

ESSAYS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teachers First

Helping Students Think
for Themselves

David Cutler

TeacherCutler.com

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Helping Students Think for Themselves

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Selected essays on teaching and learning

Ebook edition · October 2026

TeacherCutler.com

For my wife, Elana, and my son, Gabe.

May we always be learning, and always want to learn more.

Publication Information

Teachers First: Helping Students Think for Themselves

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In the Classroom



David Cutler in his classroom at Brimmer and May School. Photograph by David Degner. Image supplied by the author. [Source details](#).

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Introduction

I was 23 and fresh out of graduate school when I moved to Miami to teach at Palmer Trinity, an independent school in Palmetto Bay, Florida. I had no friends or family nearby and was unfamiliar with my surroundings. Before opening day, I frantically tweaked plans for three courses: Yearbook, AP United States History, and United States History.

I had little classroom experience, yet I agreed to coach junior varsity soccer. I wanted to prove my worth, but I was overwhelmed. I struggled with classroom management and could not reach many of my students.

Without seasoned teachers, I would have quit after that first year. Before, during, and after school, colleagues met with me to offer support and advice. Their questions helped me recognize my mistakes and see how I could make things better.

Their guidance taught me something that still shapes my work: schools already have a reservoir of expertise in the teachers who come to work each day. I call this *embedded authority*, or judgment developed through teaching, reflection, and responsibility for what happens to students when an idea works or tumbles.

Alongside it is *extracted authority*, or insight developed through reporting or reflection beyond teaching in the classroom. That distance can reveal patterns an individual teacher might miss. For example, Rick Wormeli's work on assessment and Susan Cain's work on introversion have helped me teach better. Without question, these perspectives can strengthen each other, and to be clear, neither experience nor distance makes an argument right on its own.

What's most important, however, is that current teachers have time and support to learn from one another—and to test outside ideas against their students' needs. Too often, our voices carry less weight than those of people who will not teach the lesson or see its consequences. That is so frustrating, and what I want to change. Teachers First means giving classroom judgment a leading role in decisions about learning.

This collection reflects my teacher's perspective, including lessons that worked, mistakes I made, and views I reconsidered. Much of the evidence is anecdotal, though I do back a lot of my practices with cognitive science. I welcome

disagreement as well as agreement, with teachers leading the discussion and students' learning as our purpose.

The questions change across these essays—from textbooks, homework, and grades to AI—but the purpose stays the same: helping students build knowledge and judgment they can use for themselves. The mentors who helped me find my footing showed why teachers need a voice in deciding what supports that work.

Flight attendants tell us that, in an emergency, we need to put on our own oxygen masks before helping others. The same principle applies to teaching. Teachers need support, trust, and a voice in the decisions that affect our classrooms.

Teachers first, so we can give our students our best.

Author's Note

I wrote the original articles myself, without using AI. They come largely from my existing body of work and have been edited for this collection. I see this collection as a primer for visitors who want to get a sense of my fully original work.

Some articles are abridged; others appear at greater length to preserve their context. The editing aims to retain as much of my original writing as possible, with corrections and limited changes to transitions for clarity and accuracy.

Each chapter opens with lines drawn from its essays. The conclusion likewise draws from my existing writing. Dated excerpts, brief notes, and links make changes in my thinking easier to follow. Pull quotes reproduce my words from the essays. Questions after the essays invite you to consider your own practice.

How I Used AI

I asked ChatGPT for feedback on my article selection. I also used Astra, an AI model available through ChatGPT, to help:

- Organize the book into chapters.
- Design the layout and build the EPUB file, including the code for its formatting, navigation, and links.
- Create the index.
- Select and place excerpts, pull quotes, and photos from my original posts.
- Prepare chapter headings, publication credits, and cross-references between essays.
- Check hyperlinks.

I also used AI to proofread the collection for typos.

My distinction between teaching *about* AI and teaching *with* it also guides this choice. I used AI to help assemble and edit a collection of work I had already written, drawing on years of reporting and classroom experience. That differs from asking students to use it before they have developed the writing and reasoning an assignment is meant to teach. Teachers should decide when a tool supports those goals and when it replaces the practice

students need. My use here does not remove the need to question the system's suggestions or verify its work.

I reviewed the AI-assisted work for accuracy and thoroughness, and I retain full responsibility for any inaccuracies, including those introduced by the system.

The essays are arranged by theme rather than strictly by date. I hope the dates before each entry help you see my evolution as a teacher who is always striving for perfection, even though I know it will forever remain elusive. Verified publication dates appear with each entry where available. Approximate dates are labeled "c." and their basis is explained in the source notes. Otherwise, the original date is marked unconfirmed alongside the archive date. For many older pieces, that is the date the article moved to Medium in 2018, not the date it was written. Links beneath each title take you to the published or archived article. Source details identify where each selection appeared and which version is included here.

What Will They Remember

I may be a history and journalism teacher, but first and foremost, it's my job to help students figure out how to realize their potential.

Essay 1.1

Rethinking How to Engage History Students

September 24, 2013 (original publication) · Spin Education

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Four years ago, a returning senior asked if she could retake the final exam in my United States history course in September. She had earned a solid “A” just three months prior, but after a long and eventful summer, she wanted to know how much she remembered.

As it turned out, not much. My once-shining star had devolved into just an average student, earning a “C” on the same exam. She couldn't recall the plethora of historical intricacies that once rolled off her tongue, nor effectively articulate the main arguments for American territorial expansion from 1820 to 1860, and the impact this had leading up to the Civil War.

Little deep or lasting “learning” had taken root, and I began to understand why. As well as my student had performed during the year, she really didn't care about the content — at least not enough to put any real effort into retaining and growing her knowledge. And why should she have resorted to these measures?

Without question, it's very important to have a basic understanding of past events, especially if teachers hope to foster an informed citizenry. But I question the value and purpose of having students memorize large amounts of intricate historical data, especially if our best and brightest find no intrinsic motivation to become professional historians or quiz-bowl champions. Instead, we should place a greater emphasis on skills driving content, not the other way around.

In this setting, I think that an increasing number of students want to learn more about how the present connects to the past — here as well, not the other way around. My students discuss current events each Wednesday, and in one discussion they spoke about the crisis embroiling the Middle East.

“Why can’t we have an entire course on this subject?” one student asked me. “I had no idea that this was going on around us, and it’s much more interesting than learning about old dead guys. Last night, I also discussed Syria with my parents, and they were so impressed with what I had learned in class. I’m even watching the news now.”

To the best of my ability, I rely on current events to inform my instruction. How else could I help foster such enthusiasm for learning? More and more, I acknowledge that my efforts are entirely inadequate.

My ultimate goal remains teaching critical thinking, reading and writing skills. I strongly believe that because kids prefer learning about current events as a conduit to accomplishing such a lofty goal, I would be foolish to resist. That history student who wanted to retake my final exam remains one of the most gifted individuals I’ve ever taught, but all the same, I can’t help but believe that had I done more to excite her about content, she would have gained far more lasting and meaningful insight.

If history teachers hope to help mold interested, informed students in an increasingly flat, digital world, we must rethink teaching history as a “sacred” discipline that, for whatever reason, cannot be changed or challenged.

I kept this in mind when I posted a question about the continued relevance of teaching traditional, chronological history on an online forum moderated by the National Association of Independent Schools.

“There is something tremendously unsettling in that many students — I would imagine — know much more about Louis XIV or Thomas Paine than the very real problems enveloping our global community in the here and now,” I write. “Certainly, there is tremendous value in learning history, especially with respect to not repeating past mistakes . . . But maybe we should offer more courses that focus on teaching history only insofar as they inform an understanding of what’s happening right now.”

I’m thoroughly impressed by the quality of feedback, as well as the myriad views represented. I enjoyed hearing from Andrew Webster, Head of School at The Wardlaw-Hartridge School in Edison, New Jersey.

I strongly agree with Webster that the fundamental values of teaching history include fostering skills in asking good questions, as well as “accessing a range of

evidence and weighing it carefully, and creating coherent and persuasive arguments, orally and in writing, about causes and effects.”

Webster also references the age-old skills-versus-content debate and notes that understanding concepts like democracy, the industrial revolution, and imperialism remains critically important. “The crisis du jour can be incorporated within this framework,” he says, “and a teacher who does not make a consistent effort to relate the past to the present is probably not a very good history teacher.” Still, he cautions teachers about going too far. “Someone teaching the Peloponnesian War, for example, or the French Revolution, has ample opportunity to connect to current events,” Webster writes. “But to cast the framework to the wind — and just chase whatever the current crisis is — would lead to a very spotty historical understanding.”

I appreciate Webster’s logic, but I’m unconvinced that teachers cannot do a whole lot more to connect the past with today. Along these lines, Alexander McCandless, Director of the Center for Global Studies at Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, Connecticut, contributes some intriguing remarks about teaching United States history. He believes that a majority of students are most interested in learning about the here and now, and that to enhance excitement about the year ahead, it makes sense to teach content backward.

“In my experience, it certainly helped the students see the connections much more clearly than I ever achieved with a standard (chronological) approach,” McCandless writes. “For example, the number of instances where students would come into class with excited commentary on some current event that they saw connected with a historical event simply skyrocketed. And, when discussing events increasingly distant in our past, their sense of the relevance of the subject, and their desire to seek the connections to today was much more pronounced.”

McCandless’s creativity astounds me, as does his daringness to embrace something entirely new. I also applaud the variety of primary and secondary sources he employs, as well as his emphasis on teaching skills. He also shared with me his “Find a Primary Source Assignment,” which asks students to compose one page of written analysis based on the period under discussion.

For an alternative test, McCandless asks students to “[link] four primary documents with two different time periods in [their] study of U.S. History (two with each).”

McCandless serves as a terrific example of what the most effective and creative teachers can accomplish and help inspire — a profound love for understanding history that lasts a lifetime . . . and doesn't fizzle after just one summer.

Consider your practice

What would you ask students to do several months after a unit to see what they still understand? What would their answers tell you to change about the unit?

Essay 1.2

Allowing Students to 'Figure It Out'

Original date unconfirmed · July 1, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

A qualification before you read

I still value students' independence. That does not excuse unclear directions. Read this alongside [Essay 8.1](#), where I take responsibility for assignments that left students unsure of what I expected.

Editorial date note: This account was written while the author taught at Palmer Trinity. The 2018 date above records its Medium archive version, not necessarily its original publication.

When I was a rookie teacher, one of my American history students approached me with a problem. On the final due date, she forgot to print out an essay, and she left her computer (with the Word file in it) at home. She asked for my advice.

"It sounds like you have a problem," I said. "Good luck, but I have every confidence that you can figure it out, and submit your work to me before the end of the day without penalty." My response didn't console her. She wanted reassurance that everything would work out fine. More still, she wanted me to tell her exactly what steps to take to ensure that outcome. I placed blame mostly on her shoulders, but shortly thereafter, I reflected on my own culpability. I had emphasized the importance of following directions, but I had never stopped to think about how to teach troubleshooting, and everything that goes with it.

Too often, well-meaning teachers foster risk-aversion and over-dependence by distributing exhaustive directions, which leave students with fewer opportunities to learn how to cope with uncertainty, struggle, and disappointment. How should we address this issue? Here are three tactics I find helpful.

- Make the learning goals, expectations, and citation requirements clear, while leaving students room to choose how to approach the work. Allow students to stew in uncertainty, and to figure out how best to proceed on their own. Initially, you will receive complaints during what I call the “detox period.” Hang in there. Students are used to being told what to do, and exactly how to do it. You need to wean them slowly off this, and eventually you will receive praise for encouraging creative, self-directed learning.
- Allow students to propose their own assignments. Don’t feel you need to give limitless direction. Students need structure. But they also need freedom to explore what matters to them, within the context of a given subject. In my experience, students tend to perform best when they care and are invested in an endeavor. Experiment with how much control you feel comfortable giving up.
- Don’t answer questions students can easily find the answers to themselves. It’s not that students are lazy. They are digital natives, living in an era of instant gratification. Rather than give in, teachers should encourage students to look online for helpful resources. This fosters independence and resourcefulness, essential life skills.

My convictions were strengthened when [Mark Speckman](#), a revered and highly successful Division III college football coach, currently at Menlo College in Atherton, California, addressed the Palmer Trinity School community, where I teach. What makes Speckman extraordinary isn’t just his immense knowledge and love of the game, but also how he figured out how to become great without hands. He was also born cross-eyed, and with only nine toes.

“In my experience, students tend to perform best when they care and are invested in an endeavor.” · [Essay 1.2](#)

“Success is doing a common thing in an uncommon way,” Speckman says. “I played high school football. I could play just about every sport. I played college football, and I started 40 games in college as a linebacker. The habit of no hands never was an issue for me, in my mind. Everybody else thought it was a big deal. Never caused me any problems. I intercepted passes, I could recover fumbles, I could tackle, no issues.”

