

Entrepreneurial Sensemaking: An Examination of Socially Situated Cognitive Mechanisms

By

Dr. Gohar Saleem

Assistant Professor, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar Pakistan

Dr. Muhammad Nouman (corresponding author)

Associate Professor, Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar Pakistan

Dr. Lin Xiong

Lecturer, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University Aberdeen Scotland

Abstract

This paper focuses on entrepreneurial sensemaking with an emphasis on cognitive mechanisms utilized by entrepreneurs during business opportunity development. More specifically the focus is to find out how an individual entrepreneur may assign meaning to important cues derived from innumerable unending events, interpret these cues and then take actions as per interpretations of these cues and events. These cues can be cognitively conceptualized as drivers and barriers through which the entrepreneur makes sense of his or her enterprise and the opportunities it may offer. Using a narrative case study approach this paper relies on inductive reasoning of a single female entrepreneur. A three-tiered and six-dimensional framework of entrepreneurial sensemaking has been presented. The cognitive mechanisms employed by the entrepreneur were presented in the form of cues, events and their interpretations by the entrepreneur resulting in a unique perspective on sensemaking. This paper is particularly useful because even though the use of sensemaking in entrepreneurship research has been well-recognized there is a general lack of empirical work on how an entrepreneur uses socially situated cognitive mechanisms to proceed further in terms of offering a better understanding of his or her new enterprise to others within any social or cultural setting.

Key Words: Sensemaking; Entrepreneurial Sensemaking; Cognitive Mechanisms; Cues; Events

1. Introduction:

Sensemaking has been conceptualized as a process that can be used by individuals to assign new frameworks to unanticipated and distinctive environmental signals, provide meaning to these in order to interact with others and accordingly undertake actions (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2017; Heinze, 2014; Weick, Sutcliff and Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking may also help entrepreneurs

assign meaning to important cues derived from innumerable unending events, interpret these cues and then take actions as per interpretations of these cues and events (Weick, 1995). Another way to consider sensemaking that it is a process to generate new meanings and interpretations for events that may have already occurred but have yet to be assigned any name or meaning due to their unexpected, unfamiliar and unique nature (Weick, 2001). According to Weick (2001), sensemaking is a social, reflective and continuous activity. A number of factors may influence it include identity, cues and plausibility. It is usually initiated when a current situation faced by an individual is so different from the anticipated scenario that an individual may even be forced to interrupt or cease all activities and ask about what is going on and what needs to be done. Weick introduced the concept of sensemaking as an organizational science that can be helpful for organizations to deal with changes that are continuously happening around them and assign meanings to unfamiliar events and enable themselves to survive and continue with or sustain ongoing activities and processes within existing systems. Since its inception sensemaking has become a key research topic within various disciplines including the field of entrepreneurship that is characterized by uncertainty and unexpectedness. It is pertinent to point out that sensemaking may not only enables entrepreneurial firms to improve their performance, but also individual entrepreneurs need to make sense of the various dimensions of their businesses and the environments or contexts within which these businesses are operating. More specifically it is the uncertainty in entrepreneurial settings alluded to earlier that increases the significance of sensemaking for entrepreneurs many of whom are struggling for survival. Many scholars have emphasized the crucial role of sensemaking in relation to various dimensions of entrepreneurship. Sensemaking and sensegiving (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995), entrepreneurial narratives to acquire resources (Lousbury & Glynn, 2001), entrepreneurial stories (Gartner, 2007), discovery of patterns (Baron and Ensley, 2006), creation of opportunities (Alvarez and Barney, 2007) and entrepreneurial failures (Shepherd, 2009) are some of key research areas where the role of sensemaking has been examined directly or indirectly in reference to entrepreneurship. Though the growing bulk of researches regarding entrepreneurial sensemaking seems satisfying, there seems to be some negligence about its importance in a few entrepreneurial related topics, for example, sensemaking capability could hinder entrepreneurial failure, but the role of sensemaking after failure has been given more attention from scholars, on the other hand, lack of sensemaking could deprive entrepreneurs of discovering lucrative

opportunities, making necessary changes in the right span of time and could even lead to final collapse of the enterprise.

