

Can Entrepreneurship Be Taught? After 20 Years Running Businesses, the Truth May Surprise You

According to the researchers, the answer seems to be yes. But here's what I think.

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Key Takeaways

- Denmark has been teaching entrepreneurship in schools for two decades – what the results reveal might surprise you.
- Running a business can be taught, but what it truly takes to be an entrepreneur goes far beyond the classroom.

Since 2005, Denmark's secondary schools have taught entrepreneurship classes covering marketing, accounting, mindset and valuation. Twenty years later, a new academic paper is asking a big question: can entrepreneurship be taught?

According to the researchers, the answer seems to be yes.

They found that students exposed to this content launched businesses at higher rates than earlier cohorts, and that the

education itself was a key driver. These startups were of “higher quality” in some respects (though the paper is vague on the definition). The reform also influenced students’ post-graduation choices, from higher education to jobs, in ways that made later entrepreneurship more likely. In short, earlier exposure appeared to produce not just more but “better” entrepreneurship.

I’ve found that learning to be a good business person is achievable. But learning to be an “entrepreneur”? I’m not so sure.

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Running a business isn’t as complicated as people think. At its core, it’s about math and people. High schoolers can learn how to read a financial statement, understand cash flow and taxes, analyze sales and marketing campaigns and create organization charts. They can study how successful companies generate revenue, build brands and scale.

These are important academic skills. As a CPA, I’m often amazed at how many business owners don’t know this. They’d be much better at their jobs if they had. If you’re one of them, it’s never too late.

But running a business – like what’s being taught in Denmark – is not the same as being an entrepreneur. I’ve spent more than 20 years running and writing about small businesses, and I’ve met plenty of dreamers who called themselves entrepreneurs. Few succeeded. The true entrepreneurs I know are different.

Take Andrew, a client who runs a paper recycling business in New Jersey. It’s a dirty, unglamorous business. I once asked what he’d do if it failed. He said he’d work from his basement, buy a roll of paper here, sell it there, or broker a pallet between two parties. For him, like all true entrepreneurs, it’s about buying for a dollar and selling for

three. What the product is doesn't matter. That's entrepreneurship.

Then there's Cecilia, another client. She runs a commercial doors and windows company with nearly 300 employees. Is she "changing the world"? In her own way, yes. She tells her team their work keeps people warm, safe and secure. She knows her employees and their families. Her business may be boring, but her leadership isn't. That kind of genuine care can't be taught in school.

And there's David, more of a cynic after a decade in business. He's been lied to by suppliers, underpaid by customers and ghosted by employees. He fights for every penny. He'll spend \$100,000 on equipment because he knows it'll make money, but selling him software took me two years. Entrepreneurs like him don't buy dreams – they trust, but verify. You don't learn that in a classroom. You learn it after being burned.

Entrepreneurs aren't dreamers. They're realists. They buy and sell. They connect with people. They have a vision, a plan and the grit to execute. A business education can improve their odds, but without that innate drive, they'll only go so far.

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That's why true entrepreneurship can't be taught.

What's taught in Denmark is business: accounting, taxes, basic sales and marketing. Students study case studies of companies like Airbnb and Spotify. They're encouraged to change the world. It's no wonder they're eager to launch businesses. But most have never been cheated, lied to or ghosted. They're unprepared for the realities that test entrepreneurs. My bet is that many fail or just scrape by.

Sure, I can learn physics, but that won't make me a physicist.

I can swing a bat, but I'll never play in the major leagues. Some things can be taught. But the most successful people have something deeper – an innate, maybe God-given ability they've sharpened over time.

I'm not against teaching business in schools. It's valuable. But teaching entrepreneurship? That's not possible.

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