

Using Experience Design to Develop an Interactive Co-Laboratory for Inner Development Goals in Social Entrepreneurship Education: A Design-Based Case Study

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Abstract: Entrepreneurship education increasingly emphasizes experiential and transformative learning approaches; however, little research has yet examined how experience design may intentionally foster inner development and meaningful relational connections. This exploratory case study presents a Learnfestival as a format designed for collaboration to support social entrepreneurship in Germany and especially Saxony-Anhalt. The guiding research question is how experience design can foster meaningful connections between practicing social entrepreneurs, while impacting the inner dimensions that lead to sustainable change and collaboration. The pedagogical design integrates two complementary frameworks. The Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework provided the competence lens, emphasizing capacities such as self-awareness, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, and responsible action. On the other hand, an Experience Design Model structured the emotional and spatial learning journey. The Learnfestival was conceived as a half-day lived experience of social entrepreneurship rather than a traditional academic conference. Each phase intentionally activated relational and reflective capacities: a “Tunnel of Challenges” installation raised emotional awareness of sustainability issues; multisensory engagement spaces fostered presence; small “home groups” supported belonging; collaborative exhibition formats encouraged dialogue and collaboration; and structured reflection moments enabled sense-making. Results from a prior Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program involving participants from Germany and Tanzania were presented as a focal element within the open, exploratory agenda. Approximately 70 participants, including social entrepreneurs, startups, civic initiatives, and students with entrepreneurial aspirations attended the event. The Learnfestival was evaluated through a structured participant feedback survey combining Likert-scale items and open-ended qualitative responses. Data analysis indicates high perceived engagement and meaningful interaction between participants, who emphasized the experiential and participatory character of the format as enabling authentic exchange beyond conventional networking settings. This study contributes to entrepreneurship education by operationalizing inner development through experience design and proposing the Learnfestival as a transferable set of design principles for connecting academic and entrepreneurial ecosystems. It suggests that intentionally designed emotional and spatial learning journeys may strengthen relational competencies essential for sustainable and social entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship Education, Experiential Education, Inner Development Goals, Intersectoral Learning, Experience Design, Embodied Learning

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship (SE) has been identified as a driving force and possible solution for many of today's problems (Lytvynchuk, 2023), addressing complex societal challenges that neither governmental agencies nor conventional market forces can solve alone. Consequently, the teaching and learning of SE, social entrepreneurship education (SEE), is becoming an integral component of both formal and informal higher education (Kickul et al., 2018), with some institutions extending it into secondary education contexts and many offers in professional or continuing education.

A fundamental question in SEE is whether this complex set of skills can be taught, and if so, how. A contradiction emerges in as much as that a field, entrepreneurship, driven by innovation and disruption, yet continues to be taught predominantly through conventional, and established pedagogical approaches. Approaches, that. are often rooted in traditional business disciplines and originate from the global north. However, addressing the most pressing global challenges requires moving beyond the knowledge systems that contributed to them.

Therefore, there is a clear need for more interdisciplinary, participatory, and experiential approaches that incorporate diverse perspectives in SEE (Thomsen, Muurlink and Best, 2019). Prior research suggests that experiential learning opportunities between students and third sector organizations foster the knowledge

acquisition about SE by providing opportunities to engage with social complexities that are impossible to replicate in a classroom setting (Thomsen, Muurlink and Best, 2019).

A growing body of literature portrays the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a globally shared framework for communicating societal and environmental challenges, likewise the SDGs are seen as a map for the efforts of humans in initiatives and organizations across for-profit, social innovation, and social enterprise sectors.

However, contributing to achieving the SDGs requires not only external action but also parallel attention to humans' inner development. The Inner Development Goals (IDG) framework has recently emerged as a complementary perspective, emphasizing the development of humans' individual capacities necessary to drive sustainable change. The underlying assumption is that inner conditions shape how individuals move from awareness to connection and ultimately to action (Robles, 2024).

The Inner Development Goals (IDGs) are a research-based framework and have been constructed internationally and across disciplines (Robles, 2024). The framework seeks to identify the skills, qualities, and capacities required for sustainable transformation. It is structured into five interrelated dimensions—Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting—comprising a set of 25 core skills (see Figure 1).

