

# An Entrepreneurial-Learning Lab in an International Setting for Self-directing Students

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## Introduction

In recent years we have seen a big change in labor markets. The rise of 'The Sharing Economy', also called the 'Gig economy' has a big impact on the organization of labor as a whole. More and more standard labor contracts are fading away and we see an increase in temporary contracts (Hill S., 2015). Freelancing and entrepreneurship is stimulated by governments, it is high on the agenda in the neo-liberal times we live in today. In the creative industries we have seen this already before as creative industries rely a lot on freelancers. Today the creative industries are pushed forward as a growing industry from a European perspective<sup>1</sup>. In these neo-liberal times, we are going to become self-organized labor. Moreover the 'gig economy' is mostly organized on digital labor platforms. Today, we can organize these platforms into different labor sectors. We have the ride hailing services such as Uber, Lyft, and task platforms such as Task Rabbit and Amazon Mechanical Turk who have emerged over the years. For developers and designers, we have

platforms organized by Apple and Google to crowdsource them for different tasks and different kind of labor (Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2014), (Bergvall-Kåreborn B. a., 2013). These platforms are not localized, and workers are competing against an international market. In this context our education systems need to be reinvented and needs a change to make our students more resilient, more pro-active and self-independent. This is especially important for students who choose a career in the creative industries. This industry has been by nature already self-organized and where freelancing has already been the norm for years.

The purpose of this positioning paper is to elaborate on methods and to share some initial, first-hand experiences to encourage debate based on our response to these needs by implementing an entrepreneurial lab for design students. This lab was set-up in the international entrepreneurial-learning lab at Artevelde University College of Applied Science.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/culture/sectors/cultural-and-creative-sectors>

A special note:

This positioning paper was written in spring 2019, as we are now early 2021, education in Covid-19 times has drastically changed, also our entrepreneurial lab went online, which gave a somewhat different experience, where we will try to anticipate on this in this position paper as well.

## Related work

Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs

The definition of entrepreneurs according to (Drucker, 1985) is “the entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity” while entrepreneurship uses change as an opportunity, and in its turn, entrepreneurship creates change in a society (Jack, 2008). In the last ten to fifteen years, the rise of numerous start-ups, especially in the technology field, have been stimulated by government initiatives, as mentioned in the introduction. Initiatives seen in Belgium where the start and the launch of incubators connected to universities and to a lesser extent in university colleges later on, allowed students to develop and explore their business ideas<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>. In addition, we found a rise in the number of private accelerator initiatives that facilitate private financing for potential startups. All these initiatives lead to changes in curricula in HEI (Higher Education Institutes) that nowadays implement entrepreneurship as a default module in a variety of domains. In these modules, students can gain insights into their entrepreneurial

skills, which are defined as having self-efficacy, an ability to see opportunities in a market (scanning business opportunities), network on a professional level and pitch their ideas in a professional way. Furthermore, students need to learn about their personal maturity level. Being self-aware, learning to cope with drawbacks, being accountable in what they do and being able to be creative in problem solving (Smith, 2007).

## From entrepreneurship to entrepreneurial education labs

There is a lot of debate on what the definition of entrepreneurial education is. Some scholars speak about preparing for uncertain future (Kuratko, 1997), which is of course the state of today and might be applicable, but the main literature speaks of ‘fostering entrepreneurial attitudes, skills and managerial attributes’ (Milius P., 2008).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in the last years we have seen emerging entrepreneurial labs in higher education. Together with the digital revolution we saw the introduction of startups in university settings, pre-incubators and incubators all come to life, to stimulate entrepreneurship and startups, usually in a Triple Helix setting. It is in this realm that we started to think about a sort of entrepreneurial living lab hosting international business, graphical and digital media students. This would give students the opportunity to have a greater learning experience where they are in charge of what they learn and how to get more of an entrepreneurial mindset. The teachers become mentors and coaches in this process and have the expertise on how to prepare and create

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.imec-int.com/en/istart>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.ideafactoryahs.be/>

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.zorgeconomie.be/stakeholder/howest\\_the\\_studios\\_en\\_howest\\_the\\_level/](http://www.zorgeconomie.be/stakeholder/howest_the_studios_en_howest_the_level/)

<sup>5</sup><https://issuu.com/christeldm/docs/thestudios>

a startup. Different disciplines would work together to coach the students through this process.

