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Teaching for Impact, Not Intention: How Course Design Converts Learning into Community Action

Teaching social entrepreneurship encourages students to consider societal challenges, yet course participation alone rarely leads to sustained engagement. This article presents a practice-based instructional model developed at the School of Economics and Business at the University of Ljubljana, which positions the course as an enabling environment for personal transformation and action. Through experiential learning, collaboration with social enterprises, and structured reflection, students strengthen their values, confidence, and sense of agency. Follow-up interviews with five alumni show that this pedagogical design contributed to continued involvement in volunteering, community initiatives, and social enterprise creation. The article offers transferable design principles and practical tools for educators aiming to foster real-world social impact beyond the classroom.

Keywords: teaching, learning, course design

Poučevanje za vpliv, ne za namero: kako zasnova predmeta pretvarja učenje v delovanje za skupnost

Poučevanje socialnega podjetništva študente spodbuja k razmisleku o družbenih izzivih, vendar sama udeležba pri predmetu le redko vodi v trajno vključevanje. Prispevek predstavlja na praksi temelječ pedagoški model, razvit na Ekonomski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani, ki predmet zasnuje kot spodbudno okolje za osebno preobrazbo in delovanje. S pomočjo izkustvenega učenja in sodelovanja s socialnimi podjetji ter strukturiranimi refleksijami študenti krepijo svoje vrednote, samozavest ter občutek lastne učinkovitosti. Intervjuji s petimi alumni kažejo, da je ta pedagoška zasnova prispevala k nadaljnjemu vključevanju v prostovoljstvo, pobudam v skupnostih in ustanavljanju socialnih podjetij. Prispevek ponuja prenosljiva načela oblikovanja pedagoškega procesa ter praktična orodja za pedagoge, ki želijo študente usmerjati k ustvarjanju družbenega vpliva v realnem okolju onkraj učilnice.

Ključne besede: poučevanje, učenje, zasnova predmeta

Introduction

Universities are recognised as important sites of social innovation, where pedagogical practices can generate new ways of thinking and acting in response to societal challenges (Cajaiba-Santana 2014). When learning processes shift students from observers to active contributors, education itself becomes a mechanism of social innovation: it creates new practices, new relationships with communities, and new forms of societal contri-bution. A social entrepreneurship course is thus not merely an academic module but a space where socially innovative behaviours and longer-term effects begin to take shape.

Across higher education institutions, social entrepreneurship education has expanded rapidly over the past decade (Hockerts 2018; Pischetola and Martins 2024), and aim to equip students to address societal challenges and pursue socially responsible career paths (García-González and

Ramírez-Montoya 2021). While many courses offer strong conceptual foundations (e.g. from business models to financing) less is known about how such learning translates into sustained engagement beyond the course. Understanding how course design enables that transition is therefore essential.

Although many programmes assume that exposure to concepts and cases will motivate action, research shows that awareness alone rarely leads to behavioural change; individuals must also test new behaviours, build confidence, and experience social support (Mezirow 1991; Illeris 2014). Thus, social entrepreneurship education must help students see themselves as capable of contributing to solutions – not just understanding them. This shift in self-perception, i.e. from observer to participant, appears central to whether engagement continues beyond the course.

Guided by this idea, a Master-level course in Social Entrepreneurship was designed at the School of Economics and Business, University of Ljubljana. The assumption behind it was simple: students learn best when they see that their knowledge can create value for real people or organizations. Therefore key concepts alongside authentic encounters with social entrepreneurs and opportunities for application were introduced. In this way, theory and practice are intentionally intertwined from the very beginning allowing students to connect what they learn with what they can actually do.

Across three years of delivery, the course shows longer-term effects.

These observations lead to the central question of this article: *How can course design support students in moving from learning about social impact to engaging in social impact beyond the course?* To address this, we describe the course and methodology, then outline five pedagogical design principles that supported sustained engagement.

Methods and Approach in Designing Courses for Sustained Social Engagement

This article draws on: (1) the course's design and implementation, and (2) qualitative feedback from former students collected after they completed the course. All five alumni we interviewed were selected because they remained active in socially impactful roles, continued contributing to social enterprises, nonprofits, community projects, or volunteering, and stated that they would not have pursued these initiatives without the course.

