Married couple running a traditional farm raising venison. | Experienced hunter | 45 min | Yes |
| EM7 | 66 | M | Experienced venison farmer and meat producer. Involved in a union for venison farmers. | Some experience in meat production | 58 min | No |

*NM = new member / EM = experienced member

The primary data collection consisted of in-depth interviews, observations during on-site visits and participant observations in FLN activities, as shown in Table 3. An interview with the FLN trainer, an educated butcher and meat technologist, was also conducted as part of the data source. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide, deduced from theory and from the familiarity of the first author, as previously noted. The critical incident technique (Cope, 2003) was used to identify causal relationships between the participation/activities in the FLN and knowledge sharing or learning outcomes. All except two interviews were performed at the business sites of the microentrepreneurs, thus making the setting as authentic as possible and strengthening

the reliability of the data collection. The other two interviews were conducted off-site. An FLN trainer was interviewed to get a first-hand impression of the deliberate practice in lectures and demonstrations, as well as how this was implemented in the learning network and their facilitation role in network activities. The first author’s knowledge about the FLN strengthened the interpretation of the data; however, due to a potential bias in the data collection, the in-depth interviews were conducted by a team of two independent researchers acting on behalf of the authors.

Table 3. Overview of data collection

| Data collection | Total length | Period and year | Data source |
|--|--------------|--------------------|--|
| Interviews | | | |
| In-depth interviews with 12 participants | 700 min | Feb. and Mar. 2019 | Sound files, fully transcribed interviews Transcribed sections, field notes |
| Interview with an FLN trainer; on-going conversations | 60 min | Feb.–Apr. 2019 | |
| Observations | | | |
| In-course observations following both theoretical and practical sessions | 2 × 240 min | Jan.–Mar. 2019 | Field notes |
| On-site visits of 10 participants | 580 min | Feb. and Mar. 2019 | Field notes |

Data analysis

After each interview, the interviewing researchers discussed their notes and observations with the authors to unify the collective understanding. All interviews were audio recorded and then manually transcribed, after which the authors independently read the transcripts and openly coded them. In the second step of coding, a manual thematic analysis (Mason, 2002) was performed to build on existing knowledge from the theoretical framework and explore the main patterns emerging from the data. In this step, the authors first analysed each interview to identify unique patterns from the embedded case units’ perspective before comparing the units. We confirmed the main patterns found in the data and discussed their interpretations. Three main themes emerged from the analysis (see Findings). In the final step of the analysis, we manually performed an open coding of all data to confirm the themes derived from their main structures. The observational data and historical insider knowledge were used to enrich and validate the final interpretations of the themes.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the informal mechanisms that enable knowledge sharing, access and the subsequent entrepreneurial learning outcomes from taking part in the learning community: (1) *cultural norms stabilising the community of inquiry*, (2) *engagement in the practices of others regulates access to community knowledge* and (3) *from community inquiry to individual entrepreneurial knowledge*. The following subsection outlines how the theoretical framework comes into play through these overall themes and their underlying subdimensions and illustrates the findings through selected quotes from the food micro-entrepreneurs. Data from all respondents were equally handled in the search for illustrative quotes; however, two experienced members (EM 3 and EM 5) appear more frequently than others as they expressed our findings very descriptively.

Cultural norms stabilising the community of inquiry

The thematic analysis uncovered three underlying cultural norms that frame the important prerequisite for knowledge sharing that secure the single entrepreneur and stabilise the CoI: (i) *sharing experiences benefits all*, (ii) *securing the knowledge boundaries of the CoI* and (iii) *acknowledging respect for the craft secures community reputation*.

For the first sub-theme, *sharing experiences benefits all*, the analysis reveals that new members who join the FLN are surprised by the openness and generous informal sharing from peers of what works and what does not (Rae, 2005), putting aside the fact that they all compete in the same food sector. Their shared interest in local food initiates the sharing of practical know-how about equipment and production facilities and experiences with food safety and food production, alongside advice on business development. This is evidence of the reciprocal sharing that describes a culture of trust and collaboration (Davies and Mason-Jones, 2017), typical for a CoI (Shepherd et al., 2020), facilitating members to reflect collectively on their prior knowledge and experiences (Cope, 2003) and saving many from costly mistakes. New members are introduced to this norm by the more experienced members:

They [experienced members] willingly share their knowledge, and I didn't feel they kept things a secret or looked at us as a future competition. ... It was more like they wanted to share, giving us tips so we didn't have to make the same mistakes. (NM 4)

The willingness to share seems more dominant than the fear of competition because sharing benefits all parties and, ultimately, the growth of the entire local food sector.

