Tips for Designing Entrepreneurial Learning for Empowerment

Elizabeth Swanson, Professor at Babson College

Entrepreneurship: the word evokes images of elite business leaders and refined product strategy. But, to many, entrepreneurship is simply a necessity that can mean the literal difference between life and death. The below tips will help entrepreneurship educators facilitate experiential, practice-based learning to elevate entrepreneurial activity from the margins.

Tip 1: Due Diligence

Immerse yourself in the context of your issue as deeply and expansively as possible before launching any Entrepreneurship for Empowerment learning projects. This due diligence, combing sources from multiple disciplinary, political, and cultural perspectives, will help you to enter your first conversations with potential partners as fully aware as you can be of major issues, concerns, and trends relevant to your work. This foundational research also can be part of an experiential learning experience for your class as they produce White Papers and research background to inform the pathway forward. A strong dose of cultural and personal humility is a key trait when exploring issues that have created trauma, pain, or loss in your subjects' lives. Centering their voices and points of view as you and your students learn about how to proceed will ensure the success of your work.

Tip 2: Partners In The Field

When working with people who are in precarious positions, look for partners who are already in the field. If possible, look for partners who have a staff that looks at least in part like the people you are working with (local, indigenous, BIPOC, etc). Check to be sure your partners are in good standing; learn as much as you can about their processes to be sure they are a solid partner with impeccable integrity, as well as a good fit for you and your team. As much as possible, seek to leverage multisector partnerships that involve your educational team, a non-governmental organization (NGO) or governmental agency working in the field, and/or a corporate partner—each sector carries different networks and resources that together can drive your work forward.

Tip 3: Shared Dignity And Rights, Reciprocal Learning

When teaching or engaging in Entrepreneurship as Empowerment, power imbalances are embedded in the work: be aware of them, acknowledge them, and seek to diminish them where you can. If you are teaching inside a prison, your students behind the walls are profoundly disempowered by comparison with your students from your home campus; however, in that classroom, every student is equal in dignity and in their right to learn. The best practice is to make this clear with a meta-narrative that you maintain over the course of the learning engagement, highlighting the multidirectional nature of learning that emerges, especially in uniquely charged environments like these. Let the miracles happen!

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Tip 4: Identified Outcomes, Recursive Assessment.

Entrepreneurial Learning for Empowerment requires layers of assessment: that of your students' grades and that of the project itself. Establish rigorous criteria at the outset while staying flexible about deliverables in an environment where not all variables can be controlled. Assess projects based upon shared goals set at the outset; consider a grading contract that includes the entrepreneurial work and a critical reflection journal that spans the length of the project. Provide space along the way for adjustment, for building new paths that begin to emerge through the entrepreneurial learning, and for assessing those pathways at the conclusion of the project. Build longevity with a relay model of work in which each assessment strengthens the project for the next round of students. Much good publicity can be built around such projects as they gain steam in your community!

References and Recommended Readings

Mass Incarceration:

Your state or local Department of Correction is the first place to start. Typically there is a Director of Education or of Volunteer Services who will be a great contact. Patience, persistence, and adherence to the rules go a long way with the folks who keep things running inside the walls.

» **Bard Prison Initiative**

"The Bard Prison Initiative extends the full breadth and depth of the Bard College liberal arts curriculum into six New York State prisons. BPI creates and protects academic spaces where students and faculty engage in ambitious college coursework, challenge one another intellectually, and build supportive community." One of the most successful and ambitious programs in the country; also the subject of *College Behind Bars*, an acclaimed documentary.

» **Massachusetts Prison Education Consortium**
(part of MIT Educational Justice Institute)

Funded by the Vera Institute and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Massachusetts was selected to form a state-wide consortium to create a post-secondary education continuum for currently and formerly incarcerated people. Incredible network!

» **Prison Studies Project**

"The Prison Studies Project's mission is to awaken the broadest possible public to the ways we punish, and to reimagine justice in the United States." Located at Harvard University, the Prison Studies Project provides data and resources supporting higher education in prison.

» **Vera Institute**

"Mission: To drive change. To urgently build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities." Vera Institute supports higher education partnerships with incarcerated people through the newly reinstated Pell Grant Program and other resources.

Modern Slavery:

» **End Slavery Now**

End Slavery Now believes we all have a role in ending slavery. The organization seeks to provide individuals with tools and approaches for getting involved in the fight.

» **Global Slavery Index**

This resource breaks down different types of slavery, including domestic servitude, sex trafficking, forced labor, bonded labor, child labor, and forced marriage.

» **Demand Abolition**

Demand Abolition is committed to eradicating the illegal commercial sex industry in the U.S.—and, by extension, the world—by combating the demand for purchased sex.

» **Empower Her Network**

Empower Her Network collaborates with ready survivors of human trafficking who find themselves in the same vulnerable circumstance that led to their initial exploitation by removing housing barriers, financing education, and uncovering employment opportunities.

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