Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning

How coachability shapes entrepreneurial learning in venture acceleration programs

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Abstract

Purpose – This study develops a process-oriented understanding of how entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning when engaging with coaching feedback in venture accelerators. Conceptually, we link the active use of feedback to research on coachability. The research question is formulated as follows: How do entrepreneurs enact coachability in ways that condition entrepreneurial learning in venture acceleration programs?

Design/methodology/approach – We adopt an inductive, informant-centric research design to explore the processual dynamics surrounding how entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning in venture acceleration programs. Empirically, we employ a longitudinal study of a ten-month venture accelerator program in Sweden. The core of our analysis centres on interviews with business coaches and lead entrepreneurs who took part in coaching sessions during the program.

Findings – Our findings highlight coachability as a conditioning capacity enacted through learning processes and shaped by situational orientations. We identify four key themes that condition entrepreneurial learning from coaching feedback: ownership of learning, openness to change, preference for tangible outcomes, and a short term learning preference. In all, our findings suggest that coachability is not a stable trait but a dynamic learning capacity that unfolds under the temporal and emotional conditions characteristic of venture acceleration contexts.

Originality/value – Our findings provide a qualitative, process-focused framework of how coachability is enacted in ways that condition entrepreneurial learning. Rather than assuming complete learning cycles, our framework depicts entrepreneurial learning as shaped by situational orientations that may accelerate, distort, or truncate entrepreneurial learning.

Keywords Coachability, Entrepreneurial coaching, Venture accelerators, Accelerators, Experiential learning

Paper type Research article

Introduction

The scale and scope of venture acceleration programs have expanded rapidly (Pauwels *et al.*, 2016; Wright and Drori, 2018; Cohen *et al.*, 2019; Politis *et al.*, 2019; Spigel *et al.*, 2023). By providing enterprise-oriented networking and training, these programs expose entrepreneurs to intensive feedback, mentoring, and peer interaction, while strengthening connections

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among founders, investors, and service providers (Goswami *et al*., 2018). Venture accelerators have thus become increasingly important vehicles for regional entrepreneurship by concentrating localised capabilities that underpin venture growth and competitiveness (Ester, 2018).

Experiential learning lies at the very core of venture acceleration programs (Politis *et al.*, 2019; Hallen *et al.*, 2020). A central feature of the learning process is entrepreneurial coaching, in which experienced business coaches guide fledgling entrepreneurs in achieving specific personal and professional goals (Mansoori *et al*., 2019; Nair and Blomquist, 2021). The coaches are often seasoned entrepreneurs (Bruneel *et al.*, 2012; van Weele *et al.*, 2019), which opens the way to ground the learning process in practice-based support. In these contexts, active coaching tailors more general educational and inspirational program elements to the specific challenges faced by individual ventures (Nair and Blomquist, 2021).

Studies underscore that entrepreneurial coaching is widely regarded as a key mechanism for fostering experiential learning and venture development (Rice, 2002; Kirwan *et al.*, 2006; Clarysse and Bruneel, 2007; Bergek and Norrman, 2008; van Weele *et al.*, 2017). However, so far, there is limited theoretical insight into how entrepreneurs engage with feedback in coaching interactions and how this engagement conditions the learning process. Much of the literature adopts a provider-centric perspective, emphasising the availability, intensity, or quality of coaching (Rice, 2002; Kirwan *et al.*, 2006; Clarysse and Bruneel, 2007; Bergek and Norrman, 2008; van Weele *et al*., 2017), while paying comparatively less attention to entrepreneurs as active participants who may interpret, evaluate, and act on feedback differently. As a result, feedback is often implicitly treated as an input whose learning dynamics are assumed rather than explained.

In this study, we shift attention from the provision of coaching to how entrepreneurs engage with the feedback provided as a conditioning capacity for entrepreneurial learning. Following this logic, we focus on *coachability* defined as "the degree to which an entrepreneur seeks, carefully considers, and integrates feedback to improve his or her venture's performance" (Ciuchta *et al.*, 2018, p. 869). This definition positions coachability not as passive compliance but as an active, effortful learning capacity involving feedback-seeking, critical reflection, and selective implementation (Somià *et al*., 2024; Kuratko *et al*., 2021). Yet, prior scholarly work has tended to treat coachability as a relatively uniform construct (Marvel *et al.*, 2020; Diermann and Kotte, 2021), leaving open questions about how entrepreneurs differ in their engagement with feedback under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure. This limits our understanding of how coachability is enacted in practice in venture acceleration programs and how variation in entrepreneurs' engagement with feedback shapes entrepreneurial learning.

Taking these observations as our point of departure, we pose the following research question: *How do entrepreneurs enact coachability in ways that condition entrepreneurial learning in venture acceleration programs*? Theoretically, we position our work by linking research on entrepreneurial coachability with experiential learning theory to develop a process-oriented account of how learning unfolds under conditions of intensive coaching and time pressure. Empirically, we conduct a longitudinal study of a ten-month business accelerator program run in Southern Sweden. Our findings depict coachability as a conditioning capacity enacted through learning processes and shaped by situational orientations. Four key themes that condition entrepreneurial learning from coaching feedback are identified: ownership of learning, openness to change, preference for tangible outcomes, and short-term learning preference. Together, these themes capture different situational orientations through which entrepreneurs engage with coaching feedback, shaping how experiential learning processes are accelerated or constrained in venture acceleration programs.

Our findings contribute to entrepreneurship literature in three principal ways. First, we extend research on entrepreneurial coaching by positioning coachability as an enacted, situationally shaped learning capacity rather than a stable individual attribute. Second, we advance theory and research on entrepreneurial learning by demonstrating that experiential processes in practice rarely unfold as complete, linear cycles. Instead, they are accelerated,

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truncated, or redirected depending on how entrepreneurs actively engage with coaching feedback. Finally, by situating these dynamics within venture acceleration programs, we contribute to entrepreneurship education scholarship by offering a process-sensitive lens on how entrepreneurs actively transform coaching feedback into learning and action, thereby shaping entrepreneurial learning trajectories in temporally compressed educational contexts.