Although knowledge is openly shared, there is a limit to what is being shared, represented by the sub-theme *securing the knowledge boundaries of the CoI*. All entrepreneurs respect the tacit expectation to create their own unique identity through their products. What is being learnt and

transferred among members who take part in the FLN is restricted to common problem solving and best practice. Both new and experienced members intuitively accept this boundary:

You don't share your recipes and your specialties [secret behind a unique product]—no one does. (EM 3)

This norm prevents businesses from developing a competitive attitude and stabilises the ongoing sharing among members of the community.

The third sub-theme, *acknowledging respect for the craft secures community reputation*, centres around respect for the knowledge domain and craftsmanship of local food. New members entering the FLN, who are unaware of the informal community, are expected to exhibit a basic understanding of the practice within the craft of meat production and the local food industry, and this is recognised as a criterion for separating the serious actors from the less intentional ones:

I have a friend who has made a lot of mistakes. He is one who never pays attention. He does not follow the practices or methods taught. ... You need to be able to follow a good manufacturing practice if you want to succeed. (EM 3)

Therefore, each member is acknowledged by the community due to their efforts to respectfully behave in accordance with the standards of the craft of meat production. This socially transmitted understanding defines the CoI and sets the agenda for sharing best practices between individual entrepreneurs in the community. In this manner, respect for the craft is fundamental for the community's reputation as serious actors.

Engagement in the practices of others regulates access to community knowledge

The thematic analysis uncovered three sub-themes constituting the social regulation mechanisms that give individual food entrepreneurs access to other community members' knowledge: *acknowledging the culture of sharing, engaging in the practices of others* and the *social recognition of expert skills*.

The first regulating mechanism, *acknowledging the culture of sharing*, centres on new FLN members' ability to gain access to the community's more informal knowledge resources. New members were often found to have some initial interpretations that influenced their ability to share their experiences, underestimating their contribution to the culture of sharing:

I felt like a first grader, a novice, and didn't have so much experience of interest to the others. ... I was more like an observer. (NM 4)

Unlocking these initial reservations is important, as new members' motivations to engage are interpreted by the more experienced members as genuine interest in the domain of inquiry. The

ones who hesitate or ignore the implicit dimension of the culture of sharing are kept in the periphery of the community until they either grasp this cultural norm or drop out:

A few who attend a course keep their cards close to their chest. Then you realise they don't want to let people in, and they never participate much either. They attend once, and then they are gone. (EM 3)

The FLN trainer plays an important role in creating an atmosphere of companionship through the ability to socialise with all participants, ultimately lowering the threshold for people to lean on and learn from each other:

... we keep an informal tone during courses, humour—yes, I often spend time with those who are quiet, loosening them up with a quick humoristic remark. ... Some have been to a course before. They are more relaxed, and I use them actively in courses [for socialising purposes]. (FLN trainer)

Motivating new members to think out loud and engage in an exercise to make the perfect sausage recipe together with the FLN trainer and then demonstrating this in practice, is one way that the FLN trainer manages to involve all members in a reciprocal discussion on why something will or will not work.

The second regulating mechanism, *engaging in the practices of others*, occurs when members exhibit more involvement in the community. An increased best practice sharing leads to self-awareness, which makes it easier to attend discussions, ask for advice and approach others in the community with more qualified questions, and hence enhances the quality of the knowledge acquired. Through this process, the experienced members are patient and choose to look beyond the repeating trivial questions from the new members, as they identify this as 'role play' and an important step in learning in the craft—they even value repetition as a confirmation of their own competency:

The ones asking the most questions are the most recent ones. That is quite good. It brings up the basic, for even though you have been around for a while, you need to get things highlighted in a new way. And we who have some experience can contribute the other way. (EM 2)

Continuous informal knowledge sharing between new and experienced members brings everyone closer and builds a relationship in which everyone realises they have something to learn due to their shared interest.

