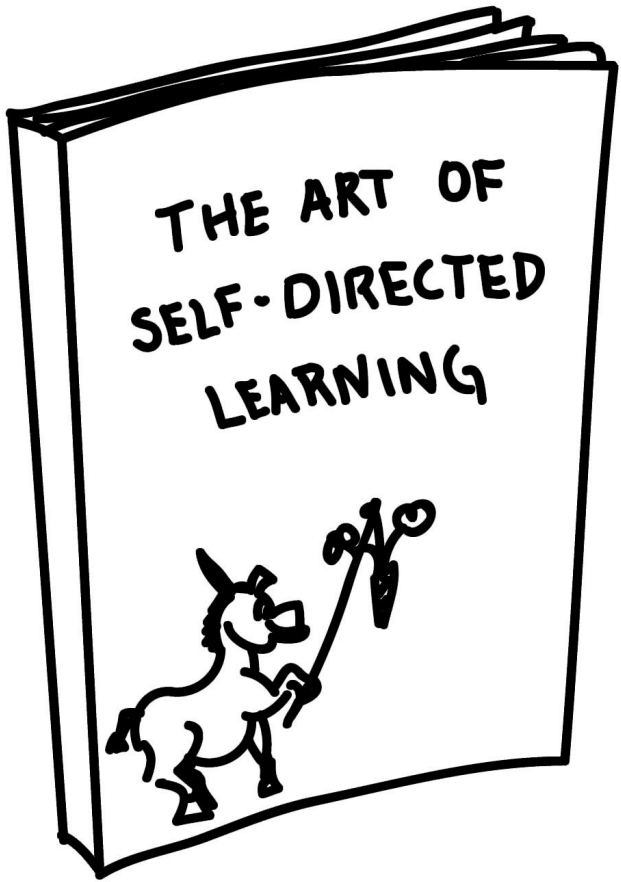
THE ART OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

23 tips for giving yourself an unconventional education

BLAKE BOLES


THE ART OF
SELF-DIRECTED
LEARNING

The Art of Self-Directed Learning

In high school or college, did you ever take a class on self-education? A class that helped you learn how to learn?

Neither did I.

Yet whenever we finish our formal schooling—and often during it—that's exactly what we need to do: learn all sorts of important things, on our own, without a blueprint.

Ask yourself, do you want to:

- build something from scratch: a website, a business, a house?
- pursue a course of self-study or personal research?
- work in a field unrelated to your degree or previous experience?

- improve yourself in a deep, meaningful way?
- travel independently?

Yes? Then you need self-directed learning. Because for these kind of challenges, no one will hold your hand. The only way to solve the problem is to learn your way there.

But self-directed learning (which I will define in the first few chapters) isn't just a collection of practical tools for getting stuff done: it's also a mindset that can help you lead a life very different from that of your friends, family, or society.

This book is a compilation of the wisdom, stories, and tools I've garnered from working with self-directed learners for more than a decade. Unlike my first two books, which I wrote specifically for teenagers and young adults facing the question of college, I created *The Art of Self-Directed Learning* for:

- high school and college students who are passionate about learning, aren't content to just "do school," and want to take more control of their educations

- teenage homeschoolers and unschoolers who want to become more effective and engaged self-educators
- young adults who aren't going to college and who are seeking guidance in their ongoing educations and career pursuits
- parents who want to support their kids (or future kids) as self-directed learners
- skeptical relatives and friends who want to see that self-directed learning isn't about mindless wandering, avoiding work, or being irresponsible
- adults of all ages who want to shape their careers to better reflect their beliefs
- anyone who never wants to stop learning

The book starts with an explanation of who I am and where I've been, and then it provides 23 stories and insights for becoming a better self-directed learner. I begin by defining self-directed learning and then discuss motivation, learning online, learning offline, meta-learning, and building a career as a self-educator. The final chapter discusses how nature, nurture, luck, and mindset influence self-directed learning. An original illustration by my friend Shona Warwick-Smith accompanies each chapter to further illuminate its ideas.

