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Building gender-aware ecosystems for growth: Women's entrepreneurial learning and leadership development.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine processes of entrepreneurial learning and leadership development (ELLD) for women involved in growth-oriented businesses. It considers how ELLD can be supported by building gender-aware ecosystems for growth.

Design/methodology/approach – Data are from a small-scale study of a growth accelerator program in Canada run by Alberta Women Entrepreneurs. The study uses a mixed-methods approach, drawing on interview, document, and observational data.

Findings – The study finds that three key activities— formal learning, informal learning, and peer / community support—are central to women entrepreneurs' learning and leadership development. In line with emerging scholarship, entrepreneurial learning is found to be strongly relational, with social capital play a central role in the formation of human capital.

Originality/value – This study contributes to our understanding of the micro-foundations of growth, the processes involved in ELLD and the importance of developing gender-aware ecosystems.

Keywords Women, Entrepreneurship, Growth, Entrepreneurial learning, Entrepreneurial Leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the past two decades, women have dramatically increased their participation in entrepreneurship in Canada and other high-income, innovation-driven economies. Yet, despite their growing presence in start-up and established businesses, research suggests that female-led businesses often lag male-led ventures on standard performance measures, such as profitability, or growth in revenue or employees (Hughes and Jennings 2015). This so-called 'performance gap' has sparked significant debate and important questions—not only about the extent of the gender performance gap, but about the barriers to and facilitators of growth, and how best to nurture and support women's engagement in growth-oriented business venturing. To date, research has explored various factors that appear to partly explain gender-based outcomes. These include growth aspirations, industrial location, and access to financing, to name a few (for reviews, see Jennings and Brush, 2013; for important critiques of the performance gap debate, see Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Watson and Robb, 2012).

Far less studied, however, but critically important, are questions about how women entrepreneurs develop the skills and knowledge needed to grow their businesses, and what types of supports aid their 'entrepreneurial learning and leadership development' (ELLD). Knowledge about these issues can greatly enhance our understanding of the dynamics of gender and business performance, and the 'micro-foundations' of business growth (Wright and Stigliano, 2013). Beyond contributing to this debate, such questions are also highly relevant to nascent work on the nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2011; Spigel, 2017) and the processes involved entrepreneurial learning and leadership development more generally (see Harrison and Leitch, 2018; Leitch and Volery, 2017).

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Our goal of this paper is to explore these issues, drawing on data from a small-scale, ongoing, study of a growth accelerator program for women entrepreneurs in Canada. Working between our empirical study, and scholarly writing on entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2011), and 'gender aware' approaches to entrepreneurship (Brush et al. 2009), we examine the following overarching question: *What processes are involved in entrepreneurial learning and leadership development (ELLD) for growth-oriented women entrepreneurs?* Using interview, document, and observational data the study excavates women's experiences of ELLD, as well as the entrepreneurial ecosystems as a gendered space (DeVault, 1999). The study highlights the importance of three activities—formal learning, informal learning, and peer / community support—and how they work together to support women's learning, leadership development, and growth aspirations.

Literature review

Blending insights from gender-aware and entrepreneurial ecosystem frameworks

Two theoretical perspectives are helpful for thinking about how women entrepreneurs experience the processes and challenges of business growth and entrepreneurial learning. The first—Brush et al.'s (2009) "5-M gender-aware" framework—is most central, as it provides a foundation for understanding the gendered patterns and dynamics within entrepreneurship, and more specifically in growth-oriented business venturing which is the focus of our study. Starting from established frameworks of entrepreneurship—which emphasize the 3Ms of markets, money, and management as the core building blocks of successful venturing—Brush et al. (2009) argue that such approaches fail to capture the

socially embedded nature of entrepreneurship, and the centrality of gender to entrepreneurial activity (see Hughes and Jennings, 2020 for a valuable overview).

Proposing a 5-M gender-aware framework as an alternative, they argue for consideration of two additional factors (or M's): i) the *family embeddedness* of business and the influence of family responsibilities and expectations on business venturing (captured under 'Motherhood'); and ii) the force of *cultural and social values* around gender as they operate both at the macro level (e.g. societal attitudes), as well as various institutions in the meso-environment (captured under Macro/Meso Institutions). This second facet is especially important in our study, as it includes "occupational networks, business associations, and the like" where learning often takes place (Brush, 2009: 9).