Speckman also managed to learn to play the trombone, throw a baseball, get

dressed, and brush his teeth. His troubleshooting skills are remarkable, surpassed only by his humility and eagerness to help others. In fact, he often travels the country, speaking to large crowds about how to “figure it out.” About the only thing Speckman can’t do is tie his shoes, but even in that instance, he has an important lesson to share.

“One of the things I learned, sometimes you have to ask for help. Sometimes, if you want to reach your potential, you can’t do it all yourself. Sometimes you have to ask for help. I remember, the night before my first college football practice, I was scared to death. I wasn’t scared about meeting girls, I wasn’t scared about going to college or academics, I was scared, ‘Who was going to tie my stuff tomorrow?’”

I don’t mean to suggest that when students encounter difficulty, “figure it out” is always the best answer. Still, we should resist the urge to offer immediate assistance on every occasion. Otherwise, in the long run, we could do more harm than good. Speckman’s resilience is astounding, in large part because he figured out how to do almost everything on his own — including play baseball. If a person without hands possesses the resolve to learn how to throw and catch, we can certainly encourage kids to solve other matters on their own.

“I didn’t have a glove, I didn’t have an engineering degree, I just figured it out,” Speckman says. “The next day, I got up, I had an idea. I told my brother, ‘Let’s go play catch.’ He thought that was a great idea... I’m not going to play varsity baseball, but I can play catch, I can play first base.”

Each student is unique, and it’s our job as teachers to help each student reach his or her unique potential. For Speckman, no matter how hard he tried, he would never play varsity baseball. But in that regard, he reached the pinnacle of his ability. “Potential is something that could happen, but hasn’t happened yet,” Speckman says. “You could go to college. It hasn’t happened yet. You could win the state championship. It hasn’t happened yet. Could do something, but it hasn’t happened yet.”

I wish to thank Speckman for reminding me of my role. I may be a history and journalism teacher, but first and foremost, it’s my job to help students figure out how to realize their potential.

Consider your practice

Where do your students need room to figure things out, and where do they need clearer directions? How would you tell productive struggle from confusion you created?

Essay 1.3

Learning That Makes a Difference

May 23, 2014 (earlier publication) · Spin Education

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Often students question how what they learn in the classroom has transferable, real-world applications. Grasping the American Civil War, human evolution, and the quadratic formula may be important, but by and large, educators do a poor job of convincing anybody, much less kids, that such knowledge is crucial not only for future success, but also for the here and now.

More still, teachers need to understand that today's students live in an era of instant gratification, and that this reality isn't all bad. Students don't want to wait to make a difference tomorrow; they want to take what they've learned and make a difference now. They are hungry to make a positive difference, a prospect made all the more possible by emerging technologies. We should let them try.



Max Lehrer tries the robotic hand made by his father with high school students. Photo courtesy of Rich Lehrer. [Original post](#)

Along those lines, I recently learned of such a real-world, difference-making project spearheaded by Rich Lehrer, a middle school science teacher at Brookwood School in Manchester, Massachusetts. Lehrer's son, Max, 3, was born with a congenital abnormality which prevented fingers from developing on

his right hand.

About a year ago, Lehrer saw a Facebook post about Richard Van As, a South African who, after losing several fingers in a bad carpentry accident, consulted with American designer Ivan Owen to construct his own prosthetic, the “Robohand,” which returned much of his hand’s original function.

In Owen’s TEDx Talk, which he gave in January, he explains how consumer-level 3D-printing allows independent designers a cost-effective means to quickly test out ideas in the real world. “In some applications — and mechanical fingers for children is just one example — it’s even possible for these designs to be ready for use in the real world right after coming off of the printer,” he says. “As a tool for open source development, this makes it possible for people from a very wide range of backgrounds and experience-levels to collaborate with one another.”

Owen’s words hit home with me. I don’t teach science, and I’m only minimally aware of how to use a 3D printer. Too often, though, I see and hear of students creating trinkets and jewelry, and I question the value, or what real difference it makes, when the heated plastic, emanating from the 3D printer, takes shape. But Van As and Owen show how students can make a meaningful and lasting difference, almost immediately, with 3D printing.

Lehrer connected with Van As, wanting to make a similar hand for Max, who had undergone a major operation, in which doctors moved one of his metacarpals to afford a bit better grasp. Lehrer tells me that since then, he and his wife had decided to hold off on any other intervention. But all of that changed when Lehrer watched a video showing the possibilities of a prosthetic hand. [Watch the video.](#)

Van As offered to custom-build Max’s Robohand, but Lehrer thought to do it himself. Last summer, he came up with the idea of sponsoring a school club to help with that endeavor. One group would find a 3D-printer to create the most intricate parts, like the fingers and knuckles. Another group would track down thermoplastic, to serve as a splint and hold the hand in place. A third group would locate tools, latex rubber, and orthodontic elastics, listed in the Robohand assembly manual provided by Van As.

As for the 3D-printer, each year several Brookwood graduates attend The Governor’s Academy, a nearby school in Byfield, Massachusetts, where senior Arjun Bhatnagar oversees use of the machine. Lehrer connected with Bhatnagar, who showed immediate excitement about getting involved. “The work I’m doing

will have a direct impact on someone,” Bhatnagar says. “It feels really good to really help a child with the work I was trying to do It was just awesome, the whole idea of something I worked on for hours will now benefit a child who can actually pick up things and do stuff with it.”

I’m equally intrigued by Bhatnagar’s relationship with Lehrer, and how the two represent the best of what can come from students and teachers working together. Bhatnagar speaks glowingly of Lehrer, a “really sunny guy” who is always approachable. For his part, Lehrer describes Bhatnagar as “inspiring,” and says working with a student like him was a “home run.”

“We each had knowledge that one of us knew, and we wanted to share and bring this project to fruition in the end,” Bhatnagar says, noting that he considers Lehrer more his partner than just another teacher. “At the same time, he was willing to let a student take charge of something that he had no idea of, and show him and . . . basically the whole school, what a student can do. He can create a curriculum, create an agenda, create a program, and start some things of his own,” Bhatnagar tells me.

As I listen to Bhatnagar, I find validation of an article I wrote this fall with Preston Michelson, a now-former student, for *Independent Teacher Magazine*: “In the classroom, no longer are adults the only source of knowledge — and often they aren’t even the best,” we write in [*A Tale of Two Teachers*](#). “Now more than ever, kids are taking learning into their own hands. The best teachers embrace this development and don’t feel threatened by students who may know more than they do. Instead, they revel in a changing dynamic, in which students and teachers learn together to improve their collective understanding and mastery of relevant subjects and skills.”

Brookwood and Governor’s are independent schools, and Bhatnagar also got me thinking of my trip to Washington, D.C., where along with some 20 of the nation’s top innovators, educators, and change-agents, I participated in an Educational Technology and Blended Learning Summit, hosted by the National Association of Independent Schools. One key consensus called for more independent schools working together, not against each other. That includes sharing not only resources, like the 3D-printer, but also talented and motivated teachers, like Lehrer, who can and should continue to reach students beyond the confines of his daily workplace.

Speaking of which, Lehrer is grateful for deciding to build the Robohand with students. “There was always this sense that it wouldn’t work out, or we wouldn’t be able to do it,” he says. “When all of a sudden we had all the stuff there, that realization on their part and my part that ‘Oh, my God, we are literally going to be able to build my son this little, prosthetic hand.’ It was this moment in teaching . . . I’ve never had anything like it.”

Here’s hoping more teachers follow in Lehrer’s footsteps.

Consider your practice

Which assignment could let students use what they know to help someone beyond the classroom? What subject knowledge would they need to make that contribution responsibly?

Essay 1.4

Top Five Life Skills Schools Rarely Teach

Original date unconfirmed · June 30, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Schools place too little stock in teaching kids highly relevant life skills. Here is my top-five list of what schools and teachers fail to do.

We fail at teaching students how to market themselves

If you think “marketing” is a dirty word, and that educators have no business teaching students how to do this, you need to reconsider your role. In today’s digital age, it may be true that plenty of students know how to create digital media, but too few know how to produce high-quality content, the kind that makes them stick out to not only college admission officers, but also potential employers. What does this involve? We need to teach and encourage students to post original, quality content to brand their unique identities in a sea of increasingly indistinguishable resumes — which are going the way of the typewriter. In one class, I encouraged a talented student-journalist to post his work on Pathbrite, an online electronic portfolio that showcases his diverse writing, broadcasting, and reporting talents. I am currently helping a talented student-photographer create her own site, which she will use to brand her creative identity. At the very least, I encourage all of my seniors to create a LinkedIn page.

We fail at allowing students to concentrate deeply on a specific interest or passion

I know I'm not alone in trying to answer students asking, "How is learning this relevant for my life?" We might respond in a number of ways, the most common of which is that it helps strengthen one's critical thinking and analytic skills. This may be quite true, but in my experience, fewer and fewer students are buying that as enough of a reason to devote years of study to any particular discipline. Instead, teachers need to do two things better. First, through whatever means necessary, we need to do a much better job of helping students identify their passions in life. It's a shame that many go on from high school without ever knowing what they might love to pursue, even if they end up changing directions. The next step is figuring out a way to make learning math, science, English, history, and language more relevant to each individual student. I don't have an easy answer for this, but we should consider allowing a student dead-set on pursuing art, for example, to delve deeper into that passion by forgoing an advanced science or English course.

We fail at encouraging students to fail, by harshly penalizing failure

Everything worthwhile I've learned in life, I've learned because of failure — and repeated failure at that. Too often, we penalize students too harshly for simply progressing through the learning cycle at different speeds. If the end goal is mastery, no matter the subject, why penalize a student for failing a chapter 1 test when she scores much better on the final? Does it really matter when that student displayed mastery throughout the course of the year, so long as she ultimately achieved mastery? How does this in any way reflect real-world expectations? In business, would a boss fire or penalize an employee for not understanding a concept right away? Perhaps, but that's not somebody I would ever want to work for. It's also unfair to hold students to expectations that, for the most part, aren't reflected in how adults in the real world treat each other.

We fail at teaching students financial management

In most schools, American history is a required course; "Financial Responsibility 101" should be, too. I challenge all teachers of juniors and seniors to ask their students how comfortable or competent they feel with managing a credit card,

balancing a checkbook, or paying taxes by themselves, right now, without any help from Mom or Dad. I would be shocked to learn that many soon-to-be high school graduates feel ready to use these crucial skills for living a responsible adult life. I'm not saying that learning algebra or calculus isn't important (it certainly is), but not to the extreme of completely abandoning teaching students about financial management.

We fail at teaching basic repair and maintenance skills

I'm 30 years old, and I can't even change a tire. I'm not alone. Many of my friends can't either. And I have highly educated friends. We've grown too accustomed to relying on roadside assistance, but I'm screwed if I pop a tire in the middle of a dead zone. I'm also awful at putting together furniture, and I have absolutely no clue about how to complete basic home improvements. Certainly, I shoulder much of the blame. Nothing has stopped me from going out and learning about those things on my own. All the same, why wasn't this a required course in school? Among all the useful things I learned in the classroom, I wish I had learned how to take care of my home. Today, I would be saving a nice chunk of change.

I don't mean to say that all schools are alike and that no school addresses any of these needs. I'm sure that some schools already do a terrific job with some of these categories. Still, across the board, a lot more work needs to be done.

Consider your practice

Which practical skill do you assume students learn somewhere else? What could you do to find out whether they actually have an opportunity to learn it?

Essay 1.5

Why School?: A Conversation Worth Having

Original date unconfirmed · July 9, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

A later change of emphasis · 2026

Here I ask why students should remember the Gilded Age. I now put more weight on the knowledge that historical thinking requires. Read this alongside [Essay 8.6](#) and [What I Reconsidered](#).

I attended the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) Teachers of the Future conference at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia. It was the single most rewarding experience of my career — never had I met such a collection of bright, passionate, and progressive educators.

We tackled difficult issues, ranging from effective use of classroom technology to how to engage more teachers in online forums. NAIS President John Chubb even spent a morning with us, learning about our ideas on making a positive difference.

Two weeks later, I still can't shake the belief that what most teachers do, and the ways most schools operate are not only antiquated, but also sharply antithetical to how 21st-century students acquire knowledge. More and more, our students are discovering how to use the Internet for self-directed learning, geared to individual interests. A disconnect exists between how and what students learn in school, and what skills and knowledge they will need to succeed and function beyond a classroom.

To show that I'm in good company, my fellow Teachers of the Future suggested that I read Will Richardson's short but insightful book, [Why School? How Education Must Change When Learning and Information Are Everywhere.](#)

"Based on visits to hundreds of schools in the past few years, I'd estimate that 95 percent of them are doing little or nothing to truly prepare their students for the world as it currently exists," Richardson writes. "Connecting and learning with other people online, distinguishing good information from bad, creating and sharing important works with the world: None of that (and a whole bunch of other stuff I could mention) is on the test. And sadly, therefore, we don't value it. It finds no place in our classrooms."

I couldn't agree more. Educators are doing too little to make learning relevant. To change this, we must first reconsider much of the traditional curriculum. I enjoy teaching history, but I'm not naïve. After completing the final, most students will not remember the Gilded Age.