Literature review

Coaching in venture acceleration programs

Venture acceleration programs have become a central component of modern entrepreneurial ecosystems, providing knowledge-intensive services to growth-oriented start-ups (Carayannis *et al.*, 2018; Wright and Drori, 2018). They are designed to provide tailored incubation services to cohorts of ventures seeking to develop them into investment-ready businesses (Cohen and Hochberg, 2014; Wise and Valliere, 2014). The programs are intensive, highly structured, and temporally compressed, typically comprising a mix of enterprise-oriented training and networking opportunities (Mian *et al.*, 2016; Pauwels *et al.*, 2016; Van Weele *et al.*, 2017). The supportive environment provides fledgling entrepreneurs with valuable opportunities for learning and professional development (Politis *et al.*, 2019; Kuratko *et al.*, 2021) and helps them establish connections with investors and industry contacts (Wise and Valliere, 2014; Pauwels *et al.*, 2016; Clayton, 2024).

Entrepreneurial coaching is a core feature of venture acceleration programs (Mansoori *et al.*, 2019). In general, coaching can be defined as a formal, short-term relationship between a client and a designated coach, focused on specific developmental issues that involve structured, focused interaction. The relationship is aimed at promoting desirable change for the benefit of the one being coached, as well as potentially other stakeholders (e.g. Cox *et al.*, 2014; Blackman *et al.*, 2016). In this respect, it is a collaborative effort where the coach uses certain strategies, tools and techniques to understand the client and their development tasks, to challenge current constraints while exploring new possibilities, and to ensure accountability and guidance in reaching goals and sustaining development (Ting and Hart, 2004; Blackman *et al.*, 2016).

The broader literature on business coaching is vast, but two points stand out. First, there is a difference between coaching and other forms of developmental interactions aimed at achieving specific personal and professional goals, such as mentoring (e.g. Deakins *et al.*, 1998; Sanchez-Burks *et al.*, 2017). Yet, the difference can be vague, especially in the entrepreneurship literature where the terms are often used interchangeably (e.g. Fielden and Hunt, 2011; Pauwels *et al.*, 2016). We follow D'Abate *et al.*, 2003, who recognise some similarities between coaching and mentoring, such as their dyadic nature, but also identify distinct characteristics that suggest they are not the same. Furthermore, to distinguish coaching from mentoring, we lean on discussions in Hawkins and Smith (2013) and Gray *et al.* (2016). The main differences identified in these sources are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Coaching and mentoring

	Coaching	Mentoring
Basis for commitment	Paid, professional activity	Often voluntary activity
Time frame	Short-term performance	Long-term development
Focus	Specific development issues	Broader view of the person as a whole
Provision	Facilitator of learning and development within a specific setting	More general psychosocial support
Exhibited behaviors	Goal setting, providing practical application, providing feedback, teaching	Modelling, counselling, supporting, advocating, introducing, and sheltering

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Coaching is also a highly context-bound phenomenon that requires careful attention to the specific learning and development agenda at hand (Cox *et al.*, 2014). In venture acceleration programs, coaching is not a stand-alone developmental interaction. Rather, the highly intensive and temporally compressed program deliberately combines coaching with additional business support services such as seminars and workshops, inspirational lectures, and other counselling services (Wright and Drori, 2018; Hallen *et al.*, 2020). In this setting, entrepreneurs receive feedback and guidance from multiple sources—including coaches, peers, instructors, and program activities—making coaching part of a broader constellation of experiential learning inputs.

This multiplicity of inputs means that entrepreneurs must actively navigate, interpret, and integrate feedback from different sources as part of an ongoing learning process. The characteristics of venture acceleration programs thus suggest shifting attention from the provision of coaching to *coachability*, defined as how entrepreneurs engage with feedback as a conditioning capacity for entrepreneurial learning (Ciuchta *et al.*, 2018; Marvel *et al.*, 2020; Kuratko *et al.*, 2021; Somià *et al.*, 2024). This shift highlights that coachability is not merely the passive acceptance of instructions in a coaching session, but an active process of seeking feedback, reflecting, and implementing changes in an intensive, highly structured, and temporally compressed educational context.

Experiential learning dynamics

In this article, we embed our reasoning and logic in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Politis, 2005; Corbett, 2007) to develop a process-oriented understanding of how entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning through their engagement with coaching feedback within venture accelerator programs. The theory conceptualises learning as the creation of knowledge through "the grasping and transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Grasping refers to the process of taking in information, while transforming refers to how the learner interprets and acts on that information. The learning process is portrayed as an idealised cycle in which the learner continually forms (and reforms) ideas and solutions to problems through action, experience, and reflection (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). In practice, individuals differ in how they engage with and progress through learning and problem-solving processes, which reflects underlying preferences for particular stages and activities within those processes (Basadur, 2004). Consequently, learning unfolds differently depending on how learners engage with experience, reflect on it, and experiment with alternative courses of action.

From this stance, experiential learning in the context of venture acceleration programs can be understood as a practice through which entrepreneurs grasp and transform experience to activate and sustain the learning process (Politis *et al.*, 2019). Successful completion of the learning process stimulates knowledge creation, skill formation, and inquiry (Corbett, 2007; Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2025), which generate personal satisfaction, motivation, and self-development. At the same time, experiential learning arises in a social or relational environment (Kolb and Kolb, 2005), meaning it cannot be separated from the contexts in which it occurs (Taylor and Thorpe, 2004; Harrison and Leitch, 2008). This reasoning suggests a dual interaction in which the learner and the immediate learning environment are interdependent and largely intertwined (Kolb, 1984, p. 34; Lans *et al.*, 2008). This perspective highlights that entrepreneurial learning depends not only on exposure to experience but also on how learners engage with, interpret, and act on inputs from their immediate learning environment (Politis and Gabrielsson, 2015; Zheng *et al.*, 2023).

