ANETTE OXENSWÄRDH[*]

Micro-business entrepreneurs and bricoleurs on their way towards sustainable practice – implications for learning processes

Abstract. The purpose of the study was to investigate how some micro-business entrepreneurs and bricoleurs experience their learning processes through workshops, especially with respect to sustainability issues. This qualitative and explorative study focuses on learning processes during the GreenBizz course, which are analysed on the basis of inquiries and observations of discussions among course participants and on documents describing the course design and assignments. It was found that entrepreneurs are aware and are familiar with sustainability issues but they have neither proper tools nor the knowhow for implementing sustainable changes in their businesses. To be successful, the learning process needs to sufficiently heterogeneous, should involve the transmission of tacit knowledge and provide opportunities for participants to learn about their motivations and should include both theoretical and practical elements. Participation in the course enables entrepreneurs to network with other entrepreneurs, give support and share knowledge about sustainable solutions in their businesses. The study shows that such courses not only must allow for a certain degree of flexibility but also require a course or team leader with a solid and practical knowledge in entrepreneurship and sustainability.

Keywords: co-creation of learning, co-creation of values, bricoleurs, study circle, sustainability, tourism, micro-entrepreneurs

 JEL Codes: A29, D91

1. Introduction

In recent decades sustainability issues in the tourism industry have become increasingly important. Sustainable innovation plays an important part in all micro-businesses involved in tourism. This is also true for the Swedish island of Gotland,

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where tourism has been an important economic factor for more than 150 years (Friis & Scholz, 2013). A big challenge for the future development of tourism is to find ways in which it can be made more sustainable. There has been a new wave of tourism research that calls for the co-creation of sustainable values and solutions through the involvement of local stakeholders and communities (Li & Hunter, 2015). A core of small businesses, particularly micro-businesses (with fewer than 10 employees), is required to build and maintain sustainable development of communities in the social, cultural, environmental and economic dimension. However, the entrepreneurial role of micro-businesses has not been really recognised by communities because entrepreneurship has been regarded as an economic rather than human and cultural behavioural concept (Rae & Carswell, 2000).

To become a successful entrepreneur today, a person needs to be able to come up with sustainable solutions, services and products. This article outlines the importance of educating entrepreneurs who run micro-businesses and so-called bricoleurs about sustainable solutions. The author presents results of a study conducted in Gotland concerning learning processes of micro-business entrepreneurs and bricoleurs participating in what is known as a study circle in order to learn how to transform their businesses into more sustainable enterprises.

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1. Innovative entrepreneurs as bricoleurs

Innovative entrepreneurs who create value in environments with scarce resources are called 'bricoleurs' by Baker & Nelson (2005). The concept of entrepreneurial bricolage was introduced by Lévi-Strauss (1966) and can be defined as "making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker & Nelson, 2005). This process involves three complex sets of behaviours. Firstly, making do which could refer to creating something from nothing. Secondly, it means refusing to accept limitations, such as accepted definitions, practices and social conventions. Thirdly, it means appreciating action and improvisation as well as taking part in several projects and always responding to new opportunities (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Davidsson, Baker, & Senyard 2017; Fisher, 2012). Still, there is always a risk of falling back on local and cheap solutions, which do not prioritize knowledge and tools. Growth can be retarded due to the inclusion of bricolage as a company's identity (Fisher, 2012). On the other hand, companies seeking long-term survival

solutions can benefit from the mindset of entrepreneurial bricolage (Stinchfield, Nelson, & Wood, 2013). Another related term is spatial bricolage, which is defined as: a) spatial practices which involve engagement with local communities in order to get access to local resources (Di Domenico Haugh, & Tracey, 2010); b) a specific place, a local resource for developing products and services (Kang, 2017). With respect to spatial bricolage, Korsgaard, Mueller, & Welter (2018) identifies three connected sets of activities: local sourcing, commodification through storytelling and community involvement, which all can help entrepreneurs to overcome resource constraints.

Local searching includes both non-material and physical resources. Nature, landscapes, infrastructure as well as different raw materials available can all be regarded as physical resources. Non-material resources include culture, heritage, traditions, and distinctive local identities (Kang, 2017). Commodification, transformation of products and services into objects of trade occurs through storytelling and refers to how entrepreneurs create narratives. Entrepreneurs include local physical and non-material resources into their offerings. Storytelling and commodification of local heritage increase the value of products and services (Anderson, 2000).