The 5M gender-aware framework offers a valuable foundation for understanding the challenges faced by growth-oriented women entrepreneurs, directing attention to gendered processes that either support, or constrain, business growth. To briefly illustrate, a wealth of studies show how family responsibilities shape women's entrepreneurial activity, at times leading them to reduce or limit their growth aspirations, and/or the time and resources they devote to business development (for discussions, see Jennings and McDougald, 2007; Brush et al., 2014; Leung, 2011; Loscocco and Bird, 2012). Similarly, macro-level, comparative, research highlights how sociocultural values and attitudes shape women's entrepreneurial intentions, practices, and opportunities for mentorship and success (Elam, 2008; Elam and Terjesen, 2010; Ettl and Welter, 2010). Finally, meso-level studies illustrate the critical role of social networks for building entrepreneurial capacity, and the ways in which gender, intersecting with other social identities (e.g. age, race, class) shapes

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access to networks and learning (Aldrich, 1989; Brush et al., 2009; Greve and Salaff, 2003; Leitch and Harrison, 2014; Ruef et al., 2003).

A second perspective that is helpful to our study is that "entrepreneurial ecosystems" (EE) (see Isenberg, 2010; 2011; Zacharakis et al., 2003; WEF, 2014; for critical discussions, see Spigel, 2017; Spigel and Harrison, 2018; Brown and Mason, 2017). Here we draw on Isenberg's (2011) typology which identifies distinct EE domains: i) cultures conducive to entrepreneurship; ii) enabling policies and leadership; iii) access to finance; iv) human capital; v) venture friendly markets; and vi) a range of institutional and infrastructural support[1] Isenberg's attention to human capital is highly relevant to our study; his model emphasizes the importance of the entrepreneur's *formal education and learning* opportunities (including general education, as well as specific entrepreneurial training and education); *informal learning processes and opportunities* (often occurring through entrepreneurial families, networks, and mentors); and the availability of *appropriately skilled and educated employees* to work in new ventures. In addition to Isenberg, the ideas of Spigel and Harrison (2018) are also helpful, arguing for the value of a process view of EEs that illuminates how learning unfolds in *relationships* between entrepreneurs.

Together the 5-M gender-aware and entrepreneurial ecosystem frameworks highlight several issues that are germane to our study. First, both approaches highlight the importance of understudied questions about whether and how women entrepreneurs are supported in their immediate environments—a point emphasized by Brush et al. (2009) in drawing attention to meso-level concerns, and by Spigel and Harrison (2018) in their emphasis on social relations and social networks as key sites for learning. Second, both

perspectives offer a critical reminder that ecosystems are not neutral landscapes, but socio-cultural arenas that reflect established discourses and stereotypical ideas about women and men's competence and potential as entrepreneurs (Balachandra et al. 2019; Malmstrom et al. 2017; Wynn and Correll, 2018).

Business performance and growth in women-led enterprise

Beyond these broad frameworks, our study is also informed by existing research on: i) gender, growth, and business performance; and ii) entrepreneurial learning and leadership development (we use the acronym ELLD to capture this body of work, as noted earlier). We offer a focused summary here to highlight key findings and unresolved questions (for more detailed overviews, see Hughes and Jennings, 2015).

   With respect to the first topic, there is an extensive body of research on gender, business growth, and the so-called performance gap between female and male entrepreneurs (for overviews see Jennings and Brush, 2013; for a valuable critical commentary, see Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Overall, many studies do find evidence of a gendered performance gap—whether measured by the size of male- and female-headed businesses (e.g. revenue, employees, assets), or by annual growth rates (see for example Du Rietz and Henrekson, 2000; Fairlie and Robb, 2009; Kalleberg and Leicht, 1991; Loscocco and Bird, 2012; Rosa et al., 1996; Powell and Eddleston, 2008). That said, a growing body of work also challenges ideas that women-led enterprise consistently underperforms, pointing to methodological issues as well as explanatory factors (e.g., Kalnins and Williams, 2014; Robb and Watson, 2012; Zolin et al., 2013). In reviewing this evidence, some commentators have concluded that women-led firms do appear to perform less well, on

average, with respect to revenues, employee size, assets, and growth (Jennings and Brush, 2013). Yet, others argue that constrained growth is a feature of most small business, not only those led by women, and that more robust and diverse measures of business performance (e.g. work satisfaction, work-family integration) highlight as many similarities as they do differences (Ahl, 2006; McAdam and Marlow, 2013).