And why should they?

How will that knowledge help them succeed after college? I'm not suggesting that a basic understanding of American history, or any subject for that matter, isn't a worthy mission. But we need to place an equal emphasis on allowing and

encouraging students to explore and share their own ideas — and strengthen a passion for creativity and individual inquiry.

All the same, I reach out to ask Richardson if students might suffer from an emphasis on individual-based inquiry, especially at the expense of not learning as much traditional content:

“We make choices about what we want kids to learn,” Richardson says. “They need to learn Shakespeare. They have to learn algebra, because if they don’t get those things from us, they’re not going to get [that] anywhere else. Even though we know, I think, in our heart of hearts that not everybody needs two years of algebra or not everybody needs calculus, we think that we need, as a school system, to make sure they get it — just in case they pursue that direction they need that type of information at some point. My kids live in a different world now. The reality of it is, for most adults, if you went back and had them take that Algebra II test, we’d fail miserably, because it’s just stuff that we’ve never used — and we never will use.”

With the advent of Web 2.0, Richardson reaffirms my belief that teachers are no longer the only source of classroom knowledge — and not even the best.

“It’s not just, ‘I’m going to impart the knowledge to you’ anymore, because Google is going to do a better job of that than you can,” he says. “Basically, it’s, ‘How can I help you develop the dispositions that you need to really be patient, to be persistent, to deal with failure, to embrace failure, to embrace change?’”

Our role as teachers will need to change to resemble that of a coach or mentor. We will need to guide students to pursue worthy questions in the context of areas that interest them. In that learning environment, I see no place for expecting students to memorize mountains of data — especially when doing so won’t cultivate creativity, passion, and innovation. It also makes no sense to quiz students on minutiae that a Google search will easily provide.

Richardson tells me about his daughter’s experience taking United States History in high school. For the final, she had a 100-question, multiple-choice test: “Can my daughter do something with that knowledge? Can she actually create something?”

It’s no wonder that so many students are bored and frustrated at school. In an age of innovation and self-discovery, for the most part, we subject our students to

scripted learning. This has to change.

[What I Reconsidered: history and content knowledge](#)

Consider your practice

What knowledge must your students retain to think well in your subject, and what should they be able to do with it? Where would you challenge this essay's distinction between remembering and using knowledge?

What I Reconsidered

Knowing history and doing something with it

[2018 archive · Essay 1.5](#)

I enjoy teaching history, but I'm not naïve. After completing the final, most students will not remember the Gilded Age. And why should they?

[2026 · Essay 8.6](#)

Real historical thinking requires knowledge of the material itself: context, chronology, cause and effect, and the ways historians have argued about the past over time. Without that, teachers are not helping students discover the truth about America's past.

Freedom within clear expectations

[Essay 1.2](#)

Students need structure. But they also need freedom to explore what matters to them, within the context of a given subject.

Read alongside [Essay 8.1](#), where I examine my responsibility for unclear assignments.

You Cannot Cover Everything

As far as content goes, I favor depth over breadth.

Even when that choice demands more work, select materials that meet students where they are and invite them to read, reason, and write.

Essay 2.1

Discarding Textbooks: Learning by Doing

Original date unconfirmed · June 30, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

At an SXSWedu conference in Austin, I met Georgette Yakman, a leader and founding researcher of STEAM, an increasingly popular framework for teaching science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.

Interested to learn more, in late March, I spoke with her again about STEAM, what it actually is, and why more schools should show interest. Yakman — whose [resume](#) includes advanced degrees, honors, and positions from Virginia Polytechnic Institute — is passionate about creating a common learning language and demolishing the notion that one field of study is superior to another.

“Science teachers are given an amazing amount of clout, and science is seen as so important,” she says. “I certainly don’t deny that in any way, but within the school it creates this hierarchy of, ‘I’m better than you, my subject’s more important than yours is.’ But construction teachers, music teachers, art teachers — they use science all the time. They have to. They can’t get away from it, but they’re not often given respect by the scholastic community.”

Yakman consults with schools around the country and around the globe, helping teachers coordinate their subjects, assistance which in turn helps students discover deeper relevance in their learning. “How can we ask our kids to be future engineers when they’re . . . not studying how they could take something from the past and apply it to the future?” she says. But even within disciplines, she tells me, teachers must rethink how they try to make learning relevant and exciting. I couldn’t agree more. Times are changing, and schools need to change with them.

“We don’t teach kids to be scientists,” Yakman says. “We teach them to be linguistic learners with scientific information. And it turns them off in general from science. Most kids will tell you that a scientist looks like Bill Nye. I love Bill Nye, but he’s a white guy in a white lab coat. I know a lot of scientists and very few of them are white guys in white lab coats. The students in my programs, they do scientific discovery in real life. They investigate things that need to be investigated. They don’t always change the world, but there’s a venue for them to realize that even as young achievers, they have a voice and enough knowledge to do basic studies.”

Yakman’s remarks remind me of Tyler DeWitt, another innovative educator who also attended SXSWedu, delivering a 15-minute presentation, “[Crowdteaching: A Learning Revolution](#).” During his standing-room-only session, DeWitt, who holds a Ph.D. in microbiology from MIT, explained an evolving movement in which thousands upon thousands of educators, from all around the world, are uploading high-quality educational content online — free of charge. In 2012, DeWitt also delivered a passionate TED talk, “Hey Science Teachers — Make it Fun,” in which he lambasts science textbooks as boring, confusing, and age-inappropriate.

“A standard high school biology textbook, I don’t know a single 14-year-old who can read that and learn anything from it,” DeWitt told me for a March 24 story I wrote, *Crowdteaching: A Learning Revolution*. “But textbooks that completely confuse students still get published every single year. No longer will a student have to suffer through awful textbooks that weren’t written for them. They’ll be able to go to the Internet and choose content that meets their needs.”

Yakman echoes DeWitt’s thinking, and with constantly evolving online learning tools, she sees no reason for teachers to assign textbooks — in any course. “The kids should be accessing online basic information,” she says. “School doesn’t have to spend tens of thousands of dollars on a new set of textbooks. They can spend their money on project-based learning and the supplies that kids need, and professional development. That’s where we need to be spending our money in schools, is on our educators and on our students.”

In fact, Yakman says that for schools wishing to successfully implement STEAM, the biggest administrative challenge remains finding time for professional development and planning. More than anything, there has to be

sufficient buy-in from everybody involved. This also includes understanding and placing a larger emphasis on the maker movement.

Too often, Yakman tells me, students don't see things being made. "If they're given a choice between a STEAM project and an iPad, they go for the STEAM project every time," she says. "Because they all have electronics at home, but lots of kids don't even know that when you bake a chicken, it gets gelatinous." This sense of discovery fosters inquisitive minds, Yakman says, along with "a passion for learning that traditionally schools suck out of kids."

Consider your practice

If you removed a textbook from one unit, what would take its place? How would you keep the learning coherent while giving students more to make, investigate, or explain?

Essay 2.2

How Superhero Comics Enhance Learning

2014 (earlier reporting) · Spin Education

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Prof. James Bucky Carter has written extensively about how comics can enhance education. "A substantial, expanding body of evidence asserts that using graphic novels and comics in the classroom produces effective learning opportunities over a wide range of subjects and benefits various student populations, from hesitant readers to gifted students," Carter writes in [Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels](#).

When teaching American history, I love using comics to heighten engagement. In fact, when covering World War II, I ask my students to analyze the March 1941 cover of Captain America Comics #1, depicting super-soldier Steve Rogers deflecting an attack while knocking out Adolf Hitler. From there, students contemplate why for the better part of the 1940s, Captain America remained a huge success for Timely Comics, the publishing company which would evolve into Marvel Comics.

I'm curious to hear more of how Carter recommends teachers make effective use of comics in the classroom. As a first step — just as most responsible teachers do — he suggests thinking about big themes one wishes to explore during the year.

Then he advises teachers to go out and see what comics or graphic novels fit those themes. In other words, Carter doesn't suggest building an entire curriculum around comics and graphic novels.

"You don't necessarily have to feel like you're reshuffling your curriculum," he tells me, as I nod in agreement. "You're just looking for material that will help your students address those things or answer those big questions that you're posing to them . . . If you're exploring the issue of sacrifice, maybe go look at some comics where characters might have sacrificed themselves in one way or another."

In fact, four years ago I ran an "unofficial" independent study with two interested students, curious to explore how superheroes personify sacrifice. I first had them read [The Death of Superman](#), the hugely successful, bestselling 1992 storyline from DC Comics. Superman makes the ultimate sacrifice in defeating Doomsday, a crazed killing monster whose might equals (or surpasses) that of the Man of Steel. My students then read ensuing issues, narrating Superman's return from the dead, and they soon referenced strong similarities with the Passion. In a very real sense, Superman awakened in them a genuine desire to learn more about biblical times.

I also recall how comics ignited my eagerness to learn history. As a junior in high school, I read a reprint of Iron Man's first appearance in the March 1963 issue of [Tales of Suspense](#). In this story, the Viet Cong capture wealthy industrialist Tony Stark. To escape, in secret Stark cobbles together his first Iron Man suit, a primitive iteration of what he will eventually create. As a 17-year-old, I knew very little about the Vietnam War, and what role America had played in the conflict. To address that deficit, I read several history books on the topic — at first, mostly to have a better understanding and appreciation of Iron Man's origin story. Weeks later, fate would smile upon me when my history teacher assigned a research paper on the Vietnam War.

As I listen to Carter, I realize more and more that it's not unusual for comics, even superhero comics, to instill a love of learning. "Going back to the X-Men series, I know that [Chris] Claremont's vocabulary certainly helped inspire my own," Carter says. "Not everyone needs to know what a telekinetic person is, but I knew at a fairly early age. There's a long history of comics influencing people's vocabulary for the better, or at least not doing them any harm."

The same holds true for Josh Elder, an award-winning graphic novelist and nationally syndicated cartoonist who, in 2009, founded [Reading With Pictures](#) (RWP), a nonprofit organization that advocates the use of comics to promote literacy and improve educational outcomes. Elder also had a difficult time in school — not so much with comprehension (his IQ tested off the charts), but with finding relevance in his studies. All of that began to change when his teachers encouraged his passion for reading comics.

“The biggest challenge is getting [students] to pay attention in the first place, getting them to give a damn,” says Elder, who also writes several titles for DC Comics, including [Scribblenauts Unmasked](#), [The Batman Strikes!](#) and [Adventures of Superman](#).

“Comics are a way to do that. That’s the hardest fight you have to face as a teacher. Getting them to actually understand the material once they’re actually paying attention to you and listening — that’s not as hard as getting them to pay attention in the first place.”

Carter gives me some advice. “You might be surprised who is working for Marvel or who is inking for DC or who is editing for scholastics in your state,” he says. “Even if they’re not particularly in your neighborhood, you’d be surprised how many folks are nearby.”

Consider your practice

What could a comic help students notice that prose alone might not? How would you assess their understanding beyond whether the format captured their attention?

Essay 2.3

Using Pop and Rock to Teach History

Original date unconfirmed · July 1, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I’m a junior at Brimmer and May, a fantastic independent school in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, excited about following song lyrics to Barry McGuire’s 1965 rendition of “Eve of Destruction.”

We’re studying the Cold War, and today I’m about to listen to one of the greatest anti-war songs ever recorded. [Listen to “Eve of Destruction.”](#)

My teacher encourages the class to sing along, and all of us are doing much more than just jamming out. We're engaging with an amazing primary source, brought alive by the magic of sound recording. Who cares that passersby are looking at us with confused faces? We're engaging in deep learning. And we're having a blast. There's enough substance in the opening verse alone to direct an entire week with valuable discussion. And it did.

From the threat of nuclear annihilation and violent world conflict to nonsensical governmental regulations, I'm finding tremendous relevance in what I'm learning.

Seven years later, as an American history teacher myself, I "steal" from my teacher and his use of music to engage student interest. Here are some of my favorite "teaching songs" from three awesome decades.

The Roaring 1920s

Eddie Cantor ("Makin' Whoopee"/1928): Made popular by Cantor in the 1928 musical Whoopee!, the song addresses sex and love, two major themes of the time, as well as the possibility of disillusionment and divorce. The issues Cantor sings about are authentic, but the lyrics and upbeat tone distinguish themselves from much darker songs of the 1930s.

Gene Austin ("My Blue Heaven"/1927): Written in 1924, Austin's rendition perfectly exemplifies the "good old days" of the 1920s. This is made all the more clear when Austin sings, "What makes the world go round/Nothing but love." Of course, I am also careful to point out that contrary to popular recollection of the period, many people, especially Black Americans and other minorities, never experienced anything close to a "blue heaven."

The Great Depression

Billie Holiday ("Gloomy Sunday"/1941): With a melody written by Hungarian composer Rezső Seress in 1933, the song was popularized by Holiday in 1941, after Hal Kemp recorded a version with English lyrics by Sam Lewis in 1936. The lyrics refer to suicide, with Holiday singing, "Gloomy is Sunday,/With Shadows I spend it all/My heart and I/Have decided to end it all." I can think of no better song to illustrate the sadness of the 1930s.