2.2. Lifestylers

A new type of entrepreneurship, associated with so-called lifestylers, has emerged in the tourism sector. According to Gomez-Velasco & Saleilles (2007), there are numerous definitions of lifestyle entrepreneurs. For Burns (2001), lifestyle entrepreneurs are primarily motivated by their desire to do something they enjoy and that provides an adequate income. However, according to Morrison (2006), the main reason why lifestyle entrepreneurs start a business is not economic. This is confirmed by Ateljevic & Doorne (2000), whose study of small enterprises in New Zealand involved in adventure tourism shows that economic factors were not the driving force for those entrepreneurs. Instead, lifestyle values were central to the success of their businesses and could be best measured in terms of their continuing ability to perpetuate their chosen lifestyles (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000). In the tourism industry, lifestyle entrepreneurship can be a highly creative and innovative occupation, because it is not a totally profit-driven business but rather provides opportunities to engage with market consumers (Shaw, 2004). Research also shows that in the creation of new tourism products and services as well as in the conservation and promotion of local natural and cultural heritage lifestyle, stakeholders are important actors in creating platforms for understanding sustainable tourism development (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000).

2.3. Learning

Learning has been looked at from various perspectives and by representatives of different fields throughout history. As a result, the concept of learning is used to refer to a wide range of ideas, which can include both individual and collective learning processes (Minsky, 1988). In this article both processes are taken into account. It is further assumed that the process of value creation is a learning journey.

2.4. Learning individually

Theories of individual learning are central to the understanding of joint learning processes, often emphasizing the concrete experience of learning. According to Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis (2001), experiential learning takes place when an individual experiences a situation, analyses it and understands its meaning and value from their own perspective. This experience can be understood as a cognitive, affective or behavioural phenomenon. The theory of experiential learning describes how people learn, grow and develop. The theory emphasizes the importance of effective and personal experience (Corbett, 2005; Kolb 1984; Schön 1995). According to Passarelli & Kolb (2011, p. 5) "in the process of learning one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking". This perspective is preferable when learning about sustainability issues because it focuses explicitly on the relationship between cognition and action, rather than the individual's stock of knowledge. The weakness of this theory, however, is that it does not take into account the social context or values and other interests that can influence human action. While learning about sustainability, all these issues are important. According to Schön (1995), values and beliefs can be integrated. He argues that cognition cannot be separated from values and beliefs, and the same is true with respect to the link between cognition and action. A lot of knowledge is tacit and goes unnoticed. This is why, it needs to be brought to the surface: people have to be made aware of their tacit knowledge and the value it may have for others.

2.5. Learning in a group

Group learning is more than merely enhanced individual learning: when several individuals interact, the complexity of learning increases. For instance, issues of motivation and reward, which are an integral part of human learning, become more complicated in a group setting. When discussing processes involved in

group learning, adjectives such as *collective, collaborative, cooperative* and *collegial* are often used to describe them. Collaborative learning can be defined as a social activity, where learners make progress individually, but not necessarily as a group (Järvelä, Violet, & Järvenoja, 2010; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2008). Collective learning, instead, focuses on achieving a common understanding and attaining a common goal in the group. Experiences need to be described collectively so that the group has a possibility to problematize and reflect on the experience for accomplishing a learning outcome (Järvelä & Järvenoja, 2011; Ohlsson, 1996; Wilhelmson, 1998).

Action learning is an approach pioneered by Revans (Pedler, 2016), who regards learning as a noticeable change in behaviour. Change can be viewed as a process involving learning and action. These two phenomena are connected to each other and presuppose each other. Action learning has been used as an instructional method in the pursuit of organizational development in both public and private organizations (Boaden, 2006). Bowerman, (2003) and Conger & Toegel (2003) argue that action learning is preferred as a method for problem-solving and a way of changing behaviour because it relates to real-world issues. In the action learning approach, participants try to find satisfactory answers to problems by working in small groups, where they meet regularly in order to solve issues they encounter. They analyse, develop solutions, choose the most appropriate one and finally implement recommendations. Learning and task achievement go hand in hand throughout the process. Learning includes programmed instruction and questioning insight (Pedler, 2016).

