

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

How to Inspire Entrepreneurial Thinking in Your Students

Whether or Not They're Actually Studying Entrepreneurship

by Amy Gillett and Kristin Babbie Kelterborn

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Diane Villadsen / Stocksy

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The world is in flux. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched every corner of the globe, profoundly impacting our economies and societies as well as our personal lives and social networks. Innovation is happening at record speed. Digital technologies have transformed the way we live and work.

At the same time, world leaders are collaborating to tackle the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#), which aim to address issues related to health, education, gender equality, energy, and more. Private sector leaders, too, are recognizing that it makes good business sense to be aware of corporations' social and environmental impact.

So, how can we as educators prepare our students to succeed in this tumultuous and uncertain—yet hopeful and exhilarating—global environment? As the world changes, so do the skills students need to build their careers—and to build a better society. For students to acquire these evolving skills, we believe educators must help students develop an entrepreneurial mindset.

6 Ways You Can Inspire Entrepreneurial Thinking Among Your Students

An [entrepreneurial mindset](#)—attitudes and behaviors that encapsulate how entrepreneurs tend to think and act—enables one to identify and capitalize on opportunities, change course when needed, and view mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve.

If a student decides to become an entrepreneur, an entrepreneurial mindset is essential. And for students who plan to join a company, nonprofit, or government organization, an entrepreneurial mindset can help them maximize their innovation and creativity inside their organizations. It can also help in everyday life by minimizing the impact of failure and reframing setbacks as learning opportunities.

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Effective entrepreneurship professors are skilled at nurturing the entrepreneurial mindset. They, of course, have the advantage of teaching a subject that naturally demands students think in this way. However, as we will explore, much of what they do in their classroom is transferable to other subject areas.

We interviewed top entrepreneurship professors at leading global institutions to understand the pedagogical approaches they use to cultivate this mindset in their students. Here, we will delve into six such approaches. As we do, think about what aspects of their techniques you can adopt to inspire entrepreneurial thinking in your own classroom.

1. Encourage Students to Chart Their Own Course Through Project-Based Learning

According to Ayman Ismail, associate professor of entrepreneurship at the American University in Cairo, students are used to pre-packaged ideas and linear thinking. “Students are often told, ‘Here’s X, Y, Z, now do something with it.’ They are not used to exploring or thinking creatively,” says Ismail.

To challenge this linear pattern, educators can instead help their students develop an entrepreneurial mindset through team-based projects that can challenge them to identify a problem or job to be done, conduct market research, and create a new product or service that addresses the issue. There is no blueprint for students to follow in developing these projects, so many will find this lack of direction confusing—in some cases even frightening. But therein lies the learning.

John Danner, who teaches entrepreneurship at Princeton University and University of California, Berkeley, finds his students similarly inhibited at the start. “My students come in trying to understand the rules of the game,” he says. “I tell them the game is to be created by you.”

Danner encourages students to get comfortable navigating life’s maze of ambiguity and possibility and to let their personal initiative drive them forward. He tells them, “At best you have a flashlight when peering into ambiguity. You can shine light on the next few steps.”

In your classroom: Send students on an unstructured journey. Dive right in by asking them to identify a challenge that will hone their problem-finding skills and encourage them to work in teams to find a solution. Do not give them a blueprint.

For example, in our [M²GATE virtual exchange](#) program, we teamed US students with peers located in four countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. We asked them to identify a pressing social issue in MENA and then create a product or service to address it. One of the teams identified the high rate of youth unemployment in Morocco as an issue. They discovered that employers want workers with soft skills, but few schools provide such training. Their solution was a low-cost after-school program to equip students ages 8-16 with soft skills.

2. Help Students Think Broadly and Unleash Their Creativity

Professor Heidi Neck says her students at Babson College struggle with problem finding at the start of the entrepreneurial journey. “They are good at solving problems, but not as good at finding the problem to solve,” she explains. “For example, they know that climate change is a problem, and they’re interested in doing something about it, but they’re not sure what problem within that broad area they can focus on and find a market for.”