The third regulating mechanism, the *social recognition of expert skills*, deals with the community members' recognition of the more experienced members' status in the community. Such experienced entrepreneurs have a confident way of sharing their experiences and are recognised by their ability to challenge the FLN trainer by constantly questioning current industry

standards. Showing a high self-awareness regarding one's own skills as a food entrepreneur is therefore indicative of the social recognition of expert skills:

After all, I've been practicing for some years. I'm a trained butcher, have a letter of honour as a slaughterer and have worked as a slaughterer for six years before I started my own business. ... I think I can speak with a certain weight on what I do. (EM 5)

These highly self-confident members and the way they pursue relevant discussions with the FLN trainer put extra weight on the benefits of engaging in the practices of others, as they provide access to exclusive industry-specific knowledge in the local food sector which challenge the established formal knowledge.

However, the community risks losing these highly confident members. Thus, the FLN trainer plays an important role in retaining these knowledgeable members by providing them with access to FLN learning activities and offering them more formal roles as instructors, mentors and company visit hosts. This social recognition reinforces new members' self-efficacy and serves as a valuable reference inside and outside the boundary of the FLN:

... I will be a partner in the course ... I get to show potential customers what my profession is. And it is a great reference to be able to say that I have been arranging courses together with [the FLN trainer]. (EM 5)

Cooperation with these knowledgeable members is a win-win situation that contributes to the continuous development of the shared interest domain and keeps community learning relevant for all.

From community inquiry to individual entrepreneurial knowledge

Building on the theoretical backdrop of social entrepreneurial learning for the individual entrepreneur, we identified two sub-themes for entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition based on community inquiry: (i) *exploiting and exploring community knowledge to develop opportunities* and (ii) *the community as a safety net for legitimising oneself in the local food sector*. These are valid for both new and experienced entrepreneurs; however, they evolve differently based on the members' individual business experience and participation in the FLN.

The first sub-theme, *exploiting and exploring community knowledge to develop opportunities*, describes how the unifying shared interest in local food and informal experience sharing with others contributes to opportunity development (Politis, 2005) for food micro-entrepreneurs. Due to the individual entrepreneurs' level of experience and knowledge needs, new members and experienced members gain different outcomes from engaging in the FLN.

New members, who lack industry-specific experience, develop important basic skills within the craft, leaning on other members' experience and picking up explicit 'how to' advice and tacit knowledge from the community. This learning outcome is particularly centred on informal exploitative learning from others' start-up experiences, preventing new members from making costly failures. Thus, benefiting from others' experiences increases effectiveness and accelerates the ability to make the right business decisions regarding, for example, investments:

We're newbies, really, and we have to learn everything from scratch. It's valuable to lean on those in our profession who know. ... When we invest and try to build something durable, it's valuable to do it right the first time. (NM 2)

New members may not immediately act on new ideas because of their scarce knowledge resources, but these ideas are stored for later explorative learning (Politis, 2005). In contrast, experienced members use the CoI to refine and validate their prior knowledge, accelerating updates on food legislation and technological improvements to expand the business through exploitative entrepreneurial learning. In addition, experienced community members actively explore new knowledge to improve their products and come up with new ideas for further business development and innovation:

I didn't use to cut [the flat iron filet] out before I attended that meat-cutting course ... they are fantastically tender. I used to cut it as stew meat—I didn't know how good it was. ... So, this is a perfect example of how I have benefited greatly from that course; it made me realise that I should experiment with new cuts. (EM 5)

There is also evidence that informal collaboration within the community on the one hand affects individual food entrepreneurs' access to knowledge resources, such as skills and experience in operating expensive meat processing machinery. Especially new members benefit from an easier market entry by cooperating with others, making them less vulnerable during the early start-up when the knowledge acquisition and costs associated with establishing a business are high. Cooperation on production, on the other hand, gives experienced members new financial opportunities as they make their equipment and expertise available for others in the community:

... Many come to us with products they want us to produce for them. The equipment we have, they will never be able to purchase themselves if they plan to keep it small. (EM 3)

In the FLN, the informal culture of sharing and knowledge acquisition within the craft improves the learning outcomes of all members and provides new business opportunities, products and innovations, eventually expanding the market for the entire local food sector.

