

# AGENCY AND EMOTIONS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Research on entrepreneurship education (EE) has emphasized its outcomes and impact, but the students' aspect of EE is less emphasized. The study context, experiential EE, assumes that students act as agents and that they self-direct and -regulate their actions (Bandura, 2001; Jones, 2019). In this study we investigated how higher education students construct their agency and emotions in their talk. Drawing from longitudinal qualitative data, we analyzed talk in video diaries (vlogs) collected from 10 students who participated in experiential EE course. Our findings extend the views of agency as a capacity by showing how subjectively constructed agency unfolds as shattered, ambivalent, and continuously transforming expressions. Students' talk about the agency is drifting, and the comparisons between the student and her team, between her team and other teams and elaborations on the course shape their expression of agency. In addition, we found that the continuous transformation of agency is followed by the changes in the expression of the emotions. Positive emotions concern reaching personal and/or team-level milestones, whereas negative emotions arise from setbacks. Hence, our findings generate implications for EE and requests to refine its assumptions of students as self-guided entrepreneurial subjects. Hence, our study suggests that in addition to the intended learning outcomes set for entrepreneurship education, the changes in students' agency and emotions should be taken into account, as well.

**Keywords:** Agency; emotions; entrepreneurship education; video diaries; vlogs; qualitative; episodic research; narrative analysis

## Introduction

Research on entrepreneurship education (EE) has emphasized the outcomes and impact of EE. It may foster students' entrepreneurial intentions (Rauch & Hulsink, 2015) and support the development of students' entrepreneurial competences (Armuña et al., 2020), but it can also lower these (Nabi et al., 2017; Oosterbeek et al., 2010). In addition to studying its outcomes, a majority of recent research in EE has focused on the teachers' side, such as the pedagogies and methods they use (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008), how they design the learning environments (Ilonen, 2020), and which competences teachers need in EE (Birdthistle et al., 2016). In the search of answers to the outcomes of EE the research has neglected students' aspect.

Out of different types of EE an experiential EE is pointed out as an efficient way to expose students to entrepreneurial behavior and thinking (Cooper et al., 2004; Lackeus & Middleton, 2018). In experiential EE learning-by-doing approaches (Lackeus, 2020) place students in the center and put them to act as agents, negotiate and plan their actions and goals (Gielnik et al., 2015). Through this, students operate as interpretive agents (Gilbert-Saad et al., 2018) of their surroundings and learning environment, which often involves multiple stakeholders in- and outside of the classroom (Lackeus, 2020). Students have to self-direct and -regulate the paths of their actions (Bandura, 2006; Jones, 2019) which shape their learning or lack thereof. This kind of agency has an important, but often neglected role in EE research. In addition to the

agency, the ups and downs in experiential EE brings up an emotional aspect. The emotional influence of EE can dictate whether students will start a new business or position themselves as entrepreneurs (Jones & Underwood, 2017; Othman et al., 2019). Different emotional events and emotional support from others shape students' perceptions of their entrepreneurial identity and self-insight (Lackeus, 2014; Treffers et al., 2019). Despite the fact that experiential EE exposes students to act, feel and think like entrepreneurs, both the agency and emotional aspects of EE are not widely addressed (Jones, 2019; Jones & Underwood, 2017; Nabi et al., 2017).

The purpose of this study is to unfold the students' side of EE. In order to address the described research gap, we investigate how students construct their own agency and emotions in EE. Moreover, through our longitudinal qualitative research design we study how these intertwine with the educational episodes. In order to achieve this, we use and analyze 76 video diaries (vlogs) collected from 10 students who participate in 14-week long experiential entrepreneurship course.

Our findings show, first, that subjectively constructed agency unfolds as shattered, ambivalent, and continuously transforming expressions. Hence, students' talk about the agency is drifting, and the expressions are shaped by many aspects. This suggests that the agency, such as entrepreneurial agency (McMullen et al., 2020), is not a capacity as acknowledged in the existing literature and as something, which can be developed through education (Jensen & Luthans, 2002). Following the ambivalent expressions of agency, the discussed emotions vary, too. Moreover, the expressed emotions seem to be conflicting denoting to uncertainty and/or confusion of the interpretation of the events and experiences taking place in experiential EE. Third, intriguingly, EE seems to generate negative emotions arising from inaction and ambiguity. These emotions seem also to shape students' narratives of their agency, and our findings show how negative emotions among others transform active agency into almost *laissez faire* type-of-agency. These findings highlight the interaction and connectivity between agency and emotions (de Holan et al., 2019).

Our empirical study extends the previous approaches of agency and emotions (Jones, 2019; Othman et al., 2019) and responds to the request for investigating the production of agency and emotions as they emerge in EE (see Jones & Underwood, 2017; Jones, 2019; Nabi et al., 2017). Moreover, our study contributes to the critical EE studies (Fletcher & Selden, 2015; Tedmanson et al., 2012) by showing that EE's outcomes are diverse despite the use of simplified and intentional pedagogical design. The variation of outcomes is caused by the changes in students' agency and emotions. Finally, our findings illustrate that narrativizing agency and emotions in EE is an attractive, albeit still less addressed (Othman et al., 2019) path of research. Through the longitudinal setting and analysis of the talk, we are able to depict a more complete picture of emotions involved. Through its methodological nuances, our study also contributes to the emerging field of processual and ethnographic studies of entrepreneurship (Pilegaard et al., 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2011).

## **Background**

Approaching entrepreneurship as a method (Sarasvathy & Venkataraman, 2011) experiential EE allows students to engage in entrepreneuring (i.e. negotiating, networking, testing assumptions, making decisions, etc.) when creating new value (Rindova et al., 2009). Different types of experiential EE produce outcomes ranging from enhanced entrepreneurial competences to increased entrepreneurial motivation (Lackeus, 2020). In general, students'

engagement in an experiential hands-on and learning-by-doing approach is assumed to generate durable learning outcomes (Gielnik et al., 2015; Lackeus, 2020).