Central to research on this topic are questions about the specific factors underlying gender differences in performance, where they are indeed observed. Here growth orientations and aspirations have received attention, with studies suggesting that women may hold more diverse, or hybrid, goals, or prefer to control growth in ways that allow them to mesh with their business, personal, and family goals (Ahl, 2006; Cliff, 1998; Morris, et al. 2006; Orser and Hogarth-Scott, 2002). Other studies consider the links between growth orientations and family responsibilities (Loscocco and Bird, 2012; Orser and Hogarth-Scott, 2002), national context (Brush, et al. 2006; Thebaud, 2015), and shifts in growth orientations over the life course (Davis and Shaver, 2012). A key take-away from this area of research is that there are indeed diverse approaches to growth. While some women entrepreneurs are 'growth resisters', or happy with modest levels of groups, there is also an expanding group of women entrepreneurs interested in high-growth enterprise (Hechavarria et al. 2019; Hughes, 2017; 2018). How they develop the knowledge and leadership skill needed for success is a critical question, and one that directly to the consideration of processes of learning in the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Isenberg, 2011).

Women, entrepreneurial learning, and ecosystems of support

A growing array of studies have shown how learning is an "integral part of the entrepreneurial process" (Ettl and Welter, 2010, p. 108-09), strongly shaping central activities such as opportunity recognition and exploitation (see also, Lumpkin and Lichtenstein, 2005; Harrison and Leitch, 2005; Wang and Chugh, 2014). Especially valuable for our own study, Ettl and Welter (2010) use the 5M gender-aware approach to explore how female entrepreneurs acquire business-related skills. Building on Johannisson (1991), they conceptualize learning as involving knowledge development in distinct spheres: i) 'know why' (e.g. understanding one's motivations and goals as a business owner); ii) 'know how' (e.g. developing operational, technical, strategic, and leadership skills); iii) 'know who' (e.g. creating diverse and rich networks of social capital); iv) 'know when' (e.g. developing insights on strategy, training and intuition); and v) 'know what' (e.g. having the ability to tap into expert knowledge as needed) (Ettl and Welter, 2010, p. 109).

In studying how women entrepreneurs learn, Ettl and Welter (2010) identify a number of barriers to learning, and gaps in requisite knowledge across the aforementioned spheres. These findings are echoed in a small number of other studies (Hisrich and Brush, 1984; Hughes, 2001; 2006). Illustrating these gaps, the annual *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)* finds that women entrepreneurs in a wide range of countries are less likely than men to report having the knowledge, skills and experience needed for success (Kelley et al., 2017). For instance, the *2016/17 GEM Women's Entrepreneurship Report* found that approximately two-thirds (65%) of male entrepreneurs in Canada and the U.S. felt they had the capabilities for success, compared to less than one-half (46%) of women. A similar

gender gap is evident in the 2016/17 GEM data for a number of high-income countries in Europe as well (Kelley et al. 2017).

Digging into these issues, Ettl and Welter (2010) note that women entrepreneurs not only report less confidence in their skills and abilities as business owners, but they also face significant challenges in accessing knowledge due to time and family constraints. They also face difficulty readily accessing the appropriate resources and supports as needed in their meso-environment (111). Thus, *informal learning*—such as learning by doing, and learning through networks of peers or family members involved in business—become important mechanisms through which female business owners acquire the knowledge they need at each step of their growth process. These findings are echoed in a handful of other studies (see Fleck et al., 2011; Brush et al. 2019).

Related research also highlights the crucial role of social networks in entrepreneurial learning, and in the process of building a successful business. For instance, Hoang et al. (2003) note that social networks provide access to critical intangible resources, including: i) information and advice; ii) emotional support; and iii) access to legitimacy and role models through association with others who have had success in a given field (Hoang et al., 2003; see also Gedajlovic et al. 2013; Orser and Elliot, 2015; Spigel and Harrison, 2018). Whether and how gender shaped social networks is an important and much debated issue. While some studies suggest women build less diverse networks, with a greater proportion of family and friends, patterns appear to vary by sector, national context, and business stage (see Leitch and Harrison, 2014; Hughes and Jennings, 2015; Neumeyer et al. 2018; McGowan et al. 2015; McAdam et al. 2019).[2] Others argue that differences in network density, types of ties and support may be more a function of business size and

stage, with gender differences disappearing by the established business stage (Klyver, 2011).

