3 destructive things you learned in school without realizing it

It was high school. I was 16, and I was pissed off. My English teacher gave us a creative writing assignment: write anything about being in high school. *Anything.*

So I wrote a story about a **school shooting**.

And not just that — in my story, once police cornered the shooter, instead of blowing his own brains out he began teaching the children himself, executing the ones who misbehaved or didn't follow directions. At first his executions seemed irrational and cruel. But as the kids got older, the executions became more pragmatic and designed to prepare the survivors for the "real world." The story ended at the graduation ceremony. The shooter cried as he hugged all of his students. He congratulated them and told them how proud he was of their accomplishments.

Needless to say, I got an F.

School convinced me I was a lousy writer. Which is weird, because now I'm **a professional writer**. Eat that, Mr. Jacobs.

So in the spirit of graduation season, I figured it'd be nice to talk about what school does and does not teach you. Because if I've learned one thing, it's that who you were in school is not necessarily who you are destined to be in life. In fact, often it's quite the opposite.

1) You learned that success comes from the approval of others

We seem to live in a culture today where people are more concerned with *appearing* to be something important rather than actually *being* something important. See: the Kardashian sisters, Donald Trump, 63 percent of all Instagram users, athletes who make rap albums, the entire US Congress, etc.

There are a number of reasons for this, but a large part of it is that as we grow up, we are rewarded and punished based on meeting the approval of other people's standards, not our own. Make good grades. Take advanced courses. Play on sports teams. Score highly on standardized tests. These metrics make for a productive workforce but not a happy workforce.

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The *whys* of life are far more important than the *whats* of life, and that's a message that is rarely communicated growing up.

You can be the best advertiser in the world, but if you're advertising fake penis pills, then your talent is not an asset to society but a liability. You can be the best investor in the world, but if you're investing in foreign companies and countries that make their profits through corruption and human trafficking, then your talent is not an asset to society but rather a liability. You can be the best communicator in the world, but if you're teaching **religious fanaticism** and racism, then your talent is not an asset but rather a liability.

Growing up, everything you're told to do is for no other purpose than to earn the approval of others around you. It's to satisfy somebody else's standard. How many times growing up did you ever hear the complaint, "This is pointless. Why do I have to learn this?" How many times do I hear adults saying, "I don't even know what I like to do; all I know is I'm not happy"?

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Performance-based learning isn't even efficient. A kid who is excited about cars is going to have a hell of a better time learning about math and physics if math and physics can be put in the context of what he cares about. He's going to retain more of it and become curious to discover more on his own.

But if he isn't responsible for the *why* of what he is learning, then what he's learning isn't physics and math, it's how to fake it to make someone else happy. And that's an ugly habit to ingrain into a culture. It churns out a mass of highly efficient people with low self-esteem.

In the past few decades, concerned parents and teachers have tried to remedy this self-esteem issue by making it easier for kids to feel successful. But this just makes the problem worse. Not only are you training kids to base their self-worth on the approval of others, but now you're giving them that approval without them having to actually do anything to earn it!

Or as Branford Marsalis, one of the greatest saxophone players of all time, so eloquently put it:

External performance markers are fine, and likely even necessary, but they're not sufficient. There has to be a new starting point. There has to be personal purpose introduced into education at some point. There needs to be a *why* to learning to go with the *what*. The problem is that everybody's *why* is personal, and it's impossible to scale. Especially when teachers are so overworked and underpaid.

2) You learned that failure is a source of shame

Earlier this year I had lunch with one of those people who you just can't believe exists. He had four degrees, including a master's from MIT and a PhD from Harvard (or was it a master's from Harvard and a PhD from MIT? I can't even remember). He was at the top of his field, worked for one of the most prestigious consulting firms, and had traveled all over the world working with top CEOs and managers.

And he told me he felt stuck. He wanted to start a business, but he didn't know how.

And he wasn't stuck because he didn't know *what* to do. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He was stuck because he didn't know if it was the *right* thing to do.

He told me that throughout his entire life he had mastered the art of getting it right on the first try. That's how schools reward you. That's how companies reward you. They tell you what to do, and then you nail it. And he could always nail it.

But when it came to creating something new, doing something innovative, stepping out into the unknown, he didn't know how to do it. He was afraid. Innovation requires failure, and he didn't know how to fail. He had never failed before!

"There has to be personal purpose introduced into education at some point"

In his book ***David and Goliath***, Malcolm Gladwell wrote a chapter about how a disproportionate number of insanely successful people are dyslexic and/or high school dropouts. Gladwell suggested a simple explanation: these were talented people who, for whatever reason, were forced to become accustomed to failure early on in their lives. This comfort with failure allowed them to take more calculated risks and see opportunities where others weren't looking later on.

Failure helps us. It's how we learn. Failed job applications teach us how to be better applicants. Failed relationships teach us how to be better partners. Launching products or services that bomb teaches us how to make better products and services. Failure is the path to growth. Yet we get it hammered into our brains over and over that failure is always unacceptable. That **being wrong** is shameful. That you get one shot and if you

screw it up, it's over; you get a bad grade, and that's it.

But that's not how life works at all.

3) You learned to depend on authority

Sometimes I get emails from readers who send me their life stories and then ask me to tell them what to do. Their situations are usually impossibly personal and complex. And so my answer is usually, "I have no clue." I don't know these people. I don't know what they're like. I don't know what their values are or how they feel or where they come from. How would I know?

I think there's a tendency for most of us to be scared of not having someone tell us what to do. Being told what to do can be comfortable. It can feel safe, because ultimately you never feel entirely responsible for your fate. You're just following the game plan.

Blind obedience causes more problems than it solves. It kills creative thinking. It promotes mindless parroting and inane certainty. It keeps crap TV on the air.

That doesn't mean authority is always harmful. It doesn't mean authority serves no purpose. Authority will always exist and will always be necessary for a well-functioning society.

But we should all be capable of *choosing* the authority in our lives. Adherence to authority should never be compulsory, and it should never go unquestioned — whether it's your preacher, your boss, your teacher, or your best friend. No one knows what's right for you as well as you do. And not letting kids discover that fact for themselves may be the biggest failure of all.

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