2.6. Learning sustainability

Sustainability has become one of the most widely used and discussed concepts (Appelbaum et al., 2016; Dobson, 2008; Rambaud & Richard, 2015). The Brundtland Commission (1987) defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Definitions of sustainability can vary, but the widely common model for sustainable development consists of three, partly overlapping, pillars: economic viability, environmental protection and social equity. In order to produce goods and services that meet our needs and remain within the limits of the carrying capacity of our planet's ecological systems as well as contribute to economic and societal development, the balanced integration of these three pillars is essential (Appelbaum et al., 2016; Dobson, 2008; Rambaud and Richard, 2015). This model has been adopted as the basis for several Swedish environmental policies. Sustainability has also become a very important quality marker and value for tourists, where it refers to results of the

process of co-creation with different actors and stakeholders, which in turn becomes a crucial factor in developing products and services for the tourism industry (Matthing, Sanden, & Edvardsson, 2004; Thrift, 2006).

Learning and group processes are interdependent and interwoven. Nevertheless, groupwork is a complex multidimensional competency, and its development must be planned carefully. In any groupwork context, good communication skills, the ability to set goals, solve problems and resolve conflicts can benefit the group. Group diversity can be regarded as a positive factor. However, in groups with communicative, cognitive and cultural differences, there is always a risk of conflict. Each group member influences the group process and is affected by what happens in the group (Haslett & Ruebush, 1999; Schultz, 1999; Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999).

2.7. Value creation

Creation or co-creation of values are two concepts that are often used in business and management literature and research. Today the consumer is seen as a participant in the process of creating the meaning of a product. The consumer can thus be regarded as a co-producer, as consumption is seen as an identification marker. The co-creation act adds sense to the product. By being involved as co-creators customers become active participants in the product experience. At the same time, consumers are co-creators of values. This new role is significantly different from the idea of a passive mass-market consumer during the post-war period (Bergman & Klefsjö, 2012). In practice, this co-creation of values happens as a result of individual and collective processes. Interactions between group members involve meaning-making and sensemaking. Meaning-making is described in several scientific disciplines such as in psychology and constructivist learning theory. According to Gillies, Neimeyer & Millman, (2014, p. 208), meaning making can be defined as something people are "retaining, reaffirming, revising, or replacing elements of their orienting system to develop more nuanced, complex and useful systems." The process of sense-making, in turn, was desricibed in organizational studies in 1970s by Karl E. Weick as a process where individuals give meaning for their collective experiences (Weick,1995).

One way in which value can be created between entrepreneurs and their customers is the pursuit of sustainability. Value creation can in turn lead to more viable solutions and practices in tourism, thus contributing to the development of a sustainable society. This does not happen without participation in collective and collaborative learning, where both meaning-making and sensemaking occur and where knowledge sharing and learning take place. Figure 1 illustrates how these theoretical aspects are connected.
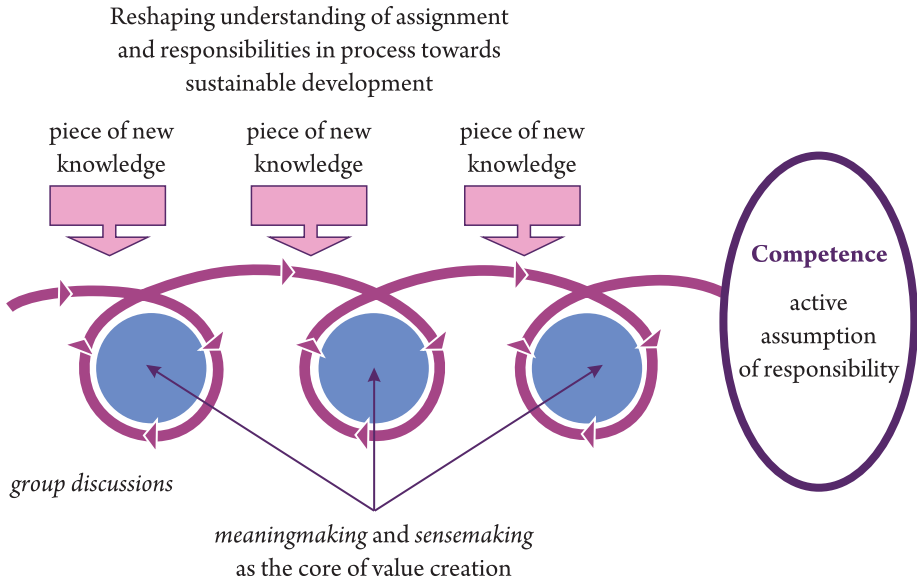
Reshaping understanding of assignment
and responsibilities in process towards
sustainable development

