

# Why Academic Teaching Doesn't Help Kids Excel In Life

MindShift

How we will learn

- [Uncategorized](#)

By Shelley Wright

# Mind/Shift

Academics. Most of our current school system



Ana Tintocalis/KQED

revolves around it, and yet, I think it falls miserably short of what our kids need. To be honest, I think our academic system of education is highly overrated, at best. At worst, it destroys a number of our kids.

Hear me out. I'm not saying that our kids shouldn't learn to read, or do math, or develop other valuable skills. But too often, the focus of our kids' school day is Content with a capital C, with little connection to why it matters. Instead of learning together, many of our students spend hours filling in worksheets or copying down lecture notes that they could google in 30 seconds.

Too often the lectures they listen to are boring and irrelevant to their lives. And from my experience, most of this content is simply memorized, spewed out for an exam and then quickly forgotten. But beyond this, there's often only one right answer, which frequently cultivates in our students a fear of failure.

## SCHOOLS VALUE HOOP JUMPING

For the most part, kids who we consider "academic" tend to be good hoop jumpers. They've figured out the system and can navigate their way through the predictable demands of the system. But they are seldom truly engaged. Rarely are they transformed by their learning. They're going through the motions.

I've come to realize that being "academic" doesn't tell you much about yourself.

Research shows that some of the least engaged students are the highest achievers. Think about that. They do well because they know how to "do school." Is this really the best we have to offer them? What if you're not "academic"? Most of these kids pass through too many years of their young lives feeling like they don't measure up. Feeling stupid. And for some, it radically alters their trajectory of their adult lives. Unfortunately, too many students have to recover from school once they graduate. Is this really what we want for them?

## **I USED TO TEACH THIS WAY**

In all honesty, I have to admit that I used to believe in this academics-oriented system. For too many years my students sat in straight rows. I asked the questions. I had the answers. I controlled the learning.

The truth is I did this because it's what I knew. It's how I'd been trained. It's what I saw replicated in universities and in other teachers' classrooms. I sincerely believed that good grades mattered.

I'm an English teacher, and I subscribed wholeheartedly to the belief that the pinnacle of success in English was the ability to write "the essay." But I've [radically changed my position](#). I've come to believe that the traditional essay is one of the most useless things we teach our students.

Recently, I've started to ask people I know, "Do you ever write an essay?" I've never had one person say yes. I wonder how many teachers, except those who are taking university classes (or writing an opinion piece like this), ever write true essays. If I may be so bold, I wonder how many English teachers frequently write essays.

I'm not saying our kids shouldn't be able to write. On the contrary, I think our students should be able to argue gracefully and persuade powerfully. They also need to know what they believe and why. I simply think the essay is a medium that has outlived its usefulness, at least in high school.

## **ACADEMICS FOR THE ACADEMICIANS**

I've come to realize that being "academic" doesn't tell you much about yourself. It tells you you're good at school, which is fine if you plan to spend your life in academia, but very few of our students do. It doesn't indicate whether or not you'll be successful in your marriage, raising your kids, managing your money, or giving back to your community. All things that matter much more than being good at school.

School should be a place where kids can discover what they love. They should be able to ask the questions that matter to them and pursue the answers. They should discover what they are passionate about, what truly sets their hearts and souls on fire. They should discover they can make a difference now. Above all, they should leave school knowing what they are good at.

Today, I think most kids graduate only knowing if they're good at school or not. Often our students have many talents; they just don't fit in our current curriculum because their talents are likely not considered "real knowledge." And what is that? In the Biology curriculum that I've taught for the past several years, one of the objectives that my students need to know is earthworm reproduction. Really? Out of all the things we could be teaching a 17-year-old about biology, someone (a whole panel of someones, we can guess) decided earthworm reproduction was essential?

## **OUR STUDENTS LOSE THEIR CURIOSITY**

We are born curious. Babies explore their environments to learn; they do it naturally without being told. Three-year-olds constantly, at times annoyingly, ask, "why?" And yet, by the time my students arrive in Grade 10, they have all but lost their curiosity. Consequently, when I get a new class of students, we start by unlearning.

We begin by imagining what school could be, instead of what they've known for 10 years. Only then can we move into the work that will help them become lifelong learners who truly enjoy the search for answers, rather than the mark at the top of their exam.

Recently I've been reading Amanda Lang's *The Power of Why*. In it she states:

*"Curious kids learn how to learn, and how to enjoy it – and that, more than any specific body of knowledge, is what they will need to have in the future. The world is changing so rapidly that by the time a student graduates from university, everything he or she learned may already be headed toward obsolescence. The main thing that students need to know is not what to think but how to think in order to face new challenges and solve new problems."* (p.14)

## **LEARNING HOW TO LEARN AND FAIL AND LEARN SOME MORE**

Our school system doesn't need to create kids who are good at school. Instead, we need to create an environment that engages learners, fosters creativity, and puts responsibility for learning where it belongs – with our students.

Instead of rote learning, teachers need to use content to teach skills. We need to build environments that allow our students to get messy and build things. Places where students learn how to learn, and know how they learn best. Where students engage in significant research, and learn how to identify credible resources amidst a plethora of information that, at times, may seem overwhelming.

Furthermore, our students need to be able to problem-solve, innovate and fail over and over again. Throughout all of this, our kids should be collaborating with each other, as well as virtually with students across the globe. They need to be able to communicate powerfully using the mediums of print, photography and video.

## **THREE QUESTIONS TO GUIDE STUDENT-DRIVEN LEARNING**

As I've worked with my students, we've come to realize they need to be able to answer three questions, regardless of what we're researching:

- What are you going to learn?
- How are you going to learn it?
- How are you going to show me you're learning?

How they get to this last question is often their decision. And what they come up with never fails to surprise me.

My classroom hasn't always looked like this. But over the past three years we've shifted to a constructivist pedagogy that has transformed not only my thinking, but my students as well. Now we learn in an inquiry, PBL, tech-embedded classroom.

The journey at times has been painful and messy, but well worth the work. The biggest lesson I've learned is that my students will often exceed my expectations, if only they're given the chance.

*This post originally appeared on the [Powerful Learning Practiceblog](#).*

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