The second sub-theme, *the community as a safety net for legitimising oneself in the local food sector*, relates to how the CoI enables food entrepreneurs to cope with the liability of newness through their shared interest in the local food domain (Politis, 2005). Both new and experienced

members consider the FLN an important contributor to their legitimacy as meat producers by enhancing their entrepreneurial self-confidence. We found that emotional support from the community provide a safety net and a sounding board so that each member can make qualified entrepreneurial decisions and reduce the emotional stress of decision making. For this reason, new members especially lean on the community:

... now that we are building our own production facility, it [FLN] has been an invaluable support. It gives us faith in our ability to actually be able to produce quality products ... to have [the FLN trainers] to lean on offers a kind of support and the reassurance that we can get help. (NM 3)

Experienced members, on the other hand, extend the safety net to value the community as an arena for meeting friends and fellow entrepreneurs, signalling that community relationships lead over time to a social network of trusted peers:

[FLN] is an important meeting point. It provides both a safety dimension and a quality dimension. ... There are always some familiar faces. ... You kind of become like a small family. (EM 1)

A unified voice and emotional support from the community are valuable when individual entrepreneurs engage with larger market actors and authorities. The community provides legitimacy beyond the individual food entrepreneur, and our analysis reveals how a unified voice can positively change food legislation to benefit all:

[The Norwegian Ministry of Agriculture and Food] wanted me to participate with my experience and represent my part of the value chain. To get a broader view, I called a few other meat businesses. ... A small change in food regulation can have a huge influence. In these matters, it is important to have a network to refer to. (EM 5)

Membership in the learning community thus enhances legitimacy at the sector level, allowing the individual entrepreneur access to the larger local food market as part of a trustworthy and respected industry.

Discussion

This study explores the social perspectives on entrepreneurial learning by considering informal social learning dynamics and individual entrepreneurs' knowledge acquisition in an FLN targeting food micro-entrepreneurs with a shared interest in local food. Our findings provide new insight into the socially situated and contextual experiences of individual entrepreneurs' learning in an FLN that serves as a CoI and how this influences their learning outcomes. The present study was approached by asking two research questions. In the following section, we discuss the findings

along the lines of these questions; however, as the construction of our theoretical framework was challenged by our findings, indicating that there was a strong interdependency between our two research questions, these questions will be discussed in light of each other.

Our findings revealed a shared interest in the craft of local food, echoing the findings of Davis and Mason-Jones (2017). The shared interest nurtures an informal and open learning community among food micro-entrepreneurs involving the FLN trainer as a facilitator for the informal and open tone that also situates the facilitator as a fellow member in the group, revealing a CoI consisting of multiple stakeholders: fellow food micro-entrepreneurs, potential competitors and a professional meat expert. This corresponds to the findings of Shepherd et al. (2020) who discuss the opportunities created by adding potential stakeholders to the body of contacts in a CoI to promote social learning for opportunity development. Adding to the knowledge stream on learning networks, this study reveals that access to the CoI's valuable knowledge was given only to the members who paid attention to and followed the underlying cultural norms and boundaries within the community, as in the theme of *cultural norms stabilising the community of inquiry*. These cultural norms and boundaries are socially transmitted to new members by more experienced members as a result of continuous effort to secure the reputation of the local food industry and maintain a certain level of expertise within the craft. It was also acknowledged as an important prerequisite preventing individual entrepreneurs from developing a competitive attitude and stabilising the culture of sharing. This finding helps explain the importance of acknowledging and respecting the cultural norms that give access to knowledge sharing in the CoI and maximises the individual entrepreneurs' knowledge acquisition from their participation in a FLN.

In the context of food micro-entrepreneurs sharing a joint interest in local food, this study confirms that the CoI framework is an interesting lens through which to explore individual food entrepreneurs' informal knowledge acquisition in a FLN. Regarding the notion that both new and experienced members had something to learn, the overall respect for others' knowledge and practice was seen as a motivation to get engaged and access knowledge in the CoI. The mechanisms regulating access to informal knowledge sharing, described as *engagement in the practices of others regulates access to community knowledge*, provide community members with important industry-specific knowledge, building a unique learning environment inside the CoI. These findings nuance prior research in explaining how membership in a FLN enhances individual entrepreneurs' knowledge acquisition and learning opportunities (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010, 2014; Reinl et al., 2015; Shepherd et al., 2020). Our findings also provide additional insight into the informal mechanisms that develop and maintain the enriching knowledge flow among members in a learning community in which the FLN trainer also plays an important role as a motivator for all members reflecting all levels of skills. Our research contributes to new knowledge describing the importance of retaining the most experienced members in the learning community, as they play an important role by challenging existing industry norms and thus advance the inquiry level in the community.

