Student Entrepreneurial Identity Formation: The Role of Reflection

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Abstract

The overall aim of this empirical paper is to contribute to the understanding of how students through video clips and narration develop their entrepreneurial identities.

Literature on entrepreneurial identity development is regularly linked to either identity theory or social identity theory. Identity theory relates to the notion of roles that an individual assumes. In entrepreneurship education students are in a transition period between roles, i.e. role transformation from student to entrepreneur and/or professional. Furthermore, existing literature suggests how students can both develop and have an entrepreneurial identity while not necessarily starting up a business.

Identity formation is further supported by the narrative the student creates with regard to their selves as the student engages in a form of dialogue with themselves but also with others as part of the entrepreneurial learning process.

Upon this backdrop, this study proposes the following problem statement: "How can student self-insights assist with their entrepreneurial identity development journey?" To tackle this question, we analysed 51 student video clips after students had participated in an entrepreneurship course.

Our findings support the theory of identity formation relating to the concept of roles: the self-reflective video clip as a form of assessment creates a means by which the students both raise their self-awareness and, crucially, construct their entrepreneurial identities. The results underline that students' entrepreneurial identities are formed in a social process and by what happens both inside and beyond the entrepreneurial classroom. These findings will be of interest to researchers and educators as it moves beyond a pure skills or competency approach of understanding the impact of entrepreneurship education.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship Education, Student Identity Development, Entrepreneurial Identity formation, Entrepreneurial Career Development, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Identity development is part of Higher Education, making sense of the question "Who am I?" including whom they are going to become (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). However, only fairly recently has the link between identity development and entrepreneurship education (EE) gained research interest (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). In fact, early notions of entrepreneurship being associated with personality traits (McClelland, 1961) which fundamentally cannot be learned, but are instead inherited, went against the grain not only of EE but also the notion of entrepreneurial identity development. Instead, today, EE is viewed as a driver for identity construction (Duane Ireland & Webb, 2007). Here we explore how self-reflective video-clips might assist students on their identity exploration and subsequent entrepreneurial identity development.

2. Entrepreneurship education and identity formation

It is widely accepted that EE can be viewed from several different approaches; "About," "For," "Through" and "Embedded" (Jamieson, 1984; Pittaway and Edwards, 2012). Teaching entrepreneurship is often recognised as a subject where students have to accomplish and develop both practical and conceptual skills in order to cope with the complexity that is part of the entrepreneurial process of starting up a new business (Balan and Metcalfe, 2012; Gibb, 2002). Moreover, the students are expected to develop certain personal qualities (Fayolle et al., 2006).

3. Stimulating identity formation through reflection

To begin with, we recognize that identity represents different concepts and approaches (P. Greene & Brush, 2018; Pratt et al., 2006) as well as being a "multidimensional, multifaceted and complex construct…" (Varelas, 2012, p. 1). However, 'messy' it seems, it is nevertheless vital to understand identity as this is a necessary component in understanding the development of students, including learning and teaching (Varelas, 2012).

More specifically, identity is of interest to researchers because behaviour is affected by one's identity in the sense that the individual seeks to achieve congruence between their identity(ies) and the behaviour they exhibit. Entrepreneurial identity relates in this sense also to motivation and "what moves entrepreneurial "dreamers" to action" (Farmer et al., 2011, p. 245). This focus on motivation and identity's role in fostering it is particularly relevant given the number of individuals who have intent but fail to engage in nascent start-up behaviour (Bogatyreva et al., 2019). Here Farmer et al. (2011) confirmed what Hoang and Gimeno (2010:4) suggested, that developing an entrepreneurial identity may "guide and motivate goal-oriented behaviour, often to the extent that a possible role becomes an actual one." Thus, entrepreneurial intent is not just of academic interest, but has practical importance if the desire of EE is to foster business start-up. Developing the individual's entrepreneurial identity is a means of fostering entrepreneurship.

Studies that focus on identity in EE are no longer novel, and yet much of the focus has been on what the identity is, rather than how it has been shaped (Donnellon et al. 2014). At the outset we acknowledge that the formation of an entrepreneurial identity could be quite challenging as traditionally identities have been recognized as fairly stable. There are voices now however (Guichard, Pouyaud, de Calan, & Dumora, 2012) that suggest that with the fluidity of modern societies (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991) individuals today assume numerous identities that are more malleable, particularly exposed to experiences. This speaks in favour of education providing a means of developing, via experiences, an individual's identity. This is compounded by the fact that young adults tend to find themselves at a stage of career exploration and identity development (Savickas, 2002) (at least more so that more mature individuals).