In experiential EE, students relate, engage and interact to test their assumptions and expectations about potential future markets. Hence, being entrepreneurial stems from acted temporal events (Morris et al., 2012) which transform, reproduce, and challenge the structure of agency (McMullen et al., 2020). Individuals act as agents, when they behave actively and purposefully (Bandura, 2001; 2006), even when facing external constraint (Goss et al., 2011; Spreitzer et al. 2005). Entrepreneurial agency specifically requires abilities and motivation from the individual as well as process skills to engage in entrepreneurial action over time (McMullen et al., 2020). When students are pushed to become agents, they self-direct and -regulate the course of their actions (Jones, 2019), and the contextualized external constraints, such as learning environment, learned norms, and practices, can discourage or encourage the entrepreneurial agency (McMullen et al., 2020). Through their agency students should build a sense of power and control over their decisions, actions, and outcomes (Baum et al., 2014; Jones, 2019). The sense of power guides what individuals do, think and feel, which connects agency to emotions (Goss et al., 2011). Accordingly, when engaging in entrepreneurial behavior in experiential EE, students seek to balance their perceptions of the imaginary or expected “entrepreneur-self” and their own actions (Jones, 2019; Steyaert, 2007).

Agency also involves interaction, social positioning and engagement. Hence, the agency is constructed through the comparisons between individual’s selves, actions, and goals with others’ actions and goals (Davies & Harré, 1990; Goss & Sadler-Smith, 2018). Hence, the subjective nature of agency, power and control of actions, interacts with its intersubjective nature, social positioning with others and with the structures surrounding individuals (Goss & Sadler-Smith, 2018; McMullen et al., 2020). This continuous interplay can be supported in EE as in any kind of training, which enables the renewal of agency when individuals seek to realize their goals (Jensen & Luthans, 2002). Throughout the learning process the structure of entrepreneurship unfolds as students get a sense of opportunities and understand the context of their actions both of which shape their agency in the process: Understanding, actions, and agency are in dialogical, dynamic relationship (Jack & Andersson, 2002). This implies that agency is a “living organism” which evolves over time. Both the conscious thinking and the intended goals are shaped by students’ actions, but also when they consciously adjust their inner and outer worlds (Jones, 2019).

Hence, agency strongly links to personal dimensions, such as values, aspirations, self-confidence, and identity (Bandura, 1989). Agency is a deeply emotional action taking aimed to change something that one truly cares about into a better state (Lackeus et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial actions relate to individuals’ affections, emotions, feelings, or moods (Cardon et al., 2012; Scarantino, 2017), and having a “students as entrepreneurs” -pedagogy directs students’ emotional processes that shape their behaviors (Jones & Underwood, 2017). Accordingly, experiential EE, which encourages students to employ their agency, generates real-life emotional consequences for students (Lund Dean et al., 2019). These outcomes stem from the dialogue between agency and emotions both of which are vital in understanding of individuals’ experiences (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2004). Emotions affect the construction of agency and self-efficacy (de Holan et al., 2019; Zampetakis et al., 2017). Hence, EE shapes emotions through its learning environments, tasks provided for students, and collaborative learning (Arpiainen et al., 2013).

Emotions are related to our goals—“in happiness a goal is attained or maintained, in sadness there is a failure to attain or maintain a goal, in anger an agent causes a loss of a goal, and in fear there is an expectation of failure to achieve a goal” (Stein & Trabasso, 1992 in Ekman, 1999, 46). Reaching the set goals generates positive emotions, which boost the agency, but on the contrary not achieving the goals may generate negative emotions, such as anxiety, powerlessness and loss of self-confidence (Lund Dean et al., 2019) which may hinder or even lower the perceived agency.

Although emotions can occur in the absence of other people, emotions are most notably mobilized to deal with important interpersonal encounters and to develop and regulate the interpersonal relationships (Ekman, 1999). The reflective nature of emotions can echo the area of living and even the social position of individuals, and thus, emotions affect the construction of a self (de Holan et al., 2019). Emotions increase actors’ commitment and engagement in actions (Fan & Zietsma, 2016), and for instance, founders’ ability to control emotions seem to aid their recovery from poor results (De Cock et al., 2020). Agency and emotions are also partially constructed in the interaction with others. Emotions help people to connect and position themselves with others through social bonds (Tracy & Robins, 2004).

## **Research materials and methodology**

### *Study context*

We collected our data from voluntary participants in a non-compulsory, practice-based bachelor-level course organized jointly among four Finnish higher education institutions. During the course, the students are required to team up, craft and test business ideas, and ultimately to set up an operating business. The course is intended for all students interested in entrepreneurship, and the participating students do not have to have preliminary business ideas, experience, or studies in entrepreneurship when entering the course. Hence, the course consists of students with an initial business idea and intention to start a business, and students with a general interest towards the topic.

The 14-week-long experiential learning experience begins with a one-day-long boot camp session where the students meet each other for the first time. Thereafter, the course comprises bi-monthly meetings followed by independent work in multidisciplinary teams. Team sizes can range from two to five members. In each meeting, teams are assigned with exercises, such as idea generation and testing, business model generation and validation, and pitching and marketing their idea. These are intended to indirectly guide student teams’ new venture formation processes. Students are encouraged to find answers themselves, and the teachers act as coaches, posing questions to help students to proceed in their new venture formation. Hence, the course can be categorized as learning 'through' entrepreneurship, which exposes students to become enterprising individuals (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008). Despite the fact that the course does not involve any traditional teaching methods, the students are briefly provided with some basics about entrepreneurship, such as financial calculations and business models, and a visitor from a local business office to introduce how a business is registered. In all, students are encouraged to experiment, test, and make the necessary decisions concerning their venture creation process by themselves, just as genuine entrepreneurs would.

### *Research materials*

Through an inductive and constructionist approach we focus in this study on students' interpretations of their own agency and emotions, and how they create their own world through the "narrative mode of knowing" (Bruner, 1991) in the context of experiential EE. We do this in a longitudinal setting in order to analyze, how agency and emotions are intertwined and how they transform over time in the students' talk, i.e. in their individually constructed narratives, during experiential EE. In this study, the narrative data represents the efforts of the students to describe and interpret themselves and their experiences (Mishler, 1990), and reflect her emotions, goals, valuations, and judgements (Riessman, 1993; Feldman et al., 2004). In narrative research, the narrative and the self are inseparable, for "narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience" (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 19). Hence, the students' narrated experiences are a form of self-interpretation (Mackenzie, 2008), where the students as narrators strive to find coherent form of self-maintenance. Often, however, individuals "narrativize [...] experiences [...] where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society" (Riessman 1993, p. 3) bringing out tensions that are meaningful for the narrator (Peura, 2017).

