

A Generation at Risk: The Imperative for Empowering Students

Let's jumpstart education reform.

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American public compulsory education was inspired by an oppressive education system from Prussia which prioritized industry and obedience.

The higher education system in America has become a marketplace with its sense of supply and demand heavily distorted by filling the gaps with student loans.

Change on a systemic level takes time, but what can jumpstart the movement?

The answer lies in the power of the youth!

When the next generation (such as teens) take the center stage in the movement to engage in critical thinking and play the role of curator for their own post secondary educational experience, they can reshape the educational landscape to meet real needs.



public libraries

+

high schools



+

teens



Through a series of workshops held in collaboration with public libraries and high schools, teens can gather to build skills and engage in critical discourse to help them take charge in their educational opportunities post compulsory education.

Why start there?

During the course of my thesis project, I went through the entire design process that lead to the final solution, which theoretically would continue to evolve as needs change over time.

Within the design stages, I also consulted with two teen programming directors to receive information and critique.



Anna Lawrence

Teen Librarian

Responsible for creating much of the teen programming at the Boston Public Library in Copley



Deron Hines

Teen Director

Responsible for directing and creating the teen programming at the Boys and Girls Club of Dorchester

Preliminary Research

The research phase started off with looking into the habits and behaviors of Generation Y and Generation Z. It consisted of online research and interviews. The initial topic areas spanned across: media, finance, geography, religion and spirituality, culture and ethnicity, and health.

Gen Y: the optimists



Gen Y (1981-1994)

Raised on the web
2 screens
Communicate with text
Share things
Present-focused
Want to be discovered
Luxury shoppers
Digital-savvy
Will take on side gigs and juggle multiple careers
Retention driver: money

Gen Z: the realists



Gen Z (1995-2010)

Raised on social web
5 screens
Communicate with images
Create things
Future-focused
Will work for success
Frugal shoppers
Digital-centric
Want to work for themselves (entrepreneurial)
Retention driver: career advancement

from an Ipsos Reid survey

Generation Z Highlights

Ultimately this project makes Generation Z the target user group.

Generation z is defined by being born inbetween the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.

They are known for being the generation that was “raised on the internet”.

**grew up with devices
with access to the world
wide web**

Pew Research Center analysis of Google Trends

**possibly the “most
entrepreneurial
generation” yet**

from a study by WP Engine

**are heavy content
creators that utilize
various digital tools
to do so**

**are tied to and
interested in social
causes**

*Business Insider
Intelligence*

This project focuses on the topic of education.