Moving on to how EE relates to identity development, it has been suggested that what happens in the entrepreneurial classroom, can function as a driver for identity formation (Duane Ireland and Webb, 2007). Here, entrepreneurial identity formation can be viewed as both a complex and reflective process where each students is trying to answer the "Who am I?" question (Harmeling, 2011; Ollila et al., 2012).

Identity formation is also frequently associated with role transition. Ashforth et al. (2000) argue that we all experience daily shifts in our social roles. As such, is it reasonable to assume that this role transformation is an incorporated part of the student's everyday life as well. From a helicopter perspective the educational setting is a place where such role transitions take place. Granted, the students take on the role as students. But, the role of being a student includes, in the classical conception, to prepare for class, show up for lectures, take on an active or passive attitude, attend the exam or hand in something and finally get their grade after the exam. Focusing on the entrepreneurial learning space which we comprehend as what happens both inside and outside the entrepreneurial classroom certain expectations are linked to being a student. Here, the entrepreneurship educator expects the students to take an active role in terms of taking a profound responsibility for their own learning while transforming their entrepreneurial development during the course or their entrepreneurial journey as a part of a given entrepreneurial course. Thus, the students' experienced learning forms their identities. Therefore, students' entrepreneurial development is strongly linked to identity construction (Brush and Gale, 2015). The role of being a student includes "identity capital" that defines the students themselves, and least how others define them in different contexts (Varelas, 2012).

According to Nielsen and Gartner (Nielsen and Gartner, 2017) students will sense multiple identities as a part of being a student, which means that alongside their student identity, they may also assume other identities including an entrepreneurial identity. The sense of being an entrepreneur is influenced when the students are confronted with several tasks in relation to the entrepreneurial process as a part of EE (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017). We could say that entrepreneurial identity develops through EE, i.e. adopting typical tasks associated with business start-up. In EE the students are being transformed during the course which affects the sense of self Nielsen & Gartner, 2017).

It is worth noting that there can be an element of conflicting identities developing in HE. Thus, students can experience the university" as a deterministic occupational structure that transforms students and makes them commit to a pre-defined, work-taker, identity" (Nielsen & Gartner, 2017, p. 148) and, as such not entirely entrepreneurial. However, the universities can act in the role of safe entrepreneurial identity development environments if they wish to do so which begs the questions: how do we make a "safe" educational environment for identity development for the students (Nielsen and Gartner, 2017)?

To better understand entrepreneurial identity formation, we have gathered different perspective on entrepreneurial identity formation presented in table 1.

Table 1. Perspectives on entrepreneurial identity formation

Quote	Authors
"…there are several possible constellations of meanings which may form the core of the entrepreneur's self-definition of the entrepreneurial role".	(Stanworth and Curran, 1976, p. 104)
"…entrepreneurial identity can be defined as a person's inclination to adopt a certain type of occupational entrepreneurial role."	(Vesalainen and Pihkala, 2000, p. 113)
"The idea is that EE will lead to entrepreneurship as a spontaneous (natural) behavior."	(Holmgren and From, 2005, p. 386)
"…being an entrepreneur allows an individual to have extraordinary control and input- when compared to more 'traditional' vocations- in their formulation of self-identity."	(Shepherd and Haynie, 2009, pp. 321–322)
"…an entrepreneurial identity has two elements, identity as 'what', the categorical identity; and personal identity, 'who', which serves to differentiate one from the other."	(Anderson and Warren, 2011, p. 592)
"…identity is central to meaning, motivation, decision-making, and other activities that can be seen as critical for entrepreneurial action."	(Ollila et al., 2012, p. 2)
"…entrepreneurship programmes can serve as arenas for identity construction…. The participants are active agents in the creation of meanings..."	(Hytti and Heinonen, 2013, p. 887)
"… they are continuously in the process of finding out if they are, would like to and have what it takes to become an entrepreneur while balancing their present student identity with a possible entrepreneurial identity."	(Thrane et al., 2016, p. 910)
"…entrepreneurial identity may be seen as the host of self-referential claims and actions that are associated with launching and running new organizations."	(Crosina, 2018, p. 105)

No doubt EE has the potential to assist in students' entrepreneurial identity formation. The students themselves must perceive their own entrepreneurial role, and how it balances with other identities. Moreover, the students develop their sense of identity in groups being a member of the entrepreneurial learning space. Students are therefore formed in a social process interacting with their educator, their student peers and what happens in the entrepreneurial learning space and at the educational facilities as well (Gergen, 2015; Kolb and Kolb, 2005; Nielsen and Gartner, 2017). But the students must also be able to look beyond the classroom and reflect on themselves in a future job-related perspective and how they will act either as entrepreneurs or intrapreneurs. Following this line of argument, we believe that EE acts as an 'opportunity arena' that allows each student both the space and opportunity to "become" someone. Thus, we derive:" Entrepreneurial identity formation is to give each student a sense of belonging. Student entrepreneurial identity is central to meaning, motivation, and decision-making. Entrepreneurship education can serve as arenas for

entrepreneurial identity construction where the participants are active agents in the creation of meanings" (Donnellon et al., 2014; Ollila et al., 2012).