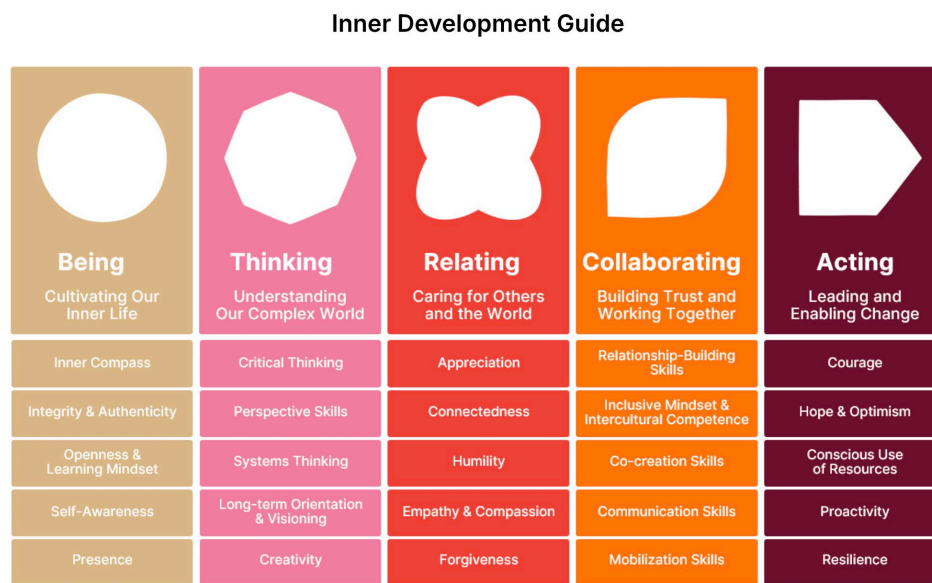


Figure 1: The Inner Development Goals (IDG, 2026)

An increasing body of literature explores the application of the IDG framework across disciplines, including sustainability and entrepreneurship education. Within SEE, the IDGs can be understood as a meta-framework for inner capacities, influencing cognitive framing, emotional orientation, value prioritization, and identity formation, which in turn shape entrepreneurial strategies and innovation processes (Kumar and Suthar, 2026).

However, as research shows, while some universities are recognizing the value of nurturing entrepreneurial mindsets, thus making progress in promoting the IDG dimensions of "Thinking," "Collaborating," and "Acting" through innovative entrepreneurship programs (Shtaltovna *et al.*, 2024), there remains a deficiency in activities related to the other IDG dimensions namely "Being" and "Relating," which would imply cultivating other inner skills and developing an ethical and holistic educational approach that includes intellectual, emotional and practical aspects (Nordén, 2024). This shows a gap in SEE, where personal and relational skills development remains under-emphasized (Robles, 2024). This is especially true of skills that are harder to grasp and less common in formal training and education, such as development of empathy, inner compass, presence, etc.; they are not merely "soft" skills, but central to resilience, frustration tolerance and stress management which in turn impact healthy entrepreneurial success (Wu *et al.*, 2019).

To address this gap, this study draws on experience design as a complementary pedagogical approach. Experience design focuses on deliberately shaping learning environments to influence not only what participants know, but also how they feel, think, and act. In particular, the 5E Experience Design Model developed by the Kaospilots provides a structured framework for designing emotional and spatial learning journeys (Sontag,

2018). This model is well suited to this context since it can situate the learning process not only at a cognitive level but also include aspects of embodied and affective learning (Wu *et al.*, 2019). The model emphasizes the intentional design of meaningful outcomes and guides the development of experiences across five phases: excitement, entry, engagement, exit, and extension.

Achieving the SDGs is a global challenge as the SDGs have been formulated by the UN as a global body with the aim to actually re-adjust developments that had historically been the reasons for the formulation of the SDGs. Thus, in order to provide a global and inclusive approach to leaving knowledge systems that have previously contributed to the creation of current global challenges, in the following there is an attempt to provide fresh insights on how to inclusively embrace contradictions in SEE through experiential learning, that is, by mobilizing the IDG framework for sustainable transformation towards achieving the SDGs.

The study adopts a design-based research approach, which involves iterative cycles of design, implementation, and reflection in real-world contexts as well as pragmatic choice of methods (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012). Within this framework, the research question guiding this study is: *how can experience design foster meaningful connections among practicing social entrepreneurs and individuals interested in the common good, while simultaneously influencing inner dimensions that support sustainable change?*

1.1 Description of the Case Study: the Learnfestival Design and Objectives

A group of stakeholders from academia, social entrepreneurship, and regional networks was convened to co-design an in-person event aimed at fostering collaboration among social entrepreneurs, startups and organizations in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. The group met regularly to define the learning objectives and format of the event.