Methods

Research setting

The empirical setting for the study is situated in a ten-month business accelerator program run in Southern Sweden from April 2018 to January 2019. The accelerator was set up by a team of

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organisers who gathered representatives of the public sector, businesses and incubators based around Lund University. The author team of this manuscript did not participate in the coaching and project management process, but one of the authors was present in the capacity of the observer. The overall structure of the accelerator program involved four steps. This four-steps structure reflects the program's own design as set by its organisers, which our longitudinal study followed rather than imposed. Step one involved scouting, during which the accelerator project team, together with a board of potential investors, met with applicants and conducted interviews to identify the best ideas for the program.

Scouting took place at various locations across Southern Sweden. In total, 47 applicants presented their business ideas to the project team and the investors' board. The scouting stage used informal, conversation-based meetings, allowing the project team and investor board to assess each idea. These meetings were held with all 47 applicants, together with the project team and the investors' board. Rather than a fixed set of questions, they were organised around a few guiding themes; how the applicant framed the opportunity, why it mattered to them, and how committed they were; which allowed the project team and investor board to compare ideas on a consistent basis and to advance the most promising ones.

On this basis, twelve applicants were selected to continue in the program, and no further formal selection was applied after Step 1. All twelve candidates continued through Steps 2 to 4, although attendance across sessions varied. Step two involved structured one-day sessions on topics such as values, sales, and the critical evaluation of participants' venture ideas for twelve candidates selected for this stage of the program. These sessions were lecture-based, followed by group discussions and presentations. Step three involved online and in-house coaching, respectively, as well as participation in several different seminars and networking events. The fourth step consisted of a pitching exercise in which participants presented their venture ideas to the board of investors.

While the planned overall structure of the accelerator program, as outlined in the four steps above, has remained the same, the content and length of some activities have been adjusted throughout the program. The accelerator program was initially planned as a four-month package. However, with additional funding and in response to participants' needs, the accelerator program was extended by another six months. The extension was, among other things, related to the coaching activities, which enabled us to follow the coaching process for a longer period. Moreover, although the accelerator program followed all four steps described above, it is important to note that coaching occurred continuously throughout the program. From the outset, participants were encouraged to reach out to coaches on an ad hoc basis, enabling one-on-one interactions that were often informal, unplanned, and not recorded in the official schedule. These interactions occurred alongside the formal sessions, making coaching a more pervasive element of the program than the official structure alone suggests.

Data collection

The strategy for data collection was to capture the dynamics of the entrepreneur-coach relationship using multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews, field observations, and online materials available on the web page of the accelerator. This allowed for the collection of rich material needed for an in-depth qualitative single case study. Both participants and accelerator stakeholders, as well as project managers and coaches, have been interviewed at every stage of the program. While all candidates participated in most events organised as part of the program, our data focuses on five entrepreneurs who attended all coaching sessions from the start until the end. This enabled us to obtain rich, detailed information about the dynamics of the entrepreneur-coach relationships that occurred. Hence, the core of our analysis centres on 25 semi-structured interviews with four business coaches and five lead entrepreneurs who took part in all coaching-related activities. Each informant was interviewed multiple times throughout the accelerator program and upon its termination.

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This allowed us to obtain real-time and retrospective accounts by those people experiencing the phenomenon of theoretical interest.

During the initial stage of the interviewing, we explored expectations related to the accelerator program and entrepreneurial coaching from both coaches' and participants' perspectives. As the program progressed, we continued the interviews on the same topics to follow the development and dynamics that emerged in the entrepreneur-coach relationships. We have also been present, as observers, during the planned coaching sessions. In addition, four hours of online group coaching sessions have been recorded. Furthermore, the author that has been present at all four stages of the accelerator program, collected observation notes in the form of the diary, that have been useful for providing and explaining the dynamics and the context of the events. The observations were conducted as open, non-participant observation rather than following a predefined observational framework. Recorder contemporaneous field notes describe the content and flow of each session, how participants presented their ideas and responded to feedback, and the interactions among participants and coaches. Consistent with the study's inductive orientation, these notes were not structured around predetermined categories but provided contextual descriptions used to situate and triangulate the interview accounts. One of the authors has also been copied on electronic communications between the project team and participants, as well as between the business coaches and participants. The research team took no part in the selection decisions, the author attended the scouting stage, and all subsequent stages, solely as a non-participant observer. The complete breakdown of data used for this study is presented in Table 2.

The semi-structured interviews were developed for each stage of the accelerator program and adapted to capture better the coaching experience and the relationships between participants and coaches. The literature and research on business coaching were consulted during data collection and before the last round of interviews. Across the program, these interviews were organised around evolving themes, allowing the conversation to follow each informant's experience while ensuring the core themes were covered. Early interviews conducted during the scouting stage addressed entrepreneurs' background, the origins and development of their venture idea, their motivations, and their expectations of the program and of coaching allowing for the emergence of additional themes, in light with semi-structure nature of the process; later interviews adhered also to semi-structured philosophy, while focusing on their experience of the learning process, including which activities and coaching interactions they found most and least useful and why, the lessons they drew, and how their knowledge and skills developed. Interviews with the coaches addressed their professional background, how they engaged with entrepreneurs and adapted their sessions to the individual' and group's needs, and the development of the entrepreneur–coach relationship. These themes were designed to capture, from both sides of the relationship, how entrepreneurs engaged with and learned from coaching feedback over time.