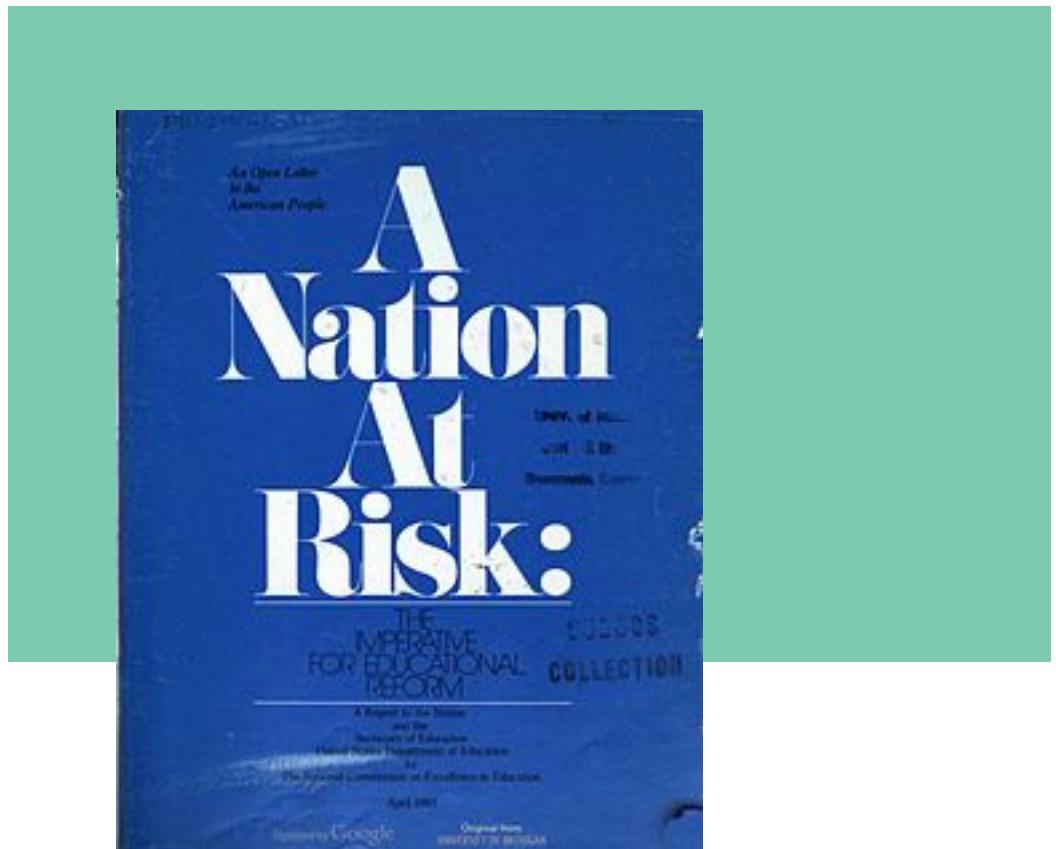
While higher education is not compulsory, heavy societal stigma presents college as a requirement to fulfill the definition of success, act as proof of owning skills, and to be qualified for many careers. Institutions have a lot of competition with the amount of educational resources available in communities (free standing classes and groups) and online (the very large database of heavily developed online courses, many with free access). Still, institutions have the upper hand in credibility but aren't necessarily offering the best options for each student.

“ If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. ”

- Gerald Holton, *A Nation At Risk*

A Nation At Risk:

The Imperative for Educational Reform



A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform is the 1983 report of American President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. Its publication is considered a landmark event in modern American educational history.

During my time in my Introduction to Education [Looking Forward and Looking Back on Education in America] class in Fall 2018, I learned about how A Nation At Risk was written in an effort to jumpstart reform in the American education system by comparing education to a skillset that is analogous to artillery and resources used in national defense to keep the country safe - all delivered in an unusually urgent and angsty tone for coming from a national education committee. It was not written by a diverse group of people but rather 12 men from --- We have not had a full reform since then, but the report did create a movement.

College as a product.

“College is More Important—But More Expensive—Than Ever Before”

Between 1992 and 2012, the average amount owed by a typical student loan borrower who graduated with a bachelor’s degree more than doubled to a total of nearly \$27,000.

- U.S. Department of Education

The cost of tuition rises every year, disproportionate to wage increases.

With high desirability as people are told college is a necessity, colleges seize the opportunity to operate as a business, marketing teams and recruiters included.

Even if a large population can't afford college, student loans are so easily offered to even those without a credit score, which enables schools to offer less for more.

Questions to ponder: What if colleges had to appeal to the whole population on loans, without offering them loans? How else would they acquire their customers? Would they be more strategic with their budgeting or make the programming at a level of quality that is more appealing?

Resources in the tech generation.



There is an almost endless amount of well developed educational content that is available online and in community programs (nonprofits, interest groups, and libraries)

From the preliminary research, it is obvious that there is a wide array of educational content and materials that already exist - whether online, in an institution, or in a community. Currently, colleges and universities remain as the most verifiable “curator” of an education experience via conferring of degrees.

Even though many educators may use the free educational materials they find online and pass them onto their students, when students engage in those materials on their own without school, they don't get the credit for it.

question for the next stage:

How do people find out and get access to the different types of educational opportunities that cross their path?

Interviews

The preliminary research and statistical information found related to educational opportunities say a lot. Listening to the voices of people whose representation may get lost in the numbers tells a richer story.

As part of the research, I interviewed three Gen Y adults who took different paths for their education and career. I was thinking of the concept of lifelong learning and also wanted to learn how endeavours from younger years pan out.

Then I interviewed two Gen Z teenagers, one who is in college and one who is in high school.