piece of new
knowledge

piece of new
knowledge

piece of new
knowledge

Competence

active
assumption
of responsibility

group discussions

meaningmaking and *sensemaking*
as the core of value creation

Fig. 1. Learning processes including meaning- and sensemaking

Source: author's work.

All these processes should be treated as interconnected (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Furthermore, these processes can be regarded as a framework for understanding the complexity of learning about issues of sustainability in any organizational context.

3. Methodology

The following section describes a qualitative and explorative study of some entrepreneurs and their learning processes. Entrepreneurs were selected from a group participating in the green business course. All course participants ran their businesses on the Swedish island of Gotland. Each course section included between 6-11 entrepreneurs. The author's study is based on responses collected from five entrepreneurs who participated the course regularly.

Primary data collection for this study took place between January and April 2020. The data consisted of documents about the course, observations and exercises completed by course participants and answers to an online questionnaire, which was filled in by participants at the end of the course. It consisted of three sections: about the course in general, (11 questions), about group processes,

how participants experienced the course (10 questions) and about sustainability (general questions about sustainability and how participants have been implementing sustainable solutions in their businesses and about their plans concerning sustainability – 6 questions). As an observer in the course collecting observation data, the author did not participate in course activities or group discussions. Data analysis was based on the theoretical concepts presented in the previous section.

4. Results

4.1. The Green Bizz programme

NatureBizz is a three-year EU-funded Interregional Central Baltic project[1] scheduled to run from March 2018 to October 2021. Green Bizz is part of this project, a pilot training project. The aim of the training programme was to support the growth and competitiveness of subject-specific business competencies necessary for green entrepreneurs to support development of those competencies, and in turn, to contribute their long-term success, competiveness and customer satisfaction. The training programme was focused on special characteristics of green consumption and green entrepreneurship and business. The programme took place between January and April 2020 on Gotland Island. It consisted of eight study modules: Managing green micro-business, Understanding green consumers, Brand and quality management, Product development and service design, Supply chain management, Communication and export, Communication in customer journey and Green entrepreneurs go international.

4.2. Study participants

Five entrepreneurs chosen for the study completed the whole training course. All of them run a business in the tourism sector. All of them had more than one vocational area of expertise. In their business activity, they offer different services for tourists. Three of them provide bed and breakfast accommodation, offer guided tours, run cafés and sell local products. One offers BnB accommodation, operates a wool scouring mill and a shop selling wool products. One represents a cooperative that owns a camping site, a museum, a restaurant and a café, a harbour for leisure boats and guided tours. Another offers guided tours, traditional cooking and handicraft classes and organises other local events. They run their businesses alone or together with their partners most of the year. But seasonally some of them

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[1] https://www.sh.se/forskning/var-forskning/forskningsdatabas/forskningsprojekt/naturebizz

hire extra employees, from 1 to 5 persons. Their pathways through the course were documented by observations, exercises completed and their responses to the questionnaire. All of these data sources are presented and analysed below.

4.3. Opinions about the course

Participants said they had decided to participate in the course because they thought it was necessary to become a greener entrepreneur.

