

Lively Discussions Improve Students' Entrepreneurial Mindset

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The Harvard Case Methodology, which emphasizes vigorous debate guided by teachers, can help students gain the thinking skills they need to succeed as business owners.

While business history is filled with stories about “born entrepreneurs,” the reality is that entrepreneurial thinking is **learned rather than inborn** (<https://eiexchange.com/content/110-entrepreneurs-are-built-not-born>). Research has shown that having an “entrepreneurial mindset” (EM) leads to better success as a business owner. EM helps people to better perceive opportunities, make decisions with limited information, and remain resilient under conditions of uncertainty and change. And even if they don't start businesses, people with EM are increasingly coveted by companies looking to hire innovative thinkers.

Many institutions that teach entrepreneurship have begun to recognize that cultivating EM is just as important as teaching students the principles of launching and running a business. But what's the best way to instill this thinking? Many colleges and universities are using projects, games-based learning, and human-centered design to enhance EM among their students, but these all require adding new materials to the course rather than adapting how they teach.

We had the chance to study the efficacy of one teaching adaptation -- the Harvard Case Methodology (HCM) -- in cultivating EM among undergraduate students. Rather than listening to lectures, students in HCM-oriented classrooms review case studies and other material then debate with one another, which lets everyone question their own assumptions and hone their thinking.

After studying undergraduate classrooms that used HCM over 2.5 years – including during the pandemic, when they were forced into hybrid learning or totally online – we saw that the HCM improved students' EM in any setting. While the best overall results came from in-person learning, students in hybrid or online learning environments also saw an improvement.

How HCM Works

HCM uses real-world business problems as the foundation for formally structured classroom discussion. Initially developed for medical and law students, the method was adopted in the early 1900s by Harvard Business School professor and dean Wallace B. Donham, who argued that working through complex and ambiguous problems would teach students to think critically, solve problems, and make decisions. Unlike traditional lecture-based instruction, case discussions aim to generate high levels of active participation and engagement, which are expected to foster deeper learning outcomes.

Students in classrooms using HCM are required to wrestle with real-world business cases and, through repeated questioning and discussion, to reflect deeply on their decision-making processes and those of their peers. The goal is not to teach students what to think and what to do, but rather how to think about what to do. Students are frequently challenged to draw upon their prior knowledge and personal experiences to analyze case studies and propose viable solutions.

Socratic instruction is at the heart of HCM. Rooted in the philosophy of Socrates, who believed that the deepest forms of learning emerged through repeated questioning and critical dialogue, this approach positions the instructor as a guide who stimulates critical thinking and promotes deeper learning through strategic questioning. Instructors pose open-ended questions at increasing levels of complexity, encouraging students to examine



their assumptions and think more deeply about the material and their interpretations.

This is clearly very different from asking students to present pre-prepared analyses, or having instructors guide students toward predetermined correct conclusions. In HCM, students' assumptions, inferences, logic, and conclusions are frequently challenged, compelling them to engage in deep reflection and to reframe and revise their analyses. Successful Socratic dialogue requires sustained, in-depth interactions with individual students while the remainder of the class actively observes or occasionally contributes their own reflections, questions, and meta-conclusions. A more detailed description of HCM can be found [here](https://www.exed.hbs.edu/the-learning-experience/the-case-study-method).(https://www.exed.hbs.edu/the-learning-experience/the-case-study-method)

Our study was the first to examine whether the HCM contributed specifically to enhancing an entrepreneurial mindset among students. We suspected that it would, especially in in-person teaching settings.

What We Studied

We collected data from 222 students enrolled in eight different class sections of an undergraduate, entry-level course on entrepreneurship and innovation at a private, comprehensive University in the U.S. Midwest. Not all of them were business majors; they included students from other majors who wanted to hone their business knowledge.

The teaching format adopted for the course was HCM, both as a formal pedagogical strategy and as course content, with case studies serving as the only materials and means of instruction. Each case study was chosen to align with each of the specific topics, skills, and frameworks to expose students to the typical knowledge base of an introductory entrepreneurship course.

During the data collection period (2020-2022), the course under study was delivered in three types of settings: traditional face-to-face, fully synchronous online, and synchronous hybrid formats. We didn't plan for this variation, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary, and it provided an opportunity to examine how these different settings might affect how well HCM helped cultivate EM.

