

Addressing global challenges with compassion: The role of entrepreneurship education



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Background: Entrepreneurs have the potential to play an especially important role for sustainable development, considering their very foundational character of finding solutions to problems in different creative ways. Thus, we need more entrepreneurs who are willing to address global challenges of today.

Aim: This paper aims to discuss the role of compassion in entrepreneurship education, particularly within experience-based teaching.

Setting: Based on a 3-week course, where students were exposed to poverty and other challenges in the Global South, the focus is on how experience-based teaching affected their compassion and motivation related to sustainability issues.

Methods: This qualitative study is based on longitudinal interview data collected during a 3-week entrepreneurship education course, involving 23 master's students from various academic disciplines. The course included a field visit to an underprivileged, rural area in India.

Results: Students gained a deeper understanding of social and economic sustainability. After the field visit, they expressed stronger focus on compassion and empathy and deeper interest in working with sustainability issues. Further, they expressed an increased interest for entrepreneurship.

Conclusion: The rich data collected during the process described above, gives in-depth insights on how students can develop compassion, empathy and a deeper understanding for global challenges of today.

Contribution: Findings contribute to entrepreneurship literature, by highlighting the importance of compassion and empathy, and to the topic of entrepreneurship education, by discussing how students can be trained to develop these characteristics.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; experience-based learning; compassion; SDGs; India; qualitative methods.

Introduction

Humanity is facing several urgent challenges today related to social, economic and environmental sustainability. At a global scale, the UN targets these challenges through 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030 (UNDP 2023). All constructive actors are needed in this process. Entrepreneurs have the potential to play an especially important role for sustainable development, considering their very foundational character of finding solutions to problems in different creative ways.

In response to the growing worldwide awareness of sustainability challenges, educators have engaged in incorporating sustainability perspectives into study programmes, research and other activities, aiming at educating future sustainability professionals as change agents with a global perspective (Ploum et al. 2018). These change agents do not only develop sustainability as a success factor within various professions but also incorporate sustainability into business processes and spread the vision of sustainable development to the wider society (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger 2014). By nature, formal education is focused on equipping students with theoretical knowledge, where different cognitive skills are central. Lately, there has been an increased interest for how educators can complement traditional teaching, for example, by exposing students to real-world scenarios (Vanevenhoven 2013) and on using experiential learning strategies (George 2015).

There is also a growing interest for the role of emotional aspects in entrepreneurship education. Jones and Underwood (2017) discuss how different academic disciplines engage with emotions but argue that the topic is under-studied and therefore call for more research on how to understand the role of different emotions in educational settings. Within the field of social entrepreneurship, special attention has been given to the role of compassion, which is an other-centred emotion that emerges when someone notices the pain and suffering of others, and feels an urge to ease this suffering (Miller et al. 2012). Smith, Kickul and Coley (2010) investigate how simulation can be used as a tool to spur empathy among students. Although they find simulation to be useful, they also call for other pedagogical approaches and tools to train students to become more empathetic. Further, a recent study by Dodd et al. (2022) emphasises that enterprise education needs to address issues of sustainability, social justice and hope. They argue that new pedagogies and practices may help us to navigate complex times in entrepreneurial, ethical and creative ways.

Entrepreneurship education has a potentially crucial role to play, in fostering change agents who are willing to address global sustainability challenges. This paper aims to discuss the role of compassion in entrepreneurship education, particularly within experience-based teaching.

Two research questions are guiding the discussion: (1) *How can experience-based teaching spur compassion?* (2) *Can compassion play a role in spurring (sustainable) entrepreneurial motivation?*

The study is based on a 3-week entrepreneurship course with master's students from various disciplines, where students were exposed to poverty and the everyday struggles of people in a community in the Global South. The purpose of the course was to contribute to the fostering of change agents, who are willing to embrace the challenges expressed in the SDGs. Thus, the course did not focus on training entrepreneurs per se, but rather on equipping students with an entrepreneurial mindset, that is applicable to any discipline or profession.

