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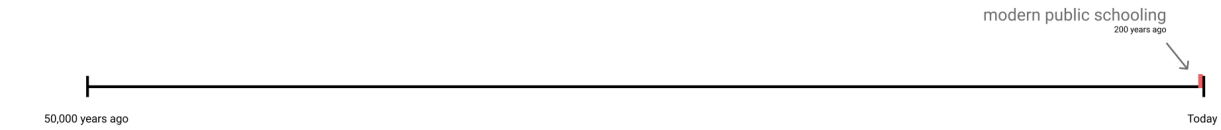
Free Learning

Dani Grant – May 2, 2019

There is an **aptitude test** that measures creativity by asking people to name use cases for objects such as a paper clip. People who score in the genius category not only come up with many use cases for a paper clip, they also change what it means to be a paper clip: if the paper clip were 9 feet tall, it could hold up a house. 98% of 5 year olds score in the genius category, but by the time those kids are adults, only 2% do.

To borrow from Picasso, all of us are born curious, the challenge is to remain curious as we grow up. One of our beliefs is that we can collectively build a more curious world if we leverage technology to make it more affordable and accessible for future learners to opt out of traditional public schooling and forge their own paths, learning creativity, curiosity and passion along the way, rather than note taking, test taking and following the rules.

If humanity is a blip in the timeline of the Earth, public schooling is a blip in the timeline of humanity. Modern humans have existed for 50,000 years. Modern public schooling has existed for less than 250.



That is to say, the way public schooling is today isn't the way it has to be. Many of the ideas we take for granted as public schooling are recent innovations. The idea of grouping students by age and advancing them every year was established **170 years ago**, the idea of specialized higher-education for secular professions such as doctors and lawyers started **225 years ago**, and the idea of teaching math as something that's completely separate from philosophy, music and physics would have seemed absurd in the academies of ancient Greece.

It's true that by many metrics, public schools are succeeding. The high school completion rate is rising, so is the number of students taking advanced math and science courses, teacher salaries are even on the average increasing, and standardized test measurements show that the public school system is able to teach students on the whole to the same level of test score achievement every year.

The current system seems to be working, but only if you measure it by its own yardstick of completion rates and standardized test scores. By any other measurement such as the **growing rate of depression** among

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kids to memorize for the test instead of using their natural curiosity to drive the learning. We tell kids that they can't divide by zero instead of asking them – well what would happen if we tried!* Students are bored in class because we've made the learning boring. As per Aristotle, Malala and Richard Feynman, seeking knowledge is what makes us human, and yet, we've somehow managed to take all of the joy and wonder out of learning at school.

In **A Mathematician's Lament**, Paul Lockhart describes a dystopian world in which music is taught to K-12 students the same way math is taught today (though, sadly, music education isn't available any more to at all to many students). Students memorize the circle of fifths and get points taken away if the stems on the music notes they draw face the wrong way. They never get to hear any music unless they somehow choose to stick with it to an advanced graduate level course.

This, of course, is how we teach math to students, we teach all of the symbols without the bigger picture. Imagine if instead, we taught math to students by starting with big, fundamental questions and mysteries, the same way people like Isaac Newton, René Descartes and Rosalind Franklin grappled with the unknown and asked themselves questions, leading to them discovering new ideas about calculus, curved lenses, and DNA.

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This is the core idea of **Free Learning**. Free learning is free form and self-directed (much like Free Climbing or Free Diving). In free learning, learners ask questions, they want to know things. They use their innate curiosity to drive the learning.

How does one free learn? The first step is to be passionate, the next step is to ask a question, and then the last step is to find a community where finding the answer is encouraged. This passion and community-driven learning is already happening in music and sports – we join bands and teams that encourage us to learn more, and it is our own passion that drives us to get better – imagine if the same could happen in other subjects too.

In his **TED talk**, Sugata Mitra, an educational researcher and the founder of **The School In The Cloud**, explains how questions can drive learning: "There was a time when Stone Age men and women used to sit and look up at the sky and say, 'What are those twinkling lights?' They built the first curriculum, but we've lost sight of those wondrous questions. We've brought it down to the tangent of an angle. But that's not sexy enough. The way you would put it to a nine-year-old is to say, 'If a meteorite was coming to hit the Earth, how would you figure out if it was going to or not?' And if he says, 'Well, what? how?' you say, 'There's a magic word. It's called the tangent of an angle,' and leave him alone. He'll figure it out."

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Even though free learning is not strictly about learning for employment, the skills acquired in free learning are important in today's changing job market. As automation replaces jobs for which the job has concrete tasks (such as forecast the sales for the next quarter), the jobs that are left are those where the solution is unknown (such as how do we grow our enterprise sales without increasing our salesforce?).

Freelearners.org

This belief that the web can help make alternatives to traditional education an accessible option to more people is one we have been investing in for about a decade: **Duolingo**, **Skillshare**, **Quizlet** and **Codecademy**, for example, are excellent learning resources available to anyone online.

Alongside this blog post, we've published a **list of resources for free learners** and a **list of ideas we think could be interesting free learning companies and projects to start** such as ClassPass for university classes, GitHub for academic research and Pioneer for free learners. Not all of these project ideas are high-growth businesses that are right for venture capital, but they are all projects that we think should exist. You can check out both at **freelearners.org**.

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To quote from **Fred on AVC**: “The internet and technology writ large are making it a lot easier for someone to learn something. But we have barely scratched the surface of what is possible. Twenty-five years after the emergence of the web browser and the commercial internet, education still works largely like it did back then. That is going to change, is changing, and I am very excited for it to happen.”

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** Here’s what happens when you divide by zero. Let’s say, for instance, that we are dividing the number 10 by 1, we get 10. Then if we divide 10 by 0.1, we get 100, if we divide 10 by 0.01, we get 1,000. If we divide 10 by 0.000000001, we get 10 billion. The smaller we make the divisor, the larger the outcome. As the divisor becomes so small it approaches zero, the answer becomes so large it approaches infinity. And so you can’t divide by zero because it is a limit that approaches infinity. It also cannot be the case that 1 divided by zero is equal to 4 divided by zero and is equal to 13 divided by zero, but if we say that they all equal infinity we can get into some messy false logic.*

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