The intended meaningful outcomes of the experience were defined as community, beauty, harmony, and accomplishment. The central objective was to create a space in which the IDGs could be experienced in practice rather than communicated solely through theoretical instruction. In response to a perceived declining official engagement with sustainability topics in the German context (Thurau, 2025), the event aimed to foster a sense of connection, empowerment, and agency among participants.

The main theme of the festival, “A whole new world” was co-created and guided the design elements and the tone of communication with all stakeholders. The core idea behind it was to imagine a whole new world, one that is regenerative and participative, aiming to create bridges across the world. Bridges, metaphorically, are needed to solve the most urgent problems with appreciation for different cultural lenses and personal knowledge.

The event was designed as a half-day experience hosted in a former monastery, chosen to create an atmosphere combining historical depth with reflective space. The design intentionally addressed all IDG dimensions by incorporating activities that supported Being (arrival and presence), Relating (connection and dialogue), and Acting (collaboration and experimentation), alongside more traditional cognitive elements (like talks and presentations). A prior Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program involving participants from Germany and Tanzania was integrated into the event as a focal element. This component included presentations of six collaborative projects and represented the most structured part of the program. The remaining agenda was intentionally open, allowing for self-directed exploration and emergent interactions.

Thematic areas of the event included waste prevention, circular economy, and sustainability education. Participants included local initiatives, social entrepreneurs, startups, civic organizations, and students interested in starting a social business.

The experience design of the event was guided by the 5E Model, a practitioner framework, developed by Kaospiloten (Sontag, 2018). We followed the five phases of the 5E model during event planning, each step was guided by the question of how participants should feel at different stages of the event:

(I) Excitement: The initial phase aimed to foster curiosity and openness. Participants were invited without detailed information about the event format, emphasizing participation over passive attendance. A pre-event survey was distributed to gather information on participants’ motivations, interests, and expectations.

(II) Entry: At the entry stage, participants were welcomed and provided with a “scan card”. The card contained questions to guide the reflection process of each participant, as well as a map of the experience (see Figures 2 and 3). To introduce a sense of urgency regarding environmental challenges, participants passed through a “Tunnel of Challenges” installation. Rather than relying on conventional imagery of environmental degradation,

the installation featured large-scale artworks by Swaantje Güntzel, a German artist well known for her ecological activism, accompanied by carefully curated instrumental music to create an emotionally reflective atmosphere.

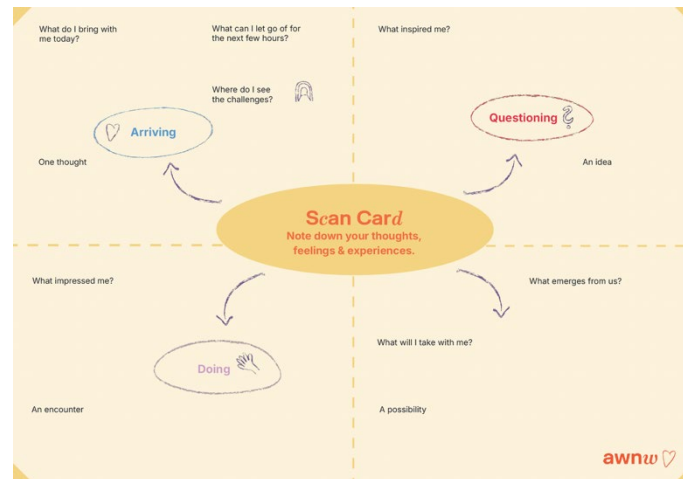


Figure 2: Scan card to guide the self-directed learning experience

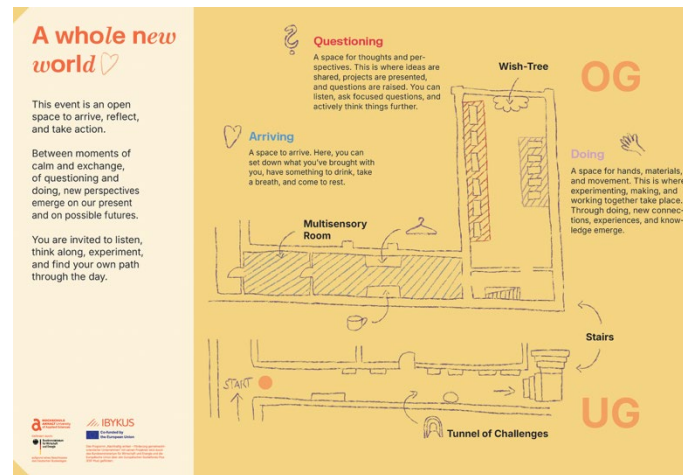


Figure 3: Map of the experience and broad objectives

(III) Engagement: The engagement phase aimed to foster inspiration and connection. Participants were organized into small “home groups,” which served as recurring spaces for reflection and exchange. They engaged in discussions about their aspirations for the future and participated in various co-laboratory (“co-lab”) spaces and exhibitions.