In the next section, the theoretical fields used as points of departure are discussed. Thereafter, the methodological approach and data collection are presented. The empirical findings are presented, followed by a discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical points of departure

The role of compassion as driver for entrepreneurship

Even though traditional entrepreneurship research mainly has focused on cognitive skills, there is an increasing interest for the role of affective skills. The role of emotions in entrepreneurship has been investigated to some extent, not the least with focus on the role of passion as a driver for

entrepreneurs (Cardon et al. 2009; Cardon, Glauser & Murnieks 2017). However, partly thanks to a growing body of literature on social entrepreneurship, where market-based methods are used to solve social problems, there is also a growing interest for the role of other emotions, such as compassion and empathy (Stirzaker et al. 2021).

Miller et al. (2012:621) explore the role of compassion in encouraging social entrepreneurship, defining compassion as a 'prosocial emotion that connects an individual with a suffering community and produces sensitivity to the pain and needs of others'. Thus, compassion is different from the broader concept of empathy, where empathy is experienced in relation to both joy and suffering of others. Compassion emerges when an individual notices the pain and suffering of others and feels an urge to ease their suffering. Thus, there is a strong other-orientation in compassion, directing the attention away from one's own self-concern. According to Miller et al. (2012), the combination of integrative thinking, pro-social cost-benefit analysis and commitment to alleviate others' suffering can transform compassion into social entrepreneurship. Building further on this thought, Stirzaker et al. (2021) argue that there are several drivers for social entrepreneurship. Some individuals are driven by a personal, social or philanthropic mission while others are attracted to the social enterprise business model, used to run a commercial business in socially and ethically informed ways.

Closely related to social entrepreneurship is the concept of sustainable entrepreneurship. Because of an increased awareness of environmental degradation and climate change, it has been argued that entrepreneurs have a particularly important role to play, in infusing their ventures with sustainable decision-making. Engel, Ramesh and Steiner (2020) argue that emotions of compassion are central in determining entrepreneurial decisions, involving ethical balancing between, on the one hand, environmental concerns, on the other hand, economic sustainability. Thus, they extend the literature on social entrepreneurship and propose that affective constructs, previously studied exclusively as predictors of social entrepreneurship, also may predict sustainability-related decision-making. However, they call for more studies on what entrepreneurs can do to become more compassionate, and thereby make more environmentally sustainable decisions.

Educational design linking compassion and sustainability

Experience-based teaching

In many ways, entrepreneurship education is different from most other academic disciplines, which means that teaching methods need to be adjusted (Duval-Couteil 2013). Fretschner and Weber (2013) suggest that educators should focus on what makes an entrepreneur, by designing awareness courses. They argue that entrepreneurial attitudes, rather than skills (which can be developed in other programmes) should be prioritised and highlight the value of entrepreneurial behaviour, not only for starting a business

but also in existing organisations, social settings and life in general. Vanevenhoven (2013) suggests a somehow different approach, arguing that the most central aspect in entrepreneurship education should be a stronger real-world focus. He draws on social entrepreneurship values and argues that not only do educators need to adjust existing pedagogies but rather fundamentally transform existing models, and calls for an 'intellectual revolution led by fearless educators' (Vanevenhoven 2013:468). He argues that educators need to shift from a profit maximising towards a stakeholder value-creation orientation. In line with this suggestion, both students and educators should get out of the classroom and get experiences from the real world.

Closely related is the growing interest for experiential learning, which can be seen as a process where learning transactions occur between the individual and the environment (George 2015). Winkel (2013) calls for a move away from skill building towards experience building among entrepreneurship educators, thus focusing on teaching competencies. Similar to this, George (2015) discusses the need for different strategies that engage and foster experiential learning. He gives an example of how an experiential learning project can help to create social consciousness among management students and raising their level of understanding for preconditions for everyday workers. According to the study, the absolute majority of students who participated in the experiential learning project developed both work skills and empathy for workers, as well as better knowledge of entrepreneurial processes.