This latter research highlights the value of a process oriented approach that traces how entrepreneurs develop their networks and knowledge over time (Hoang et al., 2003; Leitch and Harrison, 2014). For instance, Leitch and Harrison's (2014) qualitative work on networks deepens knowledge about the generative aspects of social networks, showing how and why women entrepreneurs participate in networks, and how learning, support, and benefits flows between members. Paralleling these insights, Spigel and Harrison (2018) draw attention to the ways that entrepreneurial knowledge may be 'recycled' through the ecosystem, especially through successful established and serial entrepreneurs who are committed to mentoring emerging growth-oriented entrepreneurs.

Building on these existing studies, we now turn to discuss findings from an ongoing study that offers insights into ELLD.

Study details

Our study focuses on the AWE Peer Spark™ program created by Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE), a highly successful women's enterprise centre operating in Western Canada since 1995. Launched in 2012, AWE Peer Spark™ focuses on growth-oriented entrepreneurs who are seeking to expand an established business, offering a system of blended learning, leadership development, expert coaching, mentoring, and support (AWE, 2014b; AWE, 2019). The original impetus for Peer Spark™ was to fill gaps in the existing entrepreneurship ecosystem—in particular, an overemphasis on start-up vs. scale-up

support, and an absence of gender-aware programs where support for business growth did exist.

The Peer Spark™ programs provides a valuable research site for exploring ELLD, given its underlying goals and the opportunity to learn in real time from participants, program staff, and alumni. This is especially true given that Alberta has one of the highest rates of women's entrepreneurship in Canada, and amongst high-income countries (Hughes, 2018). In order to develop a rich, in-depth, analysis of the program, the study utilizes a mixed methods approach, drawing on multiple sources of data. This approach aligns with Brush et al.'s (2009) 5M gender-aware framework which emphasizes the value of moving away from purely quantitative approaches, to tap into interpretive, observational, and other forms of data.

In this paper, our analysis draws from the following data sources: i) documents from the AWE Peer Spark™ program, including administrative program materials and curriculum materials; ii) observations of program sessions and related events for one cohort of participants; iii) qualitative interviews with female entrepreneurs who participated in the program; and iv) qualitative interviews with AWE staff involved in either developing or facilitating the program. While the study is ongoing, analysis in the next sections focuses on interviews and observations in a specific time period from 2014-16. Due to the small size of this study, and promises to protect anonymity and confidentiality, we do not report detailed information about the participants, offering instead a profile of the businesses involved. In total, we draw on interview, survey and related data gathered from 13 business owners and 4 staff members involved in the Peer Spark program (e.g. founder, program leaders). The data was analyzed with qualitative coding software (NVivo) using thematic

coding and constant comparison techniques (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Given the very rich discussions in over 300 pages of interview transcripts, we use quotes selectively to illustrate the common themes and issues that emerge across the breadth of the interviews.

With respect to the businesses involved, all are incorporated, and engage in business-to-business (B2B) activities, as a requirement of the program. Of the 13 businesses involved in the 2014-16 cohort under study, the average age of the business is 11 years, with a range of 4 to 29 years. The vast majority of businesses were established by the current owner, alone or in partnership; a small number are family businesses where succession had occurred. With respect to industry, the businesses operate in a wide range of sectors, including construction and development; environment consulting; agribusiness; business marketing; health care; data management and IT services. Most businesses were located in urban centres, with just two in rural areas. In selecting participants for each cohort, AWE program staff worked to ensure that participants were not direct or potential competitors.

Drawing on the experiences of female business owners, and program leaders, we briefly discuss the philosophy and design of the Peer Spark™ program, before turning to explore our central interest in processes of ELLD.

Empirical findings

Philosophy and design of the AWE Peer Spark™ Program

The AWE Peer Spark™ Program builds on the strong knowledge and expertise of AWE, a publicly funded, not for profit organization, which since 1995 has played a leading role in supporting female-led business in the province. Historically AWE served women entrepreneurs in a variety of ways, offering entrepreneurial training, access to start-up and

expansion capital, business advice, and mentoring opportunities. While the original focus of AWE was on early-stage business, the success of many women entrepreneurs in the 2000s led it to begin exploring how it might better support growth-oriented business, in recognition of the more established nature of female enterprise in the province (AWE, 2014b).