„*It was an interesting theme that could help to develop our business.*"

Respondents indicated that the course content, in general, was good but some of the course material was designed for larger organizations and industries, not for micro-businesses in the service sector. The study participants said they were inclined to use the course parts depending on their own specific needs. In their opinion, discussions with other participants provided the largest stock of knowledge in the course. Comments regarding the content of different modules varied. Here are some opinions:

„*The content of the modules helped me to see my own company from several different perspectives.*"

„*I gained new knowledge about international sustainability goals.*"

„*There is a large number of different certifications that we, as micro-entrepreneurs, cannot afford or benefit from.*"

„*I did not learn any new facts but had an opportunity to reflect on green values.*"

„*I learned nothing new.*"

„*Parts of the module use traditional reasoning from industrial production. It should be slightly deeper and clearer, more focused on the service sector and experiential tourism.*"

„*The modules were not adjusted to the needs of the hospitality industry.*"

„*It was excellent with extra material, which was available as a backdrop and the various links.*"

The study participants represented different areas of entrepreneurship, but all of them were active within the hospitality industry. They said the course did not always satisfy their expectation of improving their competencies. These entrepreneurs can be called as bricoleurs not only because they provide tourists with services in different areas but also because they used the course content for their own specific needs (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). They incorporated pieces of knowledge they regarded as necessary and useful into they own business puzzle. They can also be seen as *spatial bricoleurs*, according to Korsgaard, Mueller, & Welter (2018); Di Domenico Haugh, & Tracey (2010) and Kang (2017) because they are engaged with local communities and use available resources, specific places, cultures and commodification through storytelling.

4.4. Group processes and group learning

The study participants seemed to enjoy being part of their group. They pointed out that because the group was heterogeneous, they had an opportunity to learn about the situation and conditions of other entrepreneurs operating in the tourism sector. In addition, they believed that the group was reasonably large and enabled different discussions during the course. (Haslett & Ruebush, 1999; Schultz, 1999; Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999).

The respondents believed the course leader allowed a lot of freedom in discussions, sometimes even too much, so that it was difficult to follow the agenda of the day. However, most of the study participants viewed those discussions as the most rewarding part of the course. Some respondents said that one of the course participants had built a website based on different course themes. The number of participants decreased as the course went on and this was perceived as a disadvantage because in this way they lost several other experiences about entrepreneurship. Other problematic aspects of the course regarding that particular group included the lack of structure, overly long and sometimes excessively diverse discussions. According to two respondents, areas relating to the production of goods and services or conditions in which companies of different sizes operate were covered inadequately, as the diversity of perspectives and values make for a very enriching contribution.

All these skills and ways of learning can be regarded as important in learning sustainability issues. Co-creation of values, such as sustainability, and the processes of meaning making and sensemaking take place and are intertwined with learning processes in the study group (Gillies, Neimeyer & Milman, 2014). The respondents identified strongly with their companies. They showed commitment and interest in developing their companies to become greener and more sustainable. While discussing in the group, the participants shared their narratives, discussed their problems, tried to find solutions together and learn from each other (Abolafia, 2010; Isabella, 1990; Weick, 1995). The respondents extracted context cues that helped them decide what information could be relevant and what explanations could be acceptable (Salancick & Pfeffer, 1978).

4.5. Entrepreneurs and sustainability

The entrepreneurs gave many examples of how they already work on sustainability issues in their companies.

"We try to be sustainable. It is a lifestyle and we try to be as sustainable as possible. Sustainable products or locally produced products are the most important, not a sustainable product that has been flown here from another part of the globe."

"We work with a sustainable raw material, sheep wool, so this makes our business sustainable. We are also certified as a farm and as a B&B and we usually make conscious choices in construction and purchasing."

The respondents also added that they had solved their rainwater collection, grew their own food, thought about resource management, used conservation methods that include only water and a little salt (lactic acid fermentation), dealt with local suppliers, handled most of the raw materials, minimized and took care of waste, had a solid knowledge of sustainable tourism, cooking, etc. So, in other words, they already applied sustainable solutions in their businesses.

They also stated that they were planning other measures in their companies to step up sustainable actions. All of them wanted to expand the range of sustainable products and services in their companies. They were also curious about new sustainable technologies and wanted to maintain a coherent process with a holistic vision of how to run their business, how their staff should behave, how to dispose of materials, how to preserve natural values. 4 respondents wanted to deepen their understanding of what is meant by sustainable and long-term development. They also learnt about rules and support to become more sustainable, and about things that slow down or speed up the development of sustainability (Matthing, Sanden & Edvardsson, 2004; Thrift, 2006).