Blenker et al. (2011) argue that there have been several paradigms within entrepreneurship education, regarding what is taught and how it is taught. One recent paradigm is related to how students can be trained to solve societal problems entrepreneurially, where education is aiming to create social value, rather than economic value. As argued by the authors, entrepreneurship education is not generic and therefore has to be tailored to the target audience. Firstly, one has to ask what type of value students are expected to create, and secondly, one has to consider where the 'mindset' of students are, to be able to start the education at a suitable level. However, independent of expected value, entrepreneurship education should always be based on facilitating entrepreneurship as an everyday practice, as this can result in multiple forms of value, both economically and socially.

Education that spurs compassion and motivate action

The role of emotions in education has been studied within different academic fields. Jones and Underwood (2017) investigate how a variety of disciplines (neuroscience, psychology, education and entrepreneurship) engage with the role of emotions and find that the topic is under-researched and potentially under-valued. Given the importance of emotions for learning, they propose a model to support pedagogy. In a study by Smith et al. (2010), simulation and reflection are used as pedagogical approaches in social

entrepreneurship education. They discuss how this can develop students' empathy and their motivation to take action as change agents. An important part of this is to raise awareness of social structures, such as uneven distribution of privileges. A first step in developing empathy is to adopt the perspective of another. The development of empathy often involves a 'cognitive or affective matching of emotions with those in need' (Smith et al. 2010:19). This process can, in turn, help students to recognise their own ability to make a difference for societal change for the better.

George (2015) argues that experiential teaching and learning, where students meet challenges in real-world scenarios, will help to develop their soft and hard skills, and leading to cognitive, affective and behavioural changes in them. This will build competence, which is important, independent of if the later position is as individual employee, manager or entrepreneur. An experientially based project does not necessarily have to span over a long time period – even a four-day learning project can make a big impact on students' mindsets and increase their ability to feel empathy.

In order to equip change agents for the future, educators do not only need to provide students with cognitive knowledge but also enable them to 'reflect on further effects and the complexity of behaviour and decisions in a future-oriented and global perspective of responsibility' (Rieckmann 2012:128). Despite the urgent need for actors who engage in sustainable development, educational scholars have mainly either focused on the issue of education for sustainability or entrepreneurship education. Yet, when linked together, the two different fields of education for entrepreneurship and for sustainability have the potential to reinforce each other (Lans, Blok & Wesselink 2014). In order to provide educators with tools to provide students' sustainable entrepreneurship development, Lans et al. (2014) suggest a set of distinct competencies, combining competencies needed for both entrepreneurship and for sustainability work. Building further on this thought, Ploum et al. (2018) argue that several kinds of competencies are needed at an individual level when targeting real-world problems, challenges and/or opportunities, which relate to both skills, attitudes and knowledge. Some of the previously identified key competencies for sustainable development are anticipatory thinking, system thinking, interdisciplinary work and participation (Ploum et al. 2018).

Similarly, Lynch, Andersson and Johansen (2021) highlight the fact that humanity is facing systemic challenges regarding climate change, pollution, poverty and inequality. Traditional entrepreneurship does not manage to tackle these challenges, and as the problems are systemic, solutions also need to be systemic. Therefore, system perspectives need to characterise entrepreneurship education, where system thinking and entrepreneurship combined can push students towards sustainability. The authors argue that in order to change a system, one has to change the mindsets of those inside the system, and entrepreneurship education should therefore

have a holistic approach to environmental and economic systems. Experiential learning can play an important role in a shift towards sustainable entrepreneurship.

The present study seeks to combine the different theoretical perspectives discussed above. The focus of the study is an experience-based teaching case, where students were exposed to real-world scenarios with potential to spur their empathy and compassion for others. Further, this is linked to the role of compassion as a driver to address sustainability challenges with entrepreneurial solutions.

