

Leeds University Business School

Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode: Entrepreneurial learning at the margins

Speakers: Dr Peter Gittins and Dr Colleta Gandidzanwa

[00:00:05] **Peter:** Hello everyone. Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Dr Peter Gittins, lecturer in entrepreneurship studies at Leeds University Business School. And today I'm joined by a colleague from Pretoria University.

[00:00:20] **Colleta:** My name is Colleta Gandidzanwa. I am a lecturer in the Department of Agricultural Economics, and Extension and Rural Development at the University of Pretoria. I'm glad to join.

[00:00:33] **Peter:** It's nice to have you here. Thank you, Colleta. So today we're going to be talking about our collaboration between the universities. This is a two-year collaboration which we're currently working on together. So this collaboration is all about exploring the notion of entrepreneurial learning and learning at what we call "the margins", which we're going to talk about in a few moments' time.

[00:01:04] **Peter:** So this collaboration, it builds upon some of the previous connections that we've had at the University of Leeds. So I was introduced to Colleta and contacts at Pretoria University through Professor Diane Holt, who did some previous research through the FS Net Africa program.

[00:01:31] **Peter:** So inside the Business School, we've had these long-established connections, and I was awarded some internal funding to go out to Pretoria University a few years ago, and that's when I met with Colleta and some other representatives from the Agricultural Research Council too.

[00:01:56] **Peter:** So this internal funding bid, it was really important for getting this research started, this two-year collaboration. This opportunity to go out there, it really helped shaped my own understanding of the South African farming and rural context. This is completely different to the context which I'd previously been looking at in the Business School, where I was doing a lot of research looking at the upland and hill farming context in England.

[00:02:28] **Peter:** So following that trip, myself and Colleta, and with support from the Agricultural Research Council, we put in a funding bid for the British Council's International Science Partnership Fund, and we were successful in our project. That funding bid wanted to see collaborations between UK universities and certain overseas countries, one of which was South Africa. And I'm very much delighted that we were awarded that funding.

[00:03:02] **Peter:** So this project, it extends some of the existing research that we've been looking at here at the Business School. So I've been looking at this notion of constrained rural entrepreneurship, so those factors and forces which hinder entrepreneurial potential. But now

we're extending this to look at the Global South and developing nations context too. So I'm very excited to be taking part in this two-year collaboration. Anything to add from you, Colleta, from this?

[00:03:36] **Colleta:** No, that's right, Peter. And what I would just add is that, what's different from what you've been doing in your Business School is that we've got the Global South ground reality of what is actually happening in South African communities. So the contexts are different, and really understanding entrepreneurial learning at the margins in the informal township communities of South Africa. So really what we wanted to do is to have something different, in terms of understanding entrepreneurial learning at the margins. So the context is here in South Africa and we just want to get insights that shift from how entrepreneurial support is designed here in South Africa when we are looking at this dualism of informality in South Africa.

[00:04:42] **Colleta:** And if I am to speak about, we mean about entrepreneurial learning at the margins and maybe shedding some light on what we mean by "the margins" is that, most of entrepreneurial education in South Africa is built for someone who has got access to capital. They can go to a university, they have a formal bank account, and they've maybe a market where they're actually selling.

[00:05:18] **Colleta:** But if you are to look at the South African context, and you walk through the townships, you look, you walk around the rural communities, you'll find that there is somebody who is, hustling, in one way or the other. There's a spaza shop, there is a backyard cooking, stock fill type of things. And that is also entrepreneurship. But it's not taught, it's not financed, it's not registered, and it's not even studied in the same way. So when we're looking at entrepreneurial learning at the margins, those are the margins that we are looking at. There is innovation that's happening there because there's very little institutional support that is existing in those areas.

[00:06:16] **Colleta:** So these are the margins that we wanted to explore. So rural communities, township traders, smallholders. Yeah, so this is really also connecting with some of the work that we do with indigenous crop farmers, for example. They are in the rural areas, no access to markets. Youth and women who are involved in entrepreneurial learning, but they do not... they're really excluded from formal activities. And, yeah, Peter, maybe you want to add more to how we are defining entrepreneurial learning at the margins.