The respondents pointed out the breadth of different things that they had learned during the course. Four respondents improved their knowledge about different certification opportunities, others had learned how to better market their company or concept with the help of knowledge acquired during the course. They were interested to find out more about rules and regulations concerning sustainability, where to get help, examples of sustainable solutions in different companies and businesses. One persons wanted to learn more about competitive advantages that sustainability measures can provide. In addition, three study participants wanted help with practical sustainability measures in their specific business areas.

From the perspective of the respondents, the learning process requires certain conditions to be effective:

– the course material needs to be sufficiently diverse and have a greater breadth to better suit the different needs of participants;

– the study group needs to be sufficiently heterogeneous to inspire and function as a knowledge bank for participants;

– learning requires a balanced structure with diverse elements and course leaders who are not too dominant;

– participants are allowed to learn collaboratively, because they have different goals and needs;

– group discussions highlight so-called tacit knowledge

– participants have some prior knowledge of sustainability in order to be motivated to continue their learning;

– participants are curious about practical sustainable solutions;
– participants value and are willing to learn from other participants;
– entrepreneurs need support, particularly practical support, to move towards sustainable businesses.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the course analysed in this exploratory study was to increase the participants' knowledge about sustainable entrepreneurship. Five micro-entrepreneurs, who completed the entire course, can be regarded as bricoleurs and lifestylers because of the way they run their businesses and how they acquired knowledge during the course. In their business activities, they provide different services, are open to new ideas, are innovative and inventive, flexible and enduring. They are constantly in search of new knowledge that can improve their business. They want to interact with other entrepreneurs, share their experiences and create networks. They need both theoretical and practical knowledge. It seems that different learning approaches were useful to these entrepreneurs during different phases of the course. They often switched between individual and group learning modes. In many and long discussions, they seemed to benefit most from the collaborative way of learning.

Results indicate that these micro-entrepreneurs need support and knowledge from different areas of entrepreneurship. Sustainable entrepreneurship should first relate to practical problems that bricoleurs faced with in their everyday life. One possible alternative they would find preferable would be a course where sustainability aspects are linked to everyday problems and are discussed in separate blocks of themes related to specific needs, which participants could choose depending on their preferences. These results indicate that what is really needed is not only a good and flexible course structure but also a course leader with a solid knowledge of both entrepreneurship and sustainability, both in theory but mostly in practice. In future research, it would be interesting to study several different groups of entrepreneurs and their need for knowledge about sustainability issues.

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Mikroprzedsiębiorcy na drodze do działalności zrównoważonej – implikacje dla procesów uczenia się

Streszczenie. Celem badania było rozpoznanie, w jaki sposób niektórzy mikroprzedsiębiorcy odbierają proces uczenia się w trakcie warsztatów, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do kwestii zrównoważonego rozwoju. W przeprowadzonym badaniu jakościowym o charakterze eksploracyjnym

przedmiotem analizy były głównie procesy uczenia się podczas kursu GreenBizz. Analizowane były odpowiedzi udzielone przez respondentów w kwestionariuszu, notatki z obserwacji dyskusji między uczestnikami warsztatów oraz dokumenty opisujące strukturę kursu i wykorzystane w nim zadania. Stwierdzono, że przedsiębiorcy mają pewną wiedzę na temat kwestii zrównoważonego rozwoju, ale brakuje im odpowiednich narzędzi do wdrażania trwałych zmian w swoich firmach. Aby proces uczenia się był skuteczny, musi być wystarczająco zróżnicowany, powinien obejmować przekazywanie wiedzy ukrytej, dawać uczestnikom możliwość poznania swoich motywacji oraz zawierać zarówno elementy teoretyczne, jak i praktyczne. Udział w kursie umożliwił respondentom nawiązywanie kontaktów z innymi przedsiębiorcami, udzielanie sobie wzajemnego wsparcia i dzielenie się wiedzą na temat zrównoważonych rozwiązań w przedsiębiorstwach. Badanie pokazuje, że tego typu kursy muszą nie tylko zapewniać wystarczający zakres elastyczności, ale również powinny być prowadzone przez osoby posiadające solidną i praktyczną wiedzę z zakresu przedsiębiorczości i zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: współtworzenie wartości, bricoleur, rozwój zrównoważony, turystyka, mikroprzedsiębiorcy