Methods

Overall study setting

In order to address the aim of this study, an inductive research approach was used. The focus of the study was a group of students at a Norwegian university, taking the same course in entrepreneurship. At the university, all students at master's level are required to take a course in entrepreneurship, independent of study discipline, during their first year at master's level. The overall idea is to expose them to entrepreneurial experiences and thereby stimulate an entrepreneurial mindset, which can be useful within all sorts of academic disciplines and future professional positions. The students get to choose between a variety of entrepreneurship courses, and one of the options was the course in focus in the present study, with the subtitle 'become a change agent'. In the presentation of the course, it was clear that the focus was on entrepreneurial solutions in a poor and rural context in India, and that the course would be partly spent in India. It was also clear that the aim of the course was to work in close collaboration with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in India as well as with locals in the specific area. There is a self-selection, as students who were already interested in sustainability and development work would prioritise the course in their ranking. There was only room for 25 students, and a random selection took place (students were not ranked neither based on study results nor on expressed interest for the specific topic).

The course was given over a 3-week period, where the first week was spent in Norway, thereafter the whole group travelled to a rural area in India during the second week, and the last week was spent back in Norway. Two students dropped out the first week, meaning that the total sample consisted of 23 students. In teams of four or five, they were given a task to address specific entrepreneurial challenges. During the first course week, a lot of time was spent on learning about the specific task, talking to the partners in India over Zoom and on teambuilding. During the second week, focus was on practical work 'on the field', to collect information from the local 'owners' of the entrepreneurial challenges and being in close dialogue with them. In India, a local NGO was functioning as a bridge between students and community members, and assisted with interpretations and cultural contextualisation. All entrepreneurial challenges had been identified by the local community prior to the course, and students were asked to find suitable solutions to these very

real challenges. Thus, there was a bottom-up approach throughout the process. During the last week, when back in Norway, focus was on writing a report and presenting suggestions for the local partners on how to proceed. The entrepreneurial challenges that the students worked on were, for example, related to marketing problems, to the community's waste handling and to local transportation for women (who often are harassed when travelling with public transport). One teacher (and overall course responsible), two researchers and three learning assistants were following the students during the whole time.

Data collection

Central to this study is to capture the process taking place over the course period. Thus, longitudinal data collection, where data are collected from the same informants on several occasions, was found most suitable. This makes it possible to capture changes over time, within and between study participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). Two months before the course, all students were asked to fill out a short survey regarding their expectations. During the course, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with all students three times – before the field visit, during the field visit and when back in Norway. Five students dropped out of interviews in the last week (because of illness), resulting in a total of 64 interviews (see Table 1); 23 students completed the course: 15 females and eight males. They were all between 22 and 30 years old. Five of the students originate from outside Norway, whereof two were from Asian countries.

All interviews were semi-structured and lasted around 20–30 min each. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how students reflected during the whole process – from

TABLE 1: Overview of respondents and interviews.

Name	Sex	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3
Elena	F	x	x	-
Idun	F	x	x	x
Sonja	F	x	x	x
Marit	F	x	x	-
Arne	M	x	x	x
Emily	F	x	x	x
Nora	F	x	x	x
Marcus	M	x	x	x
Jakob	M	x	x	-
Ole	M	x	x	x
Eirik	M	x	x	x
Swati	F	x	x	x
Lene	F	x	x	x
Vikram	M	x	x	x
Viktoria	F	x	x	x
Tove	F	x	x	x
Ragnhild	F	x	x	-
Hege	F	x	x	x
Bork	M	x	x	x
Trond	M	x	x	x
Iselin	F	x	x	x
Line	F	x	x	x
Marianne	F	x	x	x

F, female; M, male.

motivations to participate in the course and expectations, to the experiences of facing very real challenges in a context very different from their own, to their thoughts on potential future motivations to work with any global sustainability challenges. This approach was used, as some standard information was needed, but also to gain deeper insights on the interviewees' feelings, attitudes and behaviours, which is central in this study (Miles & Huberman 1994).

All interviews were, with consent of the interviewees, recorded, transcribed and made confidential. With inspiration from field studies in anthropology, the present study was complemented with ongoing participant observations and the writing of field journal notes (Van Maanen 1988). This was helpful for the overall understanding of the interview data and to make sense of interviews during the analysis process.

