

The Cool Entrepreneurship Program for At-Risk Youth: An Illustration of the Social Construction of Economic Thinking

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This study explores and expands on the understanding of the social construction of economic thinking, by showing general benefits derived from socio-economic development initiatives sensitive to social constructionism perspectives. Social constructionism as a philosophical position considers all knowledge and meaning in a social context. The socio-economic development initiative I use to illustrate the benefits of utilizing social constructionist perspectives as a framework was a customized entrepreneurship program for at-risk youth. In addition to achieving its initial purpose, the customized entrepreneurship program helped participants appreciate the importance of education and feel more welcome at school, while feeling more confident, hopeful and self-assured. "The Cool Entrepreneurship" Program's name made it more appealing to youth.

Our first chapter describes the genesis of the Cool Entrepreneurship Program (details about development and implementation are covered in another chapter). It describes the role of participating agencies: Florida International University, US Department of Labor, Miami Children's Trust, Youth Coop, Inc. Insight, Inc. and South Florida Workforce. It briefly introduces my discovery of social constructionism, and my role in the program. Chapter 2 expands on the professional and personal experiences that led me deeper into the subject of social construction of economic thinking, including my training in qualitative methods and assignments. Chapter 3 provides a conceptual context for social constructionism and the role of language creation as it relates to the program. Chapter 3 also presents different philosophical positions in an attempt to explain the origin of knowledge and perception of reality; and my contention that social constructionism as a philosophical position enables humans to develop new understandings of economic reality. Chapter 3 also summarizes transition from social constructionism theoretical principles to practical applications in the Cool Entrepreneur Program for at-risk youth.

In chapter 4, we establish the Social Construction of Economic Thinking's relationship to Entrepreneurship and the Cool Entrepreneur Program. Chapter 4 covers the impact of social construction of economic thinking on the market--a dynamic progression of economic ideas related to entrepreneurship. These economic ideas encompass the microeconomic foundations and principles of sociology/social psychology presented by Adam Smith and other economists as mentioned above. This theoretical framework hopefully will prepare the reader to evaluate the merits of our Cool Entrepreneurship Program for at-risk youth, even as it helped me prepare to make the best use of an initial meeting with them

Chapter 5 shares specifics of the Cool Entrepreneurship Program's conception, set up, and implementation. We define entrepreneurship as a social construction of economic thinking through

observation of potential participants' social psychology: their desires, voices, and ultimately their potential to transform themselves from within. Chapter 5 describes program development and customization based on specific at-risk youths' needs, which entails a complex identification process of motivational factors and participant preconceptions in order to develop a more humane program. We expand on the convergence of social constructions to follow the exchange of ideas, emotions, understandings and perceptions that affected program implementation. We also mention the Brookings Institution's Growing the Middle Class; Needs Assessment Study of Hispanics in South Florida and Advancing Economic Prosperity through Workforce Development publications, which helped to justify creating the Cool Entrepreneur Program.

Chapter 6 gets into specifics of the Cool Entrepreneur Program's objective, at-risk youth definition, challenges in working with at-risk youth, case management, and customized program curriculum. The chapter covers the program's fifteen entrepreneurship modules, along with three additional sessions on Leadership, Communication and Portfolio/Illustration.

Chapter 7, entirely devoted to program evaluation and outcomes, first discusses several evaluation criteria. Following social constructionism guidelines, these evaluations incorporated participants' voices as quickly as possible.

Chapter 8 briefly tells how we got out the word about the Cool Entrepreneur Program--primarily at conferences and workshops hosted by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, the Tri County Regional Economic Councils, South Florida Workforce Development Board, and the Association of Universities Continuing Education (AUCE).

Chapter 9, explores the program's intriguing impact on participants' daily lives, and what form that impact took. The program staff wanted follow-up to help support and sustain positive program outcomes. This "relational continuity" principle grew from the program staff's dedication to participants and their futures. Participant follow-up included one survey after six months, another after twelve months, verbal communication with case managers after eighteen months, and ongoing communication between instructors and participants via social networks.

"Summary and Conclusions" recaps the theoretical base for social constructionism of economic thinking, and describes Program benefits. I conclude that understanding economic thinking and entrepreneurship as social constructs will enable all members of society to seek a better world by breaking away from rigid thinking platforms.