Recognizing gaps in the ecosystem around growth and gender-aware programming, AWE developed a proprietary program aimed at supporting growth-oriented entrepreneurs through a peer-based learning network, that blended; i) high-quality *formal* and *informal* learning on key topics (e.g. strategy, leadership, financing); ii) leadership development; iii) mentoring from industry leaders and alumni; and iv) expert coaching from AWE program staff (AWE, 2014a; 2014b).

Describing how these pieces fit together, the program founder explained the philosophy of the program, emphasizing an intentional shift a transactional approach to one focused on community building and long-term relationships:

> The theme underlying our program is "We build the person, we build the business, and we build the community." So there's always those three pieces that are woven … So rather than having transactional things, where people come in and then leave, which is what the organization was when I started here, we have developed a place where, if we can create community, we can build on that and wrap that support to be really able to understand the business and what they need, really understand the entrepreneur and what they need, and really understand how we could leverage the community that we have of other entrepreneurs and other expertise … And I would say that's the most powerful, what we're seeing right now … is the community. It's the glue that holds it together. (Int 01)

Participation in the program was designed to be selective, based on a detailed application process.[1] A key part of the program involves team building, with each cohort developing

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[1] At the time of the study, to be eligible, participants needed to: i) be involved in selling business to business; ii) have been in business for a minimum of two years; iii) have a minimum of $250,000 in annual revenue; iv) have a minimum of two employees, including the owners; v) a clear desire to increase growth

agreements on how their group will run. Delivered over a 10-month period, the AWE Peer

Spark™ Program begins with a Nominee Reception for successful applicants, followed by

a two and a half day Opening Retreat held over a weekend in the Rocky Mountains where

participants meet one another and begin the process of learning together. During the

weekend, facilitated formal learning sessions are intertwined with team building exercises,

guided self-reflection, goal setting, and social activities. Individually, participants begin to

work on their own business and personal goals for the year ahead. As a group, they develop

a team charter and code of conduct to guides their activities during the program, with

respect to how the sessions run, how they deal with the confidentiality of their business

ideas, and conflicts of interest or other issues that may arise.

Following the retreat, participants attend an all-day session, once a month, that blends

formal learning on specific topics, with informal peer-to-peer learning where individuals

can share experiences and challenges with peers, AWE facilitators, and invited experts.

Curriculum and materials are specifically developed and tailored for each cohort. Monthly

sessions require a significant time commitment away from daily business activities.

Participants are expected to switch off from their day-to-day role, to work on the business,

rather than in the business, and to set goals, and review progress, for the business and

themselves, at each monthly session (AWE, 2019).

Other activities include participation in the annual AWE's Leadership Summit which

attracts entrepreneurs from around the province, as well as high profile keynote speakers.

There are also opportunities to participate in trade missions to the U.S. and other countries,

in conjunction with other provincial women's enterprise centres through the Government

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and profitability; and iv) a commitment to attending all of the key events and monthly meetings and to
learn from and share openly with others (AWE, 2014a; 2014d).

of Canada's Business Women in International Trade (BWIT) program. A final feature of the program is the ongoing involvement of alumni from the program, as well as mentors from AWE's broader network. While not every alumni is active, there is a strong network of support. This engagement is critical for developing an ecosystem that supports women's growth aspirations. Alumni continue to benefit from their connections with peers and the organization, while in turn providing role models and expertise to new participants. Speaking to the value of this feature, a program leader explained:

> We're creating this ecosystem where it's not just people that come in for the one year program, there's also this alumni network that is around them, that become mentors, and role models. And our experts and service providers are part of the broader community as well. So we've got really incredible engagement from them … they really believe in it … So the community is really, really strong … (Int 04)

Entrepreneurial learning and leadership development

How do processes of entrepreneurial learning and leadership development unfold in the AWE Peer Spark™ program? Based on interviews with participants, alumni, and program leaders, three key elements of the program stood out as especially important: i) formal learning opportunities; ii) informal learning; and iii) and peer /community support. Though each element played a key role independently, they also interacted in important ways, highlighting the relational nature of learning, and the importance of social capital for human capital formation. We discuss each of these components in turn.