## From entrepreneurial labs to entrepreneurial education

### The Methods

Within this entrepreneurial-learning lab, we provide different methods to the students. First, there are the 'Future Skills' defined by Institute for the Future<sup>6</sup>. This skill set helps the student to become more digitally aware and more digital savvy. Second, we use 'Human Centered Design, developed by Ideo Inc. in combination with Behavior Design' a model developed in the Persuasive Technology lab at Stanford University by Dr. Fogg<sup>7</sup>, to stimulate students towards creative, innovative ideas. Third, we provide students with the Entrecomp framework, The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework, developed by the European Commission in 2016<sup>8</sup>. In addition, students are guided and coached in developing and designing their ideas towards a valid business model. Here we use the traditional Business Model Canvas or derivatives, developed by Alex Osterwalder<sup>9</sup> and Board of Innovation strategies<sup>10</sup> to provide them with the necessary tools to think differently about new business models as well.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.iftf.org/workandlearnfutures/>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.behaviormodel.org/>

<sup>8</sup><https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/eur-scientific-and-technical-research-reports/entrecomp-entrepreneurship-competence-framework>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.strategyzer.com/>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.boardofinnovation.com/>

### Future Skills

The future skills defined by Institute for The Future will help the students to think more digitally but also be more digital aware. Today we promote ourselves through platforms such as LinkedIn or even Facebook to be used as platforms for personal branding, even to create our identities. One of the first skills is 'Make yourself known'. This skill goes deeply into how humans can make themselves known via personal branding. Students also need to be aware, need to learn and to manage their reputation online with all the data analytics that is utilized today through advertising, retail, education, gaming and so forth and students need to learn how to deal with this. We can split this in three subjects 'your data, your brand', 'credit for all' and being 'multiculturally smart'.

The second skill goes deeper into 'befriending the machine'. The future is digital, and humans will have to work more and more closely with machines – self-learning machines, robotics, devices and applications. Students need to be prepared for this. They will enter a long-life learning process and need to stay updated all the time. Also, here we split this in three subjects. 'AI-IQ' students will need to learn and trust these new digital features, with self-learning mechanisms and they also will need to learn to work with them as sort of complementarity tools besides the human teams that are working together. 'Digital fluency' and 'simulated action', with the augmented reality, virtual reality and mixed realities, we can simulate a lot of actions, experiment with them and try to grasp extra knowledge through this process.

The third skill 'build your tribe' goes deeper into building communities. These communities can be created online but can also expand into the

offline world. You can have 'pop-up' community happenings or meet-ups. Through communities you can 'co-create' new things or ideas and thirdly you can work with new 'crypto solutions', so everybody can get credit for the work they do.

The fourth skill is 'making sense', trying to connect the dots, to see the bigger picture, to create foresight and detect signals to convert into future actions.

The fifth skill is about 'keeping it going'. Students need to learn about their ethical path, in our case on entrepreneurship, bringing added value and going towards a purpose economy (Hurst, 2016), having the empathy and social intelligence to create for the greater good.

### **The Human Centered Design method and Behavior Design model**

This method builds further on the future skill set. Students must go through a process that has five main phases (empathizing, defining, ideation, prototyping and testing). This process is important to understand the target audience well and to design something that is really needed and wanted for a specific target audience. There are some pitfalls here which we will highlight later. By using the behavior design model, students get an insight on how to design for behavioral change. As innovation usually implies behavior change, it is necessary to have that insight into how we can facilitate this. When the Behavior Model is used in combination with the Human Centered Design method it can be a key factor for success. There are numerous examples of mobile applications which became a rapid success because of the simplicity and efficiency in using them (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Lyft, Uber, etc...). Giving high ability to use technologies, the greater the

motivation will be and with the right triggers, behavior change might happen fairly quickly. It is then the challenge to get users engaged in the platforms or mobile applications that are in the market or going to be sent to the market.

### **Measuring the entrepreneurial growth of the student**

When students enter the entrepreneurial-learning lab, they must first evaluate themselves in what phase they are and where they can grow. By using the Entrecomp Progression Model they can identify the current situation and where they want to grow, we then evaluate their selection at the end of the module and discuss it together.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the different competences divided into three categories 'into action', 'resources' and 'ideas and opportunities', which are then validated from 'foundation' to 'intermediate' to 'advanced'.

For example, in the section of 'Resources', 'Mobilizing others', the foundation is '*Learners can communicate their ideas clearly and with enthusiasm*' to the advanced skill of '*Learners can inspire others and get them on board for value-creating activities*'.

