

Book review: *The innovator's mindset: empower learning, unleash talent and lead a culture of creativity* (Couros, 2015)

Lama Mahmoud

Hanar Atroshi

Zayed University, UAE

In order to confront the continuously growing industry meanwhile, there is an urgent need for next generation innovative mentalities which can handle these changes the best possible way. Knowledge-transfer institutions are major drivers of change in realizing innovative thinking both within institution campuses and beyond campuses in communities and industries at large. Such an innovative mindset is not possible to achieve without the involvement of educators as one of the major influencers of an institution. George Couros in his book, *The Innovator's Mindset: Empower Learning, Unleash Talent and Lead a Culture of Creativity*, has outlined a roadmap for education leaders to change their traditional static mindset and upgrade to an innovative dynamic one through practical examples of innovation.

George Couros is a leading educator and a social media influencer. He espouses innovative leadership, teaching, and learning. In addition, he is the creator of Connected Principals.com, an initiative that globally connects educators together to effectively create powerful learning platform for students.

If this book is to be given another alternative title, one might name it *A Guide to technological innovation in educators' mindsets*. What follows is an overview of some of the key points and takeaways enclosed between the two covers of this book in each of its four parts.

The opening part of the book is subdivided into three chapters, where Couros is clearly defining innovation, innovator's mindset and its characteristics, respectively. Innovation is a way of either uniquely inventing something new, or iterating a better version of an existing thing. He adds, the only way to innovate is actually to try things and check if they work. Even if they do not work, failure is an important part of the process. This is specifically true, because in real life, *the world only cares about and pays for what you can do with what you know, and not how or how long it took you to learn it*.

The most powerful portion in this part of the book is when Couros invites the readers to ask themselves; Would they be happy to be a learner in their own classrooms? Undoubtedly, if teachers use this question to guide lesson planning and executing, it would be a great start to think innovatively and consequently to enrich their educator-student classroom experience. Additionally, this question could inspire teachers to focus on what the best way might be for students to learn in a way which relates to their own lives rather than how it has been taught conventionally.

As Couros wanted to keep himself on the same page with the reader, he lists eight characteristics that define an innovative educator. To begin with, an educator with an innovator's mindset is continuously thinking about the classroom atmosphere and classroom instructions from the students' perspective – that is he is an empathetic. Once students themselves are asked to expect what problems can look like from a specific lesson, only then their educator has got the problem finding characteristic. Further, educators need to take risks and think out of the box when delivering a lesson or an idea. In fact, a single idea can generate a network of them which needs to be well-communicated between educators and students. Keeping an open eye on places where students can be inspired is vital. This could be powered by avoiding the conventional teacher-centric environment and shifting it to the learner

centric one which effectively makes students absorb more. Moreover, an innovative educator needs to be able to confidently convince students, colleagues and supervisors to about his or her creative teaching ideas even if he or she faces some pushbacks. In the end, it is true that not every creative idea might be feasible inside the classroom. As such, educators need to reflect their efforts, test how much they were absorbed and try to iterate accordingly. As such, explicitly, they need to ask questions like; What worked? What didn't? How can I change it? What do I do next?

The second part of the book is divided into one section focusing on the importance of educator-leader and educator-student relationships, and another half where educators should look at their lesson plans as if they were students in their own classes.

Spending time creating or even strengthening trustworthy relationships bonds is critical to moving forward in applying innovative mindset in knowledge-transfer institutions. This is particularly important because it will make it easier for people, especially leaders, to welcome new thoughts. First, in order to build relationships with leaders and other educators, Couros recommends to asking them about their professional development goals and give them big ears. Secondly, an easy hint for educators to bridge gaps with students is to be an available buddy not only in class but also outside the classroom. The supplementary contact around schools corners or playgrounds can effectively open opportunities to read students' minds and understand their fears which in turns, builds trust.