Taking influence from the above-mentioned key dimensions of entrepreneurial sensemaking this paper attempts to provide support to its theoretical dimensions with empirical evidence. In particular we aim to demonstrate how an individual entrepreneur gives meanings to salient cues taken from innumerable and continuing events, interpret these cues and take actions as per the interpretations of these cues and events. These cues can be cognitively conceptualized as drivers and barriers through which the entrepreneur makes sense of his or her enterprise. To further elaborate we focus on the socially situated cognitive mechanisms influencing the entrepreneur. More specifically a single narrative case study methodology has been followed to present the sensemaking offered by a female entrepreneur from Peshawar, Pakistan in terms of setting the stage, organizational background, issues and challenges and drivers and barriers interpreted cognitively by the entrepreneur. This paper is particularly useful because even though the use of sensemaking in entrepreneurship research has been well-recognized there is a general lack of empirical work on how an entrepreneur uses socially situated cognitive mechanisms (Jones & Li, 2017); to proceed further in terms of offering a better understanding of his or her new enterprise within any social or cultural and social setting (Attfield et al., 2015)..

2. Review of Literature:

In order to link the individual entrepreneur with his or her social context, sensemaking (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Weick, 1995) has remained a strong paradigm. Taking influence from entrepreneurship and its principles and practices Hill and Levenhagen (1995: 1057) state that entrepreneurs “operate at the edge of what they do not know”. Therefore it is imperative for them to convert the ambiguous events happening around them into unambiguous ones by building a certain perspective about their business that is relatively clear (Alvarez & Barney, 2007). It is also equally important for early-stage entrepreneurs to communicate with people around them regarding their vision for the enterprise and acquire their feedback and support (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Consequently, such visions and opportunities that they suggest or interpret may be perceived consciously or felt unconsciously but that are usually articulated verbally (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995).

Therefore, this paper takes influence from Hill and Levenhagen's (1995) approach that such influential effects of the entrepreneur's language on his or her thought process (e.g. Langacker, 1991) need to be taken up and conceptualized in the context of the whole process of entrepreneurship and new venture creation. While the innermost thoughts and imaginations of entrepreneurs may be important, they may not be expressed explicitly through words. And while this may not have happened, something else takes place in the mind of the entrepreneur and that is what we can call sensemaking. Structurally sensemaking can happen at a point where the new ideas in the form of words take shape within the realm of the entrepreneur's experiences while external speech may influence the need to fulfill the demands of spoken or common language understandable to everyone. Sensemaking, therefore, is an act of turning situations into more comprehensive scenarios through explicit use of words and that guide further action (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking entails that the world around us may not offer us meaning in a raw form. Rather, it is the entrepreneurs who actively seek to construct it using language and the frameworks it offers including a pre-determined use of vocabularies (Weber, 2005) to elaborate on seemingly vague objects and scenarios. Even though sensemaking has often been considered as reflective of past events (e.g., Weick et al., 2005), it may be used to develop a picture of the future in the context of a new enterprise and generate meaning for future opportunities (Gioia & Mehra, 1996). Entrepreneurs may therefore connect words in a creative manner through the use of analogies and metaphors as they speak. This can pave the way for them to imagine future scenarios for opportunities and help present these opportunities to others around them as well (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Sensemaking is also a dynamic process, with the social context of speaking and interactions with others affecting the construction of meaning about a new venture (Alvarez & Barney, 2007; Slobin, 1987).

Using tacit and a socially constructed sense, entrepreneurs attempt to deal with the uncertainties associated with their venture (Weick, 1995). Humans have a natural tendency to react or respond to stimuli associated with uncertainty by arranging information in a certain order and make sense of their environment (Dervin, 2008; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Pitch, Loch and Meyer (2002) argue that sensemaking is one of the most logical and expected response to

how an individual may deal with uncertainty. The cycles of iteration and retrospective interpretation may help an entrepreneur generate a metastable reality of things; something that is more stable yet continues to evolve or change in light of any emerging situations (Weick, 1995; Dervin, 1992).

