Learning Before Transforming: Coaching as a Catalyst of Entrepreneurial Learning During SME Digital Transformation

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***Abstract*—**Digital transformation is a strategic imperative for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), yet many initiatives fail despite substantial technological investment. Existing research emphasizes digital capabilities, infrastructure, and business models, while paying limited attention to the learning processes that enable adaptation. Drawing on Entrepreneurial Learning Theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and coaching literature, this conceptual paper develops a framework explaining how coaching facilitates entrepreneurial learning during SME digital transformation. It proposes that coaching catalyzes four complementary mechanisms—reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning—that strengthen entrepreneurial learning capability, enabling SMEs to develop the dynamic capabilities required to sense opportunities, seize possibilities, and reconfigure resources. Entrepreneurial learning thereby contributes to transformation success and sustainable growth. The paper reframes digital transformation as a learning challenge rather than solely a technological one, identifies coaching as a mechanism that accelerates entrepreneurial learning, and offers a microfoundational explanation of how learning supports dynamic capability development.

***Keywords*—**Digital transformation; Entrepreneurial learning; Coaching; Dynamic capabilities; SMEs; Sustainable growth; Organizational learning.

I. Introduction

Digital transformation has become a strategic imperative for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to remain competitive in increasingly dynamic and technology-driven environments. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, digital platforms, and data analytics are reshaping how firms create value, engage customers, and organize internal operations [1], [2]. While these technologies offer significant opportunities for innovation and growth, successful digital transformation remains elusive for many SMEs. Existing studies report that transformation initiatives frequently fail due to organizational resistance, capability gaps, and difficulties adapting to new ways of working [3], [4].

The Research on digital transformation has largely emphasized technological infrastructure, digital capabilities, and business model innovation [2], [3]. However, successful transformation requires more than technology adoption; organizations must acquire new knowledge, challenge assumptions, experiment with new practices, and continuously adapt. Thus, digital transformation can be viewed as a learning process rather than merely a technological one.

This perspective is especially relevant for SMEs, which often lack formal training systems and specialized expertise [5]. Their ability to learn and adapt quickly frequently determines transformation success. Although entrepreneurship scholars have long recognized learning as central to entrepreneurial action [6], [7], entrepreneurial learning remains underexplored in digital transformation research.

One potential catalyst is coaching. Coaching promotes reflection, feedback, behavioral change, and continuous learning [8], [9], helping individuals challenge assumptions and derive insights from experience. Yet its role in facilitating entrepreneurial learning during digital transformation remains poorly understood.

Drawing on entrepreneurial learning theory [6], [7], Dynamic Capabilities Theory [10], and coaching literature, this paper proposes that coaching enhances reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning. These learning mechanisms strengthen entrepreneurial learning capability, enabling SMEs to develop the dynamic capabilities needed for successful digital transformation. In doing so, the paper reframes transformation as a learning challenge, identifies coaching as a catalyst of entrepreneurial learning, and provides a micro-level explanation of capability development during technological change.

II. Digital Transformation as an Organizational Learning Process

A. Beyond Technology Adoption

Digital transformation is frequently described as the adoption and integration of digital technologies into organizational activities. However, contemporary research increasingly suggests that transformation extends far beyond technology implementation. Digital transformation involves fundamental changes in organizational processes, decision-making routines, customer interactions, and business models [2], [3]. Consequently, successful transformation depends not only on technological resources but also on an organization's capacity to acquire, create, and apply new knowledge.

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Although technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and digital platforms provide opportunities for innovation and efficiency, they do not automatically generate competitive advantage. Organizations must learn how to use these technologies effectively, understand their strategic implications, and adapt existing routines to support new ways of working [4]. As a result, digital transformation can be viewed as a process of organizational learning in which firms continuously acquire, interpret, and apply knowledge to navigate changing environments.

This perspective aligns with broader theories of organizational learning that emphasize the importance of knowledge creation and adaptation in organizational change [11], [12]. Digital transformation often requires organizations to challenge existing assumptions, abandon obsolete practices, and develop new competencies. Consequently, transformation success depends not only on access to technology but also on the ability to learn faster than environmental conditions change.