Course Context and Pedagogical Approaches

The course integrates theory with experiential learning. Key elements include:

- collaboration with real social enterprises and NGOs (students work on authentic challenges),
- field visits and guest speakers,
- structured reflection assignments that connect learning with personal values and motivation,
- a solidarity project ('Do Something Good') in which each student carries out a small prosocial action during the course.

The design aligns with experiential learning research showing that learning deepens when students explore ambiguity, act, and reflect (Kickul et al. 2018; Mir Shahid and Alarifi 2021). Such approaches have been linked to increased creative self-efficacy (Heng and Khiam Jin 2025) and the development of key 21st-century skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Gleason Rodríguez and Rubio 2020). The role of the educators shifts accordingly, i.e. from instructor to facilitator of meaningful experiences.

Data for Evaluating Impact

We conducted semi-structured interviews with five alumni who got involved or remained engaged in socially impactful activities after the course, which they completed in 2022 or 2023. Participants (aged 26–30; four women, one man) were Master's students in the Social Entrepreneurship course. Interviews lasted 20–35 minutes.

Thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017) showed that course structure and learning design, rather than theoretical content alone, shaped students' willingness and confidence to act. Students emphasized that experiencing 'what changemaking feels like' was pivotal.

In this sense, the course design also functioned as a process of social innovation. Students experimented with new behaviours, tested small prototypes of prosocial action, and observed real-world effects, i.e. all practices characteristic of social innovation processes (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010). Within the university context, such experimentation represents a shift towards pedagogical practices that strengthen students' capacity to act in their communities. The course thus served as a testbed for social innovation, with students as its first carriers.

Five Pedagogical Design Principles that Lead to Real-World Social Impact
Principle 1: Start with the WHY to Anchor Learning in Personal Values and Meaning

In many courses, early sessions focus on definitions and frameworks. In our course, the first session focuses on students themselves. They explore personal values, past experiences that shaped their worldview, and social issues that evoke emotional reactions. Rather than asking, 'What social enterprise will you design?' or 'Do you know any social entrepreneur?', we begin with, 'What breaks your heart?' and 'Who do you want to serve?' These prompts help students articulate the deeper meaning behind their interest in social impact and explore the WHY?

Engaging the emotional system before the cognitive one strengthens motivation. The WHY-first approach aligns with research showing that prosocial motivation supports persistence and problem-solving (Grant 2008; Miller et al. 2012) and increases intention toward social entrepreneurship (Yamini et al. 2022). Students often described this as a turning point; as Student 2 explained, 'Profit is not the only thing that matters – you can also do something socially beneficial.'

Mini-Tool: Purpose Mapping

Educators can use a simple purpose-mapping worksheet that guides students to connect three elements: their personal values, the beneficiaries they care about, and possible actions that could create positive impact. The exercise can be done individually or interactively using sticky notes. Students write their answers on sticky notes and either present them briefly to classmates or place them on a wall. If a student initially claims that they are 'profit-oriented only', the educator can gently challenge this claim by asking them to recall a small past action that made someone else's day better, such as giving up a seat on a bus for an elderly person. This helps students recognize that they already have prosocial tendencies, even if they do not label themselves as socially oriented.

Principle 2: Make Students Collaborate with Real Social Enterprises

Collaboration with real social enterprises exposes students to the realities of creating social value and allows them to apply newly learned concepts in authentic contexts. At the beginning of the course, teams are assigned a social enterprise and a concrete challenge (e.g., business model refinement, marketing, volunteer engagement, or impact storytelling). Students research the organization, prepare focused questions, and engage in a guided field visit where they interview founders, speak with beneficiaries, and observe operations. Throughout the course, they prototype solutions, test ideas, and iterate with educator support – all with ongoing mentoring from educators.

Field immersion consistently produces two outcomes. First, students gain a realistic understanding of social entrepreneurship as a series of incremental steps taken by relatable individuals: 'You see firsthand, not just read about, how satisfied social entrepreneurs are with what they do' (Student 2). Second, their confidence grows as they see their ideas create value: 'Ideas can indeed be realized, even if they seem idealistic' (Student 5). This aligns with research showing that practitioner engagement enhances perspective transformation and lowers perceived barriers to action (Kickul et al. 2018; Mir Shahid and Alarifi 2021).

