

Written by Allan Besselink
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 Imagine a class of 1st-grade students left unattended in a room with crayons, markers, sketchbooks, finger paints - and a healthy dose of their creativity. When left to their own devices, there would be a whirlwind of activity as they explore their world in a non-linear fashion. There are no rules to using crayons nor expectations for an artistic genius in the making. In the midst of this tsunami of activity, they were building the foundation for life-long learning. But then, something dramatic happened.

The educational system got involved. It demanded linearity, forcing them into a world of outlines and if-then statements. Suddenly there was the laundry list of what you need to know and how you need to know it so that you can make your way through standardized tests A, B, and C. Don't color outside the lines. In fact, stop coloring - it has served its role already. Don't even consider thinking about your own thinking; meaning isn't important. This isn't the time or place for that sort of thing.

As the arc of life-long learning was developing, linear thinking was demanded of non-linear brains. But we forgot something important - that active learning requires creativity. Hanke (2012) noted that generative learning is the process of constructing meaning through generating relationships and associations between stimuli and existing knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Generative learning involves creating something that makes sense to you based on your experiences and prior knowledge. It doesn't happen through osmosis.

If there is a failure in academia, in my humble opinion, it is in failing to promote creativity in the learning process. I don't think it is a coincidence that Leonardo da Vinci was simultaneously an acclaimed artist, thinker, and inventor. There's a reason why creativity is considered to be one of the four core 21st-century skills (which also include communication, collaboration, and critical thinking - but more on that in an upcoming post).

However, when I suddenly ask a graduate student to create - after years of being exposed to other things - they look at me like I am crazy. They rebel. They resist. Of course, they are incredibly uncomfortable because that's not what higher education has conditioned them to do.

Students need to generate and create their learning using those same core skills that have oftentimes been left to gather dust. They must connect the dots - literally and figuratively - using that same healthy dose of creativity that naturally came to them during their younger days. The basic elements of generative learning are rooted in kindergarten. Creativity involves making sense of what lies before you to establish meaning in your mind. As much as an instructor can guide, mentor, and provide feedback, they simply can't make you learn.

The arc of life-long learning is ever-changing. We are all students - forever. The beauty is that you had some of the foundational elements of life-long learning long before you ever started your formal education. Create. It will serve you well and provide you with one of the most critical skills as a global citizen in the 21st century and beyond.

References:
Hanke, U. (2012). Generative learning. In: Seel, N.M. (eds) *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_171

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