B. Learning Challenges During Digital Transformation

The learning demands associated with digital transformation are substantial. Organizations must simultaneously develop technological knowledge, redesign business processes, understand changing customer expectations, and experiment with new business models [1]. Unlike traditional improvement initiatives, digital transformation often occurs under conditions of uncertainty where optimal solutions are unknown and outcomes cannot be fully predicted in advance.

Such uncertainty creates significant learning challenges. Employees must acquire unfamiliar skills and adapt to changing roles. Managers must make strategic decisions regarding technologies whose long-term implications remain unclear. Entrepreneurs must identify emerging opportunities while simultaneously managing the risks associated with transformation. These challenges require continuous experimentation, reflection, and adaptation rather than reliance on established routines.

Furthermore, learning during transformation is often iterative rather than linear. Organizations rarely move directly from technological adoption to successful implementation. Instead, they engage in cycles of experimentation, feedback, adjustment, and renewal. Through these cycles, knowledge is gradually accumulated and integrated into organizational practices.

C. Why SMEs Face Unique Learning Challenges

The importance of learning becomes particularly evident in SMEs. Compared with large organizations, SMEs typically operate with limited resources, fewer specialized experts, and less formalized learning systems [5]. While their flexibility may facilitate rapid adaptation, their resource constraints often make it more difficult to acquire and disseminate knowledge required for transformation.

Owner-managers frequently play central roles in SME transformation efforts. Their personal knowledge, experiences, and learning capabilities often influence strategic decisions and organizational responses to technological change [13]. Consequently, transformation outcomes may depend heavily on how entrepreneurs and managers interpret emerging opportunities, learn from experience, and guide organizational adaptation.

At the same time, SMEs often lack dedicated training departments, digital transformation offices, or formal knowledge management systems. As a result, learning frequently occurs through informal processes such as experimentation, observation, interaction, and reflection. Understanding these learning processes is therefore critical for explaining how SMEs navigate digital transformation successfully.

D. Entrepreneurial Learning as the Missing Explanation

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of learning, much of the digital transformation literature continues to focus on technologies, resources, and capabilities while paying comparatively limited attention to how entrepreneurs and organizations actually learn during transformation. Existing studies often assume that organizations possess the knowledge required to implement change successfully. In practice, however, such knowledge frequently emerges through learning processes that unfold during transformation itself.

This observation suggests that entrepreneurial learning may represent a missing link between digital transformation initiatives and successful organizational outcomes. Entrepreneurs must continuously interpret new information, experiment with emerging technologies, learn from successes and failures, and adapt their actions accordingly. These learning processes enable organizations to develop the capabilities required for transformation.

If entrepreneurial learning is central to transformation success, a critical question emerges: what mechanisms facilitate such learning? This paper argues that coaching represents one important but underexplored mechanism. Through reflection, feedback, questioning, and developmental dialogue, coaching may accelerate the learning processes through which entrepreneurs and SMEs navigate digital transformation. The following section therefore examines entrepreneurial learning and its role in organizational adaptation and renewal.

III. Entrepreneurial Learning During Digital Transformation

A. Understanding Entrepreneurial Learning

Learning is widely recognized as a core element of entrepreneurship because entrepreneurs operate under uncertainty, incomplete information, and rapid change. As a result, entrepreneurial action depends on continuous learning through experience, experimentation, and adaptation [6], [7].

Entrepreneurial learning refers to the process through which entrepreneurs acquire, transform, and apply knowledge derived from experience. Politis [7] argues that this process shapes opportunity recognition, strategic decision-making, and entrepreneurial action, while Cope [6] emphasizes that learning often emerges from critical experiences and challenges that force entrepreneurs to reconsider assumptions and develop new insights.