In order to achieve the above, we take use of students' video diaries, vlogs, (Bates, 2013) that are one form of participant-generated data easily produced in connection with participating in EE. Although videos are still less frequently used form of research material in business studies (Clarke, 2011), they are well fitted to study participants self-reports of their own thoughts, actions and emotions (Rich & Patashnick, 2002). In doing so vlogs allow us to study agency and emotions as lived experiences with the spontaneity of life events to be captured (Cherrington & Watson, 2010). Nicolini (2012) also suggests that visual or verbal artefacts, such as videos, are empirically appropriate methods for investigating the complex interplays of practice, emotion, reflection, performance, and identity (Lund Dean et al., 2019).

The research materials consists of 76 vlogs (i.e. narratives) from 10 students. The vlogs were created during the described entrepreneurship course in 2019 and 2020. Vlogging was voluntary, and it was an option for the students to get an exemption from the mandatory final self-evaluation report. The volunteering vloggers were given a guidance sheet that instructed them to discuss what had happened during the course and talk about their own and others actions with a video that lasted minimum ten minutes. The instructions gave them freedom to choose how, where and when they filmed the vlogs, but advised them to submit minimum one vlog per every second week close to the course meetings. The length of the final vlogs varied between 10 to 30 minutes, and the amount of vlogs per student was from 6 to 10 vlogs. Vlogs were private and not shared outside the research team.

### *Analyzing research materials*

Elementary video attributes consist of visual, auditive and textual components (Smeaton, 2007 in Knauzt & Stock, 2011). In this paper, we focus on spoken text. The vlogs were transcribed and talk-as-text was analyzed. *In the first phase of analysis* both authors read the transcriptions and created a grand narrative for each student to form an overview of the content of the vlogs. This included noting the objectives the student set for the course at start, main events described in the vlogs, and finally, the outcome of the course (Table 1).

**Table 1. Research participants**

Name (pseudonym)	Year	Vlogs (amount)	Field of study	Interest towards entrepreneurship	Outcome
Johnny	2020	10 vlogs 101 minutes	Cultural production	No interest in starting a business	No interest in starting a business
Elly	2020	8 vlogs 80 minutes	International business	Interest in starting a business	Interest in starting a business, recognizes learned skills
Andy	2020	8 vlogs 113 minutes	Cultural production	Is currently self-employed	No interest in starting a business
Jonathan	2020	8 vlogs 83 minutes	Community pedagogue	Is currently self-employed (freelancer)	No interest in starting a business
Edith	2020	6 vlogs 82 minutes	Cultural production	Interest to see, how a business is created from an initial idea	Interest in trying again to develop a business from an idea
Edward	2020	8 vlogs 85 minutes	Community pedagogue	Interest in developing and selling a business concept	No interest in starting a business, but possibly to sell a business concept
William	2020	8 vlogs 98 minutes	Nursing	Interest in starting a business	Interest in starting a business, a few ideas ready
Ally	2020	8 vlogs 99 minutes	Marketing	Considers entrepreneurship as one potential career option	Considers entrepreneurship as one potential career option, but which requires more effort
Hannah	2019	7 vlogs 77 minutes	Community pedagogue	Considers entrepreneurship as one potential career option	Considers entrepreneurship as one potential career option, but which requires more effort
Violet	2019	5 vlogs 103 minutes	Community pedagogue	Interest in starting a business	Will proceed establishing a business

*In the second phase of the analysis* both authors participated in the narrative analysis of the texts, where each vlog was analyzed and coded concerning the goal congruence (primary appraisal) of the events and thoughts reported by the student and timed with the course program. In order to synthesize different elements referred in the literature review, we posed two questions to the research materials: 1) How the narrators construct their own agency (Riessman, 2001), also in relation to others (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 2005), and 2) What emotions are constructed in the talk and to which actions, events, and social interactions they are connected to? (Valdés et al., 2010)

Agency can be detected narrative material by analyzing how the narrators assume power and exert influence over actions and events (Riessman, 2001). The focus is on how active or passive the vlogger is (powerful vs. bystander vs. victim), and how active she is (subjective narratives vs. neutral narratives). The vloggers' self-conception indicates how they place judgments on the retrospective interpretation of their actions, whether or not they "see" themselves as active

agents in their talk. Furthermore, we take into account, how the narrators interact and socially position themselves with other agents (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 2005). The analysis is concerned with whom or what does the vloggers interact with, how they position themselves with other agents, what kinds of interactions transpire between them, and what kinds of roles and parts are assigned to all agents.

Emotions and emotional expressions can be observed in speech, in the linguistic content. Emotion denoting words are the most concrete description of emotions (Schröder, 2003 in Valdés et al., 2010) Basic emotions include happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust (Ekman, 1999). For identifying verbal emotional expressions, we applied emotion classification (Valdés et al., 2010) that considers that each basic emotions denotes a family of related emotions. For example, expressing enthusiasm denotes happiness that is considered pleasant and positive emotion, annoyance denotes to anger which is considered unpleasant and negative emotion, and curiosity is considered neutral (Valdés et al., 2010). When we analyzed emotions, we considered not only the content (what is said), but also the form (how it is said). Studies in the area of psychotherapy—that regularly uses narratives as a method to elicit subjective appraisal of current or past events—note that the quality of the content of individual’s speech provides information of the emotional involvement. High emotional involvement is exhibited in highly personalized, vivid, and detailed telling (including also e.g. a problem-solution event), whereas descriptions of impersonal and external events represent lower levels of personal involvement. (Valdés et al., 2010) Hence, the quality of telling was analyzed against this backdrop.

*In the third phase of analysis* the episodes described by the student were thematically categorized and compared to narratives of other students. Data sessions were held within the research team in each step of analysis to ensure consistency of the interpretation of the research material.