Here's a preview of the upcoming chapters:

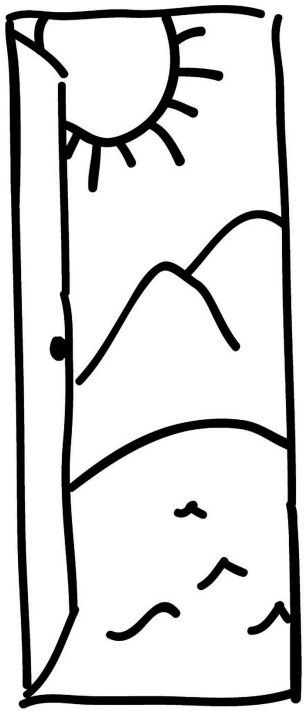
MOTIVATION

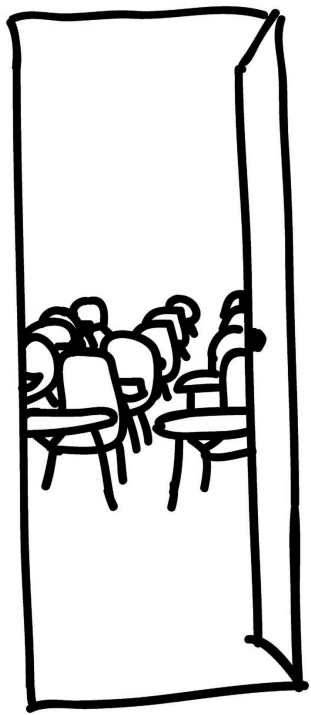
LEARNING ONLINE

Whether you're a veteran self-directed learner, the parent of a highly independent child, a student looking for new options, or a newcomer to self-education, this book will give you the tools and inspiration to learn more effectively and give yourself an unconventional education in a conventional world.

Ready? Let's begin.

What I Learned at Summer Camp





When I was 11, I went away to summer camp for the first time. I didn't brush my teeth for two weeks. It was fantastic.

The next summer, I had a camp girlfriend. She was 14. I told her I was 13. We held hands for one steamy week. Then she discovered that I was actually 12, and I learned that lying to make someone like you doesn't work.

A few summers later, I joined the camp's toughest backpacking trip. I helped plan the route, pack the food, and lead the group. We hiked to a high-elevation river, played on natural water slides, and ate orange drink-mix powder straight from the bag. Life was good.

Blake (left), age 15, eating orange drink-mix powder on a backpacking trip

Then, as I did every August, I went back to school, and life seemed to lose its color.

I did well in school. But that didn't make things better, because camp and school felt like two totally different worlds:

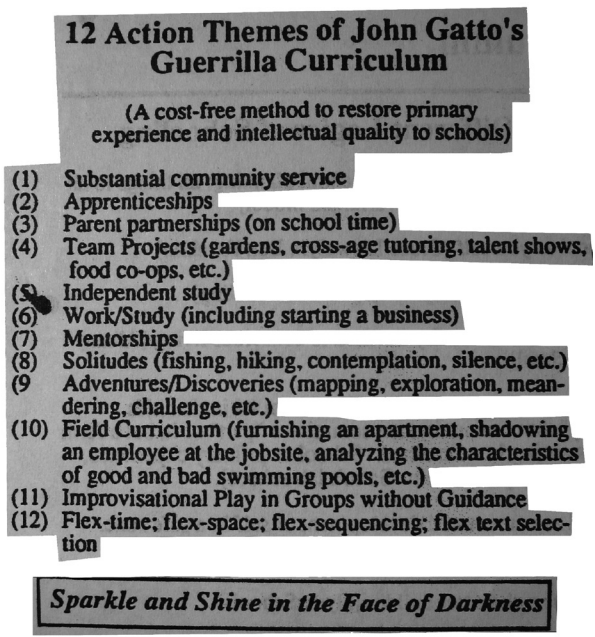
- At camp, I had control over my schedule. At school, it was predetermined.
- At camp, I could go deep into my interests. At school, I could only skim the surface.
- At camp, I was a social freelancer. At school, group identity meant everything.
- At camp, adults treated me like a person. At school, they treated me like my test score.
- At camp, I went because I chose to. At school, I went because I had to.

School taught me how to memorize a fact until Friday and alter the margins on an essay to create a higher page count; camp taught me how to figure out what I want, take the initiative, conquer my fears, own my victories, and learn from my failures.

To my teenage sensibilities, the annual ratio of camp to school didn't make sense. Why didn't I go to camp most of the year and then head off to school for a couple months to learn grammar, algebra, and whatever else camp didn't teach?

Down the Rabbit Hole

My quiet frustration with school didn't find an outlet until halfway through college when, by a stroke of luck, a friend handed me a book by New York City public schoolteacher John Taylor Gatto.



