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Closing Keynote
Building the Future through Entrepreneurial Innovation
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Annual Conference 2026 | Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

BUILDING THE FUTURE

through entrepreneurial innovation

Jenny Zapf, PhD • University of Pennsylvania



Meet Dr. Jenny Zapf

Stepping into the Future!

Empowering Asia's Workforce

Senior Fellow and Founding Director

Education Entrepreneurship MSEd and MBA/MSEd at the University of Pennsylvania

Co-Founder and Faculty Director

Global Entrepreneurship, Innovation, & AI Micro credentials

Founder and Managing Director

Global Education Impact Fellowship and Fund

Dr. Zapf is a global leader in education innovation. She has trained thousands of education, business, and industry professionals to build, test, manage, and scale new models – including schools, universities, programs, services, and products.





A PERSONAL STARTING POINT

I didn’t start my career as an entrepreneur.

I started as an evaluator.

THE QUESTION THAT CHANGED MY WORK

How do we build better things to evaluate in the first place?

Bring evidence upstream — while there is still time to change course.



At Penn, we tried an experiment.

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Could entrepreneurial thinking be learned — and used far beyond startups?

2014

We began building the world's first graduate programs in education entrepreneurship.

600
working professionals

45
countries

100+
institutional partnerships

Education **Business** **Design** **Engineering** **Technology** **Community**

What have we learned?

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More than a decade of developing education entrepreneurs and innovation leaders.

1. **Entrepreneurial thinking can be learned.**
2. **Start with the problem — not the solution.**
3. **Evidence belongs at the beginning — not just the end.**
4. **Innovation is an ecosystem sport.**

The third lesson is where my two professional worlds came together.

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Evidence is not only a verdict. It can also be a navigation system.

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EVALUATION

Did it work?

→

ENTREPRENEURIAL EVIDENCE

What do we need to learn next?

Entrepreneurial thinking isn't an alternative to rigor.

It is a way of bringing rigor earlier — while we still have the opportunity to change course.

Four conversations. One future.

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These are not separate tracks — they are interconnected choices.

AI + DIGITAL

What is now possible?

TALENT + MOBILITY

What capabilities matter?

FAIRNESS + SECURITY

Who benefits — and whom do we trust?

ETHICS + GOVERNANCE

What should we do?

Our choices do not merely respond to the future. They help shape it.

How confident are you?

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That you can predict the capabilities your organization will need five years from now.

A **Very confident**

B **Somewhat confident**

C **Not very confident**

D **Ask me in five years**

We still must make consequential choices today.

A USEFUL REFRAME

Entrepreneurship is not only **about startups.**

It is a disciplined way of acting when the answer is not yet known.



Startups

Universities

Government agencies

Assessment organizations

Established institutions

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Learn your way into the future.

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Not a five-step recipe — a repeatable cycle.

The goal is not the perfect answer.

It is faster, better learning.

WHAT WOULD HAVE TO BE TRUE?
Which assumption are we least certain about — and most dangerous to get wrong?



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Sometimes innovation starts by changing the question.

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SINGAPORE • SKILLS-FIRST WORKPLACE

What credential do you have?

→

What can you do — and what could you learn to do?

88%

of surveyed organizations using skills-based hiring reported tangible benefits

If the nature of talent changes, shouldn't the ways we recognize talent change with it?

Scale ≠ sameness.

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Shared principles can travel. Solutions still have to meet context.

- **LANGUAGE**
- **CULTURE**
- **INFRASTRUCTURE**
- **REGULATION**
- **LABOR MARKETS**
- **TRUST + ACCESS**

Scale the learning. Scale the principles. Adapt the solution.

The bigger the problem, the more likely it is an ecosystem challenge.

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INDIA • APAAR + ACADEMIC BANK OF CREDITS



What role will we play in creating the future?

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Assessment can be part of a larger pathway from capability to opportunity.



What can people demonstrate?

What does the evidence tell us?

What capabilities need to grow?

How do those capabilities create opportunity?

What if we help create pathways through which more people can develop, demonstrate and deploy their talents?

What are we treating as fixed that may no longer be true?

ABOUT TALENT?

ABOUT ASSESSMENT?

ABOUT OUR ORGANIZATIONS?

10 sec → think • 60 sec → share the assumption, not the solution

Our job isn’t just to assess the future when it arrives.

It’s to help build the future we want to assess.

What will you help build?

Education Entrepreneurship at Penn GSE

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The program behind many of the ideas in today's talk.

Education Entrepreneurship, MSEd/MBA @ UPENN

Offered as a MSEd or dual degree with the Wharton MBA

FACULTY FROM FOUR PENN SCHOOLS & INDUSTRY

- Penn GSE
- Wharton
- Weitzman School of Design
- Engineering & Applied Science

FOUNDING DIRECTOR

Jenny Zapf, Ph.D.

WEBSITE

LINKEDIN

Scan to learn more about the program