Formal learning. Though many participants spoke of the difficulty of clearing their schedule for the monthly sessions, they highly valued the opportunity for *formal learning*. Overall, there was very strong agreement that the program delivered high quality information that business owners could readily use and apply. Most valuable, and frequently mentioned, was the knowledge and tools related to leadership, strategic

management/planning, and financing. Program leaders were aware of, and discussed at length, the need to strike the right balance with formal versus informal learning. As one explained, their goal was really to "build an environment for learning", which provided high quality information but did not involve "curriculum overload" (Int 04). With this in mind, AWE staff worked hard to ensure that the formal learning components, such as readings and lectures, were focused, relevant, and applied. Said another member of AWE: "It's not an MBA. What we're doing is giving them an Executive Education in entrepreneurship, and the critical tools that will help their business … So it has to be very accessible." (Int 02)

In interviews, and written evaluations of the program, participants assessed this feature strongly, discussing the formal learning components in very positive terms. Speaking to this, one participant compared the program with past experiences in other programs that she had found to be "highly abstract and conceptual, not grounded in my situation" (Int 05). Equally important, she noted, was the ability to access information in a timely manner: "I need someone to help me with the problems I am having, now!". (Int 05).

Beyond building their knowledge about essential topics, such as leadership or strategic planning, the formal learning component also played an important temporal function, creating a pause, or boundary, in the constant whirlwind of activity and demands that many women faced each day. Overwhelmingly, participants spoke about the value of having this structured time to step away from the business, to analyze what was happening, and to reflect on successes and challenges, and what next steps they needed to prioritize. Said one business owner: "It's so easy to get caught in …what's the next thing, what's the next fire, without taking time to stop and say: 'What already happened? Why did that happen? Would

I change anything?" (Int 06). Beyond the temporal break to engage in reflection and assess their options, participants spoke positively about how they were able to apply fairly readily what they had discussed and learned in the formal sessions to current problems or challenges in their business. Said one, in discussing how her day-to-day work had benefited from the formal learning:

> Leadership has been one of my biggest areas of development … For me, when I first joined the program, I thought of myself as a business person, not a leader. So it made me realize that I am a leader, and I have to be a leader. And they had really good sessions about leadership. So the tools and sessions helped us understand leadership, what is really involves, and how to adjust our behaviors, how to lead and coach our staff. So for me, that was huge … (Int 07)

Informal learning. Beyond the formal learning sessions, however, a second, and far more important, feature of the program was the *informal learning* that took place, especially between peers. This was central to the program's philosophy of building relationships and community, and highlights the relational nature of learning that has been noted by other researchers discussed in earlier sections of our paper. Speaking to this, one of the program leaders explained: "What is the most important? The social coming together … Being with people who are 'like you'" (Int 04). In her view, the informal learning process allowed women to take the formal content, apply it to their own and other's experiences and challenges, and brainstorm and learn together. Explaining how the *formal and informal learning* reinforced each other for participants in the program, she remarked:

> They get to be part of this network that is people that they feel energized by. So that's a big piece. And we keep saying as we build up the program "We need to cover the basics, absolutely, and make sure that we give them tangible tools to take back to their business." But what is most important is to have the time to discuss and reflect on how they've incorporated those ideas into their business and what the impact has been. (Int 04)

In their interviews, program participants repeatedly emphasized that the informal learning was one of the most valuable features of the program. Describing how the sessions operated, one participant explained: "We start the session out with what's going on for everyone, what's happened since we were last together. And part of that is other people have suggestions and ideas for you. I've gotten lots of things to try from that". (Int 05) Said another: "The content they provide in the actual sessions has been very helpful. But honestly [it's] the peer learning and support"(Int 10). Women talked about many benefits that flowed from the informal learning, including information exchange, new ideas, as well as being around others who understood the challenges they faced. Women not only appreciated learning from others, but enjoyed sharing their own knowledge and experience, and the sense of identity and accomplishment as a leader which this gave them in turn. As one business owner elaborated:

> Just the access to other women who, again it's knowing that you're not alone and that other people go through the same struggles as you. And I think even having the opportunity to share your experience with someone else who is having a struggle can be empowering as well, because being able to both give and receive information and mentorship is really helpful. (Int 06)