Table 2. Data breakdown

Data type	Sources of data	Details
Interviews	4 coaches 5 lead entrepreneurs	25 interviews
Observations	Three bootcamp sessions	18 h of in-person observation
Recordings	Online group coaching sessions	4 h of recorded material
Email correspondence	Final feedback from the online coach to the entrepreneur participants Messages sent by the project leaders to the entrepreneur participants	15 pages of written content

Source(s): Authors' own work

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A summary of the informants is presented in Tables 3 and 4, which report the gender, age, and professional background of all participants. For the entrepreneurs, Table 3 further reports their business idea, its maturity, and whether the venture was solo or team-based. For the coaches, Table 4 reports the type and area of coaching, their work experience, and whether they were external consultants or part of the in-house (project team) program management. These tables provide information on the material we have gathered and analysed, while preserving confidentiality. All participants provided informed consent for the use of the data for research purposes and were informed of their right to withdraw their consent at any time. The study adhered to established ethical principles for research and followed the university's procedures for ethical self-assessment. Accordingly, formal ethical review and approval were not required.

Analysis of data

The analysis of the empirical data follows the principles for qualitative thematic content analysis outlined by Gioia *et al*. (2012). First, we conducted a careful analysis of the accelerator program at the program level, with an emphasis on basic process questions, such as: "How do things happen?" In this respect, we were particularly interested in the temporal sequencing of activities and events in the program. This descriptive analysis relied on multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, press releases, and progress reports, which enabled us to develop an overall understanding of temporally evolving processes and the relationships between activities and events in the program. Thereafter, interview transcripts were carefully read to understand the coaching experience in terms that were meaningful to the participants. Whenever possible, we cross-checked interview accounts of activities and events with other data sources to enhance data credibility.

Building on this descriptive groundwork and following Gioia *et al.* (2012), we examined similarities and differences among emerging categories, gradually reducing them to a manageable number and assigning category labels that retained the meaning of informants' terms. The resulting constellation of first-order codes was then critically reviewed to identify deeper structures or processes that could be interpreted at a second-order thematic level. These

Table 3. Description of informants–entrepreneurs

Id	Gender	Age	Educational background	Business idea	Maturity of idea	Solo or team-based
E1	Female	50	Fashion design	Swedish design of household items inspired by Majorca landscapes	Up and running	Solo entrepreneur
E2	Female	47	Fine Arts and Design	Well-dressed, functional and environment-friendly mid-layers, suitable for urban as well as outdoor life	Up and running	Team of two entrepreneurs
E3	Female	54	Health management	Speech and communication training for children with Down syndrome	The idea phase	Solo entrepreneur
E4	Male	26	Software development	A platform where two people-one who wants to sell his apartment without a broker and one who wants to buy one-meet. (Team)	The idea phase	Team of four entrepreneurs
E5	Female	41	Fashion and technology	A brand based in Sweden designing a non-seasonal clothing using local producers with minimal transport pollution	Prototype phase	Solo entrepreneur

Source(s): Authors' own work

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Table 4. Description of informants–coaches

Id	Gender	Age	Type of coaching	Coaching area	Work experience	External or in-house
C1	Male	50	Online group coaching, planned in advance	Marketing and sales, methods for habit design and training	Start-up experience, working in consulting, various organization of development projects, coach for CEOs and management teams of SMEs and larger companies	External consultant
C2	Female	45	Group coaching, planned in advance	E-commerce and online industry	Start-up experience, e-commerce and online industry (crowd-funding, pop-up stores), business coach for entrepreneurs in venture creation programs	External consultant
C3	Male	68	One-to-one coaching, ad-hoc when issues emerge	Business development, sustainable business development	Start-up experience, experience in business acceleration processes, sustainability, design industry, business coach for entrepreneurs in venture creation programs	Part of program management
C4	Female	54	One-to-one coaching, ad hoc when issues emerge	Value process, idea management, finance	Business development and project specialist, business coach for entrepreneurs in venture creation programs	Part of program management

Source(s): Authors' own work

second-order themes were further organised into aggregate dimensions based on how the inductively identified themes related to existing theory (e.g. Gehman *et al.*, 2018). The outcome of this process served as the basis for a data structure that illustrates the progression from raw data to theoretical dimensions. The data structure, comprising first-order codes, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions, is presented in Figure 1.

The views and orientations toward coaching expressed by the entrepreneurs were then contrasted with our longitudinal data to derive theoretical insights into the dynamic flow of activities and events (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Finally, the observed patterns and regularities in our data were condensed into graphical representations presented in the results section to illustrate our findings.

The author team took different but complementary roles in the data analysis. The first author conducted the interviews and led the inductive coding of the data, while the third author adopted an outsider perspective and contributed to linking emerging empirical patterns with theory. The second author served as a bridge, remaining close to informants' views while engaging in debriefing sessions throughout the process to apply systematic conceptual and analytical discipline, thereby supporting credible interpretations of the data. In this manner, we engaged in both inductive and deductive-like analyses. This approach is particularly suited to our exploration of the processual dynamics surrounding entrepreneurial learning in venture acceleration programs.

Declaration of generative AI-assisted technologies

While preparing this study, the authors used Grammarly to improve their grammar and spelling. After using this AI-assisted tool, the authors have reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final text of the publication.