I asked them questions about their relationship to school, community, and the path of finding/ supporting their interests from middle school age to their current age.



Murat, 26



Krystina, 26



Danny, 26



Alia, 18



Faye, 16



Alia, 18

Freshman currently studying at MIT; Alia applied as a Computer Science major but is currently undeclared and considering being a part of the Comparative Media Studies Program.

“the most influential people in my life are my age.

“I didn’t think I could be an artist until I met Athena.

Alia mentions the significance of the afterschool program they commuted to Dorchester from Lexington to attend and the impact of peers their age when it came to supporting their interests.

Alia feels as though their ‘cleanse liberal’ high school in the suburbs was overall suffocating and also oppressive toward their identity. Alia has a deep interest in social justice that was in part cultivated by the afterschool program



Faye, 16

Junior in high school currently studying at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts in NYC. Faye is currently going through a college prep process and hopes to attend RISD after high school.

“kids don’t like school.

“kids are pretty fearless.

Faye said this after talking about how a student at her school made a website to collect student input and also made a list of 10 commandments from it. It was taken down and the student got reprimanded by the school afterward.

Faye talked about the influence of her parents’ active role in her life and how that helped her find many opportunities. She also talked about the stresses of how college prep seems to start in 8th grade, and the intense standards in NYC.

Faye believes the administration at her high school does not adapt curriculum to the interest of the students.



Krystina, 26

Community organizer and educator, Krystina pursues various interests and talents. She recently attained a masters in education.

“I knew when I got to high school that I wanted to teach.

Krystina was inspired to become an educator because of a teacher she had in high school who was an example of someone who was like her and doing an amazing job. She says they were all “young, Black, and beautiful”.

A lot of Krysina's interests were solidified in high school and she supported them from that point on and into her college years. As teenager she was interested in creating a t-shirt company that would bring awareness to ecological injustice. She also mentioned how a toxic relationship as a teen negatively affected her pursuits



Danny, 26

Pursues his main passion of dance with friends and by teaching it. Danny is also a manager at his “day job of bougie retail” to support what matters most to him.

“success is happiness.

“the computer was my home.

He mentioned that he taught himself programming as a teen and found out about a lot of things through searching in the ‘deep corners’ of the internet

Danny prioritizes his personal relationships and his ambitious tendencies to succeed at whatever he is involved in. In highschool, he followed the activites he enjoyed and eventually prioritized that over schoolwork. His dream is to make dance what he does fulltime but currently “turns off Dance Danny” when he works his main job.



Murat, 26

A senior undergrad at MIT studying physics. Murat participates in college for personal reasons and access to resources, and is not concerned about grades or the degree.

“I don’t care [what they’re looking for]. All I want is an interesting project.

He was talking about how narrow the process is for college admissions or being hired for a job. He says that the type of “probing” they do doesn’t really reveal true personality traits of the person being interviewed. Also, he has a tendency to follow his own path even if it conflicts with his superiors in the workplace.

Murat was expected to be involved in STEM from a young age as his sister at his orphanage also followed that path. One of his favorite people is his chemistry teacher in high school because Murat believes he taught the subject in a really engaging way. Murat hopes to one day open his own business.

From the interviews, some common threads and some interesting considerations can be found:

All generations technically had access to many resources. Still, having a connection with someone, whether a friend, parent, or mentor, really made an impact on the decision they made or were making for their post secondary educational plans.

Teens rather follow what’s engaging and enjoyable and this may influence what path they go toward, even if it’s something that isn’t normally recommended to actually pursue (such as dance, video games and defying commands to lead your own way).

Accessibility may depend upon curiosity to ask/find out more about what is given to you. Some people questioned more in regards to certain subjects but then were more likely to follow the rules or not investigate in other situations. They had dual attitudes coexisting.

Ideation

The interviews provided a lot of rich contextual information inviting me into the user's perspective of how they navigate all that is thrown at them from a young age. From that I began to create opportunity areas, coming up with a top 6:

#1

How can teens help create their educational experience? & get respect for their say on it?

how do they and we realize that they really do have this power?

#2

How can we create a reliable support system to enable high schoolers to get what they want out of their education/future?