[00:07:00] **Peter:** Yeah, absolutely. No, I think you've summarised it very well. We're looking at, effectively, how different rural actors experience degrees of marginalisation. So things we're, that we're interested in are, you know, how do these rural actors learn to become good farmers and traders? What types of learning are they exposed to? How have they learnt? For those that were successful, despite the constraints which they faced, how did they overcome those constraints? And what are some of the critical constraints which prevent effective learning?

[00:07:35] **Peter:** And yeah, we're looking at a range of different agri-food actors here. So we're not just looking at the commercial farmers who are marginalised much less than other forms of farmers, but we're looking at different agri-food actors too, such as subsistence farmers. So these could be farmers who are producing food more for their own livelihood and survival. And we're looking at small scale, small holder farmers, emerging farmers, informal sellers. We're, we're looking at a range of different, rural actors out there. And I think there's something to be

said for rural areas too. You know, there's something interesting in here. The rural areas themselves are often regarded as being institutionally thin. They're often regions which often fail to develop as quickly as the urban environments. Policy is often incredibly focused at developing urban areas. You know, rurality and rural areas have their own challenges.

[00:08:39] **Peter:** You know, being in a rural area often means that because of the geography and the topographical factors, you're often many miles away from the essential urban districts. And then there's other challenges which are also prominent in rural areas too. So you could look at things like poverty within rural areas. There's huge rates there. If you could look at educational things like high school dropout rates. So there's all these interesting factors which can constrain learning and subsequently entrepreneurial pursuit too. So that's what we're interested in exploring, understanding the learning processes across these different rural actors.

[00:09:22] **Peter:** So in terms of what the project is actually doing, so as I've mentioned, this is a two-year collaboration. But this project is essentially split into two streams. On the first side, we have the research stream, and then on the other side, we have the capacity-building stream. So on the research side of things, we're conducting qualitative fieldwork, drawing on ethnographic research, which means deep immersion within the context.

[00:09:55] **Peter:** We use a range of qualitative techniques, such as semi-structured interviews, but also less conventional techniques too, like unstructured interviews, diary notes, observation, and photographs. So we're using a range of different qualitative techniques to really understand how marginalisation is playing out within this context.

[00:10:18] **Peter:** So in terms of the data collection as well, we plan to do 30 interviews, and we're well on track to achieving that, probably a lot more too. And we want to understand how learning takes place across these different rural actor groups. Then on the capacity-building side of things as well, we're also delivering a number of workshops. So we're delivering eight workshops altogether to the PGR and early career researcher audience. We have mentoring opportunities for PGRs and ECRs. We have the workshops, and we also have visits. So earlier this year, I went out to South Africa and joined Keletso and colleagues over there. And then next year, Keletso and some South African visitors will come to Leeds. So we have this two-pronged process of research and capacity building.

[00:11:18] **Colleta:** When Peter visited South Africa, we had, a stakeholder engagement workshop, and this is what part of the activities that we'll have as part of the dissemination. So we want to really speak to policy and we are including stakeholders from diverse groups to have input into the project and we'll also validate and consult with them as we do the research. So maybe I can get into what we are finding so far. One of the things that Peter has mentioned that we'll do, we'll spend a lot of work in the field because we want to really understand how people learn. And, we have already done a pilot, when Peter was here. And, this October we'll have, researchers in the field, including myself, trying to understand this concept further in four provinces in South Africa.

[00:12:22] **Colleta:** But so far on what we have done based on the pilot and the workshop that we had when Peter was here, we have found, a few interesting insights. Firstly, one thing that is coming out as a main form of learning at the margins, which is not really surprising, is mentorship. So we visited a farmer called Blessing, and she does not have any background in

farming except she was passionate about farming, and they did have a family farm, but she was involved with other forms of business, and she ventured into farming horticultural crops like, cucumbers and peppers.