In this study, all community members reflected on their increased knowledge acquisition and improved skills in meat production, as described by the theme *from community inquiry to individual entrepreneurial knowledge*. Acquiring knowledge in a CoI based on community members' own experiences and common respect for the craft were found to build an improved ability to discover new opportunities and to develop these into innovations (Politis, 2005) for both new and experienced members. The more experienced members with a higher knowledge basis were found to be more explorative in developing innovations and new business opportunities, supporting the research of Shepherd et al. (2020), which revealed that founders' open engagement with CoIs to gather and collect new information, and sometimes also unexpected information, are likelier to experience opportunity development. The newest members, on the other hand, were more exploitative in using community knowledge to build a sustainable business and learnt from others' mistakes before doing the same themselves. Interestingly, our research found that receiving support from a network community by engaging in a CoI helped individual entrepreneurs to make more qualified strategic business decisions, initiated valuable business collaboration and provided them with a stronger voice when interacting with policy makers and authorities, which validates opportunity development in line with Shepherd et al. (2020). Our findings also suggest that knowledge acquisition in a learning community confers on members an important legitimacy as local food producers, gives them access to valuable knowledge resources, provides emotional support and expands their network of contacts, and thus their CoIs; this is useful for business development and innovation. The emotional dimension of CoIs represents a contribution to Shepherd et al. (2020)'s research in that open engagement supports the individual entrepreneur on a deeper and personal level in developing opportunities.

In order to provide an overall structure for our empirical analysis and discussion, we present in Figure 2 an extended conceptual framework based on Bessant and Tsakouras' work (2001: 89), which summarises our research findings.

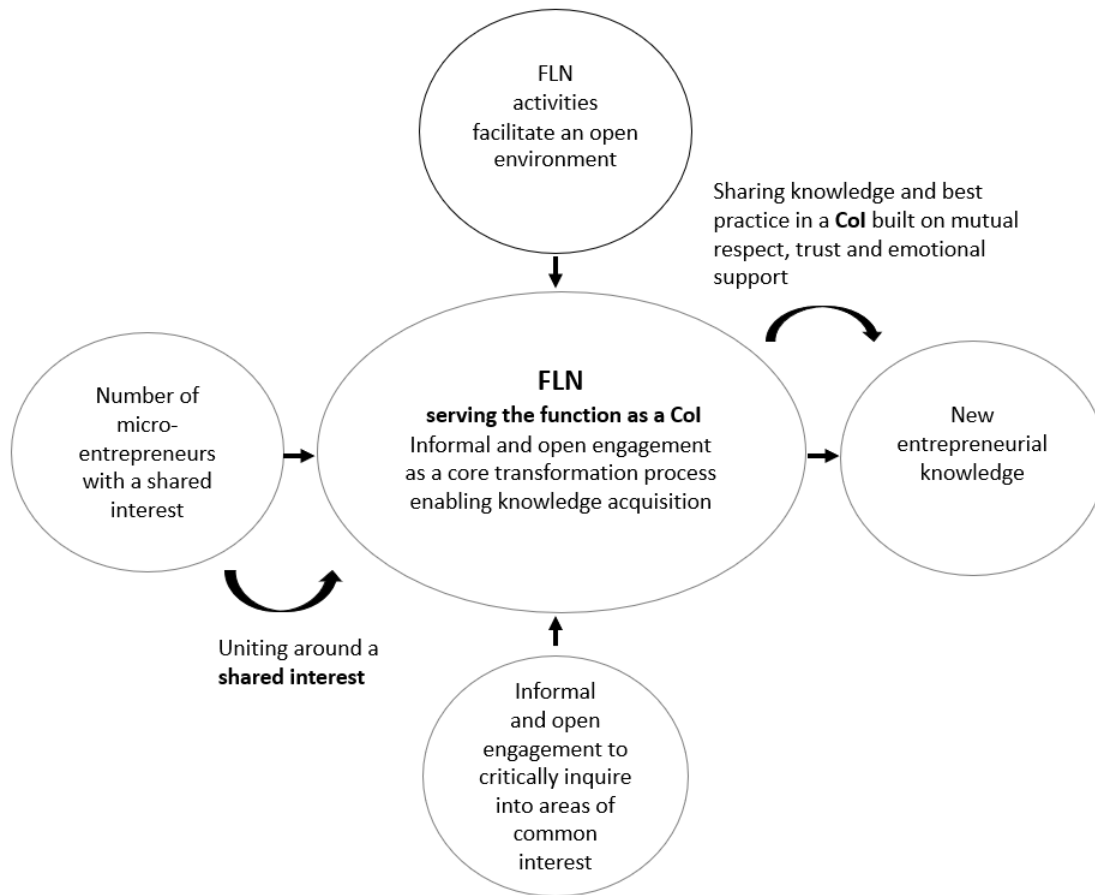


Figure 2. Conceptual framework: the individual micro-entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition in a community of inquiry.