## **Results**

We present our results by focusing on how the students construct agency and emotions in their talk across the vlogs via discussing overreaching and repeating themes related to team, other actors and the course implementation. Students introduce these issues in their vlogs as issues that either enable/support or inhibit action. Accordingly, the students express emotions or emotional reactions as a response to action taken or not taken. We divide the results into five sub-themes that illustrate the construction of agency and emotions: *The alignment of personal and team-level motivation to enable and support agency, Locating “I” and “we”, Employing comparisons to position “them”, Non-action and other protests against the course, and Taking a step towards/ away from entrepreneurship.*

One particular aspect in our data is the role of COVID-19 due which the course organized in 2020 moved from physical meetings to an online version in the middle of the implementation of the course. This was a new situation for students and teachers, and hence, many of the studied students talk about it. According to our analysis, however, the issues introduced in the vlogs regarding team, other actors, and the course implementation were initiated already before the COVID-19 and they continue throughout the online version of the course. Hence, the sub-themes do not seem to change how students narrate them. Accordingly, we have decided to analyze and present the research materials from the course 2019 and 2020 together.

## **The alignment of personal and team-level motivation to enable and support agency**

Students start vlogging by introducing themselves and telling why they have enrolled the course. Only a few students do not articulate the reasons for participating to the course, but most explain what they expect from the course. They are interested in either setting up a business or learning how to set up a business in order to understand about entrepreneurship. Interestingly, students also anticipate what their team members look forward to already based on the initial interactions with others during the first contact days. They seem to accept the fact that some students attend the course only for the study credits and with secondary interest in entrepreneurship. Most students are able at this point to reconcile their own expectations with others and stay good spirited although there are already apparent differences among the team members' interest towards entrepreneurship.

Team and team members are prominent topics the students discuss throughout their vlogs. One overreaching insight concerns the team: The importance of team motivation and the fit between the team and the individual student. More importantly, the team is constructed in the vlogs as one of the critical contexts that supports or inhibits the students in taking action as intended according to the course program. Concretely, students react to different changes in their context and express contentment or dissatisfaction depending on how it affects their actions. They also express when they perceive their own actions and team to be aligned/not aligned. For example, first, the students and their teams begin with certain levels of expectations that the vloggers construct in their vlogs by telling about initial “*good feelings*”, “*high motivation*” and “*shared understandings*” of the objectives set by the team for the course.

*“I have to still mention our group that it is pretty good, I have made two new good friends and one old good friend was already there so we have now a pretty good combination and everyone have pretty similar set of values” (Johnny, vlog 2)*

Some students mention that they were “*nervous*” at the beginning, but later they felt “*relieved*” to notice that their own and the team’s motivations match or that they are “*pleased to find like-minded people*” with who they share “*good chemistry*” (William, vlog 1).

The high expectations set at the beginning of the course, however, start fading out quickly. It is notable that all students express this shift in their vlogs. Hence, their first setback in the course emerges quite early, and this makes them “*extremely disappointed*”. In these instances, we detect a change in the students’ narrative concerning their and their team’s agency. Specifically, while the start of the course provides an open future and different opportunities to grasp on, the decrease in team motivation prompts the students to talk about lost opportunities instead of making plans for the future. This is particularly vexing for them. Some also report that the same takes place within the team discussions indicating the team becoming passive as opposed to being proactive in reaching their initial objectives. For example, Johnny (vlog 5) discusses how the talks in the team start to focus on what “*should have been done, but still nothing is done*”.

Most students report reasons for the sudden stall both in the personal and team level. Such reasons are related to the perceived disparity between the required effort and the reward. For example, William (vlog 3) and Edith (vlog 3) both conclude at the same part of the course that it might not be worth the effort to try to do anything, if others are not motivated. While William tries to empathize with others understanding their situation (lack of time or interest), Edith is

puzzled on what to do, if others are not motivated anymore. In these occasions, she—and others alike—present themselves to be in the middle of no-win situation.

*“If people are thinking of quitting, it does not motivate me much to put a lot effort in this course. Because why put effort now, if there is a fear that somebody will quit. It would be then for nothing, because the whole thing would break apart.” (Edith, vlog 3)*

Elly, on the other hand, elaborates this through comparing the students’ effort in the team:

*“...she doesn't attend our meetings, and she has usually missed almost every [laughs] team meeting, which has been pretty annoying...she hasn't brought almost any input while other members and myself are producing content...it has annoyed me a lot, but on the other hand I have had moments when I haven't done so much for the team.” (Elly, vlog 5)*

Johnny, also, reports that he and his team did not complete many of the course assignments. They did not register their business and they forgot to submit their application to the only business idea competition they were intended to participate as part of the course. He explains (Johnny, vlog 5) that completing course assignments “*are too demanding*” when one is not interested or motivated.

While each student and team in the course is unique, they still seem to share similar experiences during different phases of the course. Specifically, students report temporally positive experiences at the early stages of the course, when they are enthusiastic about their idea. The idea development is at this stage supported by seemingly easier exercises, such as naming the team. Such exercises can be completed quickly and they have little consequence concerning the business idea development even if they mainly boost the team morale and give the students a positive experience in advancing in the course. These accomplishments are accompanied with expressions of joy and contentment in the vlogs. Edith (vlog 2), for example, joys over the “*fantastic name*” the team has chosen. The students report in their vlogs of many changes in the team name, hence, they can be flexible with it.

However, when more demanding exercises focusing on testing the idea and customers’ needs are at hand, the motivation starts fading and the students express disappointment. Hence, these exercises require the team to advance in the course synchronously with the course program. When this does not happen, the students express in their vlogs concern and worry of not being able to act as intended by themselves or as a team, according to the course design. Weakened team motivation puts students’ own motivation at stake, too. Even students, such as Elly, who participate in the course with high expectations of possibly starting a new venture after the course, start to lose their motivation. Teams, which get back on the track, are satisfied of their progress. Edward, for example, has a “*better feeling*” that eventually they “*have something concrete, a business*” and they are now “*founding members with a bank account, where each have out money*” (Edward, vlog 5).

### **Locating “I” and “we”**

Students construct their own agency in different ways in relation to other students in their teams. As narrators, the students have the possibility to focus and bring forth any topic that is important or interesting to them. Concerning discussed topics they narrate different stories or incidents that have taken place in the course, and place different actors in them. This positioning is a way for the students to construct themselves as agents in the course. Some

students focus on narrating mainly their own experiences in the course from the first person perspective, analyzing and recalling their own actions and their own feelings. These students, most notably, discuss their own role or lack thereof, if they have not been able to find themselves a suitable role fitting their skills or expectation.