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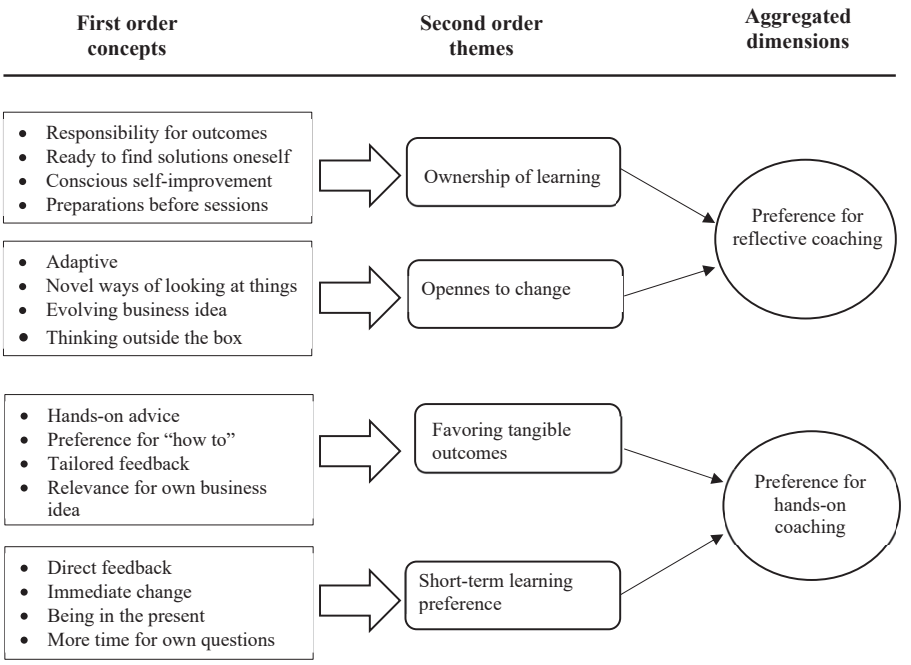

Figure 1. Coachability approaches. Source: Authors' own work

Results

This section is organised into two sub-sections, corresponding to our principal interest in exploring how entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning when engaging with coaching feedback. In the first section, we discuss four key themes that emerge from the grounded analysis of how experiential learning is enacted when entrepreneurs engage with coaching feedback in the structured training environments of venture accelerators: ownership of learning, openness to change, preference for tangible outcomes, and short-term learning preference. Second, and building on our grounded analysis, we depict how the themes relate to theoretically distinct coachability approaches employed by the entrepreneurs: one favouring *hands-on coaching* and the other favouring *reflective coaching*. In all, our findings suggest that coachability is a dynamic learning capacity whose enactment is shaped by the temporal and emotional conditions characteristic of venture acceleration contexts.

Enacting experiential learning

Building on definitions of coachability as the capacity to seek, consider, and integrate feedback (Ciuchta *et al.*, 2018), our findings highlight how entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning in response to coaching feedback. While the analysis identifies four themes that explicate these processes, their underlying emphases also connect them and, in turn, shape the learning process in different ways. In line with process-oriented perspectives suggesting that individuals naturally emphasise different stages of learning and problem-solving processes (e.g. Basadur, 2004), the results suggest that entrepreneurial learning in coaching is contingent on underlying orientations that can accelerate movement through some stages of the learning cycle while potentially distorting or truncating movement through others.

Two emerging themes, connected by a common emphasis on learner agency and active engagement with feedback, were "ownership of learning" and "openness to change". The

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theme "ownership of learning" refers to the entrepreneur's sense of control over and responsibility for their own learning journey when actively using coaching feedback. In our data, ownership of learning is expressed through a set of interrelated orientations and practices, including sustained motivation and engagement, self-directed goal setting, confidence in one's ability to learn, ongoing self-monitoring, and persistence in following up on feedback over time. One informant described this orientation as follows:

> I have a lot of dialogues with myself and I think it's very important to start with myself. Then dialogues with others, such as family and friends . . . So little bit like I am working myself with my coaching, with the speech and communication, put some goals, see each other in four weeks, try to look at how did we reach and if not- how can we arrange it better. And if we reached the goals, how can we go on. So maybe I prefer more like the process, I can see the process for myself. (E3)

With respect to experiential learning dynamics, ownership of learning is a cross-cutting orientation through which entrepreneurs take control of how they learn from coaching. This is especially visible in how they initiate and run experiments, as they decide for themselves when and how to act on insights. As such, ownership of learning manifests as self-directed experimentation (e.g, Zellweger and Djokovic, 2026), where entrepreneurs actively assume responsibility for testing, evaluating, and applying insights in their ventures.

The theme "openness to change" when actively using coaching feedback refers to an individual's level of acceptance and conscious awareness of the possibility that change may be needed across a range of situations and scenarios, together with the drive to enact that change. One of the informants describes this with respect to the business model as follows:

> When we started [the venture creation program] it was a very different idea but now it has evolved into something else. I think I got the whole business model different, now I have a much clearer view of what I want to do, because that changes a lot . . . I think this business model I have now is much better than the one I got in the first place. So that's the biggest thing that changed for me. (E4)

Another informant reasoned about openness to change in the following way:

> . . . I think it's good to have critical feedbacks if you can take the feedback as a good feedback. I think I can do, I don't think people around you say bad things just to hurt you. I think they gave me feedback in order to do better. (E3)

With respect to experiential learning dynamics, being open to change when receiving coaching feedback facilitates reflection on prior experiences, enabling entrepreneurs to extract insights that inform subsequent decisions and actions and thereby cognitively reframe those experiences (e.g. Gabrielsson *et al.*, 2025). It also supports acting on insights by lowering resistance to testing alternative courses of action in practice. From a learning perspective, our analysis suggests that openness to change facilitates deeper and more generative learning through sustained sense-making and theory-informed experimentation.

Two other themes emerging from the data, both marked by a common emphasis on immediacy and action-oriented learning, were favouring "tangible outcomes" and "short-term learning preference". Favouring tangible outcomes involves a preference for practical advice and knowledge tailored to specific situations when actively using coaching feedback, preferably delivered in smaller groups or individually to discuss issues directly related to their own businesses. One informant described their strong hands-on coaching preference as follows:

> . . . It's really good to have it "hands-on", because all this talk it doesn't really work. I don't know what it is, but for me it's more . . . I want to know how to get from there, technically, how to do the advertising on Facebook . . . I mean, to do the really advanced ones. For that's what I need, more hands-on things. (E1)

Another informant discussed the benefits of getting practical and tailored advice in one-to-one sessions in the following way:

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> . . . for me having one-to-one coaching means that the person is actually interested in what I do, and that he really knows what you are doing, by going through your things and make follow-ups . . . when there are many teams in a session you can learn from the variety of questions . . . but you also tend to have less time to really work on what is my specific problem. (E2)

Favouring tangible outcomes marks a preference for trying things out in practice rather than grasping them abstractly. Similar action-oriented learning patterns have been identified in research on entrepreneurial learning, where experience is transformed into knowledge through experimentation, feedback, and engagement with concrete venture challenges (Politis and Gabrielsson, 2015; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). As a result, learning tends to become closely tied to refining current practices and resolving immediate problems, potentially placing less emphasis on developing more generalisable principles that can be transferred across situations.