We gauged entrepreneurial mindset before and after they took the class using the Berkeley Innovation Index

(BII), a survey with 31 questions addressing different qualities of entrepreneurs. The instrument was developed based on the Berkeley Method of Entrepreneurship teaching approach and grounded in social psychology research that identified eight consistent behavioral patterns exhibited by entrepreneurs and innovators. These include resilience, trust, belief, collaboration, perfection, diversity, comfort zone, and innovation zone.

What We Found

After measuring the students' EM through the Berkeley test before and after they took the classes, we saw marked overall improvements among students in all three settings. Students in traditional classroom settings showed the most improvements in most dimensions of the test. In these settings, classes of 30-35 students followed standard HCM protocols. The instructor maintained close physical proximity to students, enabling intensive Socratic questioning characterized by deep, probing dialogues. Students could feel the instructor's presence in the room, and observe body language, vocal intensity, and physical positioning within the classroom space. As a result, students scored especially high in the "trust" and "comfort zone" dimensions.

The technology limitations of the hybrid settings made it more challenging to enjoy these benefits. It hindered the quality of the exchanges and the depth of the discussions, as well as the teacher's ability to guide the Socratic questioning. However, online students experienced more improvement than in-person students in the "innovation zone" dimension of EM. This could be because in-person learning favors people who are more confident and outspoken, while online learning levels the playing field and is more inclusive. This can benefit students who often censor themselves in face-to-face settings but have no problem speaking up in emails, chats, and other online channels. Research has shown that women and international and minority students engage better online than they would in class.

Takeaways

The HCM has served as a cornerstone of management education for over a century, initially at the graduate level and now widely adopted across business curricula. With the proliferation of case study publications, instructors have abundant resources to teach entrepreneurial concepts, tools, and theories. But our

study suggests that Socratic dialogue within case-based instruction should be part of the toolbox to help students master entrepreneurial thinking. The active engagement fostered by deep, reflective Socratic inquiry affects not only what students think about entrepreneurship but fundamentally how they approach entrepreneurial challenges. This represents a shift from knowledge transmission to cognitive transformation—a critical distinction for developing entrepreneurial practitioners.

Teachers can learn the basics of HCM with authentic Socratic questioning but it will require deep commitment. They will need to master open-ended questioning techniques, active listening skills, and comfort with co-creating meaning in classroom dialogue. These competencies require rigorous training, mentoring, and experiential development. However, established training resources exist for educators seeking to incorporate these methods (Paul & Elder, 2007), and instructors already comfortable with case-based teaching possess a foundation for developing deeper Socratic dialogue skills.

To maximize HCM's effectiveness, instructors should prioritize cases featuring recent startups, diverse entrepreneurial settings, and contemporary relevance. Additionally, pairing case discussions with action-oriented and experiential activities can enhance the methodology's practical impact. Finally, given current teaching trends toward shorter formats, future research should examine whether abbreviated cases or "caselets" can achieve similar EM development outcomes while accommodating time constraints and attention spans in modern educational settings.

Our findings also suggest that teachers of hybrid and online courses may need to make some changes to reap the most benefits from HCM. These could include having longer class periods, capping enrollment, adding preparatory assignments, or changing their questioning techniques to encourage higher-order analytical inquiry among their students. Teachers may also want to explore ways to help online students feel more connected with one another, especially those from economically diverse backgrounds. [This article](https://familybusiness.org/content/design-remote-learning-to-help-students-feel-connected) (<https://familybusiness.org/content/design-remote-learning-to-help-students-feel-connected>) includes some ideas.

Conclusion

Developing an entrepreneurial mindset is a complex, time-intensive process that extends beyond any single course or teaching method. HCM alone is not a comprehensive solution for developing sustained entrepreneurial thinking; rather, multiple pedagogical approaches likely should be integrated to help students improve their entrepreneurial mindset.

However, our study demonstrates that incorporating HCM into entrepreneurship curricula can help improve undergraduate students' EM, even if these improvements may be temporary. Perhaps most encouraging is our finding that HCM can achieve this goal even in hybrid and fully online delivery formats. This adaptability expands access to evidence-based entrepreneurship education and helps students develop an EM whether they are on campus or remote. While additional research is needed to see if the EM improvements last, our findings offer both a practical tool that teachers can use now and a promising avenue for future inquiry.

Explore the Research

The original research paper about the Harvard Case Methodology and its effect on students' entrepreneurial mindset can be downloaded at the top of this article.