In analysing the data, an interpretive approach was used, aiming to get a deeper understanding of how the students reflected on their own role in relation to the course task (the entrepreneurial challenges) and how their reflections and attitudes changed over the course period. Inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006:79) a thematic analysis was conducted, which has been described as a method of 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. As suggested by Castleberry and Nolen (2018), the following steps were taken in the process: Firstly, interviews were transcribed and sorted. Secondly, data were grouped into meaningful codes (where codes could be pre-defined and originate from interview questions or emerge directly from data). Thirdly, codes were organised into themes. Fourthly, data were interpreted and sorted into patterns. Fifthly, conclusions were drawn and related to the research questions in focus. NVivo R1 was used as a tool in the whole process of coding and analysing data.

New experiences and changing perspectives

The analysis revealed three main patterns: (1) learning from experiences, (2) compassion and (3) entrepreneurial motivation. These three patterns were identified throughout the three interview occasions. It was of particular interest during the analysis of data, to capture the processes that took place among the students, and to identify how they shifted perspectives and reasoning within these patterns. In the following sections, this will be further elaborated on.

Learning from experiences

Three dominant themes build the first pattern: the importance of working together with a local partner, competence and skills of the students and learning about the culture and context of India.

Working with a local partner

The employees of the local NGO functioned as cultural guides and interpreters and played a crucial role for student's learning processes. Each team had a designated

support person, and for the majority, this worked out really well. They:

'... pushed us both on time, but also in the right direction concerning our outputs and learning.' (Arne, male, Week 2)

'The [person from NGO] was so helpful and translated everything, it would have been impossible otherwise. It was especially good because he had a lot of information and he asked the right questions and he helped us a lot in the process ... They have a lot of knowledge about the area, they have a lot of knowledge in general about business and NGOs and enterprises, and they have been really helpful and really nice to us. I feel like they have treated us as a part of their own group, and that is really special.' (Sonja, female, Week 2)

On the other hand, if the cooperation is not well-functioning, it creates a lot of frustration:

'What is challenging is that we cannot talk to the people ourselves. Our question and the answer are going through a channel twice, through the [NGO] person. It is impossible for the [NGO] person to not be biased. So, I think that is a challenge, to understand what is actually being said, what is being filtered, because we can only trust what we are being told, but that might not necessarily always be what we are actually looking for.' (Marianne, female, Week 2)

Competence and skills

Before the field visit, most students expressed that they had low expectations on their ability to actually contribute with something meaningful to the community in India. Several were motivated to make things better for the people there as Elena expressed, but found it hard see what they could contribute with, beyond:

'... being engaged and interested in trying to find a solution' (Marianne, female, Week 1)

Even though they all had bachelor degrees in various fields, they could not see how their professional competencies could contribute. Another summarises:

'I think it is difficult to say, because I don't know myself.' (Iselin, female, Week 1)

This perception changed over the course, and they perceived higher potential to contribute to something with a lasting value for the community when actually working on their tasks, than prior to the field visit:

'I am sure we will [contribute with solutions to the community], as [local partner] said yesterday, if we do not give the solution to the other problems, then at least we will give them some new ideas and new perspectives. I think we have already done that.' (Elena, female, Week 2)

During the last week, Idun, one of the female students, reflected:

'Well, if you had asked me about this in Norway, I would have said that "no, I cannot see [entrepreneurial opportunities]. I've never done this before". But I felt that being in India made it much easier to think more like "well, ok". One became more motivated to see opportunities. Maybe not everywhere, but it was easier to think "ok, so what can we do? This is actually a problem and we are eager to help out with this. So how can we find a solution?" I felt that being in India really helped a lot. It was a great motivation in itself.' (Idun, female, Week 3)

Thus, independent of previous skills, the exposure to challenges in India helped the students to become better at identifying entrepreneurial opportunities.