[00:13:14] **Colleta:** But she did not have any... she just thought you take a plant, you put the seed into the soil, and you water it. But she started experiencing some challenges, with pests and diseases and it took her looking for experienced peers, who had experience in farming horticultural crops. And, this she had to do because she had tried to engage, you know, the formal, publicly available extension services and her quest for learning from that, did not go so well.

[00:13:52] **Colleta:** So mentorship is really coming up as one of those areas of learning at the margins. I don't know, Peter, if there were any other lessons or specific insights that you'd like to speak to based on the work we have done so far.

[00:14:10] **Peter:** Yeah. There's quite a few interesting things which I think are, which are worth highlighting. So firstly, the extreme constraints in which many of these rural entrepreneurs are having to operate within, you know, it makes the upland farming context look like nothing in comparison. But yeah, in terms of formal support and advice and things like that, one of the key things highlighted by many of the smaller scale farmers has been that the formal advice is not the best.

[00:14:44] **Peter:** You know, one case highlighted that the farming advice that she received through the official government channels, it was often wrong. She found the engagement with these policy perspectives quite difficult, so she had to go through informal mechanisms of learning through from her neighbours and through her own contacts.

[00:15:06] **Peter:** You know, I've not actually come across that many farmers so far which have... that sing too many praises about the government agricultural extension officers. Now I know the extension officers will disagree on that front and I know they are very limited, in terms of resources and are overstretched. I know they deal with their own challenges. They have a lot of farmers to deal with and have a lot of land to oversee. But that was certainly one of the tensions. So a lot of these farmers are having to turn to informal modes of learning because the formal channels are not always the best some other interesting things too as well, and some which made me challenge my own assumptions too was, you know, as I've been talking to some of the younger farmers out there in South Africa, a lot of those are turning to emerging digital tools and technologies for decision support.

[00:16:08] **Peter:** So a lot of them are using generative artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT and other large language models, and some of those farmers have been praising them, saying that they can ask questions to it and they don't feel any shame about asking questions. They often get better advice than what they receive through the formal channels. Often it's free or extremely low cost. Engagement with these tools, it's often very natural and they can input a text-based prompt or input a video of a crop or a photo or whatever, a document, and those tools are extremely helpful for some of those younger entrepreneurs and then a final thing which I'll say is that, one of the things which I've noticed is that learning takes place across a variety of different forms.

[00:17:07] **Peter:** You know, you've got formal and informal channels. You've got formal via the formal routes of education, such as going to university or agricultural college or through an apprenticeship. But then even within those formal modes of learning, you have lots of informal aspects of learning taking place too.

[00:17:27] **Peter:** So you'll have somebody who's going through those channels, and they might not be getting the most value out of the actual taught content, but they will be learning in a different way within. They'll be watching their boss or their mentor, or their friend and seeing and copying, and transferring skills that way.

[00:17:51] **Peter:** Many of the more successful farmers I interview, they'll often emphasise experiential learning as the reason as to why they've been able to succeed. They will say that you get good at farming by farming. You don't learn it through a textbook. But when you dig a little bit deeper, often there is, hidden away, there is a lot of studying going on in the background too.

[00:18:20] **Peter:** So that's an interesting thing which I've noticed. A lot of the farmers too, often emphasise learning through mistakes as well. That seems to be a crucial moment in which these people have learnt the most. There was a young farmer who told me a story about how he learnt the hard way how to properly vaccinate animals.

[00:18:48] **Peter:** He said that he was told by his boss to go and, and get, and get the syringe of medication and administer it to the animal. and he, he went, he got, he got the, the medication, he brought the bottle back, and then he dropped it on the floor and it smashed. And he got a very stern telling off from his boss, and he ended up getting it deducted from his wages and that. And then he said that that was the moment he learnt he should have actually brought the syringe to the bottle and then the syringe back from there. So that was a costly moment, but was a learning experience for that young entrepreneur. So that was really interesting.

