

## **Cultivating Entrepreneurial Mindsets Through Compassion and Collegiality: Design Thinking-Guided Curriculum for Adult Learners**

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### **Research Domains**

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### **Abstract**

Responding to the call for deeper theoretical exploration of entrepreneurship education in global contexts, this paper examines how a design thinking-based curriculum can support adult learners in risk-averse cultures. It shows that embedding compassion and collegiality into the learning process holds key in cultivating a learning space for entrepreneurial mindsets. Grounded in constructivist principles, the course encouraged knowledge-building through reflective journaling, peer feedback, and dialogue with guest entrepreneurs. In a culture where mistakes are punished, a compassionate learning community allowed participants to develop empathy together. They began to see one another not just as learners, but as individuals with unique stories, struggles, and aspirations. This sense of being seen, heard, and respected created space for practicing empathy and helped participants connect personally with the entrepreneurial ideas introduced through guest lectures and course content. The findings suggest a new pedagogical pathway for entrepreneurship education in culturally conservative environments.

### **Full paper**

### **Background**

It is widely held that an entrepreneurial mindset is not innate but can be cultivated through deliberate learning and practice (Kuratko, 2005; Dyer, et. al. 2011). Entrepreneurship education has expanded globally as a promising tool (Matlay, 2008; Wu and Wu 2017) to help learners navigate the unstructured and uncertain entrepreneurial environments (Ronstadt, 1985). At the same time, research highlights the nuanced ways that societal norms shape entrepreneurial intentions and behaviors (Liñán and Chen, 2009; Wennberg et al., 2013; Garcia-Rodriguez et al., 2017). In Asia, entrepreneurship levels are low, partly

due to a strong fear of failure (Reimers, 2024). In response, recent pedagogical developments have embraced design thinking as a framework for entrepreneurship education (Sarooghi, et. a. 2019). Grounded in constructivism, design thinking emphasizes collaboration, iterative learning, and reflective practice (Leifer and Steinert, 2011), gaining prominence in higher education (Goldman and Kabayadondo, 2017). This paper explores how a design thinking-based curriculum can help adult learners in risk-averse cultures develop entrepreneurial mindsets through compassionate and collegial community-building.

## **The Intervention**

The curriculum was implemented in Japan, where cultural norms promote conformity and often discourage risk-taking, suppressing entrepreneurial intention (Suzuki, 2020; GEM, 2025). Aimed at adults in their 30s to 50s, the course adopted an online, student-centered pedagogy grounded in constructivist approach and research on holistic learning, vicarious experiences, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Lange et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2005). Participants engaged in reflective journaling, collaborative projects, and interactive sessions with guest entrepreneurs who shared their experiences.

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used to study the impact of the intervention. Pre- and post-course surveys (n=62) captured shifts in participants' attitudes across four domains: ambiguity tolerance, diversity openness, risk-taking, and agency. Follow-up interviews with 14 participants offered deeper insights. Statistically significant gains were observed across all measures (Yang-Yoshihara and Iwabuchi, 2024). Yet the most compelling insights emerged from the qualitative data, which revealed a compassionate and collegial learning community where strong peer relationships helped shift mindsets.

## **Discussion**

Through repeated, open-ended dialogue, course participants shared not only their responses to given topics but also personal experiences and aspirations. They engaged with each other not as isolated learners but as colleagues navigating shared challenges. Participant#91 described how his company had instituted a committee to identify and punish mistakes. This sparked an outpouring of similar stories, illuminating a collective experience of punitive work cultures. Others responded with understanding and empathetic reactions, not to fix the problem but to validate the speaker's sentiment. These moments created a collegial space where mutual respect replaced judgment, and adult learners felt safe to speak honestly.

This atmosphere of compassion extended into discussions of failure and resilience. When guest speakers shared stories of business ideas that faltered or required complete reinvention, participants listened with curiosity rather than fear. These stories humanized entrepreneurship, making it less about brilliance and more about persistence and learning. Participant#59 initially expressed “an undefined fear of ambiguity.” Through collegial exchanges and hearing a guest’s narrative of falling and starting over, she came to understand that “it’s okay to make mistakes, even big ones.” Once failed in a business venture, another reflected on how the course inspired him to “unleash my own desire” and “step outside my comfort zone (Participant#81).”

Crucially, the course fostered a learning community where compassion became a shared practice rather than just a personal trait. Through reflective posts, peer feedback, and open dialogue, participants came to see each other not just as learners, but as individuals with unique stories, struggles, and aspirations. As one participant noted, self-reflection led to “broadening my understanding of others” (Participant#27), while another shared, “I feel more confident in myself now that I have someone who can empathize with me” (Participant#96). This sense of being seen, heard, and respected created space for practicing empathy and helped participants connect personally with the entrepreneurial ideas introduced through guest lectures and course content.

## **Conclusion**

Responding to the call for more theoretical elaboration of entrepreneurship education, especially in the Asia Pacific context (Wu & Wu, 2017), this study demonstrates that even a short-term online intervention can cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset among adult learners, particularly when compassion, collegiality, and community are embedded into the learning process. The course’s constructivist design encouraged participants to build knowledge through interpreting their interactions with peers and guests (Duncan & Buskirk-Cohen, 2020). In a culture that discourages risk-taking, empathetic peer support proved critical. Compassionate communities formed through collegial engagement can transform how adults see themselves as agents of change.