A Decade of Learning Together:
Entrepreneurship Education in Sri Lanka
by
Eugene Fregetto

Workshops, keynotes, and continuing collaboration with entrepreneurship faculty and students at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and the Sri Lanka Forum of Entrepreneurship

My involvement with entrepreneurship education in Sri Lanka did not begin with a formal consulting agreement, a grant, or a carefully specified list of objectives. It developed instead through relationships—particularly my continuing friendship and collaboration with Professor Rukmal Weerasinghe and his colleagues at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

Beginning in 2017, that relationship grew into a continuing exchange involving faculty, students, researchers, entrepreneurs, nonprofit leaders, and other members of Sri Lanka's emerging entrepreneurship community. Over the years, I made approximately seven trips to Sri Lanka.

When the COVID-19 pandemic made international travel impossible, the conversations continued through several online presentations and discussions.

Looking back, I have sometimes found it difficult to say precisely what I "accomplished" in Sri Lanka. There was rarely a fixed agenda. My visits were fluid. One conversation led to another meeting, another classroom, another presentation, another entrepreneur, another question. But with the benefit of time—and the documentary record of those experiences—I now see that informality less as a weakness and more as part of what made the relationship meaningful.

The work became an extended experiment in mutual learning across cultures.

Rethinking How Entrepreneurship Should Be Taught

A recurring theme throughout my involvement was entrepreneurship education itself: What are we trying to teach? Who are we teaching? How should entrepreneurship be taught in a country with its own history, institutions, culture, labor market, and entrepreneurial traditions?

In an October 2018 presentation to the entrepreneurship faculty at Sri Jayewardenepura, I posed questions that have continued to shape my own thinking: Who are we teaching? What should we teach to whom? Why does it matter? How should we teach it? How do we measure success? And, perhaps most importantly, how does the answer change depending on where entrepreneurship is being taught?

The presentation emphasized that entrepreneurship education must extend beyond the mechanics of starting a business. Its larger potential is to cultivate entrepreneurial ways of seeing, thinking, learning, and acting—to help people recognize opportunities, operate under uncertainty, mobilize resources, and create value in different settings.

Those questions were particularly relevant in Sri Lanka. Research I reviewed during these years described an educational system with notable achievements in literacy and access, but also concerns about the gap between academic curricula and the practical competencies employers and the private sector require. Some studies characterized university education as comparatively theory-oriented and identified limited opportunities for practice as a continuing challenge.

From Creativity to Entrepreneurial Aspiration

During the pandemic, technology allowed the collaboration to continue. On June 25, 2020, I presented "Entrepreneurial Aspirations: Imagination, Creativity, Innovation" to Professor Weerasinghe's students. The presentation began not with a business plan or financial projection but with imagination and creativity—the human capacities from which entrepreneurial possibilities emerge.

This became increasingly important in my own thinking about entrepreneurship education.

Entrepreneurs rarely follow a predetermined path. People may discover, create, shape, abandon, or reconstruct opportunities as they acquire information and encounter uncertainty. Another

presentation in the materials, *Opportunity: An Entrepreneur's Journey*, emphasized precisely this tension between causation and effectuation, between finding opportunities and creating them, and between managerial prediction and entrepreneurial transformation.

These conversations with Sri Lankan students and faculty reinforced an idea that became central to my later work: entrepreneurship education should not simply transfer American models to another country. It should help learners understand entrepreneurial principles while allowing those principles to be interpreted through local culture, institutions, resources, and aspirations.

Helping Scholars Tell Their Research Stories

Research development became another important part of the relationship.

During a May 2019 visit to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, I conducted sessions for faculty and Ph.D. candidates on publishing research in American journals. The university's own account records that the visit included research guidance for faculty, undergraduate and master's students, curricular discussions within the Department of Entrepreneurship, and a broader conversation about how Sri Lanka might reinvigorate its economy and what roles universities, government, and international organizations could play.

My approach to research mentoring has always been relatively straightforward: meaningful scholarly writing tells a story. Researchers need good questions, strong literature, and appropriate methods, but they must also answer the fundamental question, "So what?" A later presentation on effective publishing encouraged scholars to extend research streams, import theories from other disciplines, use new methods and data, and examine problems at individual, organizational, and national levels.