Judy Garland ("Over the Rainbow"/1939): Written by Harold Arlen and E.Y.

Harburg for the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, no song (or movie) does a better job of demonstrating the enduring optimism of the human spirit. Playing the character of Dorothy, Garland sings, “Someday I’ll wish upon a star/Wake up where the clouds are far behind me/Where trouble melts like lemon drops/High above the chimney tops/That’s where you’ll find me.” I point out to students that shortly after the song, Dorothy ends up in the Land of Oz, and it’s no coincidence that the black-and-white film turns to color — or that happy munchkins are singing and dancing. Things have gotten better. Before I give too much away, I ask my juniors to discuss what greater message this transition reveals.

The Nifty Fifties

Bill Haley and His Comets (“Rock Around the Clock”/1954): It’s not the best Rock ’n’ Roll song, but I love how the song speaks to 1950s teen angst. Parents and authorities be damned. These kids will be rocking all day and all night. I often play this song before or after showing select scenes from Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean, the original and legendary bad boy.

Elvis Presley (“Hound Dog”/1956): The King of Rock ’n’ Roll wasn’t the first person to record this song — Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton was — but his rendition took the nation by storm. I ask my students to investigate the meaning of the lyrics, which stand up as a radio-friendly insult to unfaithful lovers — especially for Thornton, an amazingly gifted singer. I then show my students a YouTube clip, highlighting the significance and controversy surrounding the King’s televised musical appearances.

Teachers, don’t shy away from having students analyze song lyrics as primary documents. I can think of few more engaging ways to help students become interested in history.

Consider your practice

Which song could your students examine as evidence about a historical moment? What other sources would they need to test the story the song tells?

Essay 2.4

Beyond “Down With Textbooks”

January 29, 2026 · Educate. (Medium)

Editorial date note: This essay predates Gordon S. Wood's death on June 7, 2026; present-tense references reflect the time of writing.

I'll concede the obvious up front... for some teachers, a textbook functions as a lifeline.

If you teach five sections of 30-plus students, follow a mandated pacing calendar, face evaluations tied to standardized tests, or are a new teacher still building content knowledge, a textbook often makes sense.

It's predictable, aligned, and (mostly) defensible in curricular meetings. At times, it's the only thing holding a course together when time, staffing, and policy tighten and render planning impossible.

I understand why educators, in those circumstances, covet that kind of support. But we need to be honest about the real price — beyond [absurdly expensive hardcover publications](#). Textbooks prioritize coverage over depth, and they rarely cultivate curiosity or deep thinking. If you have the freedom to choose something better — especially in English or history — choose it. Even when that choice demands more work, select materials that meet students where they are and invite them to read, reason, and write.

When structure becomes surrender

More than a decade ago, I wrote "[Down With Textbooks](#)" for *The Atlantic*, arguing that heavy reliance on textbooks drains interest — even from the most intrinsically motivated students. The textbook's sheer size also tempts teachers and students alike to confuse coverage with learning. As far as content goes, I favor [depth over breadth](#).

As much as I admire Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Eric Foner, the seventh AP edition of *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* exceeds 1,000 pages. Even the so-called "brief" high school edition — printed on smaller pages and one I assigned earlier in my career — still stretches beyond 900. Can we honestly expect students to remain engaged, even with careful sectioning and built-in supports?

That tension surprised me when I [interviewed Foner in 2014](#). At the time, I held his textbook in high regard, largely because of my admiration for his scholarship.

Yet Foner spoke forcefully against the very instructional practices his AP tome (and many others) so often supports — especially the emphasis on multiple-choice testing.

I will concede (and even celebrate) that the AP United States History exam improved its multiple-choice section after the [2014–15 redesign](#), which pushed students toward more analytical thinking rather than sheer rote memorization. Still, there are limits to how much any multiple-choice assessment can be dressed up; it remains a pig in lipstick.

This tension between assessment design and classroom reality helps explain why many historians remain sympathetic to the constraints high school teachers face.

“I respect what high school teachers do enormously,” Foner told me. “They have a much harder job than we do at the college level.”

He emphasized the importance of students’ knowing historical facts — without having those facts drilled into them — and criticized what he called the nation’s ongoing “testing mania.” Multiple-choice exams, he argued, fail to measure genuine historical understanding.

The question lingered: Why write a textbook that so often serves the system over students — or, in this case, the College Board? I never asked. As a newer teacher speaking with one of America’s most venerated historians, I hesitated.

I still do not presume to know. But based on our conversation then and occasional email exchanges since, I believe Foner aimed to help less knowledgeable teachers do the best they can for their students. His textbook offers scaffolding, and whatever its limits, I have no doubt his misgivings remain genuine.

In 2021, when he joined a [Zoom meeting with my American history students](#) while the pandemic still raged, Foner seemed to double down on his views.

“I don’t much like standardized tests, especially for history,” Foner said. “Maybe for math, where there is a correct answer along with [many] incorrect answer[s]. But in history, so much of it is interpretation. Questions that can be answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’ are pretty unimportant questions.”

Standardized tests, Foner continued, encourage teaching to the test rather than teaching students how to think critically, creatively, and independently about the past.

In 2013, I interviewed James Loewen, the famous author of [*Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*](#), well before his death in 2021. Textbooks then were beginning to run slightly shorter, but they still felt too long — and far too dull.

“The most boring course aims at the best students,” Loewen told me. “This is refreshing, in a way, because usually [in] most subjects [we] teach the so-called slow students in a boring way, and we get the interested students writing poetry or doing something fascinating. But not in the case of history.”

Too many teachers, Loewen argued, champion memorization of disconnected factoids — what he called “twigs” — instead of helping students see “the forest for the trees.” “Twigs are perfectly good,” he said, “but if you just sit there and teach them twigs, then you bore them to death.”

I still agree. Textbooks tend to present the past as settled, even though historical interpretation constantly shifts. They flatten conflict into consensus, replace argument with tidy summary, and narrow the story into something top-down and power-centered. For teenagers, they feel less like invitations than obstacles.

In my *Atlantic* essay, I wrote, “Nothing destroys student interest faster and more completely than a heavy reliance on textbooks.” I also included a line that still makes some educators wince: textbooks can become “a crutch for teachers who don’t know history — or the historian’s craft.”

I didn’t intend that as a moral judgment. I meant it as a description of succumbing to a temptation. Textbooks, after all, feel safe. The problem isn’t just that textbooks exist — or even that teachers rely on them. It’s that the alternatives are often designed with adults in mind, not adolescents.

“*The textbook’s sheer size also tempts teachers and students alike to confuse coverage with learning.*” · [Essay 2.4](#)

The Promise of No Textbook

For five years, I assigned Gordon Wood’s *The American Revolution: A History*. Wood wrote the book with high school readers explicitly in mind. I wanted it to work. I needed it to work. It still didn’t do the trick.

Saying that pains me. I adore Gordon Wood. I think extraordinarily highly of his work. He is, without question, a giant in the field. Few historians have done more

to clarify the ideological and social consequences of the American Revolution, and fewer still have tried — deliberately and repeatedly — to speak beyond their peers.

But my students didn't experience Wood as a giant. They experienced him as dense.

A lot of excellent “popular” history quietly assumes background knowledge that many sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds simply don't have yet. Educators rarely notice the scaffolding they carry around in their own heads. Teenagers feel every missing bit.

Those gaps don't just produce confusion. They produce resentment. Students begin to equate “serious history” with feeling stupid, and the discipline gets blamed for a mismatch the student didn't create.

With Wood, the pattern stayed consistent. Students could underline passages. They could cull vocabulary. They could summarize sections when prompted. But many struggled to answer the question that actually matters in a history classroom: *What is Wood arguing right now, in this chapter — and how does he know?*

I slowed the pace and intervened constantly. The feedback never really changed: Wood's prose felt packed, my students said, hard to hold onto.

It would have been easy to blame smart devices, shortened attention spans, or the general noise of contemporary adolescence. Those pressures are real. But lowering expectations has never interested me. The answer, I came to realize, wasn't to dilute rigor. It was to relocate it.

Instead of grading whether students could survive a dense chapter, I quickly shifted toward grading whether they could think like historians with what they read. I prioritized argumentative writing grounded in evidence, seminar discussion that rewarded reasoning over recall, and primary-source analysis that required students to source, corroborate, and contextualize. The results improved, but they never proved transformative.

Ironically, Wood himself articulated the problem better than most academics ever have.

In a 2017 interview with me, focused on [President Trump's misunderstanding of the past](#), Wood acknowledged what specialization had done to historical writing.

Academic history, he told me, had become “so quasi-scientific that articles appearing in journals are unintelligible to a lay audience.”

My students have taught me that clarity, for them, must be deliberately constructed from what they consume; otherwise, my expectations don’t come to fruition. History textbooks and monographs — almost always written for an adult audience with preexisting knowledge — rarely provide that clarity on their own.

All of this shows, I hope, a commitment to inviting my students to think and engage in healthy struggle with appropriate material. It rests on my strong belief that young people rise when the work asks them to reason rather than merely endure.

In [my new curriculum for next year](#), I put in the work to meet my juniors in American history where they are. I replaced Wood with Martha Brockenbrough’s [Alexander Hamilton, Revolutionary](#) — a biography written by a young adult novelist, but deliberately crafted with high school readers in mind.

In a recent conversation, [Brockenbrough](#) put into words what my students had been trying to tell me for years.

“The context that’s necessary to understand history and to connect to it is essential,” she said, “and it’s often missing in books written for adult readers.”

That resonated with me because it names the hidden prerequisite too many of us pretend students already have: a map.

It also resonated with my students because it validates their experience. Confusion doesn’t always mean lack of effort. Sometimes it means the book never opened the door.

Brockenbrough rejects the common fear that accessibility cheapens substance. “For me, the emotional impact of stuff that you would write for a teenager is exactly the same as the emotional impact for adult,” she said, “but to make it accessible, to open that door, you just provide the context.”

In other words, teachers shouldn’t lower the ceiling (our expectations). We should build the stairs.

Brockenbrough also framed an uncomfortable truth about education.

“We don’t need to package things and teach them for the test because ultimately that kind of learning is forgettable,” she said. “The way we should teach kids to

learn is to love to learn and to be curious and to be rewarded for their curiosity.”

That sounded like my classroom on its best days, when students argue because they care, not because they want points and a higher grade.

And when Brockenbrough reminded me that “history is made by people just like us living their lives and making choices,” she handed me the exact standard I want for my students’ writing: less summary, more analysis.

This isn’t a retreat. I still want students to engage in serious learning and form arguments grounded in cause and effect. I just want them to climb that mountain with appropriate footing.

If you have the option, consider ditching the textbook, choosing instead monographs or books, and devising courses that match your students’ needs and engage their curiosity. In an ideal world, the person best positioned to decide what content to assign is you, not administrators, outside consultants, or companies.

And yes, I’ll concede again that sometimes a textbook still makes sense. Some classrooms need that spine — even with talented, knowledgeable teachers — because the system demands it.

But even in those settings, my tactics stay the same: when students can access the text, the learning changes. They stop reading to “get through it” and start reading to figure something out.

Discussion improves with more voices, stronger claims, and real counterclaims, and that energy spreads. Students’ writing gets sharper, questions improve, and students start to see history less as an answer key and more as an argument they’re invited to enter.

That’s my hope.

Consider your practice

Where does a textbook support your teaching, and where does it set limits you no longer question? What would you change in one unit while preserving the knowledge students need?

Essay 2.5

Can Teachers Think Outside of the Box?

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

More than ever, educators are expected to foster creativity in the classroom — and to use emerging technology and pedagogical trends to do so. Whatever else is involved in this endeavor (and there's a whole lot), I fear too few teachers know what creativity actually is, much less how to foster it.

With this in mind, I recently read a short but illuminating piece by Ronald A. Beghetto and James C. Kaufman, [*Fundamentals of Creativity: Five insights can help educators nurture student creativity in ways that enhance academic learning*](#). “Education policy makers are increasingly advocating including student creativity in the curriculum,” the authors write. “But without a clear understanding of the nature of creativity itself, such well-meaning advocacy may do more harm than good; educators may experience calls for teaching creativity as just another guilt-inducing addition to an already-overwhelming set of curricular demands.”

Try as they might, teachers throw up their hands in despair because neither they nor their administrators know how to define creativity, or how to make it work in a rigid system, one which favors playing it safe over risk-taking and discovery. Only after a summer of reading about creativity did I realize that “creativity” encompasses an entire academic field; and, as it turns out, it's not a mysterious or difficult quality to define or measure.

To gain deeper insight, I spoke with [Kaufman, a Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut, in the Neag School of Education](#). He tells me that educators often think of creativity as the ability to “think outside the box,” and to come up with new ideas. Those are aspects of creativity, but there is a lot more to it. He says, “It's funny because one of the stereotypes is that you can't define creativity, but the researchers have done a pretty decent job of it, actually.”