Edward and Violet, for example, frequently discusses their role as the “leaders”, also consider the skillsets of their team members. Violet, especially, is very committed to her idea and to make it happen. The ownership of the initial business idea and her position as the leader in the team seem to be important to her. When a new team member with business background joins the team in the second joint meeting, Violet wonders if the member understand that it is her idea.

*“I do not know if she has internalized yet that I created a gang so that I can realize my own dream. That this idea is in my head.” (Violet, vlog 2)*

Ally and Hannah, on the other hand, tell being frustrated that they are dependent on others expertise in the team, because the idea their team is developing is not their idea nor in their area of expertise. Ally is a marketing student, but does not at any point in her vlogs talk about how she could employ her expertise in the team. As a result, Ally (vlog 1) feels “redundant”. Hannah, likewise, thinks she is not what is expected from the course and she starts to portray herself as a victim, who has lost the confidence she had in the beginning of the course.

On the other hand, students, who position themselves strongly with the team, do not highlight their own actions, but narrate these experiences from the “we” and team perspective. In these narrations, there is no distinction between the personal experience and the team experience. These students do not express ownership of the idea, but they more or less come along for to the ride. Furthermore, some students dedicate more time in their vlogs in discussing the team in overall. For instance, Johnny, doesn’t talk about himself, but the team as a place of action or non-action. In his and students with similar agentic positions (Jonathan, Johnny, Andy) the talk highlights and appreciates team dynamics, team members’ friendly relationships, and team’s motivation.

In some cases, students talk how they could have contributed in the team and used their expertise to progress their team’s operations. This contribution is, however, highlighted only towards the end of course as their focus turns to retrospective reminiscence of lost opportunities. For instance, Andy and Jonathan imply that changes in team dynamics, unevenly distributed workload within the team and unclear roles did not provide enough room or motivation for using their expertise with the team or in the course. Jonathan continuously expresses disappointment of that their team is not meeting enough often, and this is shown also when he discusses about being the only team member showing up to the course meetings. Elly, also, is continuously worried about the lack of communication between the team members. She, however, takes an active stance to this during the course, when she explains how she has asked a team member to do her duties (contact their potential mentor) (Elly, vlog 5).

### **Employing comparisons to position “them”**

The students employ comparisons in their vlogs particularly to other teams, be that teams in the course or alumni teams, who frequently also hold presentations in the course. Depending of the appraisal of the situation—perceived as failure or success—the students position

themselves or their team as better off, in similar situation or in worse situation than others. Their emotional reactions are conditioned by this positioning.

Comparisons are employed for different purposes. They enable students to set their personal ambitions and mark the progress in the course and feel satisfaction and accomplishment in the course. For example, at the beginning of the course, Hannah (vlog 1) talks about one of the course alumni team, *Bug*, which is a consistently mentioned also in other students' vlogs. By introducing Bug and talking about success, Hannah sets an objective to alike try to succeed in the course and fit into a team that shares similar ambitions. Both Edith and William also bring up Bug when they reflect upon the fit between them and Bug's team. Edith (vlog 3) notices the success of Bug, but considers herself to be in a "*left-over group*" with wrong people. William, on the other hand, has realized that his team is not ideal for him, but he uses Bug as an example of a possibility that a more suitable team can be formed also later on, after the course.

*"This Bug, the company producing edible crickets. Very interesting. Could have listened more, because it was in a way inspiring and especially to my ear it sounded good that they had also a situation, where the team was not fixed [...] and bit by bit they found other people."* (William, vlog 3)

William mentions in the following vlogs also several other teams. He brings up cases he looks up to and rejoices of their success. For example, he considers it fantastic that "*with a good idea and good motivation you can rise from this course high in Finnish scale.*" (William, vlog 5)

On the other hand, comparisons allow the students to express frustrations, fears and doubts regarding their own team, when no progress is shown or occurred events have been contrary to their expectations. The team is often presented as a unique entity. In this sense, for some students, team itself can be seen as an agent. Hannah compares her team to another team that was nearly as bad as them. Still, her team was the worse.

*"This is so laughable. [...] You must churn your own inferiority, because the others have good ideas. Only Softis team idea... Well they had idea, but they did not have execution [...] We had nothing."* (Hannah, vlog 4)

*Softis* is a team that focus on same line of industry as Hannah's team. Later on, Hannah (vlog 5) mentions them again as "*fellow sufferers*" indicating them both failing in the course as their perceived performance does not reach the same level with other teams. Many of the comparisons stem from the competitive setting the course, because the course consists of a series of competitions. Some of the competitions are voluntary and team has to enroll to them. When recalling the past competitions, the students analyze other teams' performance against their own. Success in the competition generates happiness for Johnny. Andy and Jonathan, on the other hand, face disappointment despite the last stretch effort they finally put in for the competitions after a long period of doing nothing. While many acknowledge the other teams being either better or worse, Jonathan utilizes his experience as a photographer and videographer to analyze competitions that utilize video material (vlog 7). His expertise can be seen as a layer of reflection when he is comparing their competitions video quality with other team's videos. His background let him to use these skills in producing their video, but it allows him to compare their teams' output with other teams' videos.

When comparing themselves with other teams, some students perceive themselves and their team better off than the others. Positive appraisals of their situations are connected, for

example, to the ways they perceive their team dynamics, such as not losing any team members like other teams might do. This has often an emotional attachment, such as feeling bad for the others. Elly, after discussing the trouble in and disappointment with her own team (vlogs 3 and 4), feels after all happy and proud of their team, because despite the challenges, they have continued and received a mentor (vlog 6).

### **Non-action and other protests against the course**

Narration of actions not taken are equally interesting as actions taken, because non-action (doing nothing) is an action in itself. The students often tell that they or the team have decided not to do the requested assignments, such as seeking for mentors or contacting customers. Hence, non-action is presented both as an individual and many cases also a team-level choice.

The conscious decision to not act upon course instructions is according to the students due to several different factors, such as decreased personal/team motivation. Their talk highlights that they and their teams think that only if they really would want, they could proceed with the idea, but the motivation and interest are fading, because there is so much work needed in order to make any progress. Hence, they could be active, i.e. they have the capability to do so, but instead, they decide not to use this capability. For example, as noted earlier Jonathan explains their team's decision not to register, but later, they registered their team, when they understood that it was one of the minimum requirements of passing the course (Jonathan, vlog 6).