Helping younger scholars gain confidence in asking those questions may ultimately have been one of the more durable contributions of these visits.

Learning Beyond the University

My education in Sri Lanka extended well beyond university classrooms.

During December 2022, I spent time with senior leaders of Sarvodaya, including its founder, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, and its president, Dr. Vinya S. Ariyaratne. The same visit included participation in the 19th International Conference on Business Management sponsored by the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. The photographs from that visit preserve something that formal reports often miss: entrepreneurship and development are ultimately about people, communities, relationships, and the institutions through which individuals attempt to improve their lives.

Sri Lanka's entrepreneurship environment also raised questions that do not always dominate American entrepreneurship classrooms: rural opportunity, youth employment, women's economic participation, informal enterprise, regional inequality, SME development, and the relationship between entrepreneurship and community development.

Sri Lanka's national SME policy, for example, explicitly identifies entrepreneurial culture and skills, access to finance, market facilitation, technology, research and development, regional balance, and an enabling environment as interconnected policy concerns. The country's entrepreneurship literature similarly demonstrates that universities themselves can become important actors in building entrepreneurial capacity through research, education, and cross-cultural collaboration.

These experiences broadened my own understanding of entrepreneurship. They reinforced the importance of examining entrepreneurship not simply as the creation of individual firms but as part of a larger social and economic system.

Bringing Sri Lankan Faculty to the United States

Perhaps the most tangible extension of the collaboration occurred in September 2023.

I sponsored two younger Sri Lankan entrepreneurship faculty members, Naduni and Chathini, to travel to the United States and partially supported their participation in the three-day Experiential Classroom program at the University of Notre Dame.

But I wanted their visit to involve more than attending a seminar.

Before traveling to Notre Dame, they experienced several parts of the Chicago entrepreneurship-education ecosystem. Their itinerary included entrepreneurship classes at the University of Illinois Chicago; visits to the Polsky entrepreneurship programs at the University of Chicago and The Garage at Northwestern University; and a visit with Professor Maja Renko at DePaul University.

The purpose was exposure, not replication.

They could observe different universities, faculty members, courses, entrepreneurship centers, students, teaching methods, and institutional cultures—and then decide what, if anything, might be useful in Sri Lanka. The Experiential Classroom at Notre Dame offered an intensive opportunity to examine action-based entrepreneurship education and interact with educators confronting many of the same pedagogical questions we had been discussing for years.

In retrospect, this exchange represents something important about the entire relationship: ideas moved in both directions.

What Did We Accomplish?

I began this reflection by acknowledging that I have sometimes struggled to answer that question.

No single venture, curriculum, or research project summarizes nearly a decade of engagement. But perhaps those are the wrong measures.

The documentary record reveals something more cumulative.

- ✓ We discussed how to teach entrepreneurship.
- ✓ We explored creativity, opportunity, uncertainty, entrepreneurial mindset, and experiential learning.
- ✓ We worked with faculty on scholarly research and publication.
- ✓ We discussed curriculum development.
- ✓ We engaged graduate, master's, doctoral, and undergraduate students.
- ✓ We connected entrepreneurship education with economic development.
- ✓ We met entrepreneurs and community leaders.
- ✓ We examined Sri Lanka's SME, education, youth, women, and rural-development challenges.
- ✓ We sustained the relationship during a global pandemic.
- ✓ Eventually, we brought Sri Lankan faculty to the United States so the conversation could continue in another environment.

What developed was not a short-term international project. It was a professional relationship sustained by curiosity, trust, hospitality, and a shared interest in understanding how entrepreneurship can be taught more effectively.

I went to Sri Lanka hoping that my experience might be useful to others. It was. But Sri Lanka also changed how I think about entrepreneurship education.

The experience reinforced something I now regard as fundamental: entrepreneurship education cannot simply be exported from one country and installed in another. Entrepreneurship occurs within culture, history, institutions, families, communities, and economic systems. Effective entrepreneurship education must therefore combine what we know globally with what people understand locally.

Perhaps the most important outcome of my Sri Lankan experience was that we learned together.