Andrew Garber

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Why I Lobbied For A Non-Traditional Education

While the circumstances that led to me seeking out a non-traditional education make me anything but objective in a comparison between a traditional k-12 public/private education, my thoughts on my own way of learning have crystallized over years of being a square peg in a round hole. The Covid-19 anxiety that ended my career at a public high school must also be acknowledged, as trying to portray the switch as entirely of my own volition would be misleading as being in a building with 2000 other students cut down on my own mental horsepower to such a degree that it made learning at all in that environment challenging. However, that particular circumstance is not why I left to pursue a traditional education, and while thinking about a better way to do school for four years yields lots of points on the subject, the main triumvirate of these are deceptively simple. First, the Low-Floor:Low-Ceiling approach to public school has never worked for me, both wholly and specifically. Second, the lack of creativity and versatility of a homogenous education system, due to the nature of having to cater to anybody who walks through the door in large part those who excel get only marginally more resources to do so, both in time allotted and freedom of assignment. Finally, the nature of self-determination that is inherent to the style of schooling that I have advocated for, is something I have always looked for in a dream educational system - which I believe I have found in this.

I think it would be helpful to define the meaning of the ‘Low-Floor:Low-Ceiling’ nature of a traditional school experience before I go into why it didn’t work for me. For example, in a public school which is required by law to accommodate everyone who lives within a certain radius of said school where the individual abilities of any person can be widely ranging they have to go out of their way to lower standards as is necessary to hit benchmarks. For every kid like myself who was so bored by what was being taught, there were 5 kids who were struggling either due to lack of effort or lack of ability. It is logical on the behalf of the school to try and help those kids who were struggling day in and day out during school, but if they aren’t trying yet still are being given greater amounts of resources that is profoundly unfair to those students who are bored due to lack of intensity. Thus, I have always defined the ‘Low-Floor:Low-Ceiling’ nature of traditional schools as subsidizing those students who struggle with far more resources than ever get devoted to those students who seek to push the bounds of the curriculum. While it is not my intention nor my goal to get schools to devote less resources to those who are struggling, if a non-traditional education is available for those who are on the opposite end of the spectrum then it seems wise for them to take it in order to push themselves. There is absolutely no purpose in making kids who obviously have mental faculties that could far outpace that of the curriculum keep themselves in an environment that just drags them down and decimates their penchant for learning.

Once again, due to the nature of a traditional homogenous school system it is difficult to allow those students who thrive in specific environments or subjects the resources to fully pursue those areas, however the concept of a non-traditional education is quite literally made for them. When I first proposed my concept for a non-traditional education, I described it as ‘The School I Always Wanted’ where for those subjects that I had a more difficult time in I could put myself in the best environment to use my mental horsepower fighting through the work, not the work environment. When a specific topic wasn’t clicking with the topics before and after, there was never a way other than to review notes to get it to click into place and when a topic clicked perfectly there was no way to just move on. While all classes in a traditional school say that they are creativity oriented, there is no incentive for the students to be as turning in a canned project that just hits the boxes gets you the exact same or worse grade as someone who pushed the limits of those boxes. The best example of not rewarding creativity is elective classes, while a computer science class should be the pinnacle of creativity, where the entire job description of a programmer is to solve problems to make applications and products that are useful and functional for consumers school computer science classes consist of following along while a teacher writes all the code on a shared screen. While students get into computer science classes because they are both interested in the lucrative career opportunities and are passionate about the work that they would be doing, they are not rewarded for any of this passion nor are they encouraged to work on things that interest them. While creativity is not rewarded, versatility is non-existent in most traditional school settings. If a student learns really well by reading, what incentive is there for a teacher to spend 30 minutes standing and lecturing about the same instructions that are on the worksheet they are about to give out. Why shouldn’t those students who need the lecture to fully grasp the subject be allowed to listen along while the students who can just read it and get on with it be allowed to do that, the teacher loses nothing in this situation and gains students who are more engaged and willing to ask questions anyway.

Finally, a self-determined education is what I have always wanted - the ability to have my school effort reflected in the amount of learning I seek to do is highly appealing and in my opinion a far more efficient learning process for individuals with similar values to my self. The objective of a school, to teach students important lessons that will be important in forming a well-rounded, educated and principled citizens of not just our country, but our world has been watered down in favor of busy work that has been passed as important to be relevant in a job market. The right to self-determination is clearly enshrined in the order of our world, Chapter 1, Article 1, Part 2 Of the UN Charter clearly states “To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.” How that has been misconstrued in our public school systems in this country and across the world is beyond my ability to speculate but when the opportunity to finish my educational career in a self-determined environment I believed that letting the opportunity slip was not a worthy cause to let go. The ability to encourage the creation of those specific assignments on those topics which I feel that my passion for the subject can be focused to allow my mental horsepower to be unleashed in greater proportion. It is my firm belief that with the non-traditional schooling environment that I have helped to create, we will be able to more fully make manifest the mandate that traditional schools have been giving and have diluted: to encourage students to become well-rounded, educated and principled citizens of the world. I have been seeking to create the school of my dreams, the very antithesis of the modern traditional school system that is perpetuated both by government funded public schools and for-profit private schools, that exhales students as high-minded individuals and not mindless drones.

While my rhetoric throughout this monologue may make it seem like I intend to either demean those who attend or enjoy a traditional schooling environment, or encourage a revolution among those in traditional schools across the world in favor of an environment more similar to the one that I have helped create, it was not my intention at all. The very nature of the non-traditional environment that I helped create was centered on its personalization for my style and preferences in learning - very few students would be able to, or would enjoy outlining the assignments that they would complete and even fewer would intentionally try to maximize the amount of learning they would do in a day. The very thesis of the Garber Institute was to challenge students who not only liked to learn, but liked to create and who enjoyed channeling their passion For learning into creative representations of what they enjoyed thinking about. I have no plan for the model that I have created to ever expand beyond a single student: me, but I do believe the reasons for creating the Garber Institute are not all specific to me, and that there are certainly other learners and people like me who dream of a similar environment, and I am happy to finally be fulfilling that dream.