12 Action Themes of John Gatto's Guerrilla Curriculum

(A cost-free method to restore primary experience and intellectual quality to schools)

(1) Substantial community service
(2) Apprenticeships
(3) Parent partnerships (on school time)
(4) Team Projects (gardens, cross-age tutoring, talent shows, food co-ops, etc.)
(5) Independent study
(6) Work/Study (including starting a business)
(7) Mentorships
(8) Solitudes (fishing, hiking, contemplation, silence, etc.)
(9 Adventures/Discoveries (mapping, exploration, meandering, challenge, etc.)
(10) Field Curriculum (furnishing an apartment, shadowing an employee at the jobsite, analyzing the characteristics of good and bad swimming pools, etc.)
(11) Improvisational Play in Groups without Guidance
(12) Flex-time; flex-space; flex-sequencing; flex text selection

Sparkle and Shine in the Face of Darkness

Excerpt from a handout provided by John Taylor Gatto

Gatto taught for 30 years in some of the best and worst schools in Manhattan. He won multiple awards for his "guerrilla curriculum" of hands-on and community-based activities. Then he quit teaching because he didn't want to "hurt kids to make a living" anymore, and he started writing—and speaking across the globe—about alternatives to traditional school.

Suddenly a switch flipped. Gatto's guerrilla curriculum and devastating critiques joined forces with my quiet frustration with school. Together they staged a coup in my mind and conspired to take my life in a whole new direction.

Within a month I had abandoned my old college major and custom-designed a new one that let me study education theory full-time. I gave up my dream of becoming a research scientist in order to spend time at tiny experimental schools, read every book I could find about educational alternatives, and organize a class for fellow undergraduates called *Never Taught to Learn*. My mind was on fire. Little did I know then that within the next five years, my experiences would lead me to my own self-directed career path.

Leading the Unschool Adventures South America group, 2011

After graduating in 2004, I returned to work at my childhood wilderness summer camp and also got involved with a new one, Not Back to School Camp: the camp for teenage unschoolers (homeschoolers who don't follow a traditional curriculum in favor of a more self-directed approach).

The campers at Not Back to School Camp—some of whom dropped out of high school, and many of whom never went to school in the first place—were mature, self-knowledgeable, and passionate. They communicated clearly, actively questioned the world around them, and considered their dreams and goals carefully. They were, I realized, exactly who I wanted to work with. Within a few years I decided to build my career around hanging out with young-adult unschoolers, full-time, by creating my little travel and education company, Unschool Adventures.

Soon I was working at two summer camps and running my own leadership programs, writing retreats, and international trips every year, fulfilling my childhood dream of doing camp-style adventures year-round. I thought I'd found the promised land, but something kept nagging at me.

. . . And Back Out Again

As I went deeper into unschooling, I realized I was riding into the Wild-Wild-West of alternative education. Unschooling was an open

and leaderless movement, and like any such movement, both the best and worst rose quickly to the surface.

In its best moments, the philosophy of unschooling promoted listening deeply to one's child, treating her as a person worthy of adult-level respect, and providing a wide variety of educational options. If her choice included school or college, so be it. In this worldview, everything (including structured learning) was an experiment from which to be learned.

In its worst moments, unschooling vilified the entire world of school, structure, teachers, teaching, and classes, labeling any sort of formal education as fundamentally coercive.

The first vision of unschooling spoke truth to me but the second didn't. My own summer camp and college experiences involved plenty of teaching, classes, and structure from which I, and others like me, sincerely benefited.

Unfortunately, the second vision of unschooling had semantics on

its side. Because what was un-schooling if not something against school? This proved a difficult trap to escape, and in promoting unschooling, I, too, found myself bashing school.

That's when I decided that I needed to find a positive vision of what I believed. So I began searching across the United States and the wider world to discover the roots of what I loved about unschooling, summer camps, world travel, entrepreneurship, and certain schools and colleges.

What I Found

By 2009, I had poked my head into some wildly different places, from the tango halls of Buenos Aires to Stanford University's Design School. On my journey, I interviewed dropouts and Ivy Leaguers, bankers and artists, punks and programmers, off-the-grid hippies and tech-obsessed "edupreneurs." I met an endless number of incredibly thoughtful and caring parents from across the philosophical and political spectrum. And I reflected deeply on my own education, both formal and informal.

As I conducted my research, a pattern emerged. Pretty much everyone, it seemed, wanted to help young people do the same things:

- solve their own problems
- become their own teachers
- work on interesting problems
- collaborate and connect with others
- be leaders in their own lives

Teachers wanted this, unschoolers wanted this, parents wanted this, and young people themselves wanted this. They all agreed that these skills would serve them both personally and professionally. The only problem? No one agreed on what to call this package.