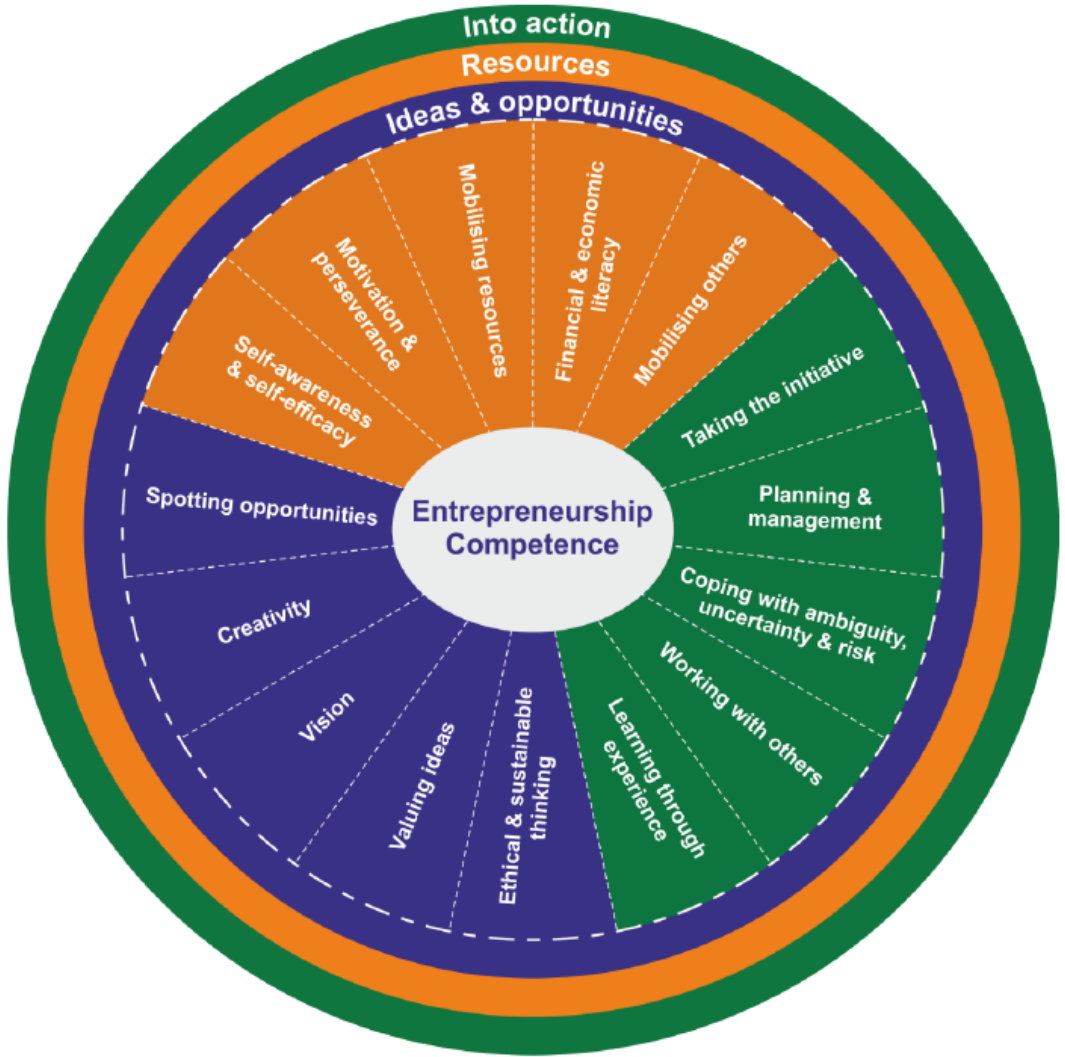


Figure 1: Entrecomp Framework (<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101581>)

## Results

This is an elective module that runs over 12-weeks, the students who enter, chose to do so. This is an important factor in the process. The students are intrinsically motivated to follow/take this class. As mentioned before this is happening in an international setting, students are coming from all over the world. We have small groups to work with and in total we have 25 students over two semesters. Working in small groups was both engaging for the students and especially interesting for the mentors/coaches. We have now done the lab six times and still refining as we go along. The students have to reach out to the mentors/coaches to get extra support besides the information they already get on the college's digital platform.