It can be argued that sensemaking is essential for our lives especially in order to generate order from within situations that are previously unknown to us or carry significant amounts of ambiguity (Foreman-Wernet, 2003; Weick, 1995). These undefined situations push all of us to make inferences that is collecting, linking and sequencing scattered pieces of information or data (Sacks, 2006). When an entrepreneur can make sense of things, it becomes more possible or rather easy for him to deal with the environment around him (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2012; Dervin & Naumer, 2009; Dervin, 1992).

It is pertinent to point out that sensemaking is not only individual-driven. Rather, as complex situations arise individuals can come together to derive collective and plausible meaning of their shared knowledge and experiences that is mutually understandable (Maitlis, 2005; Dervin, 1992). However, to complicate things such multi-directional communication characterized by reflecting, interpreting and making sense of things leads to actions that are never linear. False and backward steps, mistakes, intersecting and conflicting opinions can formulate resulting in a sometimes messy process of reinterpretation, communication and action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). What is certain though is that sensemaking process never stops (Devin & Foreman-Wernet, 2012). The inferential reconstruction of pieces of interpretations and making sense out of complex situations based on such non-linear social constructions bears two characteristics. The whole process is uncertain and spiraled and it is social to its core meaning the entrepreneur does not innovate on his own (Alter, 2013). The concept of sensemaking has usually been linked with the work of Karl E. Weick, on organizations; and Brenda Dervin, on information science. Nonetheless, it is not limited to these domains only. For example the mechanisms at play behind sensemaking have also been applied to other scenarios investigating collective or specific events and incidents. Some of the examples include school failure (Walls, 2017); information processing (Zhang & Duohai, 2014); integration of technology in an organization (Kitzmiller et al., 2010); repatriation (Kelly & Morley, 2011), decision-making (Choo, 2002); hierarchal

restructuring (Bologun & Johnson, 2004); organizational crises (Gephart, 1997); e-learning implementation at schools (Sabino de Freitas & Bandeira-de-Melho, 2012) and even military analysis (Attfield et al., 2015). The field of innovation is no exception either, and there have been studies of sensemaking in temporary organizations; (Feldbrugge, 2014); and other industries (Sneddon, 2008). Moreover, the literature relating entrepreneurship and sensemaking has grown considerably, focusing on decision-making by entrepreneurs (Nouri & Kafeshani, 2014); management of business failures and crisis in the innovation process (Lyon, 2017; Heinze, 2014); the identification of new opportunities (Hoyte, 2015); family startups (Jones & Li, 2017); and the use of inductive thought in entrepreneurship (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2017). The field of entrepreneurship and innovation is no exception. However, there is a dire need to elaborate on sensemaking for entrepreneurs who operate in extremely peculiar circumstances and cultures in developing country contexts. This becomes a further point of significant interest when the entrepreneur is a woman who is likely to be facing challenges and uncertainties of a different nature. Consequently, there is a need to know how sensemaking manifests itself in the case of an individual female entrepreneur and whether this can be elaborated upon by developing a framework of the sensemaking pattern through cognitive mechanisms.

3. Research Methodology:

This research is influenced by a qualitative approach. More specifically, narrative case study approach that relies on the principle of induction has been taken up. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) opine that there are three methodological stances regarding a narrative-based case study approach. They are supported by Elliott, (2005) as well. These include the socio-cultural, the naturalist and the literary. While the socio-cultural focuses on the broad cultural narratives and the naturalist emphasizes on offering rich descriptions of people's stories, it is the literary approach that has influenced this research. This is primarily because it focuses on describing thoughts and experiences of a person by focusing on analogies and metaphors (McAlpine, 2016; Hopwood & Paulson, 2012). Consequently the single case of the female entrepreneur has been narratively presented after completing the three key steps of the research design; (a) collection and conception of data through a use of detailed interviews (semi-structured followed by structured) of the entrepreneur, transcription, use of flip charts and vignettes, (b) data analysis deriving from Riessman's (2008) approach of deriving results from the case and not just focusing

on prior themes from literature and (c) data reporting in the form of a story derived from Holley and Colyar (2009) whereby cognitive mechanisms of the entrepreneur have been presented across three-dimensional perspective of entrepreneurial sensemaking including (1) setting the stage (2) organizational background and (3) drivers and barriers faced by the entrepreneur.