In fact, most scholars agree that creativity involves the combination of originality and task appropriateness. Kaufman explains how this might apply to a classroom setting: “If you are teaching in the language arts, you need to have the creativity take place within the context of . . . teaching grammar,” he explains. “There are different ways that creativity can be expressed, but it still needs to follow a basic structure and things still need to get done.”

Kaufman visited one school where a math teacher used “Dance, Dance Revolution” to teach about patterns. Unfortunately, a new principal axed the idea, likely out of fear that the activity was unproductive. This reeks of ignorance from what I think are well-meaning administrators, who want to retain a one-size-fits-all strict and orderly learning environment. In my experience, creativity is messy, especially in the classroom.

Even if you have an administrator who doesn’t value creativity, either from teachers or students, this doesn’t mean game over. “You can create as safe an environment as possible, [so] you can model risk-taking and not necessarily risk-taking like risking your job,” Kaufman explains, noting that teachers could give students wider choice on which questions to answer, and how to answer them. But Kaufman also gives me another piece of advice, which I take to heart: “Risk looking stupid in front of your students.” I often go one better by admitting failure, and then modeling how to get back up. I talk about my shortcomings and how I plan to learn and recover from them. It’s human to be creative and to fail — and students need to know as much.

Similarly, I want my students to know that it’s okay to fail, and that I want them to try new and daring things. I can’t think of one successful person, however defined, who got to where she is without learning from failure. More still, I fear that a child’s receiving good marks or high praise will encourage him always to play it safe. For that reason, more than any other, I dislike external motivators like grades and awards.

I ask Kaufman for his thoughts: “There’s a lot of people out there that say extrinsic motivation kills creativity, and gold stars, or check marks, or praise will just crush students’ creativity. There’s certainly some truth in that, but what some researchers found is that if you make sure the students know that you want them to be creative, rewards don’t hurt as badly.”

Kaufman encourages more teachers to learn about creativity, and what it actually means. “I could write a book about cheese, but that doesn’t mean I know anything about cheese,” he tells me, noting that some of the creativity consultants that schools rely on are well trained, but some are just people who call themselves “creativity consultants.”

“Do most teachers know what creativity is as we would define it? Do they know the things that would nurture it or hinder it? How to measure it? Probably not any

more than any smart professional,” Kaufman says. To help address this issue, read Kaufman’s work, including his book, [*Creativity 101*](#), one of the best I’ve read on the subject.

Consider your practice

When you call a student’s work creative, what do you mean? Do your assignments and feedback make room for an unfamiliar approach that still meets a clear learning goal?

Writing Is Thinking

No matter what you teach, share your written work. I always share with my students, and I ask for their feedback and even criticism.

Essay 3.1

Why I Teach Journalism to My High School History Students

December 8, 2017 (earlier version) · Edutopia

[Earlier version at Edutopia](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

In high school, I struggled to write clear, concise prose. My command of structure was minimal, and I didn't make effective use of sources to inform my analysis. I also had difficulty differentiating summary from analysis, much to the chagrin of my teachers, who still worked diligently to help me hone my writing.

However much I struggled, only when I found my passion for news reporting did my success in the humanities begin to soar — so much so, in fact, that I now teach journalism to my own history students, hopeful that they too will benefit from the combination.



David Cutler with student editors Jared Heller and Michelle Levinger in The Gator newsroom. Photograph by Jody Weinberg. [Source details](#).

Take it from Preston Michelson, who recently graduated from Northwestern

University with degrees in journalism and political science. He served as founding editor of *The Falconer*, the student news site of Palmer Trinity School (Palmetto Bay, Florida), where I spent the first six years of my teaching career. I also taught him in yearbook, American History, and United States Government.

Michelson tells me that his experience as a high school journalist allowed him to transfer two tenets of continued success in the college classroom, “clarity and information gathering.” He says, “Clarity is relatively straightforward — writing is toothless without it. The nature of journalism as a sort of public service, writing on behalf of the reader, dictates that writing not be overcrowded or needlessly complicated. To me, this is a great tenet to follow in all kinds of writing, even in the academic realm. Not overcomplicating topics boils information down to its most vital elements.”

Michelson references the necessity of quality research in journalism and in academia. “When I started writing for *The Daily Northwestern* in college, I was dispatched to cover topics new to me, everything from health care policy to Islamic theory. The role of a journalist is to act as a sort of expert no matter the newness and complexity of the topic, and that calls for doing your homework on every story. I conducted research for my history and political science research papers with much the same intensity.”

Of course, major differences exist between journalism and history. After all, journalism is the first, imperfect draft of history. Whereas reporters work under time constraints to produce the best obtainable version of the truth, historians hold themselves to a higher standard. They spend years conducting detailed research, carefully reconstructing cause and effect for a deeper, more complete rendering of past events.

For another take on the benefits of journalism for history students, I emailed Adam Hochschild, a revered journalist who teaches narrative writing at the University of California, Berkeley, co-founded *Mother Jones*, and has written eight nonfiction books, including one of my favorites, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*.

A journalist writing for a deadline, he says, often focuses on attributing facts and quotations to a specific source. For example, a news article might read something like, “‘3.7% of the American population has schizophrenia,’ said Joe Doakes of the state Department of Health and Welfare.”

“That’s good enough for tomorrow’s newspaper, but it probably isn’t good enough for a history book,” Hochschild writes. “How were they measuring schizophrenia in the year from which your statistic comes? Did the official or scholar or agency you cite have motive for exaggerating or minimizing the figure? Those are some of the kinds of things a historian has to ask. Similar questions apply to all sorts of other assertions and statistics.”

All distinctions aside, after ten years in the high school classroom, I’m here to report that history students benefit from also studying journalism, as did Nicole Font, who recently graduated with a teaching degree from High Point University. I also taught her in various history and journalism courses at Palmer Trinity.

In high school, Font says, she found it difficult to write clearly and concisely. She would spend hours reworking long-winded prose. “A specific turning point for me as a writer was enrolling in your journalism classes,” she says. “I was immediately challenged to hone my writing and trim unnecessary words that I used to sound ‘interesting’ or ‘more intelligent.’ As a result, I found that my writing — in all subjects — developed so that I was writing for more than just my high school teachers. I could piece together paragraphs and join ideas in a more natural way, which contributed to my success as a writer in high school and college.”

Font’s comments remind me of another conversation I had with Sam Ravina ’17, a former editor-in-chief of [The Gator](#), an award-winning student site which I also advise, who told me that the newsroom helped him succeed at Brimmer and May (Chestnut Hill, MA), where I currently teach. When you learn to write about events with a “piercing objectivity,” Ravina tells me, you can transfer that skill to numerous forms of communications. He believes that journalism is no less fundamental than English or history, and he credits his time in the newsroom with his success in other academic classes.

“Journalism trained me to see the objective ‘point’ in all aspects of the humanities,” says Ravina, who plans to study philosophy at Davidson College (Davidson, North Carolina) in the fall. “In history, I can spot significant causes of events, and interpret a variety of sources to understand both sides of an argument. In English, my writing is astronomically more precise, and I developed a sharper eye for tone and complexity in literature. My leadership experience in the newsroom also transformed my ability to evaluate my own writing, and give and

receive feedback to others. I cannot say enough about the extent to which journalism has helped me, and many others, develop the ability to think, reason, and write.”

To hear from someone in academia who straddles both worlds, I reconnected with Michael J. Socolow of the University of Maine, a media historian and one of my favorite journalism professors as an undergraduate at Brandeis University (Waltham, MA). “Journalism and history emphasize similar skills, such as learning how to build credibility by documenting sources and attributing information appropriately, and learning how to argue persuasively,” he wrote to me.

To reinforce those skills, my history students read newspaper and magazine articles — not just to keep them informed about today, which I care about, but also to foster discussion about sources and how journalists use evidence to craft a narrative. Whether analyzing works of history or conducting their own research, my students apply similar levels of scrutiny. Meanwhile, debate over what constitutes “fake news,” as well as how to spot it, encourages young minds to be vigilant about the types of sources they find and cite. As just one example, before they refer to a source, I ask if a New York Times reporter would trust that source. Whatever the response, before proceeding, students must defend their reasoning to me.

In this respect, Font intends to employ a similar strategy in her fifth-grade classroom next year, when she launches her own teaching career. “I recall how you constantly asked students to question where they got information, and how they planned to use it to express their learning,” she says. “You helped me think carefully about what sources should be trusted, especially if I wanted to be taken seriously by anyone who read my writing. I want to impart that crucial lesson to my own, much younger students, as well as introduce them to the news gathering, reporting, and writing process.”

With Font’s final point in mind, I have found that introducing students to journalistic writing also helps them find and engage an audience. Too often, high school teachers (including me) ask that students follow formal, academic structure — a worthwhile endeavor, but not if it precludes introducing history students to different forms of written expression. To address this deficiency, when teaching about Old Hickory, I read aloud several of my favorite passages from

American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jon Meacham. The first line of the opening chapter grabs their attention and leaves them wanting me to continue: “Christmas in 1828 should have been the happiest of seasons at the Hermitage, Jackson’s plantation twelve miles outside Nashville.”

I tell students how much I admire Meacham, a former editor-in-chief of Newsweek, whose work has appeared in the nation’s most respected publications. I recently contacted him, curious whether he thinks academic historians, in the trenches of archival research, could or should learn from how he crafts engaging narratives, which appeal to a wider readership than historical monographs might. “It’s not my place to lecture or speculate on other people’s literary styles,” he says. “If we are writers, we all have different seasons, if you will . . . There’s room for everything.”

Meacham nails what I hope to convey to my students — that even as teachers defend the virtues of the five-paragraph essay, they should also make room in the curriculum for not just narrative writing, but journalistic writing as well. I also want my history students to want to share their work with others, and the idea of sharing academic writing seldom excites them. With that in mind, last fall, capitalizing on their heightened interest in Jackson, I assigned my students a more creative task:

“This is like Andrew Jackson’s victory. This is the people beating the establishment,” Rudy Giuliani, former mayor of New York City, told MSNBC’s Chris Matthews. “And that’s how he [Donald Trump] posited right from the beginning: the people are rising up against a government they find to be dysfunctional. And yes, it’s a defeat for the Democrats, but this is a defeat for some Republicans too.”

In what respects, if any, do similarities exist between President Andrew Jackson and President-elect Donald Trump? What might these parallels reveal about our nation’s future? Or is Giuliani off base here? Either way, please compose a well-written, convincing piece that supports your stance.

All of this leads us back to something else Hochschild told me:

Spending ten years as a magazine editor was hugely useful to me. All the time you are making judgments: Are people going to want to read this article?

Why? Why not? How can we make it better? Does it need more scenes, characters, suspense? How can we draw in readers who don't have a pre-existing interest in the subject? Those are things that a historian always has to think about if you want people to read what you write.

If you're still not sold on the potential value of teaching journalism to history students, Meacham says, "I see a direct connection between what I learned in journalism and what I'm doing now," explaining that insofar as he has anything to say in his books, it's because journalism exposed him to politics and public life at an early age.

For his part, Michelson credits much of his success at Northwestern to his experience in the high school student newsroom. "That's when I really started to understand the importance of journalism and the universality of it. I felt that in many of my other high school classes, I was taught different ways of approaching research, whereas in journalism, simplicity was key. It was about understanding the story and telling the story, while adding expert analysis where applicable. That's a blueprint to succeed across the board."

Consider your practice

What might students learn by reporting on a question rather than only writing about it from assigned readings? How would you teach them to verify evidence and represent another person fairly?

Essay 3.2

To Teach Effective Writing, Model Effective Writing

June 10, 2014 (earlier publication) · Edutopia

[Earlier publication at Edutopia](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

When I was a kid, every weekend, my parents would drive me to Loon Mountain in New Hampshire to master the sport of skiing — and downhill racing, in particular. On the chairlift, my instructors would critique the technique of those skiing below us. On the race course, I would spend hours studying and eventually trying to mimic the most experienced racers.

I can't overstate the importance of effective modeling in helping me become an amazing skier. Effective modeling is also how I learned to write well. I spent equal time and effort actually watching other, more experienced writers write.

In high school, I sat beside terrific teachers and paid close attention as they actively reworked my sentence structure and diction. Just as I absorbed knowledge by watching better skiers, here too, teachers provided effective modeling for me to emulate. I wish to make perfectly clear that they certainly didn't do my work for me. Together, rather, we worked toward my overall mastery.

Writing for the student paper of Brandeis University, I spent more time watching others write, rewrite, and edit. In fact, during my first year in The Justice newsroom, I did little else than observe production night, which actually started around mid-afternoon and went until the early morning hours of the next day. Years later, I can still hear my more experienced peers calling for punchier prose, tighter paragraphs, and better quotes.