This perspective is particularly relevant to digital transformation. New technologies frequently disrupt business models, managerial assumptions, and organizational routines, requiring entrepreneurs to continuously interpret technological developments, identify opportunities, and adapt organizational practices. Consequently, digital transformation can be viewed not simply as a technological transition but as a learning process through which entrepreneurs develop new capabilities and responses to a changing environment.

B. Learning Under Conditions of Uncertainty

A defining characteristic of entrepreneurial learning is that it occurs under uncertainty. Unlike traditional training environments where objectives and solutions are clearly defined, entrepreneurs often learn while acting in situations where outcomes are unknown [14]. Knowledge emerges through experimentation, reflection, and interaction with the environment.

Digital transformation intensifies these conditions. Entrepreneurs must make decisions regarding technologies whose future value may be uncertain, invest in unfamiliar capabilities, and respond to rapidly evolving customer expectations. Consequently, transformation requires continuous learning and adaptation rather than the implementation of predetermined solutions.

From this perspective, learning becomes a mechanism for reducing uncertainty. Through repeated cycles of action and reflection, entrepreneurs gradually build the knowledge required to navigate technological change. This process allows organizations to adjust strategies, modify behaviors, and identify opportunities that may not have been visible initially.

C. Dimensions of Entrepreneurial Learning

Although entrepreneurial learning has been conceptualized in different ways, the literature suggests that learning during entrepreneurial processes occurs through multiple complementary mechanisms. Building on prior research, this paper identifies four forms of learning that are particularly relevant to digital transformation: reflective learning, adaptive learning, experiential learning, and social learning.

D. Reflective Learning

Reflective learning involves critically examining experiences, assumptions, and actions in order to generate new insights [6]. Reflection enables entrepreneurs to question existing mental models, reinterpret challenges, and identify alternative courses of action.

Digital transformation frequently disrupts established assumptions regarding technologies, customers, and business operations. Reflection therefore becomes essential for helping entrepreneurs make sense of change and identify opportunities hidden within uncertainty.

E. Adaptive Learning

Adaptive learning refers to the ability to modify behaviors, strategies, and practices in response to changing environmental conditions. Entrepreneurs learn not only by acquiring knowledge but also by adjusting their actions based on feedback and emerging information.

Digital transformation often requires organizations to revise processes, redesign workflows, and adopt new operating practices. Adaptive learning allows entrepreneurs to respond effectively to these changing requirements and maintain alignment with evolving technological and market conditions.

F. Experiential Learning

Experiential learning occurs through direct experience and action. According to Kolb [15], learning is a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Entrepreneurs often learn by trying new approaches, observing outcomes, and refining subsequent actions.

Digital transformation provides numerous opportunities for experiential learning. Organizations experiment with new technologies, pilot digital initiatives, and gradually develop knowledge through implementation experiences. Such learning frequently produces practical insights that cannot be acquired through formal instruction alone.

G. Social Learning

Social learning emphasizes the role of observation, interaction, and collaboration in knowledge development. Bandura [16] argues that individuals learn by observing others, exchanging information, and participating in social environments.

Digital transformation often involves collaboration among entrepreneurs, employees, consultants, technology providers, and customers. Through these interactions, entrepreneurs gain access to new perspectives, knowledge, and practices that support adaptation and innovation. Social learning therefore becomes an important mechanism through which organizations develop transformation-related capabilities.

H. Entrepreneurial Learning and Dynamic Capabilities

The significance of entrepreneurial learning extends beyond knowledge acquisition. Learning provides the foundation upon which organizations develop dynamic capabilities. Through reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning processes, entrepreneurs become better able to identify opportunities, respond to environmental changes, and reconfigure organizational resources.

This relationship aligns closely with Dynamic Capabilities Theory [10], [17]. Sensing opportunities requires learning about emerging technologies and market developments. Seizing opportunities requires learning how to evaluate alternatives and commit resources effectively. Reconfiguring resources requires learning how to redesign organizational structures, processes, and capabilities.