Student feedback was positive for this approach, as indicated by feedback after the course. For example, one student stated: "This 'laissez faire' approach really challenged me to think outside of the box and dare to do things that I was unfamiliar with".

Student feedback also indicated that this approach to learning was new to them. Going through the Human Centered Design method was also new for all the students. Most of them were not previously aware of this method. As this process gives students a whole different perspective on designing for a target audience, they learn more about the people who are using or going to use the potential product or service. It is, for them, a whole different way of thinking and working. Going into the field and talking to people, is still a hard thing to do for some students. As the students come from different backgrounds,

racas and religions there were at times conflicts, which steers a great deal of discussion, but at the end the students in the groups learned to deal with it in an adult fashion. As one student states in the evaluation: "Working with a team full of students from other countries, cultures, habits and orientations is a really challenging thing to do, since there can be disagreements on specific things, the way and the speed of working can really differ from person to person". The students had a lot of dialogue amongst one other, leading to respecting one another's opinion and learning to listen to each other. One enthusiastic student wrote in the evaluation: "It was such a wonderful experience of putting theory into practice and I would recommend everybody to enroll! I haven't regretted it for a second and I would do it again, without any hesitation!"

We stimulate weekly status meetings, on the same day and hour. Students are pitching and giving an update on their work, this was a good moment to see how they work together. Other groups could ask questions and learn from each other in different ways. They all were working to deadlines in delivering different phases without the push of mentors or coaches. The evaluation of the Entrecomp Framework was really an added value to monitor the student's individual evolution through the whole process of working in a team and going through the whole design phase, business modelling and the through to final delivery and presentation.

Things that stood out were especially on the soft skills, for example: **Self-awareness & Self-efficacy**; 'Believe in your ability': students go from 'I believe in my ability to achieve what I intent to' to I believe in my ability to carry out what I have imagined and planned, despite the

obstacles, limited resource and resistance from others’.

Another example in the section of **Motivation and Perseverance**; ‘Be Determined’, students go from ‘I can set challenges to motivate myself’, to ‘I can coach others to stay motivated, encouraging them to commit to what they want to achieve’.

As a last example in the section of **Mobilizing others**; ‘Communicate effectively’, students go from ‘I can communicate imaginative design solutions’ towards ‘I can produce narratives and scenarios that motivate, inspire and direct people’.

### Limitations

As we entered different times during the rise of Covid-19 we had two labs in an online environment. This was an extra challenge as we had our coaching online. Even though students can reach out all the time, it is still challenging. The challenges of dealing with the reality of the global pandemic increased stress and affected morale for both the students and the instructors. That said, this past semester (2020-2021, sem1) we had the most successful lab in terms of the end results of the participating students. Students were very motivated, but we all lacked on-campus life and guidance.

“One thing that truly bothered the whole ‘lab experience’ were the lack on-campus meetings with the team(s), due to COVID measures”, the student goes further: “There is this unexplainable thing that you miss when you are not meeting people in real life, a certain connection you do not have online. We were a bit limited to get to know each other very well, which is a real pity.”

### Conclusion

In this position paper we gave an overview on our methods that we applied to stimulate students’ minds around an entrepreneurial mind set. We elaborated on the evaluation process in our entrepreneurial-learning lab. We are adjusting our methods, time frames and follow-up with the students on a continuous basis, so they could get the most out of it. In the realm of a changing economy and also a change in educational institution, this lab was a great opportunity to explore all these new capabilities and opportunities, going more to personalized experiments for the students. We actual shape it together with the students so also as mentors and coaches we get the most out of it and get to know our students in very different way for the better.

The pitfalls of this lab are that we really need to motivate the students in the beginning to be self-steering and self-directed. In the beginning students really have a hard time at this as they are trained in almost whole their lives to be passive listeners to monologues of professors and teachers. In a lab this is not what we do, on the contrary, students are self-responsible for their learnings and actions. Furthermore, students need to learn that we are equal in a way and that we are mentors. We are there to help not to judge them in right or wrong. It is whole different relationship that we are trying to build, and students need to learn to deal with this as well. Other student feedback indicated that coaches need to offer consistent messaging. This is challenging as the desired different backgrounds and areas of expertise of the coaches’ result can naturally result in feedback, resulting from those varied perspectives.

## Future research

As this is a Belgian example of an Entrepreneurial lab, future research could lie in researching and exploring other international initiatives.

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## Links

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