Conclusions and implications

Through our study, we aimed to contribute to the research stream on social entrepreneurial learning (Lefebvre et al., 2015; Karataş-Özkan, 2011; Toutain et al., 2017), more specifically, we contribute a CoI approach (Garrison, 2015; Shepherd et al., 2020) to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition and, in particular, how informal learning from others enhances this process (Abecassis-Moedas et al., 2016; Lans et al., 2008, 2011; Lévesque et al., 2009; Rigg et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2020; Soetanto, 2017; Soetanto and Jack, 2011). Via an in-depth study of an FLN of food micro-entrepreneurs in the local food sector in Norway, we set out to explore how micro-entrepreneurs in the same industry choose to support each other and share their experiences to advance their learning despite representing different levels of expertise and being competitors. Moreover, by drawing on the CoI perspective, we illuminate the informal mechanisms that regulate knowledge acquisition and sharing between fellow peers in an FLN. This study therefore contributes an in-depth knowledge of the informal social regulation mechanisms creating an open and informal

learning environment surrounding a shared interest (Davies and Mason-Jones 2017; Garrison, 2015) enriching previous learning network research (Bessant and Tsekouras, 2001; Lefebvre et al., 2015; Man 2007; Nieminen and Hytti, 2016; Power et al., 2014; Quinn et al., 2014; Reinl and Kelliher, 2010, 2014; Reinl et al., 2015). Thus, we extended Bessant and Tsakouras' (2001) framework to incorporate the CoI perspective for entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition (see Figure 2), presenting pioneering research in the field.

Although illustrative, the results are still limited to our research context of micro-entrepreneurs in the domain of the food sector. Therefore, future research could examine how FLN in other entrepreneurial sectors resemble similar informal learning communities and to what extent a CoI materialises into individuals supporting each other and continuing to contribute to entrepreneurial knowledge acquisition. We cannot generalise the knowledge from this case study, but our findings will likely reflect similar experiences of micro-entrepreneurs who strongly share an interest in a specific industry domain.

The study's implications for social entrepreneurial learning point to the importance of informal learning dynamics in facilitating knowledge acquisition and hence innovation possibilities for the individual entrepreneur. It also illustrates that informal learning is situated and dependent on a formal learning environment enabled by the FLN and its setup. A fruitful avenue for future studies would be to look more into the interplay and dynamics between these forms of learning along the entrepreneurial process. Scholars within social entrepreneurial-learning perspectives would benefit from acknowledging the mutual importance of informal learning in learning networks and what regulates it and its effect on entrepreneurial-learning outcomes.

Considering the insights gained from this case study, we provide some practical implications that serve as inspiration for policymakers, learning network organisers and micro-entrepreneurs in similar learning network contexts. For policymakers, future quests for learning network funding can involve the combination of both formal and informal learning activities facilitated by an experienced mediator to enhance the individual entrepreneurial learning in a CoI, moving beyond the basic seek-and-take practice in traditional networks. Learning network organisers can benefit from understanding the importance of the social aspect of an FLN and how their role as facilitators nurtures the FLN to be a core transformation process enabling learning in a CoI by making room for informal social events and contributing to the socialisation and knowledge sharing among all levels of participants in the learning community. The importance of having an experienced facilitator who possesses both the expert skills and the social skills that nurture the interplay between formal and informal parts of a learning network is often underestimated and raising the awareness of these skills will be useful to future FLN facilitators. Both learning network organisers and participants in learning networks can benefit from the recognition of a cultural norm that functions as a prerequisite for engagement in a CoI and which can be a barrier for knowledge acquisition for the individual entrepreneur. Therefore, individual

entrepreneurs can benefit from understanding that their willingness to openly share their own experiences and show interest in others' community members' practices gives them access to a unique knowledge resource and important learning from others in a CoI.

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Notes

1. Informal learning in this setting is understood as a contrast to formal learning or training activities that take place in the facilitated learning network (see Table 1) and recognise the social significance of learning from other members. In accordance with Eraut's (2004) work it implies a greater scope for individual development than just socialisation. Informal learning can depart from a formal activity and draw the attention to the learning that moves beyond its formal purpose (which was intended and facilitated). It is therefore complementary to learning from one's own experience, as it taps into interpersonal exchanges of experience.

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