Mini-Tool: Field Visit Playbook (Before → During → After)

A one-page playbook structures this process. *Before* the visit, each team is assigned a challenge and researches the social enterprise to prepare focused questions. *During* the guided field excursion, students interview entrepreneurs and collect insights related to their challenge. *After* the visit, the following class session is used for debriefing and mentoring, where students compare their initial assumptions with what they observed and begin developing possible solutions. Subsequent sessions include dedicated consultation time, allowing teams to refine their ideas with continuous guidance from the teaching staff.

Principle 3: Require Action, Not Simulation – The 'Do Something Good' Assignment

A key element of the course is a small, real prosocial action that each student must plan and carry out during the course, without receiving a budget from the educators. The activity can take many forms – from a one-time volunteering effort to a micro-campaign that mobilizes others. One student described how her team organized an awareness and fundraising event in the faculty lobby: 'We organized an event to raise funds for a dog shelter. We baked cookies, which we distributed to students and staff at the event while raising awareness about social entrepreneurship' (Student 4). Another student recognised that he could influence tax donation flows and helped his youth organization secure additional funds: 'We active-

ly sought funds for our association and obtained several hundred euros' (Student 1). Students frequently referred to this assignment as a mental switch because it moved them from discussing social impact to acting on it: 'You had to really engage with the challenge – not just read something and write a summary' (Student 3).

This aligns with adult learning research showing that transformation occurs not through content alone, but when learners test new behaviours and reflect on their consequences (Mezirow 1991; Illeris 2014).

Mini-Tool: 'Do Something Good' Project Template

Students design a small solidarity or prosocial action that they can carry out within the duration of the course. They begin by selecting a beneficiary (a specific person, community, organization, natural environment, or animal-related case) and planning a meaningful action that creates value for that beneficiary. Before acting, students answer three planning questions: *Who do I want to help and why? What exactly will I do? How will I document that I carried out the activity?* After completing the action, they reflect on the experience and consider whether their initiative could develop into a social innovation or a social enterprise. Reflection prompts include: *Who are the stakeholders needed to continue this initiative? Could it be financed? Are there similar examples abroad?* The assignment builds agency by showing students that impact begins with a small, intentional step.

Principle 4: Use Reflection to Reinforce Identity and Confidence

Reflection assignments require students to articulate what has changed in their thinking and to acknowledge their capabilities. Students often wrote about new confidence, new sense of agency, and a shift in identity – from someone who learns to someone who makes things happen. Reflection is what transforms experience into personal meaning (Illeris 2014). Student 2 described the identity shift: 'I realized that this field aligns with my interests and offers opportunities for professional engagement.' Student 3 reflected that guest speakers helped her imagine herself as an entrepreneur: 'I came to understand that social entrepreneurship represents a legitimate career path.' Reflection deepens agency and reduces emotional barriers that previously prevented action.

Mini-Tool: Structured Reflection Prompts

Two reflection assignments can help students connect experience to personal meaning and identity. In the Reflection on a Guest Entrepreneur, students choose one guest speaker and examine why they were drawn to that particular entrepreneur: what resonated with them emotionally, personally, or professionally. They reflect on what makes the guest socially entrepreneurial, what values and motivations guide their work, and which qualities they personally relate to or aspire to develop. Students also identify the challenges the entrepreneur faces and consider how these insights influence their own views on creating social impact. In the Final Course Reflection, students look back on the entire course, highlighting which activities (project work, visits, teamwork, quizzes) contributed most to their learning and personal growth. They articulate whether and how the course shifted their motivation to engage in social entrepreneurship, e.g. as founders, volunteers, or supporters. The reflections help students recognize progress, clarify purpose, and see themselves as potential changemakers.

Principle 5: Create a Community, Not a Classroom

Students consistently emphasized the importance of the relational climate of the course. They felt seen as individuals, supported in vulnerability, and encouraged to explore uncertainty. A sense of psychological safety enables experimentation and willingness to try new approaches – conditions central to entrepreneurial learning (Kickul et al. 2018). Similarly, Senior and Howard (2014) emphasize that friendship groups in the learning environment create a trusted social context that enables open discussion, sharing of ideas, asking questions without fear of judgment, and deeper conceptual understanding through interpersonal interaction and real-life application.