#3

What if there was a tool that can curate an educational experience so that it can be “packaged and consumed”?

(as high education institutions do, but reaching out to a broader pool of inputs)

#4

“kids” see the faults but don’t know what to do.

adults aren’t adapting to the needs of an incoming pool of young students in real-time.

How can they connect?

#5

How can teenagers use their drive and willpower to support the path they want to take?

(*while* they are still exploring)

#6

What about lifelong learning?

Should adults get a new space to choose their educational options when they are older and want to change paths in their educational journey?

When going though opportunity areas, I went back to the takeaways from the interviews.

I chose teens as the user group because both Gen Y and Gen Z interviewees mentioned defining moments during their high school years. I decided to focus on this pivotal time in their educational career to plant the seed of change for their future.

defining the direction to build around:

How can we create a reliable support system to enable high schoolers to get what they want out of their education + future?

Product Landscape: Space



co-working space



shared learning space



outdoor



unintentional gathering
spaces

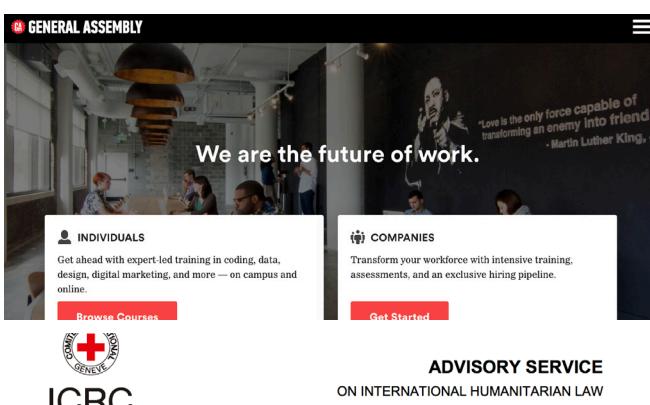
Product Landscape: System



non-profits



online course series



program

What is International Humanitarian Law?

What is International Humanitarian Law?

International humanitarian law is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict. It protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and

balance between humanitarian concerns and the military requirements of States.

As the international community has grown, an increasing number of States have contributed to the development of those rules. International humanitarian law forms today a universal body of law.

cultural/social system

Product Landscape: Statement

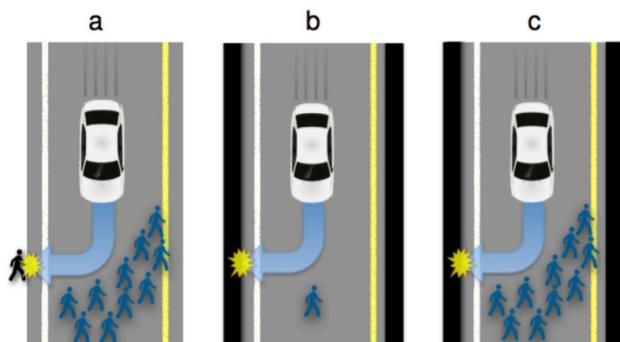
THE YELLOW MANIFESTO

A true account of a border and its people.

1. People who live on the border need a say on the nature of that border. Everyone needs to understand the emotional meaning of the border as well as its practical impacts. Don't think just of the borderline, think of the lives on the border.
6. No one was unaffected by our history; the sights we saw, the hurt and fear. Some people lost far too much. For many the border gave safety and provided a sense of identity. We all need to learn history - our own and others. Preserve this knowledge so that the troubles of the past remain in the past.

manifesto

Why Self-Driving Cars Must Be Programmed to Kill



speculative design



exhibit



lifestyle brand

Ideation: Space

Sp. 1 : A Shared Studio Space



rotating schedule

guided proposed system to help/
encourage to make helpful content

Sp. 2 : Outdoor Structure



rooftop bar vibes

GOOD WiFi

communal resource spots
(like different kinds of 'libraries';
imagine RISD Nature Lab for example)

