NjP *Journal of Business Ethics Education 23.*
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Narrative Constraint as a Pedagogical Strategy for Ethical Sensemaking in Entrepreneurship Education

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Abstract. Business ethics education increasingly emphasizes helping students articulate purpose, values, and strategic intent in ways that move beyond abstract concepts toward meaningful managerial sensemaking. This pedagogical study examines the use of narrative constraint as an instructional strategy for supporting ethical and strategic meaning-making in an undergraduate entrepreneurship course. Students engaged in a structured, team-based assignment requiring the articulation of organizational purpose and strategy through a constrained narrative format. Drawing on aggregate student reflections, instructional artifacts, and course evaluation data, the study explores how narrative constraint shaped students' sensemaking processes, language convergence, and engagement with ethical considerations embedded in strategic decision-making. Findings suggest that constrained narrative pedagogies can support reflective engagement, clarify values-driven strategic thinking, and foster shared ethical language at the team level. The study contributes practical and conceptual insights for business ethics educators seeking process-oriented pedagogical approaches that emphasize meaning construction rather than prescriptive outcomes.

Keywords: business ethics education; narrative sensemaking; purpose and values; entrepreneurship education; pedagogical innovation; strategic meaning-making**.**

1. Introduction

Business ethics education increasingly emphasizes the importance of helping students articulate organizational purpose, values, and strategic intent in ways that extend beyond abstract ethical principles toward meaningful managerial sensemaking. Students in entrepreneurship and strategy education are frequently expected to communicate visions of value creation, growth, and impact while navigating ethical tensions related to stakeholders, identity, and long-term consequences (Fayolle, 2018; Neck & Corbett, 2018; Ward, 2004). Yet many students struggle to translate ethical considerations into coherent strategic narratives, often defaulting to vague language or formulaic mission statements that obscure underlying values rather than clarify them.

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Scholars of business ethics and management education have long argued that ethical learning is not solely a matter of rule acquisition or moral reasoning stages, but a process of meaning construction shaped by language, reflection, and context (Bird & Waters, 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Pedagogical approaches that foreground how students make sense of purpose and values, rather than prescribing ethical outcomes, are particularly well suited to ethics education. Experiential and reflective pedagogies have been shown to support deeper engagement with ethical issues by situating learning within authentic decision-making and interpretive processes (Benton & Cashin, 2014; Kohn, 2004).

Narrative has emerged as a promising mechanism for supporting such sensemaking. Narrative structures require learners to select, prioritize, and connect ideas, thereby making implicit assumptions visible and open to examination (Fink, 2013). Narrative is not merely a communication tool but a cognitive and ethical one, shaping how opportunities, responsibilities, and future possibilities are understood in strategy and entrepreneurship contexts (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015; Ward, 2004). When narratives are constrained by format, length, or stylistic rules, students may be encouraged to engage more deliberately with language, coherence, and meaning rather than relying on expansive but unfocused descriptions.

To clarify the central construct guiding this study, narrative constraint is defined here as a pedagogical design strategy in which learners are required to construct meaning within deliberately imposed limits on structure, length, or form. Such constraints function not as restrictions on creativity, but as generative boundaries that compel prioritization, coherence, and intentional language use, aligning with prior work on narrative as a mechanism for sensemaking and meaning construction (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015; Fink, 2013; Weick, 1995). Constraint-based approaches have been shown to support deeper engagement by forcing learners to make explicit choices about what matters most, thereby surfacing underlying assumptions and values embedded in their reasoning (Fink, 2013; Ward, 2004).

Narrative constraint is not proposed here as a substitute for normative approaches to business ethics education, nor as a superior alternative. It is conceptualized, rather, as a complementary pedagogical strategy that can enrich students' engagement with established ethical frameworks. Normative ethical theories provide students with analytical tools, conceptual frameworks, and a shared vocabulary for evaluating ethical dilemmas and justifying decisions. Narrative constraint, in contrast, provides a structured learning process through which students collaboratively interpret, negotiate, articulate, and communicate those ethical commitments within authentic strategic contexts. Normative ethical instruction and narrative constraint, used together, support both ethical analysis and ethical sensemaking, enabling students not only to evaluate what constitutes an ethical course of action but also to construct meaningful, values-informed

strategic narratives that communicate those commitments to others (Bird & Waters, 2002; Fink, 2013; Weick, 1995).