Activities included hands-on experiences such as creating sustainable products, exploring reforestation initiatives, and engaging with sensory installations. To support the Being dimension, a multisensory room was designed to promote self-awareness and presence (Finck et al., 2023).

(IV) Exit: The exit phase aimed to leave participants with a sense of hope and cultural appreciation. This phase included some reflections about the day followed by intercultural activities such as shared food experiences and a fashion show, creating a gradual transition out of the event.

(V) Extension: At the event, participants were invited to take home a “wish card” created by another participant as a symbolic reminder of the experience. In the longer extension phase, participants received two follow-up communications: the first one including a graphic recording of the event, one week after the event, and the second one was sent out one month after the event together with the feedback survey, and a short film documenting key moments.

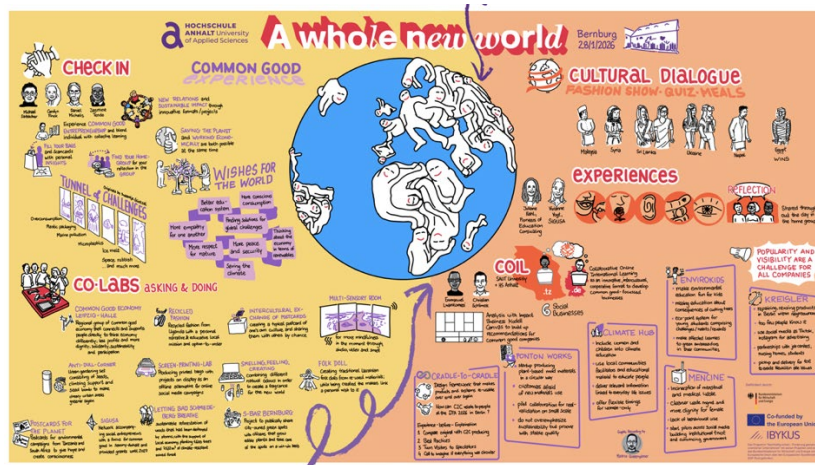


Figure 4: Graphic recording by Markus Querengässer

2. Methods

Approximately 70 participants attended the event. The evaluation was conducted during the extension phase through a structured participant feedback survey.

The anonymous survey included seven self-constructed Likert-scale items (1–5) assessing overall satisfaction, perceived learning, sense of community, and long-lasting impact, as well as open-ended questions exploring participants' experiences, highlights, and suggestions for improvement for future iterations in terms of design based research (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012). The survey was administered via LimeSurvey.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Jamovi (version 2.6.45). Qualitative responses were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. AI-assisted tools were used to support the coding process; however, all interpretations and thematic categorizations were reviewed and validated by the authors.

It should be noted that the survey was distributed one month after the event, which may have contributed to the relatively low response rate of 18.57% ($n = 11$). While this limits the statistical representativity of the quantitative findings, it is consistent with typical response rates observed in post-event evaluations of non-mandatory educational activities and the downward trend observed in general in response rates (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). Given the exploratory and design-based nature of this study, the primary analytical value lies in the richness of the qualitative responses and in the identification of patterns relevant to an iterative design improvement, rather than in generalization. Findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive.

3. Results

The survey yielded a response rate of 18.57%, resulting in a total of 11 completed and valid datasets.

Overall satisfaction with the event was high ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.04$). Participants rated the format particularly positively ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.82$), with respondents indicating that it was more personal and intensive than traditional conference formats. The sense of community received the lowest mean score ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.45$), accompanied by the highest standard deviation, suggesting heterogeneous experiences among participants. See Table 1 for all dimensions evaluated.