Doubts regarding one's or team's skills are also inhibiting action. Despite the fact that the students explain how they have received good and supportive feedback from external stakeholders, such as mentors or audiences of their pitches, they still choose not to do anything. For example, Jonathan explained how they decided not to do the demo for the final meeting of the course, because they do not have necessary skills. These negative subjective appraisals of one's own skills are present especially in vlogs of students, who are uncertain of their position concerning other team members. These students notably also waver with their initial commitment in the course to develop a business and seem not to make up their mind on what they want from themselves.

Another reason are the perceived flaws in the course design and implementation. Edith "confesses" of not doing anything. One on hand, she says the course is "too easy" and on the other, she struggle to follow the course program.

*"Because this [vlogging] comes for research purposes on only, I can confess that I have not done anything to progress these things. [...] Somebody else has done most of the things, because this course is very difficult to get hang with." (Edith, vlog 3)*

She like many other complain how "annoying" it is that the assignments come unannounced with little time to prepare. She is frustrated to the point that she announces that she probably have to take part in another entrepreneurship course, since this one does not allow her to participate properly. Johnny also complains that his team did not have enough time to conduct the required tasks and he indirectly connects this to the talk about their lowered goals "just to finish the course, but do it well" (Johnny, vlog 6). Students frequently portray themselves as lost and confused, unable to place themselves in the entrepreneurial process. This is demonstrated when they frequently refuse to accept the pedagogical design of the course. For example, Edith, Edward, and Jonathan insist needing "a timetable/timeline", "an overall picture" and "guidelines" what to do next to be able to anticipate course activities. The lack of

clear understanding when and where something should be achieved (i.e. expectations of predetermined stages) is vexing.

*“I still don’t have any idea what we are supposed to achieved in this course [at this moment]. [...] So at what stage should be at this moment in the course?” (Ally, vlog 3)*

Similarly, in the midst of criticizing the course scheduling and content, Andy “confesses” that he has not done the work to make sense about what the teachers have asked their team to do. Instead of their own role in the course and in the team, the focus stays on external issues, such as course content. Despite of him being a part-time freelancer, Andy distances himself from entrepreneurship by claiming that it works for someone else. In all, his talk of himself is overshadowed by his wonderings of the course and he continuously claims that course does not help their progress or learning, but at the same time he claims that they are not willing to take any steps as they “can’t do anything”. Andy and Jonathan continuously dwell in being “bored” and seek excuses outside themselves for not doing anything, such as being busy doing other, more important things. For Andy, the motivation to finish the course is extrinsic, a mandatory set of tasks to receive credits.

Most often, the students tell about negative experiences and focus on how little they receive information on how to start a business and what kind of paper work is needed. Hence, their expectation has been to receive practical information of starting a business, but this is not met, which makes them frustrated and disappointed.

*“I feel that I still do not know anything about entrepreneurship. Such as company forms or anything, nothing more than at the start of the course. [...] we are kind of doing our company without knowing anything about company theory. [...] it has been a kind of what the fuck moment in some way.” (Edward, vlog 2)*

Some student find the assignment “non-committal kindergarten exercises” (Edith, vlog 1), “some of the most stupid things ever” that make the students “pissed” (Edward, vlog 3) while other consider them something useful in another context. Most notably, students struggle with the freedom they have to act upon their own ideas.

*“This thing is not rolling. I am frustrated, maybe that is the main point, that the teaching we have received is bad or non-existing. I feel that they are mentors, who advice, but the rest is left for us.” (Edward, vlog 5)*

### **Taking a step towards or away from entrepreneurship**

Towards the end of the course, students start to reflect on what they have gained and where to continue (or not to continue) from there on. In these reflections, the students return to their initial ideas about entrepreneurship discussing the achievements and unfinished issues. Key question the students consider is if they want to start a business. Each student discusses this in their vlogs, including those who were initially not interested in starting a business, but instead interested in learning the process. The vlogs demonstrate that the students have conflicting emotions regarding their participation to the course. Furthermore, many students cannot always clearly express their thoughts and feelings. Especially students, who have ambivalent ideas about entrepreneurship as a career option, seem not to be able to make their minds about the course, but try to solve this conflict in their last vlogs. Their conclusions, however, are not stable, but they shift during the course.

*Entrepreneurship has always been one career option for me. I am interested and motivated by working for myself. [...] But with this course. Suddenly, there is a week, when I am not interested at all. (Ally, vlog 6)*

For some, the motivation for participating to the course has changed. Even for Elly, who had expectations for starting a business, the intrinsic motivation transformed towards extrinsic motivation, i.e. acquiring study credits, in the middle of the course. However, her annoyance and disappointment of not being able to achieve the set goals in her team turned later towards the recognition of acquired skills which she “*may find some use in the future with someone who can implement a business idea and make it just like this kind of lifestyle.*” (Elly, vlog 4) She continues to discuss this in the later vlogs and she ponders that the course does not provide so much about how to start a business, but some skills to be used later. This reflects her intrinsic motivation is shaped to learn something new despite the fact that she originally was willing to start a business. At the end (Elly, vlogs 7 and 8) she elaborates this by discussing how the course’s tasks and exercises might help in the big picture, since in real life there is no startup guidebook to follow. For her the big realization is the learning of how one has to apply what she knows to find her own solutions under uncertainty and chaos. For many other students, the recognized learning remains thin or entirely nonexistent. Hannah and Edward even repeatedly mention that they “*haven’t learnt a thing about entrepreneurship in the course*”.

Elly’s shift from wanting to start a business towards wanting learn about entrepreneurship, epitomize the difference in the students’ interest towards entrepreneurship. Many, like Hannah, are highly interested in entrepreneurship, but they are not ready to commit to it in the course. Hence, there is a constant conflict between these objectives both of which have consequences on how the students perceive themselves and their participation. For Hannah, the strategy to cope in the course without having a proper business idea to implement is it to talk about the course as if it was a play. Her team has a “*joke-like name*” and a business idea with which they are not serious (Hannah, vlogs 1 and 2). This is surprising, because she is constantly talking about entrepreneurship as a career option and admires those that have great business ideas and have been able to take them into action. On the other hand, when her own team fails, she explains that they did so, because they are “*larping*” (Hannah, vlogs 4 and 5) which means live-action role playing. Hence, she considers the course as a game and she is trying to solve in her talk the conflict between the game they are merely playing and the reality that others are able to take their actions into. In the end of the course, she did not like the idea that she left the team down by leaving project “*unfinished*” referring to the fact that a startup was not formed and this “*left a bit of bad taste*” in her mouth (Hannah, vlog 7).