For many participants, being part of a women-only network was also an important feature of the informal learning process, shaping both the style of learning and the topics that were discussed, in their view. Said one participant who worked in a very male-dominant industry where she was typically the only women, or one of few, at most events:

> When you talk to men, they want to fix it for you, right? Whereas when you get into a group full of women, they say: "Well, I had a similar situation. It's not the exact same situation, but this is what I did ..." And that sort of thing. So you're not feeling like someone is cramming a solution down your throat. They're just giving you some ideas and resources. (Int 05)

Another participant who belonged to several different entrepreneurial networks, talked at length about how she particularly valued the gender-aware nature of the program, as she felt women typically faced unique challenges as entrepreneurs, that she did not see her male peers experiencing. Reflecting ideas about a gendered ecosystem, she remarked:

> Women face challenges that men don't. Men perhaps do too, you know we're different. But dealing with sexism and having a family, all of those pieces that women have to deal with … And women are perhaps more willing to share some things. So one of the things I noticed about the difference in the AWE program [from other programs] is that the other programs are very outward focused, very technical almost, here is what you do …. Whereas AWE tends to be very inward focused, so you tend to be focusing more on yourself as a leader and yourself in the business and how the decisions you make, impact it. And your own leadership. So I found that kind of self-reflection, done together among women, to be very impactful. (Int 06)

Echoing the value of the information sharing and self-reflection that took place in Peer Spark™, another participant noted how this was missing from another industry network that she was part of: *"*No, no one really shares information [in the other network] … I mean you guard what you have with your life. So, yes, I have contacts in my industry, but no, no, these types of issues would just not be discussed". (Int 11)

Peer / Community Support. A final feature of the program that participants valued was the peer and community support, noting the sense of camaraderie, and emotional boost they received from their growing network and the wider AWE community. Connecting with their peers in the program not only helped them expand their relevant knowledge and skills, it also offered numerous psychosocial benefits, reducing their feelings of isolation and self-doubt, and boosting their sense engagement as entrepreneurial leaders. This sense of community was something women deeply valued; indeed, several discussed how their desire to connect with other female leaders had been an important

motivation for them in joining program initially alongside their interest in learning more about how to grow and expand their business:

> For me starting the program was about being around peers. I wanted to be around other entrepreneurs because I didn't have a network … So, before the program, my network was family and friends. None of them were in business … So there was nobody around me that could even remotely relate to anything I was thinking or doing or going through. (Int 07)

> I didn't have anyone to talk to … My best friend's in [another sector] … totally different thing from what I do. Another friend is a stay-at-home Mom … So I went in to this hoping to find people in a similar kind of situation. (Int 11)

In discussing peer and community support, many women also reflected on how the relationships they had developed in their immediate cohort, and beyond through alumni and other AWE community members, had boosted their sense of confidence and self-efficacy as an entrepreneur. Reflecting on how she had weathered some daunting business and financial challenges as she scaled her business, one participant discussed how having "very vocal cheerleaders" had made the world of difference in "surviving" the difficult, and often novel, situations that are part and parcel of day-to-day life in an entrepreneurial venture:

> In business when you have no friends in business, and you're having these new but normal business problems, without knowing other people who may be in different areas but also in business, you don't realize these are common problems that everyone has! So your confidence takes a hit in terms of you know "How dumb am I that I can't figure this out?" or "What's wrong with us that we're having this problem?" So realizing that pretty much everyone who is in business is in the same boat gives you confidence that you're not a total idiot, you're doing okay. (Int 12)

AWE staff also noted that being with peers like themselves seemed to help women entrepreneurs enormously in sustaining their dreams and commitment to growth, especially when faced with competing demands or those who questioned what they were trying to accomplish. Said one:

A lot of participants will talk about how they've got family and friends and they live differently, and wear different hats, right? Many of them have children, and they're part of a family, so they have social networks that are related to the different roles that they have. But their entrepreneurial social network doesn't embed in those … and a lot of times that's where the opposition or the question of "Why do you do this?", or those kinds of things that lead to some of that self-doubt comes in … (Int 02)

While participants valued the peer and community support they had developed through the program, many had also developed stronger ties in their network with a smaller subset of members. For example, one woman had developed a close friendship with another business owner, who she had never met before, but whose business was nearby. While their businesses were very different, they found they had a great deal in common, and were often in touch by phone or email, and grabbed lunch together when they could: "We go for lunch down the road and we talk about the session, and our lives and that sort of thing. And if there is something in a session that we are using, or thinking about, we say, you know, this is how I interpreted this, what about you?" (Int 05)