“Few writers have ever improved by keeping their work to themselves.” · [Essay 3.2](#)

- To teach effective writing, you yourself must be an effective writer. We can't teach what we don't know, and when it comes to writing, it's important to continue honing your craft. If you haven't engaged in much formal writing since college, you will remain a less effective teacher. No matter what you teach, try starting a blog, writing articles, or short stories. All of those are terrific ways to engage the mind and keep your skills sharp. Reading is important, but reading alone isn't enough to strengthen your writing skills, or to make you a credible authority in the subject.
- No matter what you teach, share your written work. I always share with my students, and I ask for their feedback and even criticism. In that respect, it's essential for students to recognize not only your skill, but also that you are interested and engaged in constantly refining a crucial life skill. For one lesson, I even share with students my high school, college, and graduate school essays, and they analyze what I improved upon over time. I'm excited about sharing my work, and that in turn helps get my students excited about doing the same.
- No matter what you teach, produce writing in front of students. When I am teaching about formal introductory paragraphs, for instance, my history students think of a worthy historical question for me to tackle. With the

projector on, I then write out the paragraph, sharing my thought process along the way. Students observe how I work and rework my prose, and how I place a premium on concession. They also critique my work, which in turn helps them become more cognizant of not repeating similar mistakes. More still, my admitting my weaknesses helps students become less defensive about their own work, and in turn more open to criticism.

- Create workshop environments, with multiple stations focusing on different aspects of writing. In my history classroom, I appoint a student great at transitions to staff the “transitions” booth, and a student great at topic sentences to staff the “topic sentence” booth. Of their own volition, or with my suggestion, students visit whatever booth fits their needs. As far as instruction goes, this maximizes utility while freeing me to meet one-on-one with the neediest students.
- Urge students to share their work with each other and online. Few writers have ever improved by keeping their work to themselves. As the teacher, I know my opinion holds significant weight. But the same is true of what others think, especially one’s peers. In an increasingly flat, digital age, students must feel comfortable and confident with sharing their work for the whole world to see. In that regard, teachers should help students produce appropriate, high-quality content.
- Most importantly, teachers must do whatever they can to convey the importance and usefulness of mastering effective writing. No matter what craft or profession students wish to pursue, at every turn, I make clear that knowing how to write well will play a significant role in their success. From science, math, engineering, law, history, journalism, to anything else one can think of, the ability to express oneself clearly in writing is absolutely essential. Next year, to help get that point across, I hope to invite various professionals to speak to students about how writing plays a role in their lives.

Consider your practice

When did your students last watch you struggle with and revise a piece of writing? What decision could you make visible without taking over their work?

Essay 3.3

What I Learned about Teaching Writing from the

Late, Great William Zinsser

June 6, 2013 (earlier reporting) · Edutopia

[Earlier reporting at Edutopia](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Editorial date note: This interview took place before William Zinsser's death in 2015; its present-tense descriptions belong to that earlier conversation.

It's near the end of the school year, and I'm chatting with Preston Michelson '13, my star journalism student, about the changing nature of writing and reporting.

Michelson, who will attend the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University next year, has just finished his last exam. He celebrates by walking into the Palmer Trinity School newsroom with a printed edition of *The New York Times*.

In my recent memory, I can't recall seeing any other 18-year-old read an actual newspaper — certainly not as intently. I chide Michelson for supporting a dying relic, the printed word. It seems strange that such a tech-savvy student would even glance at a newspaper. After all, Michelson epitomizes what I like to call "Journalist 2.0." He edits video, sound, and photographs, and he even has a strong command of basic website coding.

"But I still like the printed article," Michelson tells me. "It's okay to have an appreciation for both print and online journalism."

I'm taken aback. It takes me a moment to remember that with all of Michelson's technical skills, none of his other talents compares to his reporting and writing abilities. We spend the next hour discussing the changing nature of writing, and how one should teach journalism for the 21st century.

As we chat, I'm appropriately reminded of an April 28 *New York Times* piece, "[A Writing Coach Becomes a Listener](#)," about William Zinsser, 90, considered by many to be one of this country's greatest masters of prose. Zinsser is also author of [On Writing Well](#), among the most lauded and utilized teaching and learning guides.

"Clutter is the disease of American writing," Zinsser writes. "We are a society strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon."

I reach out to Zinsser, a living legend, for his views on how he adapted to writing

for an online audience, and whether the Web adds “pompous frills and meaningless jargon” to the public discourse. First and foremost, Zinsser tells me that technology is not the issue.

“The issue is learn to write,” he says. “Put one sentence after another in good, simple declarative language and get what you want written the way you want to write it. Then find a way to harness it, publish it in whatever technology that exists.”

Zinsser is a self-professed “lifelong child of paper.” For years, he sold pieces to *The American Scholar*, a prestigious quarterly magazine that ran his work in a print edition. At first, Zinsser balked when he heard from his editors that they wanted him to go online.

Zinsser says, “I thought ‘Oh, God, that’s the kiss of death. I will vanish into some electronic black hole. I don’t even know who’s reading.’ I assumed that nobody of any intelligence was reading out there — it was one vast mess.”

I have long argued in favor of moving print publications online, especially with an increased emphasis on “going green.” I find solace in discovering another supporter in Zinsser.

“I have been impressed by the fact that *The American Scholar*, like all magazines, now is putting a heavy emphasis on its online presence,” Zinsser says. “That’s their only road to salvation.”

For a man who lived most of his life dependent on paper, Zinsser adapted extremely well to the Internet — so much so, in fact, that [he proposed starting his own blog](#):

I said to the editor, “You’re only a quarterly. That’s not much product.” I said, “How would it be if I wrote you a weekly blog?” I didn’t tell him that I’d never even seen a blog, but I never really had. He said, “Fine.” I began writing this blog, and I wrote it for 80 straight weeks.

Zinsser tells me he wanted to see if he could write for a new medium and continue producing reviews and columns, which he had done so successfully his entire life. He not only succeeded — he excelled.

“We started, and it took me a while to figure out what a good blog should be,” Zinsser says. “It had to be more timely; it had to be tighter. But I learned a lot by

doing it. At the end, I heard from a tremendous number of new readers who were very bright, another big surprise. I have a whole new readership... It was very satisfying that I was able to convert my life-long skills as a writer, regardless of the technology, to the new technology, and write a blog starting at the age of 89 that won the prize as the best blog of the year.”

I discuss with Zinsser the increased emphasis on video and multimedia in journalism 2.0, and that today’s editors require reporters to do a bit of everything. I ask Zinsser if he thinks the public is losing something by placing an increasingly heavy emphasis on these areas.

“Of course, we are losing something, which is an appreciation of the written word. That’s a rather odd thing to say since it’s been going on as the main prop since the *King James Bible*.”

Zinsser also fears what he calls an “epidemic of lost logic.”

“That’s because most people in the world now get their information from multiple sources, many of them visual images that are flickering on a screen. They are not arranged in any order. They’re coming at us from every direction. They’re coming through their wrists. They’re coming through their ears. They’re coming through God-knows-whatever other wires.”

Zinsser’s words take me back to my days as a student at Brandeis University. I’m in one of Prof. Michael Socolow’s journalism courses, and I’m learning about Edward R. Murrow’s famous “Wires and Lights in a Box Speech.”

This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance and indifference.

I press Zinsser for advice on how I should conduct my class, especially if I aim to educate marketable journalists.

“I would say to anybody teaching journalism or any kind of writing, the job is to teach them how to put one declarative sentence after another — and it always will be,” Zinsser says, noting that the same holds true whether one is speaking into a video camera or using any other piece of technology to disseminate information.

After Zinsser and I part ways, I review my notes and smile at one of his remarks. “Get the darn story written as simply and as clearly and as warmly as possible.” Sage advice.

Consider your practice

Which habit in your writing feedback helps students become clearer, and which mainly teaches them to sound academic? What could you simplify in your next round of comments?

Essay 3.4

How to Curb Student Cheating

Original date unconfirmed · June 28, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I’m growing increasingly uneasy over and frightened by the escalating pervasiveness of academic dishonesty.

For deeper insight, I reached out to Prof. Earl Babbie, author of the short but insightful paper, “[Avoiding Plagiarism: And Avoiding the Dean’s Office](#).” Babbie tells me, “The thing that worries me most is that a culture starts to develop around that where ‘everyone’s [plagiarizing].’ Everyone isn’t doing it, but as long as that’s the perception, then it makes it that much easier to do it. That’s true for any kind of deviance.”

Students need to know that plagiarism, or academic dishonesty of any kind, isn’t at all akin to a minor offense like jaywalking. It’s a serious academic breach, and unlike jaywalking, everybody isn’t committing it. I don’t mean for teachers to scare their charges into obedience, but at the same time, students need to know the seriousness of cheating, and what can come from such behavior.

Certainly, students shoulder much of the blame for any sort of academic dishonesty. Still, it’s helpful to consider how teachers should respond to this problem. Here are some suggestions:

- Schools need to do a superior job of explaining and modeling character and moral behavior. Yesterday, I received an email from Jonathan Lamb, Assistant Head of School and Dean of Academics at The Storm King School in New York. “If we understand [students] are not intellectually complete

when they arrive, we should not somehow expect them to be morally complete,” he writes. “We need to teach lessons that develop honesty, tenacity, fair play and other such virtues as well.” Lamb also writes that over the course of the year, schools need to constantly and meaningfully reiterate the importance of honesty, trust, and integrity. One assembly the first week of school just doesn’t cut it.

- Teachers need to report acts of academic dishonesty, Babbie tells me. He says, “I think professors and perhaps high school teachers are reluctant to put it in the student’s record. They think, ‘maybe I’m damaging them by doing this.’ But I think it’s important to do it, not to damage them but to allow the system to catch up with them.” Embarrassingly, for that same reason, my first year of teaching I didn’t report a blatant act of plagiarism, instead just giving that student a zero. I later learned that student had also acted dishonestly in several other courses, and that by not informing the dean, I had contributed (however indirectly) to her continued unfortunate lapse in judgment. The student in this account is different from Jane in [Essay 5.5](#).
- Teachers need to do a much better job of teaching what constitutes plagiarism, how to avoid it, as well as how and when to cite. Digital natives are accustomed to instant gratification, and, in my experience, many students have difficulty understanding how or even why they need to internalize information, rather than reword or lift it from a site. To address this issue, I frequently show students examples of what I consider plagiarism, and how the author might have avoided the offense.
- Teachers should do more to guide students away from temptation. One way to do that, Lamb writes, is to help students “personalize or develop their own ideas in response to raw information.” Babbie offers an example of a teacher conducting a course on marriage and the family, and asking students to research their own background. Not only will more students likely feel a great affinity to this assignment, making shortcuts less enticing, but it’s much more difficult to plagiarize. Of course, this might not prevent devious students from simply writing falsehoods, but it’s certainly a possible deterrent.
- Another way to keep students honest, Babbie tells me, is to organize research papers or projects into several stages. As a first step, students provide a topic and maybe an introductory paragraph. Later, they submit sources, followed by

an outline and a draft. Babbie says, “What I’ve found happening in my own experience is that’ll be going along just fine, and three days before the term paper is due, the student says, ‘Oh, I changed my mind. I found a much more interesting topic that I wanted to write about and here it is. Here’s the paper.’ Well, you kind of think that maybe they bought it or copied it.”

- Before a test, collect phones and have students remove their bags from the desks. Some students are quite talented at seeming to write something down, when they are in fact checking something with their phone in their lap. If a bag is on the table, impeding the teacher’s line of sight, students are more likely to get away with looking at not just their phones, but also other notes and cheating materials.
- Most importantly, teachers, administrators and policy-makers need to rethink the unethical and amoral behavior that grades and high-stakes testing promote. Yesterday, I received an email from Alden Blodget, advisor to the head of school at Long Trail School in Vermont. Bluntly, he writes, “Grades are the coin of the realm, and everything about school, particularly most independent schools, stresses the importance of getting good grades for college admissions. Kids cheat to get good grades because grades are infinitely more important than the learning that they are meant to stand for.”

Consider your practice

What do students understand about why you assign their work and what counts as honest help? How could you address confusion or pressure before it becomes a plagiarism case?

Essay 3.5

Faking the College Application Essay

Original date unconfirmed · July 10, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I sit at my favorite sushi bar and see an intriguing Facebook post from Nikhil Goyal, the seventeen-year-old author of [*One Size Does Not Fit All: A Student’s Assessment of School.*](#)

Goyal links to a scathing Wall Street Journal op-ed by high school senior Suzy Lee Weiss, [“To \(All\) the Colleges That Rejected Me.”](#) Weiss makes me laugh

and shriek, outlining everything wrong with the college admissions process — and there is no shortage of material.

Then there was summer camp. I should've done what I knew was best — go to Africa, scoop up some suffering child, take a few pictures, and write my essays about how spending that afternoon with Kinto changed my life. Because everyone knows that if you don't have anything difficult going on in your own life, you should just hop on a plane so you're able to talk about what other people have to deal with.

I'm interested in Weiss's witty indictment of the college essay, especially because I recently spoke about this very issue with Andrew Ferguson, author of [*Crazy U: One Dad's Crash Course In Getting His Kid Into College*](#).