Culture and context

The majority of students had very limited experiences from underprivileged contexts prior to the course. A handful of them had been travelling as tourists to developing countries, for example, on safari in East Africa or backpacking in Nepal. This means that they in general had very little pre-understanding of what they would face during the field visit and how they would react on the challenges. During the first week, one said:

'... very far from it. Never been to Asia at all. I have never been in a place with all that poverty. No.' (Marianne, female, Week 1)

A strong motivation for choosing the course was to experience the culture of India. However, during the second and third weeks, many reflections on culture related to cultural barriers:

'... there are definitively some cultural challenges and barriers which might be difficult to overcome as they probably have been for a hundred or two hundred years. And it is a bit difficult to change that overnight.' (Arne, male, Week 2)

'I see many opportunities, but I also see barriers in terms of poverty, gender roles, gender stereotypes and culturally, how things are. I think it's a long way to go, in some places. But there is also potential for improvements, or growth potential.' (Marit, female, Week 2)

Despite difficulties in the context on India, several students express that they see opportunities for change:

'Since there are a lot of problems, it becomes more like "maybe it is possible to help out in this or that way". One feels like seeing opportunities instead of problems, so I feel that there are more opportunities, really.' (Idun, female, Week 2)

Compassion

The second overarching pattern relates to the role of compassion and is built on three dominant themes: the experience of working with the local community, the emotional roller-coaster that students experienced over the course, and lastly the shift in how they expressed their motivations towards the course.

Working with local community

A central part of the course was to let students interact with the local community. By visiting the villages, students got a deeper understanding of the projects they were working on:

'And yes, going into the villages, that was a very new experience to me, and very raw experience as well. I think it is hard to replicate that as a tourist. But I also feel sort of, not necessarily proud, but grateful that we get to make a difference, and that is also inspiring in the end.' (Arne, male, Week 2)

Interacting with the local community also exposed students to poverty and the needs of others. In relation to this, Trond reflects the last week:

'One can become very sad and unhappy when seeing so much poverty and understands ... Understand? One has understood

for a long time, but senses in the body how privileged oneself is. And it is something about the inner conflict, knowing that you are privileged, but still not give something back immediately. I think this has been very difficult.' (Trond, male, Week 3)

Emotional roller-coaster

A strong theme that emerges from the data is that the overall experience has been something of an emotional roller-coaster. Several students express gratitude for being part of the course, as Iselin says in India:

'Maybe not necessary to say, but I feel incredibly lucky to be here.' (Iselin, female, Week 3)

Further, another talked about the contrasts, and how this helps him to recognise how privileged he is:

'My experience of seeing the contrasts in rural India, for instance, going from one place with fancy buildings and so forth, going all the way down from the latter to places where they do not have clothes or they live in tents, sleeping on newspapers. I have learned to appreciate my surroundings, the way I live, the way we live here in Norway.' (Arne, male, Week 3)

There has also been frustration:

'I've felt small. Something like "who do you think you are? Coming here for a few days, thinking that you can make a difference?", "damn white people problems, thinking you are coming here to save them". Hopelessness is maybe a better word than small. Because the problem becomes so big.' (Line, female, Week 3)

One concluded after a visit in the villages:

'I need to soak it all up, I am going to remember this for the rest of my life.' (Marianne, female, Week 3)

Another summarises the course by stating:

'Well, I think the whole experience has been a carousel, simply expressed. There have been many ups and downs. But mostly joy.' (Bork, male, Week 3)

Shifting motivation

When, in the first week, asked about their motivation for taking the course, most of them expressed self-centred arguments, such as a chance for personal development and reflection. Around half of them expected that the course would be useful for developing their professional skills or as something to 'put on the CV'. A few of the students frankly said that they chose the course to get a free trip to India, without any ambitions to contribute to sustainable related solutions:

'The thing is that I saw this as an opportunity, to be honest, to go to India. I am straight out honest, and I am not going to lie and make up a story about that I am going to make a huge difference or that I feel like I am making the world a better place, because I am not.' (Bork, male, Week 1)