furniture design that encourages
strangers to talk to each other

Sp. 3 : Food + Skillsharing



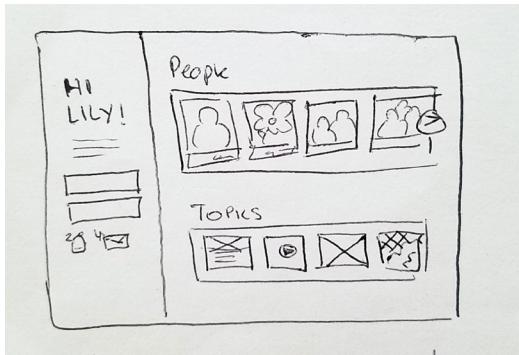
team leader / waitstaff in each
quadrant

prompts at table

food perks/discounts based on
participation

Ideation: System

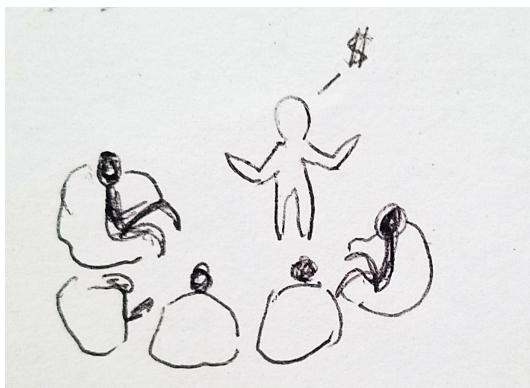
Sy. 1 : Online Community and Interface



algorithmic feed content tailored to the user

works connect to FB, but not as distracting as FB

Sy. 2 : Sponsored Teen Led Skill Sharing

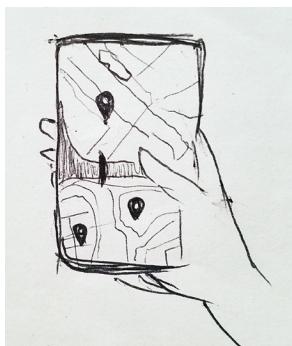


nonprofit offering small stipend per skill sharing lesson

like tutoring but in specific subjects

compensation encourages teens to achieve a certain level of quality in their 'course'

Sy. 3 : App + Service That Helps Curate An Events Feed Suited to the User's Traits



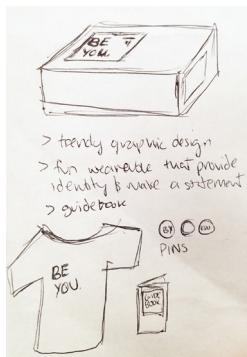
app lets teens know about events around them, filtered to their interests

...and what the requirements are to participate

inspiration: MIT Mobius app

Ideation: Statement

St. 1 : Activism Kit



"Be Your Own Boss Kit" for teens

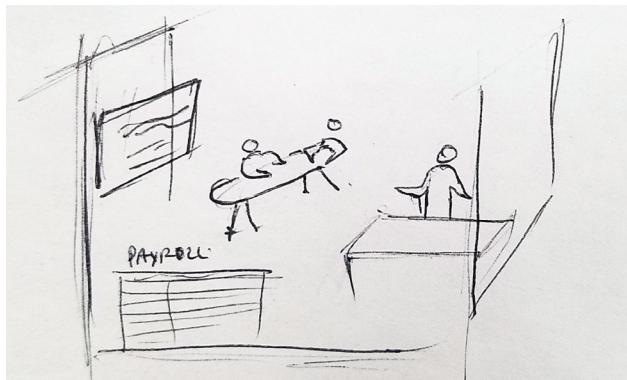
trendy graphic design

fun wearable that provides identity & makes a statement

guidebook included

should there be versions to collect?

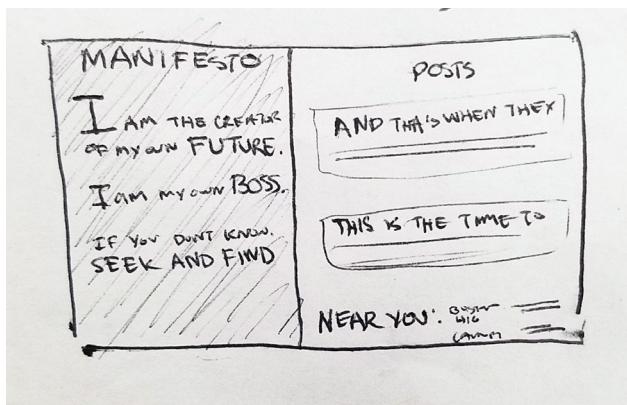
St. 2 : Start Up Launcher for Teens



employ majority teens (people w/ low experience) that learn on the job/ through each other

inspired by models of a social enterprise such as AFH and Dudley Dough

St. 3 : Young Scholar Manifesto



online community with monthly meetups

online journalistic site fueled by pledges/stories about students taking charge of their own education