Professor Niko Slavnic, who teaches entrepreneurship at IEDC-Bled School of Management in Slovenia and the ESSCA School of Management in France, says he first invests time in teaching his students to unlearn traditional ways of thinking and unleash their creativity. He encourages students to get outside their comfort zones. One way he does this is by having them make paper airplanes and then stand on their desks and throw them. Many ask, “Should we do this? Is this allowed?” When his students start to question the rules and think about new possibilities, this indicates to Slavnic that they are primed for the type of creative exploration his course demands.

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In your classroom: Think about the concept of “unlearning.” Ask yourself if students are entering your class with rigid mindsets or attitudes based on rules and structures that you would like to change. For example, they may be coming into your classroom with the expectation that you, the instructor, have all the answers and that you will impart your wisdom to them throughout the semester. Design your course so that students spend more time than you do presenting, with you acting more as an advisor (the “guide on the side”).

3. Prompt Students to Take Bold Actions

Geoff Archer, an entrepreneurship professor at Royal Roads University in Canada, says [Kolb’s theory of experiential learning](#) underpins the entrepreneurial management curriculum he designed. Archer takes what he calls a “ready-fire-aim approach,” common in the startup world—he throws students right into the deep end. They are tasked with creating a for-profit business from scratch and operating it for a month. At the end of the semester, they must come up with a “pitch deck”—a short presentation providing potential investors with an overview of their proposed new business—and an investor-ready business plan.

This approach can be met with resistance, especially with mature learners. “They’re used to winning, and it’s frustrating and more than a bit terrifying to be told to do something without being given more structure upfront,” says Archer.

Professor Rita Egizii, who co-teaches with Archer, says students really struggled when instructed to get out and talk with potential customers about a product they were proposing to launch as part of their class project. “They all sat outside on the curb on

their laptops. For them, it's not normal and not okay to make small experiments and fail," says Egizii.

Keep in mind that, culturally, the taboo of failure—even on a very small scale and even in the name of learning—can be ingrained in the minds of students from around the world.

The benefit of this permutation, explains Archer, is that students are writing plans based on actual experiences—in this case, customer interactions. Moving the starting blocks forward offers many benefits, including getting the students out of the classroom and out of their heads earlier, reminding them that the market's opinion of their solution is far more important than their own. This also affords students more time to reflect and maximize the potential of their minimum viable product or experiment.

In your classroom: Invite students to bring their lived experiences and workplace knowledge into their studies. This can be just as powerful as the more famous exhortation to “get out of the classroom.” As Egizii sees it, “student-directed experiential learning provides a comfortable and relatable starting point from which they can then diverge their thinking.”

4. Show Students What They Can Achieve

For Eric Fretz, a lecturer at the University of Michigan, the key to launching his students on a successful path is setting the bar high, while at the same time helping them understand what is realistic to achieve. “You will never know if your students can jump six feet unless you set the bar at six feet,” he says.

His undergraduate students work in small teams to create a product in three months and generate sales from it. At the start of the semester, he typically sees a lot of grandiose ideas—a lot of “fluff and BS” as he calls it. Students also struggle with assessing the viability of their ideas.

To help, Fretz consults with each team extensively, filtering through ideas together until they can agree upon a feasible one that fulfills a real need. The real magic of his course is in the coaching and support he provides.

“People know when you're investing in them and giving them your attention and energy,” Fretz says. He finds that coaching students in the beginning of the course helps assuage their concerns about embarking on an open-ended team project, while also supporting initiative and self-reliance.

In your classroom: Design ways to nudge your students outside their comfort zones, while also providing support. Like Fretz, you should set high expectations, but also adequately guide students.

5. Teach Students the Value of Changing Course

A key part of the entrepreneurial mindset is to be able to course-correct, learn from mistakes, and move on. Entrepreneurship professors position hurdles as learning opportunities. For example, Danner tells his students that his class is a laboratory for both aspiring and failing. He advises them to expect failure and think about how they are going to deal with it.