But to me, one term was a clear winner: *self-directed learning*. It was a positive term that symbolizes freedom, choice, and embracing learning wherever you may find it. It was the perfect term for independent learning in the twenty-first century, and it needed another cheerleader.

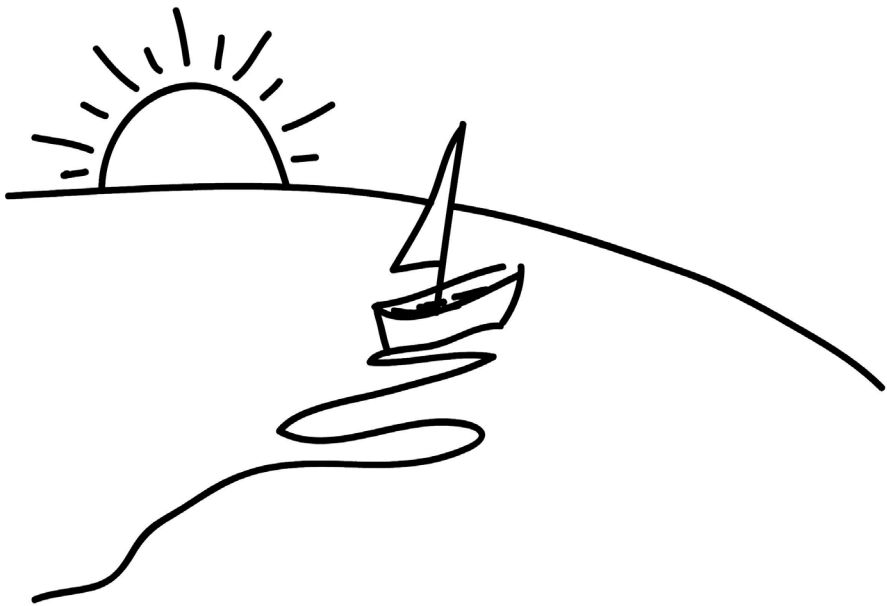
What you hold in your hands now contains the best adventures, insights, lessons, and stories that I've gathered on my journey of discovery. This book is also a love letter to self-directed learners everywhere: the unschoolers, independent learners inside school, summer campers, adventurers, entrepreneurs, parents, and travelers who continually inspire me to keep working on this funky frontier in the world of education.

If you like what you read, and especially if you have a story to share, I hope you'll drop me a line: yourstruly@blakeboles.com.

Photo courtesy of Blake Club, my anonymous online fan club (most likely composed of campers and students with whom I've worked) that photoshops my head onto photographs in weird, hilarious, and often disturbing ways (https://www.facebook.com/BlakeClub)

1

The Girl Who Sailed Around the World



Want to know what self-directed learning looks like? Look no further than Laura Dekker, who in 2009 announced her plan to sail around the world by herself.

That's impressive in itself, but the most interesting part: she was only 14.

Laura, a Dutch citizen, was aiming to become the youngest person to solo circumnavigate the globe—and she was prepared. Laura was born on a boat, spent the first four years of her life at sea, started solo-sailing at age six, began competitive racing at age seven, solo-sailed from the Netherlands to England at age 13, and had outfitted her vessel specifically for round-the-world travel. Her parents fully supported her decision and trusted her capacity to safely make the journey.

But when Laura revealed her plan to the world, the Dutch child welfare court took legal action to prevent her from undertaking what they considered an obviously irresponsible adventure.

Beyond their safety concerns, the court argued that, by missing a year of high school, Laura would fall dangerously behind in her education.

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Would Laura be ready for the challenge of sailing around the world? Would she learn as much or more from sailing around the world than from sitting in high school? Was this a dream she could defer to the future without losing an important part of who she was?

Laura knew the answers to these questions. Her parents knew the answers. But the Dutch child welfare authorities didn't know.

In moments like these, we face a choice: do we give in to an authority that claims to know what's best for us, or do we stand up for what we believe is right and important?

Laura could have accepted the court's pronouncement. She could have abandoned her dream. She could have told herself that, despite possessing the attitude, skills, and preparations necessary to run her own life, she would let someone else run it for her.

But that's not what self-directed learners do, and that's not what Laura did.

• • •

Soliciting support from an international community of parents, sailors, and educators, Laura and her family fought the court's decision.