So, in order for students to develop their entrepreneurial development, reflection can act as the tool to do so: "learning is developed into knowledge through reflecting on the experiences gained through actions taken" (Hägg and Kurczewska, 2016, p. 708). As such, reflection is a necessary tool in the EE tool box to heighten more in-depth learning and critical thinking (Murray et al., 2017). As Bourner (2003) argues, reflection can be enhanced by simply asking the right questions. While, that seems as an easy and realistic tool, it could be further argued that reflection could be incorporated as an assisting assessment tool (Wraae et al., 2018).

"Teachers are conceived as 'coaches' and 'developers' – while students are seen as individuals who actively construct their knowledge through their interaction with their educator(s) and peers." (Béchard and Grégoire, 2007, pp. 264–265). We therefore see a link between the entrepreneurial educational processes in EE reflection as a tool to stimulated students entrepreneurial identity formation as depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1. The relationship between reflection in EE and identity formation
Source: own depiction

We will now move on to contribute to the understanding of the depicted relationship and how students through video clips and narration develop their entrepreneurial identities.

4. Methodology

To understand the identity formation of the students a qualitative study was chosen in the form of participatory storytelling (Gubrium and Harper, 2013). These stories took place via reflective video clips where students recounted stories of their own experiences and learning in an entre-/intrapreneurial perspective. We chose the narrative approach as this is known to support student reflection (Gubrium et al., 2014) that assist students in their identity formation and understanding (Hägg and Kurczewska, 2016).

The data were collected in spring 2017 in a Danish non-business class at a university of applied sciences. Students had chosen an elective unit containing innovation and entrepreneurship only. The teaching on this elective unit is planned and executed around "a transformative experience for the learner whereby not only knowledge but also skills, attitudes and identity are affected" (Svensson et al., 2017, p. 4). As a part of the exam, the students were instructed to create a short (2-3 minute) video clip where they talked about "Me as an entrepreneur or intrapreneur." The students had received both oral and written instruction for this task. The video clip was made individually and only the educator (at the same time educator and researcher) could see the clip. Although not formally graded, it was mandatory to hand in the video clip, which served as a precondition for access to an oral exam. Students could choose not to have their data included in the research

project, although all students were happy to be included in the study (all data relating to the students' stories has been anonymized and students were informed of this prior to agreeing to participate). In total 58 students handed in a video clip with their stories.

As two students chose not to participate 56 individual video clips (N=56) were used in the research project. Since our overall research approach was both explorative and inductive so were our analytical approach as we let the data guide us (Saunders et al., 2012). Therefore, the video clips were not fully transcribed but instead we made summaries of each interview which were compiled alongside direct quotes where we felt these expressed an idea in a succinct, and meaningful form. An excel analysis scheme with key themes or criteria was created (Dana and Dana, 2005). We counted 17 different subjects, that the students talked about. We tried to categorise those into themes, for instance the entrepreneurial process, attitude towards becoming an entrepreneur before/after participation in the course and the meaning of family and upbringing and own role.

We acknowledge the danger of students providing what they deemed socially desirable responses, especially where they felt they might be able to please the educator (Blenker et al., 2014). However, most students seemed to be in their own world when they started talking so it reasonable to assume that not to be the case and the video-clip exercise was not tied to a graded assignment.

5. Results

Our first insight emerging from the videos and that we highlight here is students' unfamiliarity with the concepts of entrepreneurship and innovation, but their openness to them. Thus, for many of this group of students working with innovation and entrepreneurship appears remote. Nevertheless, many students have chosen the elective unit precisely because they acknowledge that the Danish public sector is under economic pressure and they acknowledge that the competences offered in the module are necessary for their own jobs but also for work more generally. Not surprisingly, it also emerged that many of the students chose the module for convenience reasons (e.g. it fit into their timetables, it was the most interesting of a range of options, their study group had chosen it etc.). As such, students enter the entrepreneurship classroom with different motives and backgrounds (Jones and Matlay, 2011; Neck and Greene, 2011).

Many video clips begin with an explanation of how each student perceives entrepreneurship and what it takes to become an entrepreneur. So, we witness the students' movement towards an understanding of entrepreneurship as both a concept (learning about entrepreneurship) and a possibility (learning for entrepreneurship). Students also describe which skills they believe are necessary to become an entrepreneur. Some students even discuss the 'born' or 'made' perspectives (Drucker, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2012) and how they acknowledge, that they probably are 'made' entrepreneurs as a result of participating in the course. This indeed refers to Gartner's (1985) conceptual model and how entrepreneurs are a product of situational conditioned dimensions. This links to students commenting how: "The surroundings have given me a drive" or "I need someone to trigger it". A few students, often those with an entrepreneurial family member, use the 'born' perspective to explain that entrepreneurship runs in the blood.