What Bork expressed changed dramatically over the course. From clearly stating that he has no interest in making a change, he started to talk about how difficult it was 'to see so many people suffer' and that it would be fantastic if the team manages to contribute, and 'if this actually can make

a change. That would just be absolutely amazing'. During the last week, he shares the following reflections:

'Something I've reflected on, is that I think I will find a lot of joy if I manage to understand the perspectives of others. The others in my team are such environmental activists, and I'm not like that at all. I am totally capitalist. But maybe I am wrong, maybe I have to start thinking differently? I'm a business person, right? The only thing I've focused on is generating returns. They [*rest of the team*] hate that, right? When I say I'm investing in stocks, they ask "when you invest, do you have any environmental concerns?". No, but maybe I have to start with that. Maybe I should, become a bit more empathetic ... I've never looked at it like this.' (Bork, male, Week 3)

Entrepreneurial motivation

The last pattern captures the shift in entrepreneurial motivation and is build on three themes: the importance of working in teams with others, the change in how students identify themselves as entrepreneurial or not and students' increased motivation to take action as change agents for sustainable development.

Working in teams

A central theme that emerged is the role of working in teams. This was highlighted by several students as a motivation for further engagement in entrepreneurship. They expressed a joy of working together and the importance of contributing with different competencies. It was also expressed that teamwork gave them the sense of being part of something bigger. Sonja reflects in the end of the course:

'... what I learned is that connections are really important, and good connections. I always thought that if I want to do something, I want to do it by myself, because I want it to be like I imagined it. And if I work with other people it would become a mess. But now I have understood that it is really important to work with people and to have a lot of good connections with other people who are doing the same things, because they inspire you and they help you, and that can also improve your own idea.' (Sonja, female, Week 3)

Entrepreneurial identity

The majority of them were non-business students and were not necessarily motivated to enter business life. However, most of them argued that they, because of the course structure and field visit, gained a more entrepreneurial mindset, which they thought would be useful within their different professional fields in the future. Trond reflected in the following way:

'Well, I had no perspectives on this before. I didn't know that there were so many opportunities to be engaged. That has really lowered the threshold for me, to be engaged [*in entrepreneurship*] or to create something new.' (Trond, male, Week 3)

Sustainability challenges

Some of the students expressed already in the first interview, that they were specifically interested in sustainable development, like Elena:

'I noticed the word sustainability and the word sustainable solutions, and the descriptions. I am interested in kind of developing that in all sorts of ways ...' (Elana, female, Week 3)

However, from being exposed to an underdeveloped community, several students reflected on the need to take action and seemed to feel that it is urgent:

'I think it has changed. Because one thing is what you read about and what you see in movies or short films or similar arenas, but when you go there you get the feeling yourself, and your interpretations of the setting, not necessarily only through someone else's interpretations. So, it has definitively been motivating in the sense that I could do work on that in the future.' (Arne, male, Week 3)

Many of them also reflected on the need to take action and to be involved in sustainable development, even if lacking 'the right technical skills':

'I really liked being down there and it is really exciting. I think there are probably other people who perform more capable than me, but I was there, I am maybe the one who is interested. So, I think I have ideas that could make a change.' (Emily, female, Week 3)

'Definitively more motivated, because I saw that it is possible, and it is being done by many people, and why not me as well? I always wanted to do something in this sector of work, but now I have a clearer vision of how it could look like.' (Elena, female, Week 3)

Discussion

The intense entrepreneurship training exposed students to several challenges, including teamwork in stressful situations, practical and intellectual tasks. Most importantly, they got first-hand experiences of real problems, facing poor people in the Global South. The data showed that several processes took place simultaneously over the course period, sorted into three overarching patterns (Box 1).

Firstly, themes that related to the learning process per se were identified (Vanevenhoven 2013). These related to the crucial role of gaining first-hand experiences, where the local partner played an important role. Over the course period, students learned to utilise previous competences and skills, and they became better at identifying what they actually could contribute with. Further, experiencing the context and barriers related to cultural norms made them reflect on barriers in new ways. Taken together, these processes increased students' ability to recognise opportunities for entrepreneurship.