Themes for the Next Stage

ability to gain access

how much does it take for a teen to be able to find out and then participate in the product?

anti-disciplinary

does the product allow teens to explore across disciplines without falling into the constraints of discipline related labels?

system is editable by the teens

do the teens see that they can change and edit their options to create their own unique result?

make sure overall that it will:

**provoke critical
discourse!**

Prototyping

The product landscape research and ideation followed three distinct categories: space, system, statement

Through ideating, I realized that there is a lot of overlap between these top ideal categories. This lead me to think through prototyping within 3 areas to test and discover:

a tool

games

mapping

[digital] interface

an area that
encourages
gathering

comfortable to hang out in

doesn't feel like school

easy to get to (transport) and access
(cost) for teens

an overarching
guide

modular

easy to adapt to various spaces

doesn't feel like hw

a tool: creating a game



What if teens picked their own cards in the game of education?

The purpose of this game was to allow teens to explore interests without the labels of majors. After exploring, they would then take a look at existing pathways and see how they can either fit or challenge existing programs through dialogue with other players.

It was inspired by personality trait based quizzes and curriculum mapping that include minors.

steps in building the game:

searched for 3 large example categories majors fall within
chosen: STEM, design, and liberal arts

chose 4 job titles within each category and researched job positions under these titles

chose 2 'unique'/required skills within each occupation (32 total skills)

how to play the game:



choose traits that resonate with you

build a structure with blocks based on the cards you chose

check the answer key to explore majors

playtesting:



lessons learned:

the icons limited people's interpretation of the skill to just exactly what the icon represented - especially if there was a person in it

even though the discipline name is removed from the cardset, the skill names have heavy connotations already tied from the discipline

quite a few of the names of the skills had to be explained but were still too jargon heavy

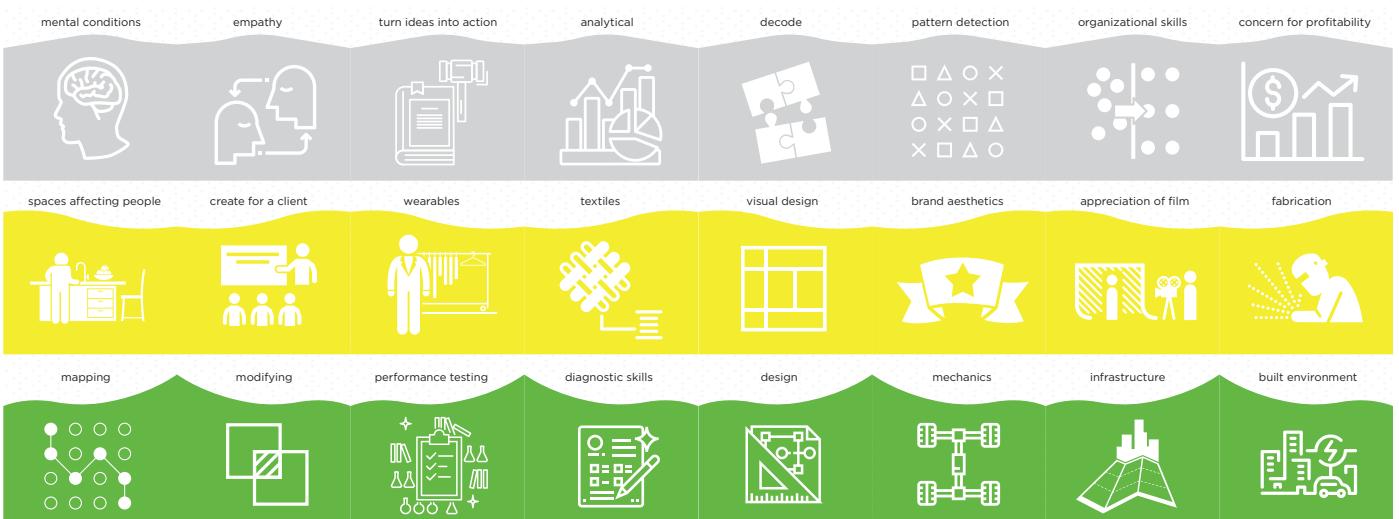
this game was pretty janky mechanics-wise, but the most valuable results were in the dialogue between the users and I! They had questions about what it all meant and imparted their thoughts and opinions on the matter