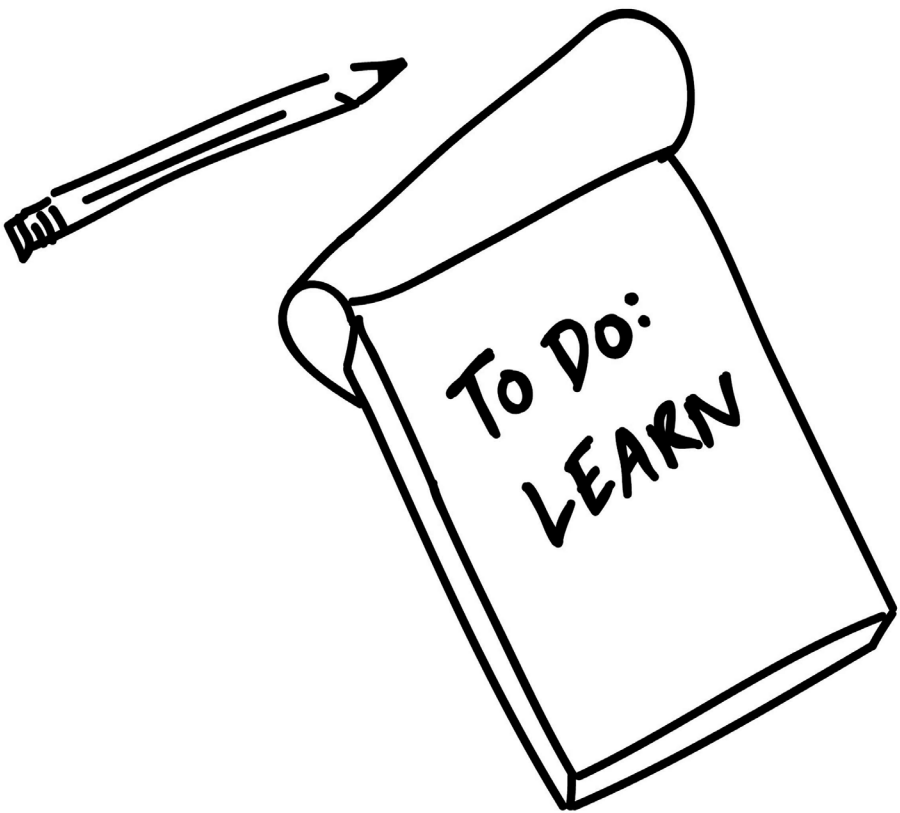
The battle wasn't easy. At one point, the state made Laura a ward of the court, which she protested by running away to the Caribbean island of St. Martin.

Eight court cases and a full year later, a second Dutch court overruled the first, and two weeks later, Laura sailed away from Gibraltar in her 38-foot yacht named Guppy. She circled the world in a year and half, finishing at age 16, the youngest girl to ever sail around the world by herself.

Self-directed learning starts with a dream to go farther, see more, and become more than others tell you is possible. But dreaming alone is not enough; you must fight to turn your dreams into reality.

2

What Self-Directed Learners Do


To Do:
LEARN

Of course, you don't need to sail around the world, wage legal battles, or do anything as grandiose to be a self-directed learner. In more than a decade of research and travel, I've met very few "brilliant" or "highly gifted" self-learners, but I have met innumerable people who have simply decided to take full responsibility for their learning. "Genius," as John Taylor Gatto says, "is as common as dirt."

Self-directed learners are normal people who wake up in the morning, put on their clothes, and eat their breakfasts. They brush their teeth, check their computers, and feed their pets. Then they ask themselves: Where do I want to go in life, and how will I get myself there?

When self-directed learners choose to go to school, they arrive on time, take notes, and do their homework—because school is taking them where they want to go.

When self-directed learners choose to go to work, they put in long hours, volunteer for the hard tasks that other people avoid, and get promoted—because work is taking them where they want to go.

The difference between self-directed learners and everyone else is: As soon as school or work stops serving their life goals, they don't stick around. They ditch the well-trodden path, bust out the map and compass, and cut cross-country to virgin territory.

Instead of putting up with a miserable or unproductive school situation, a self-directed learner figures out how to get an education on his own terms. He changes his approach to school, finds a different school, or leaves school altogether.