In business, clients are the end users; in schools, the students are the end users. If there is one idea readers may get from this part of the book, it is that the key to innovate in a classroom is actually to sit in the student's chair and ask: *Would I enjoy being a student on my own class?* Or, if this were a cinema, *would I pay tickets to watch this movie?*

The third part of the book is the major core of it, where Couros explains important practical principles of innovation, namely; strengths-based leadership; prioritizing technology; embracing open culture; and feeding students with meaningful experiences.

According to Couros, research has concluded that those individuals who focus on their strengths are six times more likely to be productive compared to those who focus on their weaknesses. From this point, it is important for leaders to inspire both educators and students to focus on what they like or what they are good at. This phenomenon is identified as a growth mindset. On the other hand, students who are obligated to focus on what they hate, will end up hating it more (a deficit model).

It is a mistake to feel overwhelmed with incorporating technology in education. In fact, education is the power and technology is there only to facilitate it and make it more interesting. For example, students can watch YouTube educational videos before they walk to school, but their drive in this case is being eager to learn and YouTube visual aids serve as an entertainment and accelerator tool in the process of learning.

Furthermore, when it comes to exploring technology in education, less is more. In other words, only those efficient technology tools which serve into the learning outcomes either faster or clearer than otherwise without them should be allowed in classroom. Research shows that education with too many technological choices can underperform conventional teaching methods.

Why not incorporate an open learning culture using social media? Sharing classroom time on YouTube, hashtagging innovative ideas and tweeting experiences are all good examples which double the resources for students and enrich their learning experiences. Moreover, it may create a healthy atmosphere of incorporation and competition between educators.

The concluding remarks of this chapter call for eight characteristics an educator should try to build in their classroom. These characteristics are as follows: 1. Cross-learning among students, 2. Strengths-empowered learning and encouraging optional skills for students, 3. Educators' self and students-to-teachers reflections, 4. Promoting creativity, 5. Encouraging Critical thinking skills, 6. Trying to push

students limit forward, 7. Student self-assessment and student portfolios, 8. Social media inspired learning.

Towards the fourth and final chapter, Couros is making the reader wonder: are we there yet? Maybe not yet but if we all plug-in the innovative mindset, it is all possible. Having said so, it is true that challenges could burden the innovative mentality such as budget restrictions, policies that don't make sense, and curricula that are way too static for a constantly changing world. However, keeping in mind the innovative mindset and trying the best out of it not only prepares students to face their generation challenges, but also it opens new horizons of creativity much more than the standardized summative tests do. Hiring technology in learning directs students to focus on learning rather than simply doing what is asked to please teachers and parents. As Couros stated; "The traditional system of education requires students to hold their questions and compliantly stick to the scheduled curriculum. But our job as educators is to provide new and better opportunities for our students. It's time to recognize that compliance doesn't foster innovation, encourage critical thinking, or inspire creativity—and those are the skills our students need to succeed"

Couros's book is a product of his long and observational experience both as an educator and as a leader. It is written in a purposeful way and in a clear, precise and relevant style to his experience, making the value gained worth the time spent reading this book. This is evident from his simple way in explaining complex concepts such as innovation in an affordable and accessible way. With its many hands-on recommendations, it sincerely invites the reader – especially if he or she are teachers who are looking to be a pioneer in education - to move from their point A to their point B. What makes this educational book unique is that it is neither too philosophical (making the reader lost and wondering what is next) nor it is too much like a recipe (leaving no room for personalization). Rather, it is a balance between a big picture, theoretical ideals and tips that show how it can be done. Nevertheless, the last chapter is a bit of disappointment when the author states that we are never there it, but this is a foregone fact.

With respect of incorporating the ideas in this book to the Gulf region institutions, several challenges as well as advantages could be thought of. On one hand, the conservative culture of the Gulf region compared to the Western region of the world in terms of writing, clothing, body language, the types and ranges of images, may be handled in a significantly different context within a technological tool. For example, the way Western YouTube bloggers dress, write, talk and present images might be distracting to Gulf region local students. On the other hand, technological tools needed in education (such as projectors, laptops and smartboards) might be expensive or beyond the budget in some places of the world, whereas this is less of a constraint in the Gulf region.