A short-term learning preference refers to founders who focus more strongly than average on the present and the immediate future when engaging with coaching feedback, whereas those with a long-term preference place relatively more emphasis on future outcomes. This short-term learning preference corresponds to what the time-preference literature describes as high time preference (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2016), in the sense that founders prioritise knowledge on how to obtain access to resources or the path to more immediate, visible effects over more distant developmental benefits. As one of the informants said:

> We got advice, yes, but I maybe missed the how. Because I did not know how to reach this . . . Okay, I could go to Google and try to find [it], but these people have a lot of other people around them. Maybe they could say, "Contact this person, contact this person," something like that. (E1)

In our analysis, entrepreneurs with a short-term preference expressed a stronger need for direct feedback in coaching sessions, more time to discuss questions related to their own specific needs, and a general urge to see immediate changes. Importantly, this did not necessarily imply a desire for habit-changing activities, but rather for actions that yield immediately visible results. This pattern is exemplified by one informant, who articulated her preference for engaging in learning from coaching as follows:

> . . . how can I solve this NOW . . . [I prefer] . . . to sit and discuss just what will I do now in my company; how will I do it in my world. (E3)

With respect to experiential learning dynamics, a short-term learning preference in feedback from coaching weakens engagement in reflecting on experiences, outcomes, and reactions before drawing conclusions. This shortens the reflection phase and encourages faster cycling between hands-on venture experience and testing ideas in action. In other words, this preference undermines reflection and risks superficial learning that prioritises rapid action over sense-making.

Coachability approaches

Our grounded analysis suggests that the identified themes reflect theoretically distinct approaches to coachability that entrepreneurs employ when engaging with coaching feedback. Rather than reflecting fixed characteristics, these approaches appear to represent different orientations toward learning, problem solving, and venture development. At a general level, the two approaches share similarities in terms of learning orientation and intended outcomes (e.g. Cavanagh and Grant, 2014). In this regard, they are both humanistic and relationship-driven, emphasising personal development and venture-level change through experiential and social learning. Moreover, they both aim to improve venture performance by connecting the unique values and competencies of individual entrepreneurs with the strategic goals of the venture. However, beyond these generalities, they differ in several other dimensions, which leads us to label them *hands-on coaching* and *reflective coaching*. The stylised characteristics of the two coaching approaches that we have identified are summarised in Table 5.

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Table 5. Characteristics of coachability approaches

	Hands-on coaching	Reflective coaching
Similarities		
Approach to learning	Humanistic and relationship-driven, emphasizing personal development and venture-level change through experiential and social learning	
Intended outcome	Improving start-up performance by connecting the unique values and competencies of individual entrepreneurs with the strategic goals of the venture	
Differences		
Problem approach	Problems as constraints inhibiting venture development	Problems as opportunities to learn from to develop the venture
Temporal horizon	History – what has happened that led to current state of affairs, and why?	Future – what is the current state of affairs, and what aspirations or effects are desired?
Communication style	Advice-driven dialogue	Reflective dialogue
Coaching behaviour	Facilitating entrepreneurs' self-awareness of underlying cognitive and emotional barriers that constrain or inhibit goal attainment	Defining possible and desired future states and constructing pathways in thinking and action that assist entrepreneurs in achieving that state
Entrepreneur's skill development	More effective thinking and behavioural skills	Improved self-discovery and accountability
Learning outcome	Single loop learning – aiming for incremental improvement in routines while preserving existing aspirations, norms and values	Double loop learning – aiming for more fundamental improvements or changes in aspirations, norms and values

Source(s): Authors' own work

A key distinction between the two approaches concerns how problems are addressed in a coaching situation. In the hands-on coaching approach, problems are primarily seen as constraints inhibiting venture development, whereas the reflective coaching approach considers them opportunities to learn from and develop the venture (Cavanagh and Grant, 2014). Another distinction concerns the temporal horizon of problem-solving. In the hands-on coaching approach, the discussion is mainly focused on what has happened that led to the current state of affairs and on analysing the reasons for this outcome. In contrast, the reflective coaching approach directs its attention to the future, asking questions about the current state of affairs and the aspirations or effects that clients desire.

A third distinction concerns communication style: the two approaches lead to different types of interactions when coaches engage with entrepreneurs. Here, the hands-on coaching approach leads to the provision of practical advice and direct feedback that often can be immediately implemented and applied, while the reflective oriented coaching approach is more prone to engage in reflective dialogues in order to challenge entrepreneurs' way of thinking and trigger their ability to see the bigger picture behind the actual problem (Mansoori *et al.*, 2019).

A fourth distinction concerns coaching behaviour. The hands-on coaching approach focuses on removing obstacles that inhibit entrepreneurial action and progress towards existing goals. In contrast, the reflective coaching approach focuses on helping entrepreneurs to critically examine their assumptions, define desired future states, and develop alternative ways of understanding and addressing entrepreneurial challenges. When it comes to the entrepreneur's skill development, the hands-on coaching emphasises the need to develop entrepreneurs' effective thinking and behavioural skills, while the reflective coaching approach emphasises the need to improve the entrepreneur's self-discovery and accountability (Crompton *et al.*, 2012).