4. Entrepreneurial Sensemaking and Cognitive Mechanisms:

4.1. Setting the Stage – Events, Cues and Interpretations

Weekend Festivities was an idea that emerged in 2014 and is now an online business. It offers a variety of fresh and aromatic food items on weekends only. Specialties of Weekend Festivities include cakes, cookies, pizzas, lasagna, casseroles and much more. Ms. Seema Kanwal Khan, a lecturer of marketing at a well known public sector university of the province, owns and runs the business. Ms. Khan was born into a very traditional Pukhtun family in 1989. Her father died when she was only six years old. Ms. Khan credits her mother who went through every thick and thin to educate her. She was a topper and a position holder in her school. The entrepreneur has always been interested in the field of baking. Due to social pressures, she could not grab a degree in the relevant field and so got a degree in management sciences. Ms. Khan states that the elders in her society forced her to opt for medical as according to them she was an intelligent student and smart students do not opt for subjects like arts. Ms. Khan had always been interested in painting and baking but her elders never allowed her to opt for these fields. Such pressure intensifies when a girl does not have her father by her side. Ms Khan still credits her mother for what she is today. She is now a PhD scholar in the field of marketing.

Miss Seema Kanwal has been working as a lecturer at a women university for the last few years. The idea for Weekend Festivities came from the fact that she has always been passionate about baking and art. She believes on passion and when one is passionate about something then nothing can stop them. Although she had a tough work schedule but still she tried to manage her time to work for her passion throughout the week as much as she could. The idea behind naming her venture “Weekend Festivities” was because she didn’t use to get enough time to enjoy her passion and love for baking fully on the working days. So she decided to serve her customers on weekends only. That’s what makes it Weekend Festivities. Moving through thick and thin of life,

she managed to invest time in her interest. Today she has achieved her dream after endless efforts and huge support from her family and friends.

Being a lecturer at Women University, Ms. Khan found a severe lack of confidence in the young girls at campus. They had no communication and presentation skills and no exposure to the outer world. They only used to come to university and then go home. There was not anything new in their life. Ms. Khan was part of CATD and she was the event organizer at her department. Seeing the situation of the young girls in her university forced her to do something for them. So she started conducting workshop and trainings like girls Leadership Conference (GLC), Soft Skills Development Programs (SSDP) and Training of the Young Trainer (TOYT) etc. Such workshops and trainings helped those young minds, grow, develop and prosper with time. Miss Khan believes that there are some loopholes in her society that does not allow females to work with complete freedom but she still believes in her society that it will change and is changing. She believes that now people are getting educated and the trends are changing rapidly. Despite the loopholes Ms. Khan still believes that it's safe for a women entrepreneur to work in this society if she is passionate and strong. Looking at the new emerging entrepreneurial trends, she believes that the passion in the youth is unstoppable now.

4.2. Organizational Background – Events, Cues and Interpretations:

The idea of serving on weekends only was the influence of her academic job. The business started to suffer back in November 2015 when the entrepreneur's only parent, her mother fell seriously ill. Her family support helped her to rise above all the fears and hardships of life. Her only motivation that is her mother, recovered from illness in a period of one year and this was the flourishing period of the business. She started giving her 100 percent to the business and things started to work better. She worked hard to retain her customers whom she had lost during the mentioned period. Meeting market demand and competition had become a challenging phase for her.

Moreover, profit had never been purpose of the venture instead the entrepreneurial motivation and interest started the business. Earnings of the business have been donated to the needy including social organizations from the very start. Working for the welfare and development of society was the hope behind this social entrepreneurship. Despite her academic activities, she is

working as a volunteer and social activist with organizations like CATD and IHelp. CATD- Centre for Awareness, Training and Development is a training and consultancy based organization working as an emerging force to develop young minds in all the sectors of the country through training and making awareness and learning available to everyone, everywhere while IHelp works to empower community individuals to ensure their meaningful participation in the mainstream without any discrimination for gender, religion or class and creating a culture of acceptability, equality and harmony.

Being a person from academia and a social activist, she has faced lack of support from local people, Higher Education Commission and academic policy makers as she always worked hard to mention Training and Development as an equally important domain as Research and Development in the academic sector of the country and bring a paradigm shift in the society for social welfare. Moreover, the online businesses need government support in gaining credibility and consumer trust as she believes that by supporting such small and enthusiastic business and social startups, we can lead to a better Pakistan.