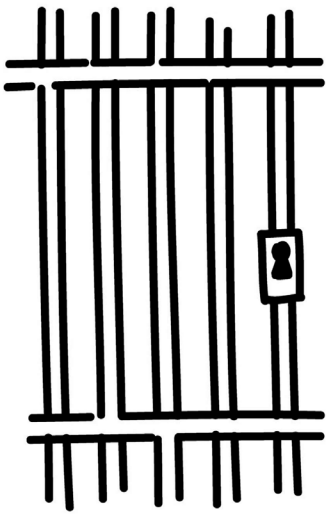
If work becomes unfulfilling or no longer serves a self-directed learner's purpose, instead of resigning herself to a life of

frustrating or meaningless employment, she takes clear steps to better her situation. She negotiates different workplace responsibilities, interviews for a better job, or starts her own business.

Self-directed learners take full responsibility for their educations, careers, and lives. Think hard about where you're going, research all your options, and then move boldly forward.

7

Cages and Keys



I CAN'T

I COULD IF I

My first year at summer camp, I heard rumors about the Saturday evening campfire. Something strange happened afterwards, I'd heard, but no one would give me the details.

At dusk on that first Saturday, I congregated with the rest of the camp for the quarter-mile hike to the campfire site. No flashlights were allowed, and the instructors advised us to look behind as we walked through the woods. Anticipation mounted.

At 10:30 PM, as the evening's talent show ended and the bonfire coals flickered into darkness, I finally learned the Great Secret. Each of the first-time campers was going to walk back to camp, through the wilderness, in the pitch black, alone. I quaked in my poorly tied boots.

Blake, age 11, at Deer Crossing Camp with camp director Jim Wiltens

Years later, as a returning camper and instructor, I would come to relish the memory of my first "night walk," a rite of passage that no one tells you about until it's upon you.

But at that moment, as I waited for my turn to descend the ominous granite shelf, my mind erupted with fear, anxiety, and the litigious thoughts of an entitled 11-year-old. *This is ridiculous! Who do they think they are? I'll sue everyone!*

A hand fell on my shoulder. "Don't freak out," an instructor gently advised me. "We've been preparing you for this."

She was, I realized, correct.

Deer Crossing Camp was a strange and special place to grow up each summer, and not just because they asked 11-year-olds to walk through the woods alone. The very first thing you learned at Deer Crossing was that at this camp, you're not allowed to say "I can't." Not during classes, not during meals, and not even during casual conversation.

Sure, I remember thinking when I heard the rule on the first day, *like that's going to happen*. It sounded like the type of grand pronouncement that a school principal would blurt on the first day of school and never really enforce.

But then I arrived at camp and saw that everyone actually took this rule seriously.

The rule wasn't universally followed, of course, and the most serious consequence for saying "I can't" was the jeers of your fellow campers crooning in unison, "You whaaaat?"

But this strange policy completely succeeded in one respect. At Deer Crossing, you learned that every time you said "I can't," you were making a choice. Because instead of saying "I can't," the instructors gently reminded time and time again, we could say a different phrase: "I could if I."

My first "I could if I" moment was in kayaking class when we practiced flipping our boats over and escaping from them into the

water. (These were whitewater-style closed-top kayaks, not open-top ones.)

During one of my flips my foot became stuck, forcing me to swallow a mouthful of water, panic, and get mad. "I can't do this stupid kayaking!" I protested. I was prepared to walk away right there, but my instructor convinced me to ask myself "I could if I" first.

What had caused my foot to stick in the kayak, and what could I do differently next time? I reluctantly began brainstorming.

"I could get my foot out if I . . . wore smaller shoes."
"Yes, that's one option," the instructor replied. "What's another?"
"If I bent forward more?"
"Okay. How about one more?"
I racked my brain. "If I . . . took a deeper breath to give myself more time?"
"Great. Let's try that one."

Lo and behold, on the next flip, I exited the kayak like a slippery fish.

• • •

If someone had introduced the "I could if I" strategy to me as an adult, I may have written it off as self-help hogwash. But to my 11-year-old self, facing the prospect of a terrifying night walk, "I could if I" was the key that unlocked my cage of self-doubt.

As my knees quivered in that cold mountain night, I took a deep breath, recomposed myself, and asked myself, "I could do this walk if I . . .

walked down to the edge of the granite shelf, where the dirt begins . . .
walked between the two tall trees . . .
and followed the rocky gully down to the forest trail.

I took the first step. Five minutes later, I was back at camp.