The interviews illustrate this strongly. One student shared: 'The lecturers were genuinely dedicated and emotionally engaged' (Student 2). Another emphasized the sense of homeliness (a feeling of warmth and belonging): 'Although it may sound clichéd, the course was different because of the professors' (Student 4). A third added: 'My classmates and I became so close that we have remained friends to this day' (Student 5). Rather than encouraging competition, the course prioritizes cooperation. Students are encouraged to share contacts, ideas, and failures. They cele-

brate each other's progress, not grades.

Mini-Tool: Community-Building Checklist
Creating community does not require complex interventions – small relational practices matter: address students by name, give personal encouragement, respond promptly to questions, and acknowledge effort, not only outcomes. Community is strengthened through course design as well. Final project presentations take place in a real entrepreneurial support environment, the Impact Hub Ljubljana, where students present their solutions to the social enterprises that posed the challenges. Presenting in a professional business incubator helps students feel their work is meaningful and that they are part of a wider impact ecosystem. After the presentations, we host an informal standing lunch, creating space for unstructured conversations and networking. Many deeper relationships and collaborations start in this setting. We maintain connections after the course as well: alumni return as guest speakers, co-develop new challenges, and collaborate with us on impact-driven projects.

Tangible Social Impacts: What Happened After the Course

As professors, we hope that the knowledge students gain is not only retained but also translated into practice. The key question, therefore, was whether students remained active in this field after completing the course. Among the five interviewed graduates, some continued their engagement through volunteering, while others began to pursue socially entrepreneurial activities.

- One student volunteers at a municipal youth organization because he believes that young people need someone to set a positive example.
- Another student shares a similar view – that young people need someone who believes in them – and therefore volunteers as a mentor at free summer schools. She explained: 'When you praise them and tell them that you're genuinely proud of them, they open up more. They start to see you as a friend, an older brother or sister. You can make a real difference in their lives' (Student 2).
- One student integrates mental health advocacy into her work with a youth centre, while another helps organize charity events in her local community.

One of the students summarized her post-course philosophy: 'Every individual has the power to influence their community' (Student 5). These outcomes demonstrate that the course produced social innovation beyond university walls. It did not produce only business plans; it produced ongoing prosocial behaviour.

Discussion and Implications for Educators and Institutions
For Educators

The findings suggest that real social impact depends on designing learning as lived experience. Educators should move from the role of instructors to facilitators of transformation, creating environments where students can test ideas, take risks, and reflect on real outcomes. Embedding experiential projects, such as collaborations with social enterprises or community actions, helps students translate values into behaviour and sustain engagement beyond the classroom. Reflection assignments and peer discussions reinforce identity as changemakers, while trust and psychological safety enable experimentation and connection.

Viewed through this lens, the course represents a form of pedagogical social innovation, as it introduces new ways for students to learn, collaborate, and engage with communities. Instead of separating theory and practice, the course intertwines emotional engagement, experiential learning, prototyping solutions, and identity-focused reflection creating teaching practices that produce broader social effects (Westley et al. 2014).

Educators hold a powerful lever of social innovation not through content, but through course architecture. Successful practice requires three intentional decisions:

1) Design for action, not theory.
2) Integrate reflection to deepen identity formation.
3) Create a community that reinforces courage and belonging.

For Institutions
For institutions, these insights point to the importance of supportive infrastructure. Universities can strengthen social entrepreneurship education by partnering with social enterprises, providing incubation spaces like Impact Hub Ljubljana, and integrating reflection-based assessment into curricula. Institutional recognition

of students' impact projects as valid innovation outputs encourages long-term motivation and community contribution. Therefore, institutions can amplify impact by:

- establishing partnerships with social enterprises,
- tracking alumni impact,
- positioning courses as innovation labs rather than academic modules,
- recognizing that student impact projects constitute social innovation outputs.

Conclusion

When social entrepreneurship education creates emotional engagement, real-world experience, structured action, and reflective meaning-making, students do not merely complete a course, they also change. They shift from *learners of impact* to *creators of impact*. They carry their projects, values, and new sense of agency beyond the university.

These outcomes can be interpreted through the lens of social innovation emerging within universities. Students' continued volunteering, mentoring, and entrepreneurial activities represent new socially beneficial practices derived from the learning process. Universities thus operate as incubators of social innovation, shaping behaviours, relationships, and values that generate tangible social impact. Higher education does not need to wait for graduates to someday improve society. Social innovation can start in the classroom, one student and one small act at a time.

Acknowledgment

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