Narrative constraint can be operationalized within entrepreneurship education through assignments that require students to articulate organizational purpose and strategic intent using tightly specified formats. In the present study, for example, student teams were required to articulate their venture's purpose, values, and strategic intent within a constrained poetic format (i.e., cowboy poetry), limiting both length and structural flexibility while requiring coherence, clarity, and alignment across team members. This design required teams to negotiate meaning, eliminate ambiguity, and align on shared language, thereby foregrounding the ethical commitments embedded in strategic articulation and reinforcing the role of language in ethical sensemaking processes (Bird & Waters, 2002; Weick, 1995).

The purpose of this study is to examine how narrative constraint functions as a pedagogical mechanism for ethical and strategic sensemaking in an undergraduate entrepreneurship course. It investigates how a constrained narrative assignment shapes (1) students' articulation of purpose and values, (2) the development of shared strategic language within teams, and (3) reflective engagement with ethical dimensions of entrepreneurial decision-making.

This study makes three contributions to the business ethics education literature. First, it advances a process-oriented account of ethical sensemaking by examining how students construct meaning through structured linguistic constraints rather than through prescriptive ethical frameworks. Second, it introduces narrative constraint as a pedagogical design mechanism that integrates ethical reflection directly into core strategic tasks within entrepreneurship education. Third, it offers a practical model for educators seeking to embed ethics within collaborative learning environments by providing empirical insight into how team-based narrative construction facilitates convergence of ethical and strategic language.

There remains limited empirical research examining how specific pedagogical design features influence ethical sensemaking processes in entrepreneurship education despite growing interest in narrative and experiential pedagogies. Much of the existing literature emphasizes outcomes or instructional techniques, with less attention to how students' strategic language and value articulation evolve through structured learning activities (Neck & Corbett, 2018). The present study addresses this gap by examining the use of narrative constraint as a pedagogical strategy for supporting ethical and strategic meaning-making in an undergraduate entrepreneurship course.

Drawing on aggregate student reflections, instructional artifacts, and course evaluation data, this study explores how a constrained narrative assignment shaped students' articulation of purpose and values, fostered shared strategic language at the team level, and supported reflective engagement with ethical considerations embedded in entrepreneurial strategy. The study adopts a process-

oriented lens to illuminate how narrative constraint functions as a pedagogical mechanism within business ethics education rather than evaluating effectiveness or superiority. It contributes practical and conceptual insights for educators seeking instructional approaches that emphasize ethical sensemaking and values-driven strategy formation.

2. Pedagogical Context and Course Design

The pedagogical context for this study was an upper-division undergraduate entrepreneurship course focused on venture growth, strategy, and scaling decisions. The course was designed to support students who had already developed a basic venture concept and were prepared to engage with more complex questions related to growth, purpose, stakeholder impact, and long-term strategic direction. Instructional activities emphasized the integration of ethical reasoning with strategic decision-making, positioning ethics not as a discrete topic but as a recurring lens through which growth-oriented choices were examined.

The course employed a blended pedagogical model combining conceptual instruction, experiential learning, structured reflection, and collaborative sensemaking. Weekly learning activities followed a consistent rhythm in which students were introduced to strategic growth concepts and ethical considerations before applying them through team-based and individual assignments. This structure was intended to encourage iterative meaning construction, allowing students to revisit and refine their understanding of purpose, values, and strategy over time rather than treating these elements as static declarations.

Student teams (Mastermind Groups/Teams (MG/Ts)) engaged in a structured weekly workflow that separated conceptual learning from applied practice. Each week included two class meetings: a "conceptual lens" session focused on strategic and ethical frameworks derived from assigned readings, followed by a dedicated MG/Ts praxis session lasting one hour and fifteen minutes. Teams worked collaboratively on time-constrained deliverables designed to translate conceptual insights into applied strategic outputs for their assigned small businesses during these praxis sessions.

One such deliverable was the One Page Strategic Plan (OPSP), adapted from the strategic planning framework presented in *Scaling Up* (Harnish, 2014), which required teams to articulate purpose, values, and strategic intent using a constrained narrative format grounded in cowboy poetry. This assignment served as a focal mechanism for examining how narrative constraint influenced ethical and strategic sensemaking within the course. Each MG/T presented and read their narrative aloud to the class, creating a shared space for collective interpretation, comparison, and reflection on how purpose, values, and strategic intent were articulated across teams.