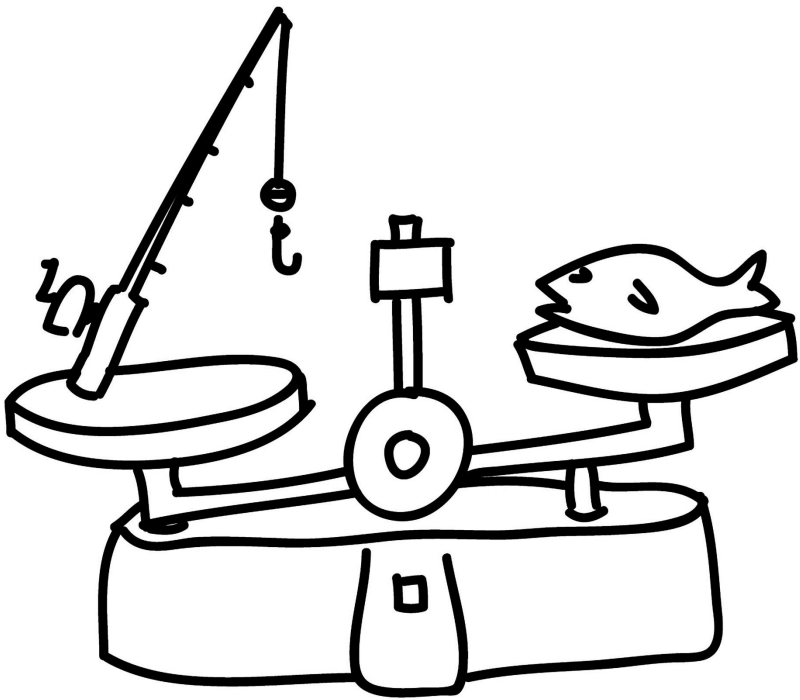
Summer camp taught me that my habit of saying "I can't" was a cage, and this cage had a key called "I could if I." To escape the cage, all I had to do was pick up the key and think a little differently.

Attitude is a self-directed learner's most precious resource. For every cage, you can find a key.

Cage	Key
I can't	I could if I
I should	I choose to
I don't know	I'll find out
I wish	I'll make a plan
I hate	I prefer
I have to	I get to

15

Learning How to Learn



I once led a six-week leadership retreat for five self-directed learners ages 18–21. I rented them an apartment in the bustling town of Ashland, Oregon, helped them devise a clear set of learning goals for the retreat, and mentored them toward completing those goals using the approaches described in this book.

One student wanted to learn about biology and Kendo; another wanted to improve her photography and web design skills. So I sent them away to interview biologists, martial arts instructors, photographers, and designers. My students boldly introduced themselves to complete strangers, pushed themselves to learn both online and offline, and then blogged about their successes and failures, over and over again.

Those were just the weekdays. On the weekends, I sent the students out on wild adventures to build their self-directed resolve in some rather unusual ways.

For "hobo weekend," they hiked on train tracks (on which trains weren't actually running) to the local reservoir and camped out under tarps and thin blankets, a lesson in the importance of maintaining one's attitude in a difficult situation: like not having a home to return to at night.

For "travel weekend," I challenged teams of students to get as far away from our home base as possible, and back, in 48 hours with only $50. I showed them how to use the websites Craigslist (to find cheap rideshares) and Couchsurfing (to find free housing), gave them some safety protocols, and then sent them on their way. One team made it as far as San Francisco, a 700-mile round-trip.

For "entrepreneur weekend," the students attempted to earn as much money as possible using only $5 seed capital. For "paperclip

weekend," they traded up a worthless starting object (a paperclip) into a more valuable one (a set of golf clubs) using only their wits.

For the final weekend, I gave them surprise one-way tickets on a Portland-bound Amtrak train, a to-do list with tasks drawn from previous retreat activities, and the challenge to eat, sleep, and get themselves back four days later, with a budget of only $80 each. (My program co-leader, Cameron, also boarded the train, trailing the group undetected with a fake moustache, as an extra safety measure.) Spoiler alert: they made it.

Walking the mean streets of Portland, Oregon. (Photo: Trevor Parker)

When the program ended, everyone went home happy—and I spent a long time asking myself why I ran it.

My leadership retreat combined some of the most fun and interesting activities I'd picked up over my years of hanging around innovative summer camps, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, world travelers, and outdoor educators. I hadn't thought about how they fit together before I ran the program, but there had to be a common thread. What was it?

An excerpt from a blog post by the author Seth Godin finally nailed the answer for me:

> *An organization filled with honest, motivated, connected, eager, learning, experimenting, ethical and driven people will always defeat the one that merely has talent. Every time.*

The world is full of places that try to teach "talent," school and college being the preeminent two. But the world has far fewer places that attempt to teach honesty, motivation, ethics, and the other traits Godin described.