We believe that this introductory description in the video clips shows students building up a reflection on entrepreneurial formation. Later in the video clips we see, how students develop a sense of entrepreneurial identity. As such, we sense a development in their reflection on themselves in the entrepreneurial perspective.

It was interesting to note that in a society that extols enterprise and entrepreneurship, many students mentioned some reluctance towards entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial career path before the elective course. However, all except one, talk about how becoming an entrepreneur could be an actual career path: "entrepreneurship is contagious" as one student says. Another student expresses how "The module has helped me to see how to reach the sky" while another has been surprised about how entrepreneurship education triggered something: "My mind got into gear".

Other students recognize, that while they might not be strictly entrepreneurial, they can see how entrepreneurship could be useful in an already existing organization as well: "I am definitely an intrapreneur". Many students mention intrapreneurship as a way to use their entrepreneurial skills in that setting. Also, for us, evidence that these reflections lead to identity formation.

The video clips showed an insight into how each student reflected on how the elective unit gave them a skill set, that they did not know they were able to use, but nevertheless did use. It is evident, that these reflections are happening while the students talk; the students transformation happened before our eyes viewing each video clip. Therefore, the video clip acts as a space for entrepreneurial identity formation (Svensson et al., 2017)

6. Discussion, conclusion and suggestions for further studies

The purpose with this paper was to answer the problem statement: "How can student self-insights assist students on their entrepreneurial identity development journey?". We have argued for a link between entrepreneurial educational processes, student reflection of own role – in this case video clips - and identity development as depicted in figure 1.

Overall, the reflective videos demonstrated a shift towards an entrepreneurial identity. As highlighted in the literature review, identities develop over time and thus we would not expect the students to throw existing identities as employees in the public sector entirely 'out of the window' and embrace wholesale an entrepreneurial identity. Nonetheless, we do recognize that for many students, the module could be the start of a journey of entrepreneurial identity formation. Surprisingly, to us, prior to undertaking the module students had not considered entrepreneurship as a career path and so the module served more as a means to raise awareness of entrepreneurship, than to strengthen existing positive attitudes towards it.

A further aspect that surprised us was students' chosen focus on whether it is possible to learn to become an entrepreneur. As entrepreneurship educators, this now feels something of an obsolete debate, and yet in the wider population the persistence of the notion that you are either born and entrepreneur or not could still be quite prevalent.

To counter the dated view of the possibility of learning to become and entrepreneur, students were aware of the wider societal discourses surrounding entrepreneurship, with application of this found within organisations (intrapreneurship) but also to individual's careers. Here then, this sample of public sector employees who might traditionally be regarded as having jobs at least at risk, did nonetheless acknowledge what academics have been writing about for at least two decades in terms of the fluidity of modern life (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1991), and within this careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001; Guichard et al., 2012; Hall, 2004).

With regard to recommendations for entrepreneurship educators, as a means to stimulating reflection with implications for identity formation we strongly recommend the use of reflective videos. Here we recognize the need to provide sufficient guidelines to permit in-depth reflection to occur. We also recognize that these guidelines should not be too restrictive. A balance must be sought between supporting reflection but without constraining it unnecessarily.

We also recommend firstly not to assume a 'level playing field' when it comes to students' awareness of entrepreneurship. Our cohort were not 'typical' beneficiaries of entrepreneurship education understood as youth on an undergraduate programme. Being more mature individuals, our assumption was a greater degree of familiarity with entrepreneurship and also having considered being an entrepreneur. Here though, many of the cohort appreciated the opportunity the programme had provided them to consider entrepreneurship as career option. Thus, student reflection empowers students to understand their own identity and identity creation. This includes students' awareness of the shift in their different identities; leaving something and moving towards something new is thus a transformation in student understanding of themselves.

Further studies could pursue entrepreneurial identity formation with non-standard cohorts such as ours. Further research could use video clips in a more extensive way (longer reflective videos, potentially even over a period of time) than ours (which was also a potential limitation of our study). There is even some scope for experimentation with different set up of video tasks and establishment of impacts on the individual. Overall, despite the growing literature on entrepreneurial identity, there is still much scope to examine how different

educational tools can support it, and in our case, might act as a trigger for entrepreneurial identity development.

Finally, in lieu of the COVID-19 crisis and the educational processes going online, it would be highly relevant to investigate how or if online learning creates the same sense of identity formation than the traditional classroom? We suggest using video clips as the reflective tool to be able to identity differences.

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