Entrepreneurial learning therefore represents an important microfoundation of dynamic capabilities. It enables organizations to transform knowledge into action and adaptation. However, while the importance of learning is widely recognized, less attention has been devoted to understanding the mechanisms that facilitate entrepreneurial learning during digital transformation.

This paper argues that coaching represents one such mechanism. Through reflection, feedback, questioning, and developmental dialogue, coaching may stimulate the learning processes that enable entrepreneurs to navigate digital transformation successfully. The following section develops this argument by examining coaching as a catalyst of entrepreneurial learning.

IV. Coaching as a Catalyst for Entrepreneurial Learning

A. Moving Beyond Performance-Oriented Views of Coaching

Coaching has traditionally been viewed as a developmental intervention designed to improve performance, enhance leadership effectiveness, and facilitate goal attainment [8], [9]. Through questioning, feedback, and reflective dialogue, coaching helps individuals clarify objectives, overcome obstacles, and improve decision-making. Consequently, much of the coaching literature has focused on outcomes such as productivity, leadership development, and employee effectiveness.

More recent scholarship, however, suggests that coaching serves a broader developmental function. Rather than merely improving performance, coaching can facilitate learning, adaptation, and behavioral change in complex and uncertain environments [18]. By encouraging individuals to challenge assumptions, reflect on experiences, and generate new perspectives, coaching creates conditions that support continuous learning.

This perspective is particularly relevant during digital transformation. Unlike routine organizational change initiatives, digital transformation often involves uncertainty, experimentation, and evolving technological requirements [4]. Under such conditions, organizations cannot rely solely on existing knowledge. Instead, they must continuously learn and adapt. Consequently, coaching may be understood not merely as a performance-enhancing intervention but as a catalyst that accelerates entrepreneurial learning.

This paper proposes that coaching stimulates four complementary learning mechanisms: reflective learning, adaptive learning, experiential learning, and social learning.

B. Coaching and Reflective Learning

Reflection is widely recognized as a central component of entrepreneurial learning [6]. Entrepreneurs learn by critically examining experiences, questioning assumptions, and interpreting the meaning of successes and failures. Reflection enables individuals to move beyond routine responses and generate deeper insights regarding their actions and environments.

Coaching directly supports this process. Through questioning, active listening, and structured dialogue, coaches encourage entrepreneurs to examine their beliefs, explore alternative perspectives, and challenge established mental models [8]. Such reflection becomes particularly valuable during digital transformation, where technological change frequently disrupts existing assumptions regarding customers, markets, and business operations.

By creating opportunities for critical reflection, coaching enables entrepreneurs to extract learning from transformation experiences and develop more sophisticated understandings of emerging challenges.

Proposition 1: Coaching positively influences reflective learning by promoting critical reflection, perspective-taking, and assumption challenging during digital transformation.

C. Coaching and Adaptive Learning

Digital transformation requires organizations to modify behaviors continuously in response to changing technological and market conditions. Entrepreneurs must frequently revise strategies, experiment with new approaches, and adjust actions based on feedback.

Coaching facilitates adaptive learning by encouraging entrepreneurs to monitor outcomes, evaluate progress, and modify behaviors accordingly. Rather than providing predefined solutions, coaching supports a process of continuous adjustment and improvement. Entrepreneurs become more capable of responding to unexpected developments and adapting their actions to evolving circumstances.

This adaptive orientation is particularly important in digital transformation contexts, where plans often require revision as technologies, customer expectations, and competitive conditions change.

Proposition 2: Coaching positively influences adaptive learning by encouraging behavioral adjustment, feedback utilization, and continuous improvement during digital transformation.

D. Coaching and Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through action and experience [15]. Entrepreneurs frequently acquire knowledge by implementing ideas, observing outcomes, and refining future actions based on experience.

Coaching enhances experiential learning by helping entrepreneurs process and interpret their experiences more effectively. Through guided reflection and developmental dialogue, coaching encourages individuals to identify lessons from both successes and failures. Rather than viewing experiences as isolated events, entrepreneurs learn to transform them into valuable sources of knowledge.