Yet for many businesses and other enterprises, these traits ultimately matter more than talent. People get hired for professional skills and fired for personal skills.

That's when I realized that what I was teaching at the leadership retreat was what educators call *meta-learning*: the personal skills that help you learn effectively in complex and unpredictable environments.

The leadership retreat wasn't really about sleeping under a tarp or finding rideshares or learning biology or Kendo: it was about building resourcefulness, creativity, self-regulation, self-motivation, conscientiousness, and focus. It was about greeting a stranger, learning from a defeat, arguing one's case, and telling a good story. Meta-learning was the thread that connected all of my own formative educational experiences, and I was trying to pass that thread along.

The best teachers, mentors, and organizations don't just pour information into your head; they teach the meta-learning skills

that help you learn how to learn. To find them, look for anyone who will teach you how to:

- give and take feedback
- speak in front of people
- tell a powerful story
- write something that people actually want to read
- lead a group
- follow in a group
- make a decent movie, website, or photograph
- live on a budget
- spot logical fallacies in an argument
- meet and converse with anyone
- set a goal and follow through on it

Seek out the teachers, coaches, and mentors in life who prefer to teach you how to fish instead of simply giving you a fish.

16

The Dance Lesson

Blake, touch my chest!"

The 50-year-old Argentine woman spoke with authority, so I did as she commanded.

I placed my palms on her clavicles. As she walked forward, I held the tension in my arms and walked backwards, matching my steps to hers.

When she paused, I paused. When she twisted her torso or shifted weight in her feet, I followed.

The year was 2008, I was 26, and I was leading my first Unschool Adventures trip to Argentina. Ostensibly, Alicia Pons was teaching

my group of teens how to dance tango, using me, for a moment, to demonstrate the art of following. (Argentine tango is composed of leader and follower pairs.) But clearly, something more than tango was happening here.

"As a leader, you need to send clear signals," Alicia instructed us. "You must know what you want and move decisively. Otherwise, your partner won't know how to respond."

For a moment, I felt like I was in a relationship therapy session.

"If you don't know what you want, then stop moving. Just shift the weight in your feet for a few moments. That's okay." Alicia rocked back and forth almost imperceptibly; I felt the motions in her chest and moved my body to match.

Now it was a life coaching session.

"In the early days of Argentine tango," she continued, "every man had to learn how to follow—to listen very carefully—before he

could become a leader, before he could take that responsibility. Today, we have many bad leaders because they've never followed before."

Now: a communication class (and political theory, too).

She released me and entered the middle of the tiny dance studio. "No matter whether you're leading or following, you must walk confidently. Raise your arms high above your head and take a deep breath. Then keep your chest in that position as you release your arms. Feel your spine lengthen. Feel your new height. This is how you will connect with your partner in tango. Practice walking like this everywhere you go."

The basics of body language? Alicia just summarized them.

"At a *milonga* (a social tango dance), it's common to dance four songs together. If you begin dancing with a partner, you are committing to all four songs. It's rude to leave early, but you always have the power to say no. If your partner is being disrespectful, walk away immediately."

Finally, a lesson about consent.

For two weeks in Buenos Aires, Alicia taught my group more than just tango—she taught us how to move with confidence, power, and grace while remaining humble, perceptive, and open to feedback. Having danced, competed, and taught across the world, Alicia had an incredible repertoire of moves to show us, but she focused entirely on one lesson: communication.

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Self-directed learners need to confidently and clearly communicate with other real-life human beings, not just computer screens. We need to advocate for our nontraditional paths to parents, employers, or college admissions officers. We need to work successfully with teammates and coworkers. We need to ask smart questions, ask for help, and stand up for ourselves.

But none of these communication tasks is easy or automatic, and some are downright terrifying.

What I discovered in Buenos Aires was that partner dancing is just

one big communication lesson that teaches a set of interpersonal skills that you could never get from a book, classroom, or website.

I learned my lesson via Argentine tango, but I have friends who gained just as much insight from swing dancing and blues dancing.

Do yourself a favor and google partner dancing classes in your area, right now. Tango, swing, blues, ballroom—the specific form doesn't matter as long as it involves improvisation, not just choreographed steps. Go alone or with a friend, whatever makes you more comfortable. Take a few classes and try different teachers. When you find the right one, you'll know, because all of a sudden you won't just be learning dance anymore. You'll be learning to kick more butt at life itself.

Learn to dance, and dance to learn. It's all about communication.

How to Light Your Mind on Fire

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Learning How to Learn

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