I'm eager to hear Ferguson's take on Weiss's piece, but I'm not surprised that he read it “cheering,” or that he felt she had “put her finger on it so perfectly.” It's amazing how similar these two are — ideologically and in their clever, sharp writing style. I imagine that if Weiss and Ferguson ever teamed up, even Harvard would shake.

In *Crazy U*, Ferguson also derides the college essay. During our chat, I ask him to explain:

“The thing that really got me in the process of applying was the application essays, which I found to be either absurd, impertinent, intrusive, or simply beside the point,” Ferguson says. “They were asking things of 17-year-olds that most 17-year-olds, even college-bound 17-year-olds, just don't have, like epiphanies, great turning points in their life, moments of self-revelation and so on and so on. The kids end up making them up.”

I like to consider myself hip and tech-savvy. But before reading *Crazy U*, I was completely unaware of the pervasiveness of online companies that, for a fee, produce customized essays. I stumble upon [BuyEssay.org](#), among the most unethical, vile pieces of website trash I've ever visited. A glance at the homepage boils my blood, and I have nothing but spite for this company, and others like it, that use fear and intimidation to induce wholly unethical behavior.

Have you ever considered using an online essay writing service? If you are a straight A student, and never fail your exams, you would probably like to keep up your reputation now that you have found a well-paid part time job. You can

buy an essay or any other paper from our service. Our custom writing service is so simple to use — you just place your order and get a completed paper in return.

The more I think about this essay-writing service, the more I think the colleges are also to blame for such sites even existing. Clearly, students and parents deserve a big slice of shame, but colleges demand insight and reflection that the vast majority of successful adults, however defined, would struggle to put into words.

Ferguson tells me about his visit to Katherine Cohen, who owns a “Platinum Package” private college admissions company in New York. Cohen charges upward of \$40,000, depending on the service:

I think I say in the book that I talked to Katherine Cohen, who you mentioned earlier, and said my son was having a terrible time with these essays. She said, “You’ve just got to tell him that he has to dig deep. Dig deep and tell his innermost thoughts.” I said, “He’s a 17-year-old boy. He doesn’t have any innermost thoughts, and if he did, neither you nor I would want to know what they are.”

The college essay process disadvantages a certain type of kid, Ferguson says, “who doesn’t feel comfortable talking about himself, who isn’t particularly self-reflective, or is shy.”

I also think of Susan Cain’s [*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*](#).

“This college dean grasped very well that the model employee of the midcentury — even one whose job rarely involved dealing with the public, like a research scientist in a corporate lab — was not a deep thinker but a hearty extrovert with a salesman’s personality,” Cain writes.

Well into the 21st century, it seems not much has changed — at least with respect to what college admissions officers expect from essays.

I speak with Bruce Musgrave, my editor, about how enough money can buy a top-rate college essay — and how this feeds into the notion that higher education in general is becoming increasingly elitist. He directs me to journalist Fareed Zakaria’s April 15 column in *Time* magazine, [“The Thin-Envelope Crisis,”](#) which reinforces my stance:

“The country’s best colleges and universities do admit lower-income students,” Zakaria writes. “But the competition has become so intense and the percentage admitted so small that the whole process seems arbitrary.”

Consider your practice

Where do you draw the line between helping a student improve an application essay and writing it for them? Would your guidance leave their voice and judgment intact?

Essay 3.6

AI Evangelists, Stop Calling Writing Teachers Luddites

May 4, 2026 · Generative AI (Medium)

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

As a veteran high school humanities teacher, I’m writing about what I see across social media, in education forums, and in ongoing conversations with peers across school types and sizes, as well as with cognitive scientists and psychologists.

I want to be clear here because too often my concerns get misread and dismissed by those most eager to champion AI and its associated technologies. Restricting AI in my classroom is not a call for a universal ban. I see a role for optional reinforcement after a concept or skill has been developed.



Teaching digital tools in the student newsroom at Columbia University. Photo by Evan Michaeli.

[Original post](#)

I'm running out of patience.

When I raise legitimate concerns about integrating AI into teaching and learning, such as cognitive offloading, those outside my discipline rarely respond with curiosity or even civil disagreement. Instead, those concerns are often dismissed.

Often, I'm called out for "leaving students behind" or "resisting the future," and told I should "make room" for new ideas and developments. Even when I argue for caution and measured adoption, critics too often hear a call to ban technology altogether. There's no room for nuance.

Recently, when an educator in a closed Facebook group called me and others like me "Luddites," I responded: "Luddites? Really? I advise [The Gator](#), one of the most award-winning digital student news sites in the nation. But because I call for caution with AI integration, you label me anti-tech?"

I'm not proud of feeding the beast. I should know better, having read *Outrage Machine: How Tech Amplifies Discontent, Disrupts Democracy — and What We Can Do About It* by Tobias Rose-Stockwell, and having spoken with him for a recent Edutopia [article](#).

He would have been right to call me out for not side-channeling and inviting the commenter into a private space rather than responding publicly.

"That's a little bit hard in some of these groups that don't start with good moderation policies in place," Rose-Stockwell told me. "But sometimes a good member or steward of the community can step in and be a clarifying voice to reset the norms if things get too hot."

In this case, I should have been that steward. I'm not offering excuses, and I should know better — but that's still a difficult role to fill when what I'm seeing is a kind of blind absolutism about adoption from many (though certainly not all) tech enthusiasts who believe I must either fully embrace AI in my teaching or be labeled an "old fogey" who wants to ban it.

In that forced choice, there's no room for caution or professional judgment — just a forced binary that flattens everything in between. It makes meaningful conversation difficult and real concerns easy to ignore.

And yet, much of the push to rapidly adopt AI comes from outside the humanities — often from people who don't use academic writing as a primary mode of teaching but still tell us how it should be taught.

I don't do this to other disciplines. I don't tell math or science teachers to abandon fundamentals just because something can be automated. I trust that those closest to the work understand what can't be replaced without losing something essential.

This isn't just about how students produce writing. It's about what writing demands of them. Increasingly, this climate feels less like collaboration and more like overreach.

Another common response I hear is, "Just teach students to be critical of what AI produces." That sounds reasonable — until you examine what it requires.

Students cannot critically evaluate writing without a solid foundation in writing. They cannot judge clarity, structure, argument, or style if they haven't developed those capacities themselves.

You don't learn to evaluate quality by outsourcing the process that produces it. It's like asking people who have never learned to cook to critique a meal prepared by Gordon Ramsay. They may have opinions, but without knowledge, they can't judge technique or skill.

The same applies here. If students rely on AI before they've built the habits and skills of writing, then "being critical of the output" becomes guesswork masquerading as evaluation.

Continue to share your expertise in your own discipline. But if you are not teaching writing, allow writing educators to guide decisions about writing instruction.

Please, trust the judgment of those teaching writing every day. Recognize that my concerns are grounded in evidence and experience — not fear.

My stance is about protecting the conditions that allow students to think deeply and develop their own ideas through writing. If I'm wrong, I'll see it and adjust. That's how my classroom works.

But if the AI evangelists are wrong, and this push toward constant AI use erodes students' ability to think, write, and develop ideas independently, that loss won't be easy to recover from. It won't show up in frameworks or presentations, but it will show up in their thinking.

That's why, while everyone's voice is welcome, when it comes to how to teach

writing, this is primarily the humanities' lane. I hope we can each bring our best to our respective areas of expertise.

Consider your practice

When colleagues raise concerns about a new tool, what would a serious response look like? How much weight does your school give to the teachers who teach the affected skill every day?

Teaching the Students in Front of Us

At Brimmer and May, I learned as much from my peers as I did from my teachers. These remarkably insightful students supported my ideas, asked for my opinions, and when appropriate, respectfully criticized my contributions.

Essay 4.1

How to Teach Introverted Students

April 12, 2016 (earlier version) · Edutopia

[Earlier version at Edutopia](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

It's 2005. I'm a junior at Brandeis University attending "Modfest," a loud, crowded and sweaty party organized by student events. I've been socializing for two hours, and I want to go home.

It's not that I don't like being around people. I do. I just feel smothered. As I leave early, I walk by my roommate, who urges me to stay. I continue walking, and I fall asleep that night thinking that there's something wrong with me.

Six years later, my mood changes upon reading Susan Cain's [*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*](#). It's the most helpful book I've ever read, and also one of the best researched.

"Introverts...may have strong social skills and enjoy parties and business meetings, but after a while wish they were home in their pajamas," Cain writes. "They prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues, and family. They listen more than they talk, think before they speak, and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict. Many have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep discussion."

Cain has me pegged to a T, and I feel a great sense of relief and validation. I'm an introvert, a perfectly normal person living in a world obsessed with championing extroverted characteristics: dominance, assertiveness, spontaneity and loudness.

I am thrilled to speak with Cain, who says that of all the audiences she's happy to reach, she's most passionate about students.

“I hear too many stories of children who are given the message by very well-meaning teachers that there’s something wrong with the way they are,” Cain says. “I think well-meaning teachers see their role as being to turn introverts into extroverts. We really need to understand that an introvert is a totally normal personality type.”

I wonder about teachers who place a big emphasis on class discussion, and if this unfairly discriminates against introverted students. I’m equally concerned about whether teachers are doing right by encouraging these kids to “come out of their shells.”

“The most recent study found that half the population are introverts. Other studies have said a third of the population,” Cain says. “That’s one out of every two or three students. They don’t need to be changed, these students. They do need to be cultivated so that they make the most of their natural talents, so they learn the skills that they need to flourish in extroverted schools and workplaces. But that’s different from changing who they are.”

Cain tells me that introverted children often have an easier time identifying their interests, and that they become extremely passionate about pursuing one or two subjects. As I hear Cain talk, it’s like she’s reading my mind. With teaching, running and blogging, my introverted personality enhances my work ethic and productivity.

In an earlier article, I wrote about school culture’s unhealthy insistence upon instilling in young people leadership qualities. Before I even have a chance to ask Cain for her take, she’s already addressing the issue.

“One of the mistakes that I’ve seen in education as I toured the country and sat in on classrooms, I noticed that leadership has become a real buzzword,” Cain says. “There’s an expectation that everybody should be a leader. It’s kind of like, ‘Well, why? Why does everyone have to be a leader, exactly?’ I don’t think we’re designed that way. I think if you look at many of the great thought leaders and political leaders in history, they were not the ones who were leaders in the classroom.”

Cain is quick to provide an example.

“Gandhi would run home from school every day as soon as class was over because he didn’t want to have to talk to the other students,” Cain says. “He was

very shy and very reserved. He came to leadership out of a sense of passion for his causes, not out of being a ‘natural leader,’ whatever that is.”

I can already hear the naysayers, insisting that fostering leadership potential provides the best possible avenue for success. To that, I say hogwash — and Cain agrees.

“Why can’t [students] be really creative or really thoughtful or really kind?” Cain says. “Or any number of other attributes that serve the greater good. It seems like a collective lunacy we’ve bought into, that everybody has to be a leader. Really, if everybody was a leader, we would get nowhere.”

I ask Cain how teachers can better reach introverted students. It’s important to acknowledge that this involves more work, Cain tells me.

“With the extroverts, they’re raising their hands,” Cain says. “They’re telling you what they know, what they don’t know. They’re giving you a very fun back-and-forth. It’s just easier. An introverted student is sitting in the class. Their face might seem impassive, so you have no idea. Are they engaged or are they not?”

Two years ago, I stopped grading students on class participation. Any type of assessment is subjective, but this feels especially so. I notice no clear correlation between how much an individual speaks, including the quality of what he or she says, and performance in all other aspects of the course.

“Why is engagement measured only through how often do you raise your hand?” Cain says. “There’s a lot of different ways of being engaged with material or participating in a classroom. This is especially true now in the age of technology and social media. I know teachers are beginning to experiment with bringing social media into the classroom. What I’m hearing is that if you generate a class discussion of kids that’s happening online that the quieter kids will often participate just as much when it’s online as the more vocal kids.”

I think back to my conversations with Curtis J. Bonk, Professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University. Bonk is also author of one of my favorite books about learning, [*The World is Open: How Web Technology Is Revolutionizing Education*](#). I wish that he and Cain would work on a project together.

“If you are introverted in a regular classroom setting, online environments allow you to feel comfortable and at home,” Bonk tells me. “You are in a safe harbor.

You can tinker with your ideas. You can search the Internet to find a visual cue to enhance what you're trying to show.”

I'm eager to hear from Cain about how educators can more effectively teach and assess introverts.

“I think it is a matter of finding one-on-one time with those students, figuring out what are the areas that they're really interested in and maybe calling on them or asking them to participate around those areas. Giving them extra assignments around their areas of passion.”

I have taught many introverts, and many fear that college admissions offices will frown upon a perceived lack of traditional extracurricular activities. Cain and I discuss whether this fear is justified.