The final distinction concerns the learning outcomes enabled by the entrepreneur-coach relationship (Mansoori *et al.*, 2019). The learning outcomes related to a hands-on coaching

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approach can mainly be characterised as incremental improvements in routines and activities while preserving existing aspirations, norms and values of the entrepreneur. In this respect, the outcomes contain the essence of single-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974). The learning outcomes facilitated through a reflective-oriented coaching approach entail more fundamental improvements or changes in aspirations, norms and values, which promote the personal and professional development of entrepreneurs. The learning outcomes in this coaching approach thus resemble double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

From an experiential learning perspective (Kolb, 1984), the two coachability approaches represent different dynamics of moving through the learning cycle (Politis and Gabrielsson, 2015), with implications for the scope and durability of entrepreneurial learning. Rather than assuming complete learning cycles, our findings suggest that learning is shaped by situational orientations that accelerate, distort, or truncate experiential learning processes. In doing so, our findings align with critiques of overly linear applications of experiential learning (e.g. Morris, 2020) to offer a process-sensitive lens for understanding how learning from coaching feedback unfolds in venture acceleration programs.

Building on the coachability approaches and their characteristics, Figure 2 illustrates how these underlying orientations create preferences for particular movements through the experiential learning cycle, resulting in different patterns of movement, with certain stages being amplified and others receiving less attention.

Figure 2 illustrates how the two coachability preferences influence entrepreneurs' movement through the experiential learning cycle. Rather than progressing evenly through all stages of learning, entrepreneurs exhibit orientations that selectively reinforce some learning activities while placing less emphasis on others (e.g. Basadur, 2004). A preference for hands-on coaching is associated with a preference for tangible outcomes and a short-term learning orientation, thereby strengthening the progression from abstract conceptualisation (AC) to active experimentation (AE) and concrete experience (CE). Learning is therefore driven by implementation, action, and rapid feedback. At the same time, the emphasis on immediate outcomes may reduce engagement with reflective observation (RO).

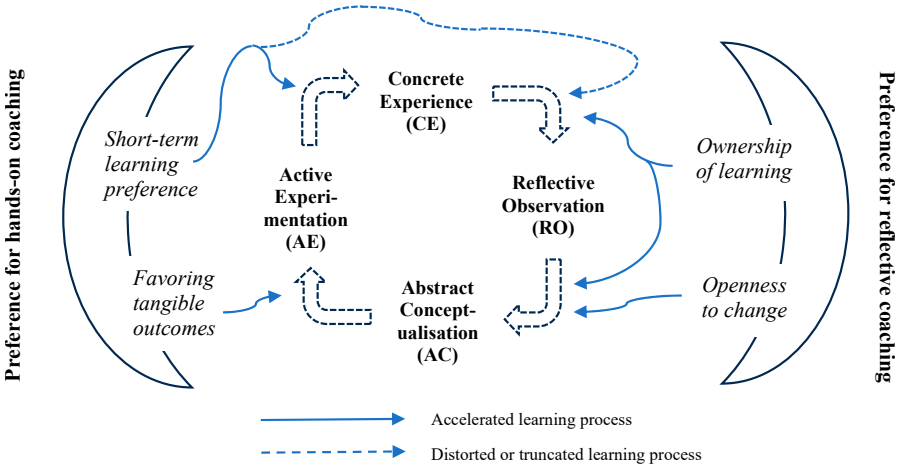

Figure 2. Coachability preferences influencing the learning process. Source: Authors' own work. Adapted from the experiential learning cycle in Kolb (1984). The four dimensions connected to coaching preferences—favouring tangible outcomes, short-term learning preference, ownership of learning, and openness to change—correspond to the themes identified in Figure 1 and summarise how distinct coachability orientations shape movement through the learning cycle

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In contrast, a preference for reflective coaching is associated with ownership of learning and openness to change, thereby strengthening the progression from concrete experience (CE) through reflective observation (RO) to abstract conceptualisation (AC). Learning is therefore driven by sense-making, reframing, and the development of new understandings. Accordingly, the two coachability approaches do not represent alternative learning outcomes, but different orientations that shape how entrepreneurs navigate the experiential learning cycle and transform coaching feedback into entrepreneurial learning. Consequently, sustaining momentum throughout the cycle may require learning activities and coaching interventions that encourage entrepreneurs to engage with stages receiving less attention under their prevailing coachability orientation.

Taken together, our grounded analysis highlights coachability as a conditioning capacity enacted through learning processes and shaped by situational orientations. The two coachability approaches identified in the analysis represent distinct ways in which entrepreneurs enact entrepreneurial learning when engaging with coaching feedback in venture acceleration contexts. Hands-on coaching accelerates learning processes by privileging immediate action, experimentation, and incremental adjustment, whereas reflective coaching enables learning through deeper sense-making, reframing, and exploration of alternative assumptions. Both approaches can be understood as complementary responses to the time-compressed, feedback-dense structure of venture acceleration programs (Pauwels *et al.*, 2016), which simultaneously demand rapid progress toward venture milestones and provide space for reflection and reframing through structured coaching encounters. Overall, this points to the elusiveness of the quest for a one-size-fits-all model of coaching (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2002), including careful consideration of the many different meanings and interpretations of the coaching context.

Discussion

Coaching has become a key element of venture acceleration programs, serving as a mechanism for fostering entrepreneurial learning under time pressure and uncertainty (Pauwels *et al.*, 2016). In this study, we contribute to the scholarly conversation by adopting a qualitative, longitudinal research design to examine how entrepreneurial learning unfolds through coaching feedback in a program context. Drawing on interviews with entrepreneurs and coaches, complemented by observations and secondary sources, we trace how coachability is enacted over time within the structured, feedback-dense environment of the accelerator. Rather than treating coaching as a uniform intervention, our findings highlight that entrepreneurs differ in how they engage with coaching feedback and transform it into learning and action.

Coachability approaches and entrepreneurial learning dynamics

Our findings advance theory by developing a process-oriented understanding of coachability as a conditioning capacity that shapes experiential learning dynamics in venture acceleration programs. Specifically, we identify two distinct coachability approaches—hands-on coaching and reflective coaching—that represent different ways of enacting experiential learning in response to feedback. These approaches are not interpreted as fixed preferences or personality traits, but as situationally shaped orientations that emerge in interaction with the accelerator's structure, time horizon, and performance expectations.