Another participant discussed how she had developed strong friendships with several people in her cohort, and would meet them outside of regular sessions, for breakfast or drinks after dinner. In addition, her network was expanding into the broader ecosystem, through these deepening social ties: "So now I've met a few people, we've hit it off, and we continually keep in touch and see each other, and make time to see each other. But then I find that my network is also expanding through their networks as well". (Int 07)

A final observation concerned how these relationships had deepened over time, through shared experiences and the development of trust. Reflecting on her experience, one business owner remarked: "The experience is getting deeper and deeper, if that makes sense. The learning has sort of meshed and gelled a lot more …We learn a lot from each

other and help each other … This is the first time I've seen something like this … We've always got this network we can tap into" (Int 14)

Discussion and conclusion

Our goal in this paper has been to contribute to current understandings of the processes of ELLD, and questions of how best to support women entrepreneurs in building strong, viable, growth-oriented businesses. Blending insights from gender-aware framework proposed by Brush et al. (2009), and writings on entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2011), we examine women's experiences of participating in a growth accelerator program, Peer Spark™, run by Alberta Women Entrepreneurs in Western Canada. Drawing on interview, document, and observational data, our analysis documents the philosophy and design of the Peer Spark™ program, the learning process within the program, and the aspects of the program that participants and program leaders evaluate as being especially helpful for ELLD and business growth.

Guided by a three-fold purpose of "developing the person, the business and the community", the AWE Peer Spark™ program generated positive outcomes for female business owners during the period of study (2014-16), by helping them develop their business knowledge and competencies, their leadership ability and confidence, and their social networks. In reflecting on the process of ELLD, participants highlighted the importance of three interrelated facets: *formal learning, informal learning, and peer / community support.* The first facet, *formal learning,* played a key role, offering valuable tools and knowledge, in a timely and accessible way, and setting up physical and temporal boundaries that helped women entrepreneurs remove themselves from the busyness of

everyday entrepreneurial life to work on the long-term vision for their business, rather than the day to day details. A second facet, *informal learning* was valued even more, giving participants an opportunity to share experiences, brainstorm ideas, and learn from others like themselves, who understood the daily challenges of trying to build and growth a business. Finally, the development of *peer and community support* not only helped participants in expanding their relevant knowledge and skills, but also provided crucial psychosocial support—reducing their sense of isolation and boosting their confidence and engagement as entrepreneurial leaders.

Overall, our study highlights the importance of ELLD for business growth, and the ways in which *formal learning, informal learning,* and *peer and community support* can be brought together effectively to support women's growth aspirations. Specifically, it contributes to research and practice in several ways. First, our study illustrates the central role of social capital —or "know who" (Ettl an Welter, 2010)—for entrepreneurial learning, and the reinforcing dynamic between the development of human capital and social capital. Here our findings align strongly with Leitch et al. (2013), and others, who argue that human capital development for entrepreneurs is not simply facilitated by, but essentially dependent upon, the expansion of social capital—with peer-to-peer interaction, trust building, and opportunities for informal exchange playing a key role. Second, our findings buttress insights from Orser and Elliot (2015), and others, concerning the psychosocial benefits that flow to women entrepreneurs through peer and community networks. Relatedly, the study highlights how positive triggers and relationships support higher-level entrepreneurial learning (Ettl and Welter, 2010). Finally, our study offers further evidence of how ecosystems can be intelligently designed (Isenberg, 2010), and the

critical value of a gender-aware approach in supporting the aspirations of women entrepreneurs who are pursuing business growth.

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[1] In a similar, though somewhat different, conceptualization, the World Economic Forum's 2014 report—*Entrepreneurial ecosystems around the world and company growth—*highlights 8 pillars of entrepreneurial ecosystems, including: i) accessible markets; ii) human capital; iii) financial capital; iv) social support systems and mentoring; v) government and regulatory frameworks; vi) education and training; vii) major universities at catalysts; and viii) cultural support (WEF, 2014).

[2] As one indicator of gender differences, the *GEM Women's Report* shows that women are much less likely than men to know, or have a personal or professional connection to other entrepreneurs (Kelley et al., 2012; Kelley et al., 2017).