During digital transformation, organizations often engage in pilot projects, technology trials, and iterative experimentation. Coaching helps entrepreneurs extract learning from these experiences and apply that learning to future initiatives.

Proposition 3: Coaching positively influences experiential learning by facilitating the interpretation and application of lessons derived from transformation experiences.

E. Coaching and Social Learning

Entrepreneurial learning is not solely an individual process. Entrepreneurs frequently learn through interactions with employees, customers, advisors, partners, and other

stakeholders [16], [19]. Such interactions provide access to diverse perspectives and knowledge sources that support innovation and adaptation.

Coaching can strengthen social learning by fostering dialogue, encouraging knowledge sharing, and promoting collaborative problem-solving. Coaching conversations often expose entrepreneurs to alternative viewpoints and stimulate deeper engagement with stakeholders. In team and organizational coaching settings, learning may also emerge through collective reflection and shared sensemaking.

Given that digital transformation typically requires collaboration across organizational boundaries and functions, social learning becomes particularly important for successful adaptation.

Proposition 4: Coaching positively influences social learning by enhancing dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collaborative sensemaking during digital transformation.

F. From Entrepreneurial Learning to Dynamic Capabilities

While each learning mechanism contributes independently to knowledge development, their combined influence creates broader entrepreneurial learning capability. Through reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning, entrepreneurs become better able to recognize opportunities, interpret environmental changes, and implement strategic responses.

These learning outcomes directly support the development of dynamic capabilities. Reflective learning enhances sensing activities by improving opportunity recognition. Adaptive and experiential learning strengthen seizing capabilities by supporting effective decision-making and implementation. Social learning facilitates reconfiguring by enabling coordination and knowledge integration across the organization.

Entrepreneurial learning therefore represents a critical microfoundation of dynamic capabilities. Coaching contributes to organizational adaptation not directly, but through stimulating the learning processes that enable entrepreneurs to navigate digital transformation successfully. The following section integrates these arguments into a conceptual framework and presents the formal propositions of the study.

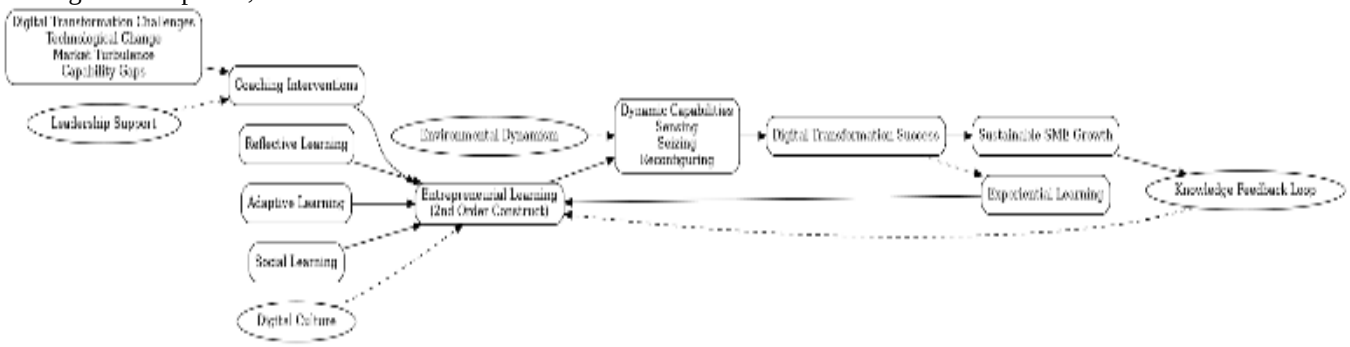

Fig.1: Conceptual Model

V. Discussion and Implications

This paper developed a conceptual framework explaining how coaching facilitates entrepreneurial learning during digital transformation in SMEs. Drawing on entrepreneurial learning theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and coaching literature, the framework proposes that coaching stimulates reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning processes that collectively strengthen entrepreneurial learning capability. Through this mechanism, coaching contributes indirectly to dynamic capability development, digital transformation success, and sustainable SME growth.