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Ismail believes letting his students fail in class is the best preparation for the real world. He let one student team pursue a project for the entire semester around a product he knew had no potential. Two days before the end of the course, he told them as such. From his perspective, their frustration was the best learning experience they could have and the best training he could offer on what they will experience in real life. This reflects a key component of the entrepreneurial mindset—the ability to view mistakes as opportunities.

In your classroom: Build into your course some opportunities for students to make mistakes. Show them how mistakes are an opportunity to learn and improve. In entrepreneurship speak, this is called a “pivot.” Can you build in opportunities for students to face challenges and have to pivot in your course?

6. Communicate with Students Regularly to Establish New Ways of Thinking

Professor Neck realized that to nurture the entrepreneurial mindset in her students, she needed to provide them with opportunities to do so outside of class. She now encourages her students to establish a daily, reflective practice. She even designed a series of daily “mindset vitamins” that she sends to her students via the messaging platform WhatsApp. Students are not expected to reply to the messages, but rather to simply consume and absorb them.

Some messages relate specifically to entrepreneurship, such as: “How can you get started with nothing?” And others apply to life in general: “What has been your proudest moment in life so far? How can you create more moments like that? What did it feel like the last time you failed?”

In your classroom: Communicate with your students outside the classroom with messages that reinforce the mindset change you are seeking to achieve in your course. Social media and apps such as WhatsApp and Twitter make it easy to do so.

All Students Can Benefit from an Entrepreneurial Mindset

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that an entrepreneurial mindset is critical for addressing today’s problems. Adapting to risk, spotting opportunity, taking initiative, communicating and collaborating, being flexible, and problem solving—these are ways in which we have responded to the pandemic. And they’re all part of the entrepreneurial mindset. By instilling this way of thinking in our students, we will equip them to handle tomorrow’s challenges—as well as to identify and take advantage of future opportunities.

Thinking about which of these entrepreneurial approaches you can adopt in your own teaching may require you to redesign portions of your courses or even create a new course from scratch. We encourage you to be open to experimenting and trying out some of these ideas. Like the best entrepreneurs, don’t be afraid to fail.

Also, be open with your students. Let them know you are trying out some new things and solicit their feedback. If needed, you can always pivot your class and involve them in the exercise of co-creating something better together. In the process, you will also be modeling the entrepreneurial mindset for your students.

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Amy Gillett is the vice president of education at the [William Davidson Institute](#), a non-profit located at the University of Michigan. She oversees design and delivery of entrepreneurship development projects and executive education programs. Over the past two decades, she has worked on a wide variety of global programs, including *10,000 Women*, equipping over 300 Rwandan women with skills to scale their small businesses, and the LIFE Project, nurturing entrepreneurship, job creation, and cross-cultural engagement in the food sector in Turkey. Follow her on Twitter: [@AmyonEducation](#)



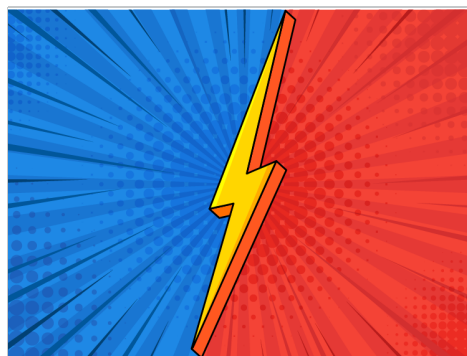
Kristin Babbie Kelterborn co-leads the [Entrepreneurship Development Center](#) (EDC) at the William Davidson Institute. She collaborates with the EDC's faculty affiliates to design and implement projects that support entrepreneurs in building and growing their businesses in low- and middle-income countries.



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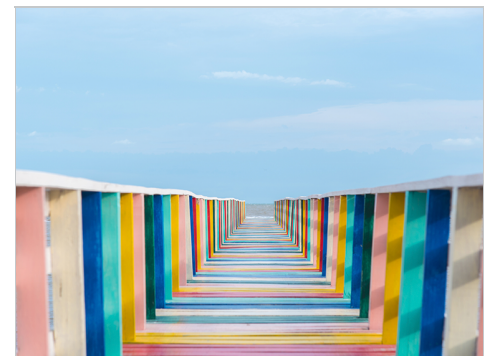
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