Secondly, themes related to the emotional journey and the role of compassion were discussed. As discussed by Miller et al. (2012), compassion emerges when someone notices the suffering of others and feels an urge to ease this suffering.

BOX 1: Overview of themes and patterns.

Dominant themes		
Working with a local partner Competence and skills Culture and context	Working with local community Exposure to poverty and needs Emotional roller-coaster	Working in teams Entrepreneurial identity Sustainability challenges
Overarching patterns		
Learning from experiences <i>Increased ability to recognise opportunities for entrepreneurship</i>	Compassion <i>From self-centred towards other-centred</i>	Entrepreneurial motivation <i>Change in entrepreneurial identity and willingness to take action</i>

In this study, the importance of being connected to the local community was highlighted, as well as the implications of being exposed to poverty and the needs of others. A strong theme was also what students experienced as an 'emotional roller-coaster'. These different processes seemed to affect students, to various degrees, from self-centred motivations towards other-centred orientations. In other terms, several of the students expressed more compassion towards people in the Global South, towards the end of the course. As suggested by Jones and Underwood (2017), this study thus contributes to understanding the role of emotions for learning.

Thirdly, themes that were related to entrepreneurial motivations were discussed (Rieckmann 2012). The team-process, and the sense of being part of a group, was emphasised. It was also clear that several students expressed that they identified themselves as more entrepreneurial after taking the course, even though the majority were non-business students. A strong theme was that the majority clearly stated that their interest and motivation to be engaged in sustainable development had increased. Thus, they expressed that they were both more entrepreneurial and were more willing to take action for positive change.

Based on findings from the longitudinal data, it is possible to identify that several processes are taking place simultaneously, as discussed above. However, the data do not show correlations between the overarching patterns. Taken together, the data indicate that the three patterns are linked, meaning that the experience-based learning process facilitates increased ability for compassion, which in turn spurs entrepreneurial motivation and sustainable agency. Even though an overall reading of the data indicates that there is a process taking place between the patterns, such potential correlations need to be further explored.

Conclusion

This study is based on a unique project, involving master's students from various disciplines, entrepreneurship educators, an NGO working with entrepreneurship development as well as numerous people in an underprivileged community in the Global South. The rich data collected during the process described above gives in-depth insights on how students can develop compassion, empathy and a deeper understanding for global challenges of today, with potential to address these within their various professions in the future.

The course in focus of this study was oriented towards awareness raising among students and to change attitudes rather than building theoretical knowledge (Fretschner & Weber 2013). In line with suggestions by Vanevenhoven (2013), the structure of the course made both students and educators to leave the classroom, getting experiences from the real world in a Global South context. Further, this was an experiential learning project, aiming to raise students' social and sustainability consciousness (George 2015). Recognising the importance of entrepreneurial mindsets for sustainable

development, the course in focus involved master's students from various disciplines.

Findings from this study contribute to the field of entrepreneurship education, by highlighting how experience-based teaching can spur students' compassion for others, as well as highlighting how students can become more motivated to take action and target urgent, global challenges of today, in entrepreneurial ways.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study is based on a small sample and conducted over a short time period. It is therefore not possible to generalize results to a broader context. The data in this study are longitudinal, where the same students were interviewed on three occasions. This approach has been beneficial in order to understand the parallel processes taking place simultaneously. However, as suggested by Jones and Underwood (2017), it would have been valuable to also conduct follow-up interviews with students some time after the course.

Further, the study is based on interviews, and there may be response biases related to the data. For example, when the last round of interviews was conducted, the students were tired and emotionally affected by the intense experiences over the last weeks, which may influence their responses. Given the positive potential of this type of experience-based entrepreneurship training, further studies are needed to investigate the field. Different students may receive different contexts, and related challenges, in individual, unique ways, which would be interesting to further explore.

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.L. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research. In Norway, there are no requirements for formal ethical clearance when dealing with non-sensitive data. No sensitive data was collected. Interviews were audio recorded, and later transcribed.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.L., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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