Table 1: Dimensions of satisfaction and perceived impact (Likert scale 1–5)

Dimension	Mean (M)	SD
Overall satisfaction	4.09	1.04
Personal & intensive format	4.55	0.82
Sense of community	3.09	1.45
Lasting resonance	3.64	1.21
Cultural diversity	4.91	0.30

Dimension	Mean (M)	SD
Broadened perspective	3.73	1.35
New impulses for action	4.00	1.05

All respondents indicated that they had established new relevant contacts, which contradicts the comparatively lower rating for sense of community. Furthermore, all reported remaining in contact with at least one participant after the event, and several noted that concrete ideas or collaborations had emerged. This suggests that, although the subjective perception of “community” varied, functional networking outcomes were consistently achieved.

3.1 Qualitative Findings: Personal Highlights

The inductive thematic analysis of the open answers to the question regarding their personal highlights of the event resulted in six overarching themes:

First, participants frequently emphasized the *aesthetic and sensory design* of the event as a key highlight. Elements such as the relaxation space, music, and visual documentation contributed to an immersive atmosphere.

Second, the *interactive* character of the format emerged as a central theme. Participants highlighted the value of actively engaging with content through hands-on and co-creative elements, rather than passively consuming information.

Third, *interpersonal exchange* was consistently identified as a core component of the experience.

Both structured and informal dialogue spaces enabled meaningful interactions.

Fourth, several responses pointed to the emotional and inspirational impact of the event. Participants described the experience as meaningful and motivating, suggesting that it fostered motivation, reflection, and a sense of purpose.

Fifth, *networking and collaboration outcomes* were highlighted, indicating that the event not only facilitated exchange but also led to tangible results such as partnerships and project development. Finally, participants emphasized the *diversity of contributions and collective engagement*, particularly in relation to sustainability topics.

Across responses, participants’ highlights reflect a holistic learning experience characterized by the integration of sensory, social, and cognitive dimensions. The findings suggest that the interplay between experiential design and relational interaction was central to participants’ positive perceptions. Rather than isolated elements, it was the combination of participation, dialogue, and emotional engagement that shaped the overall experience (see Table 2 for a summary of the key elements).

Table 2: Summary of qualitative themes emerging

Theme	Description	Representative Elements
Experiential & Sensory Engagement	Emotional and embodied experience design	Music, multisensory room, visual art
Interactive Learning	Active participation and co-creation	Co-Labs, interactive stands
Social Interaction	Dialogue and relational exchange	Conversations, group discussions
Inspiration & Impact	Emotional and motivational effects	Inspiration, meaningful experience
Networking Outcomes	Concrete collaborations	Partnerships, project connections
Diversity & Engagement	Collective action and plurality	COIL projects, cultural elements

3.2 Qualitative Findings: What to Keep for Next Iterations, What to Rethink

Participants were further asked which elements of the Learnfestival should be maintained and which should be adapted or reconsidered. An inductive thematic analysis again identified six overarching themes, reflecting both strong appreciation and constructive critique.

3.2.1 *Experiential and Interactive Highlights*

Participants consistently emphasized hands-on, participatory elements as central to their positive experience. These included interactive stands, co-creation formats (e.g., co-labs and group discussions), informal exchange spaces (e.g., table conversations and relaxation areas), and creative elements such as live graphic recording.

3.2.2 *Cultural Expression and Diversity*

Respondents highlighted the cultural performances (e.g., fashion show) and diverse project presentations. These elements were perceived as authentic, engaging, and identity-affirming, reinforcing the high quantitative rating for cultural diversity.

3.2.3 *Value of Informal Exchange*

Many responses stressed the importance of open dialogue formats and peer-to-peer exchange. Participants particularly valued the accessibility and openness of interactions during the event.

3.2.4 *Structural Tensions and Time Constraints*

A recurring critique concerned time pressure and over-programming. Participants reported insufficient time for exploration and reflection and expressed a desire for fewer scheduled activities. The need for more “breathing time” between sessions was mentioned repeatedly.

3.2.5 *Inclusion and Representation*

One participant pointed to a lack of direct voice from certain international partners (e.g., Tanzanian collaborators in COIL Projects), which could suggest that while diversity was visible, perceived equity in representation could be improved, particularly in formal program elements.

3.2.6 *Mixed Evaluation of Small-Group Formats*

Responses regarding small-group interactions were mixed. While some participants appreciated these formats, others reported limited personal benefit and expressed a preference for more open formats such as exhibitions and co-lab spaces. The flexible structure of these groups was perceived both as a strength and as a source of disorganization.

The analysis of the resulting themes within the IDG framework showed that interestingly, the IDG Being and Relating dimensions, which are the most underrepresented dimensions in conventional SEE training and activities (Robles, 2024) received the most distinctive design attention and generated the strongest qualitative responses among the participants. Table 3 provides an overview of how the qualitative themes identified align with the five IDG dimensions.