4.3. Issues and Challenges (Drivers/Barriers) – Events, Cues and Interpretations

From Miss Khan's perspective, she faced following managerial issues.

- Sometimes she gets prank calls, fake orders which really affect her work. As a good entrepreneur she deals with every customer in the best way possible. It's hard for her to decide through a call if it's a regular order or a prank call. This issue creates problems for her and the regular customers also suffer.
- Sometimes she faces issues with the delivery services available in the city. Miss Khan does not provide her own delivery service rather she utilizes the services of other delivery service providers in the city. Sometimes the riders come late or deliver the product late which creates a negative perception of her business. In today's world timely service is required by customers as everyone is busy.
- Miss Khan's mother health is also a challenge for her. Her mother has not been well in the recent years and that usually demands time. Miss Khan prefers her mother over all. So mostly she spends time taking care of her besides managing her job and business. This is a real challenge but Miss Khan never minds it.

- Another issue is managing her job and business together. She is working as a full time lecturer at a women university. Her job is the reason that she cannot work for her passion, her business except on weekends. Her job also means a lot to her so she cannot leave either one. Rather she tries to manage both together which is hard.

Miss Khan attempts further senemaking regarding her enterprise through three drivers and two barriers. The drivers include:

a. *Personal traits*

Miss Khan is an ambitious, passionate, courageous aspiring woman. Her father died when she was only six years old. Living in a patriarchal culture with no father is really hard for a woman but MissKhan managed to get along just fine. She completed her education with really good grades. In the start she faced issues from the elders of her family for following her passion and dreams but she never gave up. Once she started working independently she resumed working on her passion and started her venture “Weekend Festivities”.

b. *Support from friends and family*

Family support plays an instrumental role in the success of women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. Miss Khan was fortunate in this aspect that her immediate family, her mother was very supportive of her and she always credits her for her success. Miss Khan did face some resistance from family elders while deciding for what she wants to do in college but she still managed to work for her passions. At the time she could not disobey them because Miss Khan lives in a typical patriarchal culture where a father decides for their children’s future and if the father is not available then the next male elder of the family is responsible for making all the decisions. Suchculture makes it hard for a woman to do what she desires.

c. *Collaboration with the NGO sector*

Miss Khan constantly collaborates with the NGO sector working in her area. She mostly shares her earnings with them in order to help the needy. She also collaborates with them and arranges workshops and trainings for women who need help inside and outside her university.

Additionally the two barrier include;

d. *Managing Job and Business*

Miss Khan is managing her job and business together. Due to her full time job she only works on the weekends. Her full time job as a lecturer limits her, thus leaves her less time for her business. Sometimes work load at job can also result in untimely deliveries ultimately affecting her reputation.

e. *Lack of Organizational Support*

Being a person from academia and a social activist, she has faced lack of support from local people and academic policy makers as she always worked hard to mention Training and Development as an equally important domain as Research and Development in the academic sector of the country and bring a paradigm shift in the society for social welfare. She urges academic regulators to work for this issue and show their support in practical ways possible.

5. Discussions and Conclusions:

Our findings from the paper result in a three-tiered and six dimensional framework of entrepreneurial sensemaking presented below;