[00:19:29] **Peter:** So I think, I think another thing that's worth commenting on, about this project too is, some of the difficulties and challenges with this type of field work as well. And I think for me, I think, I think the biggest one is it's something which speaks to my own positionality within this context of the research. So in my previous research, I've very much been an industry insider. So I've been somebody who had a sheep farming background doing research on sheep farmers. So here I was very familiar with the challenges and the constraints, and I also had quite a lot of legitimacy too. A lot of the challenges which farmers spoke to me about through that research, you know, I was aware of it because it was taking place on my farm, or I was reading about it in the news cycle.

[00:20:29] **Peter:** Now, this South African context is very different. You know, before going out there, I was very much unaware of the constraints and the challenges within the industry. So that's something which I've been having to read up on more. So the context is wildly different. Like for example, here in the UK, you know, safety is taken for granted. When you go out to South Africa and you talk to farmers, crime and rural crime is a common constraint which many are dealing with.

[00:21:09] **Peter:** Colleta, is there anything which you can speak to here about the difficulties or challenges with the field work?

[00:21:18] **Colleta:** Yes, Peter, I think similar to your experience, the fact that it's an informal context, we also feel the same issue with positionality because sometimes questioning people doing research comes through or alongside somebody who's gatekeeping. So when respondents or participants see you approaching them based on the fact that you're coming from a university and so the perception that maybe they're being vetted or the checkman is here or we... Just depend where they are trading, they might think that it's some authority of some sort who's there.

[00:22:07] **Colleta:** So there's a lot of explaining and clarifying that has to go into the conversations that we are making, to clarify our position and the work that we are doing. But, really, I concur with you. For you, it might be a bigger challenge coming from a different context. But indeed, even for us South African researchers, it is still a challenge in the sense that we are coming from a university trying to... a context that is a bit different from our everyday life. So there's a lot of work that we have to do to have a meaningful conversation instead of people just telling you what they want you to hear. And that's coming with investing more time, spending more time with participants and trying to make them understand your position.

[00:23:09] **Colleta:** So maybe I can move on to talk about the outputs and next steps. So there are a few papers that we are working on. I think the main outputs that are going to come out of this are articles. Peter has already spoken about the other activities that we are doing, but really what we want to come out with is something that can speak to policy. So there will also be some policy briefs, advising policy on how they can include informal communities in policy.

[00:23:51] **Colleta:** And in terms of the next steps, we are preparing to go to the field and that is going to happen sometime this month, before the end of this year. And as I said, we are targeting about four provinces. And in those provinces, that's where we're going to come up with more insights and data that we're going to use to draft our outputs in the form of journal, peer-reviewed articles.

[00:24:21] **Colleta:** And, we are also looking forward to the webinars, that are coming up. And are also looking forward to our visit, to Leeds. It is interesting for us to see the different dimensions of informality, how it is defined in a different context from an African context. So we are looking forward to that. And, yeah, that's coming up next year. We are looking at July. We're trying to link our visit with some gathering or excursion, and Peter will look into that, so that we get exposed to as much informality in that context as possible.

[00:25:08] **Colleta:** Maybe Peter, you can add in terms of what other outputs and next steps we have.

[00:25:16] **Peter:** Yeah. Well, you, you summarised it very well but, yeah, we're currently working on a number of academic outputs with the data collected so far. So one of those is a teaching case study, which will be, it'll be published in an academic journal, but it will also be an instrument which can be used in the classroom too. So any enterprise, teachers out there teaching entrepreneurship cohorts can use this case study within the classroom setting. We're working on another two articles at the minute. And, as Colleta mentioned, you know, there's a value outside of the traditional academic article too.

[00:26:01] **Peter:** We're both very interested in connecting our research with, you know, real world relevance, the practical problems facing rural actors and linking it to policy, where relevant. Anything else to add, Colletta?

[00:26:22] **Colleta:** No. Actually, I've really enjoyed this, to reflect on the work that we are doing, and I'm looking forward to gaining some more knowledge about entrepreneurship at the margins. Thank you very much.

[00:26:36] **Peter:** Thank you for taking part in the podcast, Colleta. It was great chatting with you. Thank you everyone for listening to this episode, and if you're interested in finding out more about this project, the details are available in this episode's show notes.

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