full card set:

liberal arts

design

STEM



Looking at a point of inspiration:

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

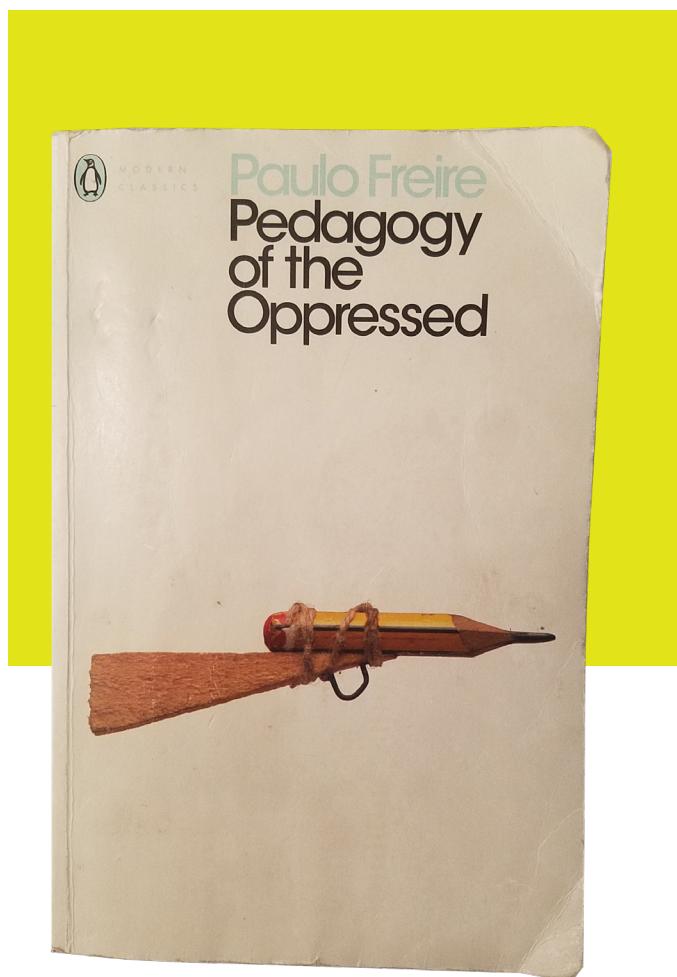
by Paulo Freire

At this point, I knew what the goals are of the experience, but I realize that it is very difficult to break out of the heavy boundaries that exist within the world of education and the marketplace of education. While users played the game, they couldn't let go of trying to figure out what box they would fit it. This isn't their fault. This is what school does. Public school and American education in general trains students to be submissive in the learning process.

How can people learn to break the boundaries to advocate for what they need and what how education should be adapted to them?

I realize there is a need for students to be encouraged to think critically about what is presented to them and for them to feel that they can change and challenge ideas about educations that have been forced onto them through oppressive pedagogy.

And so I chose to read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.



official description:

Arguing that 'education is freedom', Paulo Freire's radical international classic contends that traditional teaching styles keep the poor powerless by treating them as passive, silent recipients of knowledge. Grounded in Freire's own experience teaching impoverished and illiterate students in his native Brazil and over the world, this pioneering book instead suggests that through co-operation, dialogue and critical thinking, every human being can develop a sense of self and fulfil their right to be heard.

from this I see that my "tool" should:

have less labels

have more dialogue

use speech that encourages questioning

have the teens leading the session