Entrepreneurs enacting a reflective coaching approach engage with feedback as an opportunity for sense-making, reframing, and questioning underlying assumptions. Here, coaching conversations facilitate deeper reflection and exploration of alternative interpretations and future possibilities. Experiential learning in this mode involves longer cycles of reflection and interpretation before action is taken, potentially enhancing the depth and durability of learning over time. Consistent with double-loop learning (e.g. Argyris and

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Schön, 1974), the approach encourages entrepreneurs not only to modify their actions but also to reconsider the assumptions, goals, and values that guide those actions (Zheng *et al.*, 2023). Such deeper forms of reflection have been associated with transformative entrepreneurial learning and shifts in how entrepreneurs understand themselves, their ventures, and their environments (Cope, 2003).

By contrast, entrepreneurs enacting a hands-on coaching approach prioritise concrete problem-solving and immediate application. Learning in this mode is accelerated through action and practice-based validation, often resulting in incremental improvements to routines and venture activities. In experiential learning terms, this approach emphasises concrete experience and active experimentation while placing less emphasis on extended reflection and abstraction. This pattern is consistent with exploitative forms of entrepreneurial learning (Zheng *et al.*, 2023) and resembles single-loop learning, where actions are adjusted without fundamentally questioning underlying assumptions (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Such learning emphasises refining and adapting existing routines and practices through experience without necessarily prompting broader changes in goals, assumptions, or values.

Importantly, our findings also suggest that these two approaches respond differently to the temporal pressures of venture acceleration programs. The time-compressed nature of accelerators (Pauwels *et al.*, 2016) tends to favour hands-on enactments of coachability, as entrepreneurs seek quick solutions and visible progress. However, reflective coaching remains critical for enabling learning that extends beyond immediate problem-solving, particularly when entrepreneurs are open to questioning their assumptions and trajectories. From this perspective, venture acceleration programs constitute complex learning environments where different coachability approaches coexist, each shaping experiential learning in distinct ways.

Taken together, our findings suggest that coachability is not merely receptiveness to feedback but a mechanism through which different forms of entrepreneurial learning are enacted. By distinguishing between hands-on and reflective coaching approaches, we show how entrepreneurs differ in their engagement with learning opportunities and, consequently, whether feedback supports adaptation within existing frames of reference or prompts deeper reconsideration of assumptions and trajectories. As such, coachability helps explain why some coaching interactions lead primarily to incremental improvements in venture activities, whereas others facilitate more transformative entrepreneurial learning and development.

This distinction also provides a useful lens for understanding entrepreneurial learning in post-COVID venture support environments. The pandemic increased the legitimacy of online entrepreneurship education and coaching, normalising digital interaction between entrepreneurs, educators, and mentors (Schou *et al.*, 2022; Vecchiarini *et al.*, 2024). Yet, while online platforms appear effective at initiating contact, they are often less successful in fostering the experiential learning and mentoring relationships associated with entrepreneurial development (Lall *et al.*, 2023). Increasing reliance on digital platforms in time-compressed support interventions may therefore privilege coaching interactions that support adaptation and experimentation while creating fewer opportunities for the reflective dialogue required for transformative and double-loop learning.

Implications and recommendations

The findings suggest that entrepreneurship educators, coaches, and accelerator organisations should avoid treating coaching as a one-size-fits-all intervention. Rather, coaching practices should be adapted to entrepreneurs' learning needs, venture stage, and the objectives of the support program (e.g. Mansoori *et al.*, 2019). Hands-on coaching may be particularly valuable when entrepreneurs face immediate operational challenges and require rapid experimentation, validation, and implementation support. Reflective coaching, in contrast, may be more appropriate when entrepreneurs are navigating strategic uncertainty, revisiting assumptions, or considering alternative venture trajectories. Accelerator programs may therefore benefit from intentionally combining both approaches, balancing action-oriented coaching with structured

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opportunities for reflection and sense-making. This might involve alternating between coaching sessions focused on short-term venture development and sessions designed to encourage entrepreneurs to question assumptions, reassess goals, and explore future possibilities. By designing coaching interventions that accommodate both exploitative and exploratory forms of entrepreneurial learning (Zheng *et al.*, 2023), support organisations may be better positioned to foster not only short-term venture progress but also deeper and more enduring entrepreneurial capability development.

Limitations

The study has some methodological limitations. First, we employed a qualitative, longitudinal research design to develop a process-oriented understanding of how entrepreneurial coaching and learning unfold in venture acceleration programs. This approach allowed us to study learning processes on-site, but it also limited the analysis to learning dynamics observable during the program. We therefore encourage future research to examine how coachability enactment and learning processes evolve across longer time horizons and in different phases of venture development, including post-acceleration contexts.

Second, the study was conducted in Sweden, which is characterised by comparatively strong public and private support structures for entrepreneurship, as well as by informal hierarchical relations and participatory communication norms. These cultural features may have influenced coaching practices as well as entrepreneurs' engagement with coaching feedback. Although conducted in Sweden, the mechanisms identified may be relevant in other accelerator and venture development contexts, subject to appropriate adaptation to local institutional and cultural conditions. Future research could explore how coachability is enacted across different institutional environments and how these enactments shape entrepreneurial learning dynamics and venture outcomes within diverse entrepreneurial support systems.

While these limitations warrant caution, the distinction between hands-on and reflective coaching approaches captures more general learning dynamics in how entrepreneurs engage with coaching feedback. Since venture acceleration programs across many countries share characteristics such as intensive feedback, compressed time horizons, and a strong emphasis on venture development (Wright and Drori, 2018), these curricular features may similarly shape entrepreneurial learning beyond the specific context examined.

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