Table 3: IDG Dimensions, activities and corresponding qualitative theme

IDG Dimension	IDG Skills Activated	Corresponding Learnfestival Element	Qualitative Theme
Being	Presence, self-awareness, inner compass	Multisensory room, Tunnel of Challenges, arrival rituals	Experiential & Sensory Engagement
Thinking	Critical thinking, sense-making, perspective-broadening	COIL project presentations, co-lab spaces	Interactive Learning; Diversity & Engagement
Relating	Empathy, appreciation, connectedness	Home groups, intercultural activities, fashion show	Social Interaction; Cultural Expression
Collaborating	Communication, co-creation, inclusive mindset	Co-labs, group discussions, exhibition formats	Interactive Learning; Networking Outcomes
Acting	Courage, creativity, optimism, sustained engagement	Wish cards, follow-up communications, concrete project outcomes	Inspiration & Impact; Networking Outcomes

4. Discussion

The findings indicate a strong alignment between participants’ experiences and the intended experiential and relational design principles of the Learnfestival. At the same time, they reveal several tensions inherent to the

design of large, open, participatory learning environments. In particular, regarding the balance between openness and structure, inclusivity and representation, and immediacy versus long-term impact.

Participation levels were satisfactory; however, the relatively low representation of social entrepreneurs and startups, as well as the limited survey response rate, constrain the generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, our results suggest that the experiential design successfully fostered engagement, interaction, and meaningful exchange. In particular, multisensory and participatory elements appear to have supported emotional engagement and presence, aligning with research on the importance of embodied and affective learning even in digital settings (Wu *et al.*, 2019).

Notably, the findings indicate that learning processes were not solely content-driven but emerged through relational interaction. This supports previous research emphasizing the role of collaboration, empathy, and shared experience in social entrepreneurship education (Pischetola and Martins, 2024).

4.1 Strengths of the Format

Participants highlighted the value of interactive and participatory formats, particularly the co-laboratory spaces. These findings align with the typology proposed by Motta and Galina (2023), which suggests that experiential learning formats can help to demystify the process of (social) enterprise creation and enhance motivation.

For practitioners, the opportunity to engage creatively and collaboratively represented a departure from more conventional formats such as startup pitches or fairs. The possibility of “doing” rather than merely listening emerged as a key strength of the Learnfestival format.

The results further indicate that multisensory design elements facilitated emotional engagement and presence, supporting the argument that learning environments benefit from integrating embodied and affective dimensions (Wu *et al.*, 2019).

Interestingly, participants’ responses reflected dimensions of the Inner Development Goals, even though these were deliberately not explicitly presented as part of the program. This suggests that the design could implicitly support inner development processes.

Finally, all respondents reported establishing at least one meaningful new connection that persisted beyond the event. This reinforces the importance of relational learning processes and aligns with findings by Pischetola and Martins (2024), who emphasize the role of empathy, collaboration, and togetherness in learning outcomes.

4.2 Areas for Improvement

Future iterations should explore alternative formats such as shorter events, hybrid models, or targeted engagement strategies in order to better accommodate the needs of entrepreneurial participants.

Participants also expressed a desire for more unstructured time. Although the event was deliberately designed to be open and flexible, it was still perceived as relatively dense. This suggests that creating truly open learning spaces requires not only reduced programming of agendas but also careful expectation management of participants and stakeholders alike.

Facilitating large-scale open formats presents an additional challenge. It requires facilitators to adopt a less directive role and to support emergent processes without over-structuring them. This calls for further reflection and preparation in future implementations.

Limitations and future research

The main limitations of this study include the small sample size and low survey response rate, as well as the heterogeneous composition of the participant group. These factors restrict the generalizability of the findings. However, and in turn, as a single event design-based study, validities and generalizability are always lower due to its situated instantiation.

Additionally, the evaluation relied on retrospective self-report data collected one month after the event. While this approach captures lasting impressions, it may be affected by recall bias.

Future research should consider incorporating real-time or longitudinal data collection methods to better capture learning processes and outcomes. Furthermore, exploring alternative formats and contexts could provide deeper insights into the scalability and transferability of the Learnfestival model.

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Ethics Declaration

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and all data were collected anonymously. Formal ethical approval was not required according to institutional guidelines.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used to support literature exploration, qualitative data analysis, and language editing. All outputs were critically reviewed and validated by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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