The decision to take a step towards entrepreneurship can also be overwhelming. Ally (vlog 2) dedicated parts in her first vlogs in trying to make sense, why she is hesitant and afraid to continue in developing the initial business idea. After realizing that it “*could work*”, she gets a feeling that she “*would like to minimize everything*”. This is puzzling to her, especially because she has “*a way of thinking that no dream is too big*”. She concludes that she cannot process it and she wants to give up. She returns to this again in her later vlogs, and in the end, she concludes having bad conscious of not starting a business.

*When I chose this course, I did not even think that the point would be to do something for real. But more like try out and something like that. [...] It is very difficult to leave this course here only as a course. [...] I would enjoy more, if I didn’t have bad conscience of not wanting to*

*continue after the course. [...] My feelings are really down now. [...] I am so confused. [...] I have conflicting feelings. (Ally, vlog 7)*

Similarly, Edward establishes in the first vlog that he is a bit nervous what come of the course, but he is there “*to learn skills for the future*” (vlog 1). Later he discusses different options for taking the idea into market, such as licensing it, and he focuses on practicalities involving its implementation. In the last vlog, he expresses his disappointment that the course did not eventually lead them into a business.

*“It is really frustrating that we have pushed this forward without the teachers and the further we go the less motivation we have, because our business idea is something we cannot take into reality.” (Edward, vlog 5)*

Essentially, students want to feel accomplishment and achievement of concrete milestones in the course. Missing them causes negative emotions, such as resentment, self-blame, shame and confusion of why others were able to achieve more, and are, hence, “better”. Williams explains that although Bug and other cases are inspiring, they do not provide the expected “*good feeling*” he is looking for from the course.

*“Good feelings are not something this course should offer through the inspiring experiences of others [such as case speakers], but specifically by so that one is able himself to implement something.” (William, vlog 5)*

Concerning the agency and emotions, it seems that participation is essential. Students express a clear need to be able to participate. Edith, for example, is from the start to those, who “*have this good entrepreneurship buzz that they talk about all the time*” and finds it “*unpleasant to watch, when one cannot be part of it*” (vlog 1). In the last vlog, she continues with the same theme expressing a desire to succeed in the course.

*“It was nice that ABC Systems went for the national finals. It was great in my opinion. Great idea. It was something that I like and what I would have wanted to do.” (Edith, vlog 8)*

If students choose not to conduct the assigned exercises or competitions planned to aid their learning, they seem to feel bored and frustrated at best. If, however, they choose participate, the emotional spectrum ranges from happiness to disappointment. Students seek positive emotions, but if the agency, the negotiation and direction of their actions, is constructed via choosing not to do anything, the connection between the agency and the emotions becomes shallow.

Moreover, students can express an array of negative emotions, such as frustration or disappointment, as well as positive emotions, such as a proudness and happiness, at the same time. These emotions can concern the team, for instance. Elly felt disappointed for their team’s performance in different challenges, but was proud when they were able to continue. Throughout the course, Johnny was battling with the motivation to continue, despite the fact that he was continuously satisfied with the team’s behavior.

## **Discussion**

In this study we investigated how higher education students construct their agency and emotions in their talk over a 14-week long entrepreneurship course. Drawing from longitudinal

qualitative research design and by applying narrative analysis (Riessman, 2001; Mackenzie, 2008), we analyzed talk in video diaries (vlogs) collected from 10 students who participated in experiential EE course. Study context, an experiential EE, encourages students to engage in entrepreneurship (Rindova et al., 2009), and students are expected to act as agents—to behave actively and purposefully (see Bandura, 2001; 2006). Through enacted agency, students are expected to self-direct and -regulate their actions (Jones, 2019). The existing literature acknowledges the agency, such as entrepreneurial agency (McMullen et al., 2020), as a capacity, which can be developed through education (Jensen & Luthans, 2002). Our findings challenge this view by showing how subjectively constructed agency unfolds as shattered, ambivalent, and continuously transforming expressions. Hence, students' talk regarding agency is drifting, and its' expressions are shaped by many aspects.

Our findings highlight a view that agency is not only a capacity, but it is also “alive”. When students describe their participation in the course and its various activities, they emphasize their own and their team's attributes, motivation, and ability to engage in the course. Throughout the course, the structure of entrepreneurship unfolds as students understand the context of their actions, and hence, the actions and agency are in dynamic relationship (Jack & Andersson, 2002). Our findings suggest that the team and other actors are essential in positioning oneself as an actor. Comparison, for example, is necessary to weigh the pros and cons of the participation, but comparison functions also in evaluating the balance between possible efforts and expected rewards the course can accrue. Participation or lack thereof shapes their conscious thinking and modify the intended goals, because they continuously adjust their inner and outer worlds (Jones, 2019). In experiential EE, the intended learning outcomes require teamwork and communication (Scott et al., 2019), and hence, team-level motivation and team dynamics were discussed often.

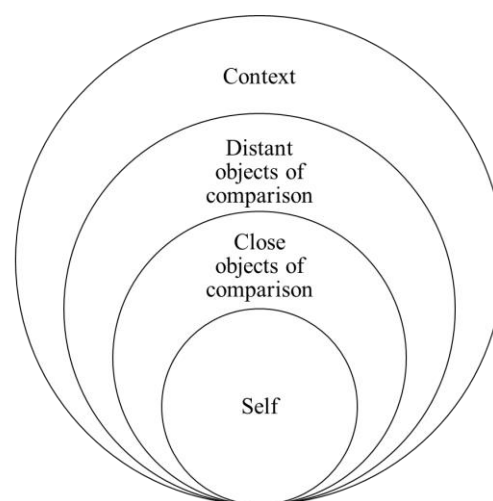
All studied students entered the course expecting that the course would provide opportunities to feel accomplishment, in some cases even success (starting a new business). However, when the course progressed and when the students realized that they are not able or interested to participate, they began to describe missing the expected positive outcomes that manifest as positive feelings. Especially, students, who are ambivalent concerning their possible entrepreneurial career, are not able to act as intended and reach the positive feelings. Hence, they are left without many planned learning experiences and often choose to stay on board only because of the study credits. Ilonen and the others (2018) noted that doubts in knowing how to proceed, unwillingness to proceed or unsatisfactory dynamics may cause this kind of coping mechanism. This also resembles the sunken cost fallacy that entrepreneurs might face (Baron, 1998): Students may think that they have invested too much to quit the course. In contrast, students with a firm commitment to establish a new business after the course were not influenced by external factors, such as varying team dynamics or lack of support from others. This implies that dedicated and motivated students' expressions of their agency are stronger and do not alter as much. Despite temporary disappointments and setbacks, committed students are able to progress and feel accomplishment.