A. Theoretical Contributions

The paper makes four contributions. First, it extends digital transformation research by arguing that transformation is fundamentally a learning challenge rather than merely a technological one. While prior studies have emphasized digital infrastructure, capabilities, and business models [2], [3], this framework highlights entrepreneurial learning as a key explanation for why firms facing similar technological conditions achieve different outcomes.

Second, it contributes to entrepreneurial learning literature by identifying digital transformation as a learning-intensive context in which entrepreneurs must continuously acquire, reinterpret, and apply new knowledge. The framework further develops a multidimensional view of entrepreneurial learning encompassing reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning [6], [7].

Third, it advances coaching scholarship by conceptualizing coaching as a catalyst of entrepreneurial learning rather than solely a tool for performance improvement [9], [18]. Specifically, coaching facilitates reflection, experimentation, adaptation, and knowledge sharing, thereby supporting organizational transformation under uncertainty.

Finally, the paper contributes to Dynamic Capabilities Theory by proposing entrepreneurial learning as a microfoundation of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities [17]. Through continuous learning, entrepreneurs develop the knowledge and adaptive capacity required to identify opportunities, make strategic decisions, and reconfigure organizational resources during digital transformation.

B. Practical Implications

The framework offers several implications for SME leaders, coaches, consultants, and policymakers.

First, SME managers should recognize that digital transformation is not solely a technology project but also a learning process. Investments in digital technologies are unlikely to generate sustainable value unless accompanied by mechanisms that facilitate organizational learning.

Second, coaching should be viewed as a complement to traditional training initiatives. While training primarily focuses on knowledge transfer, coaching supports reflection, experimentation, and behavioral adaptation. Combining these approaches may enhance transformation outcomes.

Third, consultants and transformation practitioners should pay greater attention to learning processes during transformation initiatives. Encouraging experimentation, reflection, and collaborative learning may be as important as selecting the appropriate technologies.

Finally, policymakers seeking to promote SME digitalization should complement technology-focused support programs with initiatives that strengthen learning and capability development. Coaching, mentoring, and leadership development programs may help SMEs derive greater value from digital investments, particularly in emerging economies characterized by uncertainty and institutional constraints.

Overall, the framework highlights that successful digital transformation depends not only on technology adoption but also on an organization’s capacity to learn continuously. Coaching can play a critical role in accelerating this learning process and enabling SMEs to adapt, innovate, and grow in increasingly digital environments.

VI. Conclusion

Digital transformation has become a strategic necessity for SMEs operating in increasingly dynamic and technology-driven environments. While existing research has largely focused on technological adoption, digital capabilities, and business model innovation, comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how organizations develop the knowledge required to navigate transformation successfully.

This paper has argued that digital transformation is fundamentally a learning process. Drawing on entrepreneurial learning theory, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, and coaching literature, it proposed a conceptual framework explaining how coaching acts as a catalyst for entrepreneurial learning during digital transformation. Specifically, the framework suggests that coaching stimulates reflective, adaptive, experiential, and social learning processes, which collectively strengthen entrepreneurial learning capability. Through these learning mechanisms, entrepreneurs develop the dynamic capabilities required to sense opportunities, seize emerging possibilities, and reconfigure organizational resources in response to technological change.

The paper contributes to digital transformation research by introducing a learning-centered perspective, extends entrepreneurial learning theory by examining learning in digital transformation contexts, and advances coaching scholarship by positioning coaching as a strategic mechanism for organizational adaptation. It also offers a microfoundational explanation of how dynamic capabilities emerge through learning processes.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed relationships across different SME contexts, industries, and stages of digital transformation. Scholars may also investigate how coaching interacts with other developmental interventions such as mentoring, training, and leadership development.

Ultimately, SMEs do not transform simply because they adopt new technologies. They transform because they learn how to interpret, adapt, and exploit those technologies. Coaching can play a critical role in accelerating this learning process and enabling sustainable growth in an increasingly digital world.

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