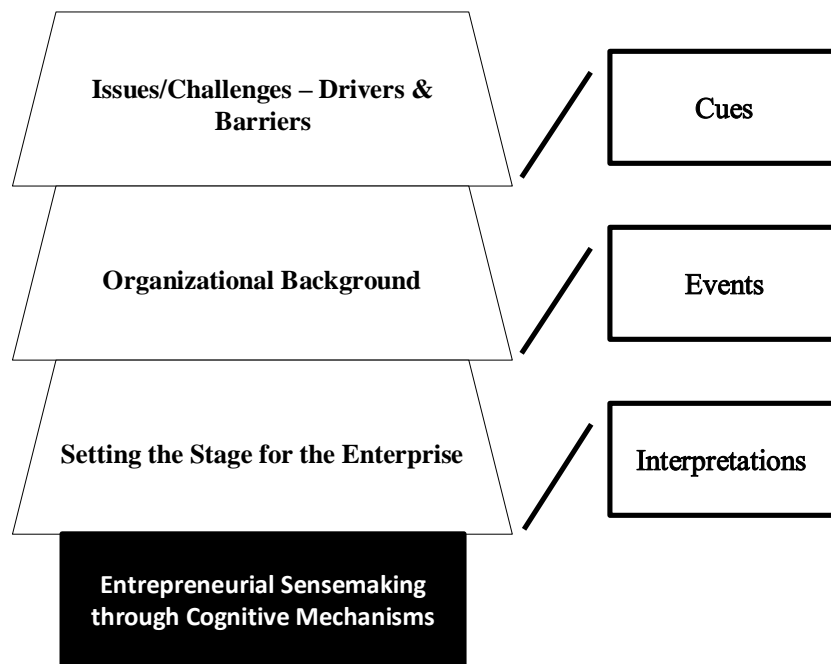


Figure 1: A Frameworking of Entrepreneurial Sensemaking

The entrepreneur's interpretations of the cues within the first tier of setting the stage included the financial and social pressures that the entrepreneur experienced including family expectation and being a woman whose father has died at an early age and whose mother has experienced significant hardships. Another cue was the hobby of baking. Further the entrepreneur's interpretations of events identified at this tier level were getting a job as a lecturer in a women's university resulting in confidence and passion for work including converting the hobby into a business, observing a limited sense of confidence and independence yet a passion to do something on their own amongst female students and organizing events within the university.

The entrepreneur's interpretations of the cues within the second tier of organizational background included the recovery of the entrepreneur's mother from illness, family's support even during difficult times, the desire to sell and generate income, the desire to help the needy through incomes from the business and the volunteer work as a social activist. Further the entrepreneur's interpretations of events included receiving first orders for the business, her mother's illness, temporary decline in sales during the first year of the enterprise and recovery of sales in the ensuing years.

The entrepreneur's interpretations of the cues within the third tier of issues/challenges in the form of drivers and barriers included managing the difficulties associated with delivering orders, the entrepreneur's traits such as passion, ambitiousness and courage, dealing with a patriarchal culture, family's constant support and encouragement and struggling with creating a balance between job and business. The entrepreneur's interpretations of events included fake orders and prank calls and getting into collaborative relations with nonprofit organizations and large customer groups to generate sustainable business.

It is evident from the above-mentioned results that an individual entrepreneur uses sensemaking within his or her social context resulting in unique frameworks to provide meaning (Cornelissen & Clark, 2017; Heinze, 2014). This meaning has been presented in the form of various cues, events and their interpretations (Weick, 2001; 1995). Such sensegiving (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995) and entrepreneurial stories help entrepreneurs gain means and resources (Lousbury & Glynn, 2001) as evident from our findings and entrepreneurial narratives (Gartner, 2007).

Patterns (Baron & Ensley, 2006) presented in the three-tiered and six-dimensional framework have been presented where the entrepreneur also shared how opportunity was created (Alvarez & Barney, 2007) and failures happened as well (Shepherd, 2009). This paper is particularly useful because even though the use of sensemaking in entrepreneurship research has been well-recognized there is a general lack of empirical work on how an entrepreneur uses socially situated cognitive mechanisms (Jones & Li, 2017); to proceed further in terms of offering a better understanding of his or her new enterprise within any social or cultural and social setting (Attfield et al., 2015)..

On an empirical level, the cognitive mechanisms employed by the case entrepreneur can be presented through her statements and beliefs. For example, Ms. Khan believes that ambitions are like oxygen for every dreamer. She considers herself a model teacher and a social entrepreneur. She also believes that women in this society are dreamers and can turn those dreams into realities if given the chance. Women in KP society have less support from their families and cannot take decisions about their professional career alone. But if given the confidence, guidance and opportunities these women can do anything. Miss Seema Kanwal belongs to the noble profession of teaching. She experienced a lot as a child. Learning from those experiences Miss Seema Kanwal is trying to guide the society and her students about what's right. She requests other teachers, parents, government and educational institutes to expand their definition of what is possible for the children. Miss Khan pleads them to let everyone make their own decisions, let them be inspired and live in the present. Let them have a real, unrestricted education.

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