We found that the continuous transformation of agency is followed by the constant changes in the expression of the emotions. In describing their emotions, students used emotion words (Valdés et al., 2010), such as “pleased” or “frustrated”. Mostly, they narrated affective situations with indirect references to emotions. Positive emotions, such as joy and satisfaction, were related to reaching personal and/or team-level milestones, such as initial idea, logo, team name and successful pitch.

However, all studied students emphasized negative emotions in their talk and these got stronger towards the end of the course after the assigned exercises started to require actions outside the team, such as meeting potential customers or finding a mentor. Negative emotions, such as annoyance, frustration, guilt, and confusion, arose from setbacks and from the course delivery model that is characterized by entrepreneurial aspects, such as uncertainty, ambiguity and quick decision-making (Kirby, 2004; Neck & Greene, 2011). The changes in agency and emotions were amplified, when students compared their progress with other team's efforts. Social comparison often decreased the confidence in the students' expressions. This also intensified their negative emotions and students felt that their actions did not progress synchronously with the course program, other teams or their own expectations. Instead of using this realization to alter the way the things are or as learning experiences (see Scott et al., 2019), this resulted personal or team-level non-action. This again opened a gateway to frustration and boredom shown in their talk. Since the experiences the students gain from EE influence their future actions (Cooper et al., 2004), our findings are alarming for EE and its expected outcomes of producing new entrepreneurial-oriented individuals.

Our findings illustrate that students discussed often the course, its content and delivery when constructing their agency. Students elaborated how much and in which terms the course and its learning environment allows intended action. Students sometimes felt that they do not have enough time to process the assigned exercises, for instance. We also, conclude that course based on students' self-directed action is not ideal for all students. When the guidance, lecturing or direct answers from the teachers are lessened, students may become frustrated and annoyed and they may choose non-action over action.

Our findings illustrate that the subjectively constructed agency and emotions build up as hierarchical layers of self, close and distant references groups, and the course context (Figure 1). The self, the core, comprises students' perceptions of themselves and their skills and motivation as constructed in their vlogs. Self is positioned in and compared with the closest object of comparison, which in our study is the team. Teams' qualities, such as team-level motivation and dynamics, operate as a mirror for reflecting and constructing the self. Both of these are compared to more distant objects. In this study, the students construct in their vlogs other teams in the course, teams' mentor, or the alumni teams visiting the course. Finally, agency and emotions are constructed in the course context. In our study, this concern specifically the course content and its delivery.



**Figure 1. Hierarchies of subjectively constructed agency and emotions**

Hence, our findings generate implications for EE. Experiential EE encourages the students to act upon own ideas and goals as well as develop their identity and skills (de Villers Scheepers et al., 2018), but it may also comprise new assessment practices, such as peer/self-assessment (Lackeus & Middleton, 2018). Such idealized educational models, such as the study context of Junior Achievement Program, are based on an idea of straightforward progress intended to guide students through the entrepreneurial process (Elert et al., 2015). These teaching models are easy to implement even without the understanding of underlying pedagogical and learning theories (Fayolle et al., 2016), but as our finding indicate that the students might have difficulties in participating. Scott and the others (2016) highlighted that experiential EE produces different outcomes for non-entrepreneurially oriented and entrepreneurially oriented individuals. Our findings, however, indicate that the reasons might be deeper: Drifting expressions of agency and emotions might stem from different ways of learning and expectations set for the participation. If one has learned that teacher teaches or that the content is discussed in analytical and critical way, facing a “just do it” learning environment is challenging. Similarly, experiential EE builds on the ideal of a self-guided entrepreneurial subject who is active, adaptable and capable of tolerating uncertainty (Laalo & Heinonen, 2016), the drifting expressions of the agency and emotions do not necessarily fit with these assumptions. Instead, students’ portrayal of themselves is both changing and ambivalent, and the emotional toll is heavy: Emotional reactions follow these changes making the course emotionally demanding, and thus, most expressed feelings are negative. These shed light on the challenges in effective achievement of intended learning outcomes (Scott et al., 2016). The findings also contribute to the critical EE studies (Fletcher & Selden, 2015; Tedmanson et al., 2012) by showing that EE’s outcomes are diverse despite simplified and intentional design. Our findings show that in addition to the intended learning outcomes of enhances entrepreneurial competences and intentions to start a new business, the changes in students’ agency and emotions should be taken into account.

### ***Limitations and future research***

Despite its merits, our study have limitations, which provide directions for future research. As our findings imply, we assume that there are differences in the learning styles among students, but our data do not provide any access to analyze this. Thus, there is a need to examine the differences between students’ learning styles and learning goals, and how they fit with the assumptions of experiential EE and EE in general. The production of entrepreneurial self (Laalo & Heinonen, 2016) might not be as straightforward as we tend to assume. As importantly future research should focus on the visual materials and connect them with the narratives. For instance, using temporal measurement, such as timelines, could enable to recognize critical events, which possible generate major changes in subjectively constructed agency and emotions. Finally, an interesting detail would be to study the possible reasons for withdrawals for participation in experiential EE.

In conclusion, our hope for entrepreneurship scholarship is the continued refinement and testing of students’ perspective in EE that might better unfold the context and process embedded in EE instead of solely focusing on EE’s usual outcomes. This might enable EE scholar to make better sense of what EE is really about if and when it serves also other purposes than careers as entrepreneurs or new venture creation. Our findings highlight that the experiences of agency and emotions in EE drift and are ambivalent for many reasons. This sets requirements for searching deeper to the assumptions on which EE is built on. To that end, we have strengthened some of the existing scholarly insights on the EE and uncovered some

potential challenges for developing EE further. We believe studying both the agency and the emotions will allow scholars to answer important open questions in EE research.

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