“It feels like if you're not the editor of the paper, president of the student body, or captain of the soccer team then nothing else counts because that's what high school culture tells you,” Cain says. “But that's not actually really true from a college admissions point of view. They might actually be more interested in the kid who is excelling in less common activities. It makes you seem more distinct and more individual.”

Before we part ways, I ask Cain to provide one final piece of advice for introverted students trying to succeed in high school.

“Find your niche,” she says. “Find the thing you really love to do. Find the people you really love to be with and don't worry so much about the other stuff.”

Consider your practice

Which students might your participation routines overlook? What other evidence could show their preparation, engagement, and understanding?

Essay 4.2

A Tale of Two Teachers

Fall 2013 (original publication) · Independent Teacher (NAIS)

[Original publication at Independent Teacher \(NAIS\)](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Coauthored with Preston R. Michelson

The role of “teacher” is changing. The best teachers embrace this development and don't feel threatened by students who may know more than they do. Instead,

they revel in a changing dynamic, in which students and teachers learn together to improve their collective understanding and mastery of relevant subjects and skills.

David teaches journalism at Palmer Trinity School in Palmetto Bay, Florida. In spring 2011, he began conferring with then-junior Preston, a strong student and local sports columnist, about how to improve campus media. Over a two-year period, their relationship came to exemplify what is possible when students and teachers learn together, beyond the traditional “sage-on-the-stage” dynamic.

Pioneering together

In early 2012, Palmer Trinity School was approached by PlayOn! Sports to partner in its live broadcasting venture. At a growing number of schools, students use PlayOn! Sports to cover competitions, ceremonies, graduations, interviews, and special events. All that’s needed is reliable Internet access, a digital camcorder, a laptop, and a video-capture cord.

Though Preston wasn’t yet enrolled in David’s journalism class, David and Preston had worked as a team to get PlayOn! Sports up and running. Since his sophomore year, Preston had served as the public address announcer for all varsity sporting events. In the second semester of his junior year, he started writing bimonthly sports columns for The Pinecrest Tribune, a community newspaper. He also published his own blog, Michelson’s Musings, and he had a strong idea that he wanted to pursue journalism as a career.

“I had done public address announcing, but I hadn’t done much in the way of live play-by-play,” Preston says. “It was going to be difficult and come with its fair share of live troubleshooting, but I was up for it. I was very eager to get more students involved in the program.”

David also wanted a medium for students to express themselves and build confidence. “To survive in any modern newsroom, a journalist needs to be able to do absolutely everything,” David says. With respect to basic broadcasting skills, PlayOn! Sports provided interested students with an opportunity to learn “absolutely everything.” It needed a cameraman, a producer, a graphics designer, and an announcer or two. And some of those roles could be consolidated. The job would develop crucial skills like teamwork, public speaking, and creativity. But despite PlayOn! Sports’s ease of use, it required a small but dedicated team. At a

small school like Palmer Trinity, with 650 students in grades 6–12, this proved challenging.

“We wanted to show students and the wider community what was possible with this great technology,” Preston says. “If we could get the program operating smoothly and reliably, and show how easy and fun it was to broadcast, we felt confident that students would show interest.” Preston spent long hours in David’s classroom, mastering the ins and outs of the program.

“Preston seemed to pick it up quickly. It was right in his wheelhouse, and, for whatever reason, I couldn’t seem to get it,” David says. “It could have even been that I became uncomfortable with the fact that he could master it so quickly and I was still trying to understand the basics. The roles were reversed.”

In mid-April, the two traveled to Coral Shores High School in Tavernier, Florida, for the inaugural live remote broadcast — a girls’ lacrosse district-final game.

“The public address announcer, the scoreboard operator — they had never seen anything like it: a high school streaming their game over the Internet,” Preston says. By year’s end, more students had expressed interest in joining journalism to learn how to broadcast events.

Learning together

David loved teaching, but he felt a sense of relief as summer approached. It had been a busy year for him and his journalism class. As part of the school’s efforts to go green and to teach 21st-century skills, students had scrapped the print edition of *The Falconer*, the campus newspaper, in favor of an all-online format. David tried his best to learn basic code and how to operate Squarespace, the online website builder that powers *The Falconer*. But he struggled with learning enough about special programming to teach how to make the site user-friendly, and its clunky design left much to be desired.

“Much of the content was a lot better than how the site looked,” David says. “I also had a difficult time learning and introducing the class to other storytelling tools, especially with how to produce a professional news broadcast. I didn’t know enough, and I felt overwhelmed.”

He spent his vacation reading books and watching YouTube videos, mostly geared to how to do and teach successful 21st-century journalism. David’s first order of business called for mastering advanced video editing software, and

producing a virtual newsroom using a newly purchased green screen. He explored various options before stumbling upon HitFilm, an easy-to-use program. It was perfect for creating a professional-looking newsroom, he thought.

From there, David learned about Audacity, a free but powerful sound-editing program. He really wanted his students to create quality podcasts. He also improved his photo editing abilities to teach his photographers those essential skills. But despite all that he had learned, there remained much he didn't know. He felt inadequate, as if he couldn't possibly master everything before the start of another new school year.

Soon enough, David's outlook began to change. That fall, Preston would join the newsroom. They had worked well together with PlayOn! Sports, and David felt confident that this collaboration would only translate to more success now that Preston was an official member of The Falconer team.

Indeed, as the new academic year kicked off, Preston provided significant vision, passion, and technological expertise. For the first time in his career, David really started to question the traditional role of teacher.

"I learned to be comfortable knowing that I didn't have to know everything," David says. "Preston understood how to use many emerging technologies much better than I. In fact, his knowledge would often surpass mine of various tools, and he would then take the time to teach me." David leaned on Preston, who enjoyed teaching his classmates.

"Sometimes, David was busy with various newsroom matters and he felt confident letting me introduce new ideas to the class," Preston says. "Often after class, we would have discussions about students and who needed more practice or one-on-one attention." Preston felt up to the task. "I had spent the summer using Audacity, and I didn't even know David was learning it at the same time. I was glad to see that he had a basic knowledge, and I was overjoyed to share some of the intricacies of the program," Preston says.

Preston liked that the class also used iMovie for video editing. But he noticed that students weren't making effective use of transitions, music, and voice overlay. "There were some truly basic corrections that I was able to make, and those increased the quality of the production significantly." Preston worked with David to instruct students, and the newsroom improved on all fronts. The community responded favorably, requesting more coverage.

Creating together

David and Preston then redirected their attention to The Falconer's redesign. They agreed that the site lacked appeal that made it exciting for users to post and access content. "Students want to post on something that looks cool. Something that's different. The former iteration of The Falconer wasn't any of those things. We needed a change," Preston says. David and Preston developed the basic look and feel of the new website, but they soon discovered that even as a team, they lacked the technical knowledge to continue. They contacted a professional website designer, who built the site with their input.

"We spent long hours with the designer, trying to create a website with the functionality and design of USA Today, with attention-grabbing colors, embeddable videos, and interactive content," David says.

On the day of the relaunch, David and Preston hit a snag. They had accidentally deleted some code, resulting in huge, empty white space on the homepage, and the school's Internet was down. They couldn't stand going home without a solution.

When school ended, Preston left to use the Internet at a nearby Starbucks. He sat down, took out his laptop, and got right to work. No sooner had he taken his first sip of coffee than he saw David rush in, frantically trying to find a seat. They looked at each other, laughed at the situation, and got right to work.

"I couldn't believe that we both had the same idea of going to Starbucks, and at almost the same exact time," Preston says. "We were in this together, and nothing could stop us from finding a solution." Preston eventually found a copy of the deleted code in an old e-mail, and The Falconer was back in action.

Once the new Falconer launched, site traffic more than doubled — as did the enrollment in David's second-semester journalism class. "I was thrilled to have 21 students in the class, but I was even happier that I could rely on Preston, whom I began to regard more as a co-teacher and co-learner than a student," David says. "We worked together, equally hard, to help a growing newsroom produce quality content each day." Student journalists could now produce that higher quality content and cover more stories.

In late January, Preston directed live student coverage of Martin Luther King III's campus visit. Afterward, Preston used the virtual newsroom setup to interview

the famous civil rights activist's son. That night, local news agencies used The Falconer's coverage in their own broadcasts.

"If I had interviewed Mr. King a year prior, I would have been especially nervous," Preston says. "But I had already interviewed different people in David's journalism class. In the beginning, we would work together to form questions and rehearse. Then I developed greater confidence to further hone my skills."

As David and Preston's collective understanding and passion for online media evolved, so too did their yearning to follow their own journalistic pursuits.

Inspiring each other

"I got a chance to experience the nitty-gritty of being a journalist while existing in a comfortable learning environment. I felt that it was acceptable to make mistakes — which I did," Preston says. "David and I were able to make learning through failure an invaluable component of our growth."

Preston used his experience working with David to develop himself as a journalist. He took comfort in the fact that the experience prepared him well for the rigorous curriculum at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, where he is now enrolled.

"The green-screen technology, the photo editing, the voice-over work — it made me a stronger worker. And instead of being taught the inner workings, David and I were able to learn them together. I have no doubt that that made my information retention stronger and more lasting," Preston says.

For his part, David rekindled his own passion for journalism. In college, he had been a reporter for *The Justice*, the student paper of Brandeis University. He eventually became the news editor there, before stringing for *The Boston Globe's* metro section.

David drew new inspiration from Preston, and after six long years, he finally decided to return to reporting. This time, though, David decided to forgo objective storytelling, and instead express his thoughts on the current state of education. He launched the blog, *SpinEdu*, featuring his take on emerging teaching and learning trends for the 21st century.

"Without Preston's support and encouragement, I would never have started

SpinEdu,” David says. “He inspired me to adapt my skills as an old-school news reporter to those of a passionate education blogger. I’ve become a much better teacher and learner, and I’ve had the chance to interview so many remarkable individuals.”

Reflecting together

Preston and David continue to support one another’s personal endeavors. Now that Preston has graduated, they consider themselves close colleagues. As a final project together before Preston moved on to college, they wanted to reflect on their co-learning experience. David says, “I will miss Preston’s presence in the newsroom, but I know that he will accomplish great things.”

Preston is encouraged to know that in all likelihood, this won’t mark the last time that he and David learn from one another. “The best students and teachers know that they don’t know everything. If that is realized, then the future of education is truly bright,” Preston says.

Consider your practice

When has a student taught you something you did not know? What would make that exchange possible without asking the student to carry your responsibility for teaching?

Essay 4.3

When Lessons Are Harmful, Insensitive

Original date unconfirmed · July 10, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Editorial date note: This essay predates Elie Wiesel’s death on July 2, 2016; present-tense references reflect the time of writing.

It’s Saturday and after a relaxing morning of sleeping in, I check my news feeds.

A *New York Times* headline puts me over the edge, undoing whatever good ten hours of sleep did for me: “[Students Told to Take Viewpoints of Nazis.](#)” An unidentified 10th-grade English teacher at Albany High School in Albany, New York, asked students to write a “persuasive essay” to argue why Jews are evil.

I discover that Scott Waldman of Albany’s *Times Union* broke the story, “[School Apologizes for ‘Nazi’ writing assignment.](#)”

“Students were asked to watch and read Nazi propaganda, then pretend their teacher was a Nazi government official who needed to be convinced of their loyalty,” Waldman writes. “In five paragraphs, they were required to prove that Jews were the source of Germany’s problems.”

I think back to my time as a history student at Brandeis University, where I studied under Prof. Antony Polonsky.

Though I’m sure Polonsky feels similarly, I fear that he would be disappointed with my initial reaction. I am justified in my rage, but I am letting this emotion cloud my better judgment. Bruce Musgrave, my editor, tells me something similar when he returns a rough draft of this article. I need to clearly express why this assignment promotes antisemitism, and why it’s wholly unacceptable and offensive. I reach out to Polonsky for his take:

“There was a similar controversy in England when in one of the public examinations students were asked to explain why [antisemites] hated Jews,” Polonsky writes to me in an e-mail exchange. “The problem is drawing a line between understanding ethnic and religious hatreds and justifying them. I think in this case the line was crossed.”

I always strive to find the best in people (another lesson from my grandmother, Joan), and I concede that in all likelihood, the Albany High School teacher had no malicious intent.

The teacher had even planned for the class to read *Night* by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, whom I’ve had the honor of hearing speak on several occasions. All the same, as Polonsky points out, a line was crossed, and any well-intentioned meaning gets tossed aside — especially when a teacher forces students to justify the destruction of 6 million Jews.

I also worry that such an assignment stops just shy of promoting Holocaust denial — a difficult problem that still plagues America — by asking students to argue that “*Jews are evil and the source of our problems.*”

At Brandeis, I remember reading Prof. Deborah Lipstadt’s *Denying the Holocaust*. I dust off my worn copy and find a highlighted passage:

The attempt to deny the Holocaust enlists a basic strategy of distortion. Truth is mixed with absolute lies, confusing readers who are unfamiliar with the tactics of the deniers. Half-truths and story segments, which conveniently

avoid critical information, leave the listener with a distorted impression of what really happened. The abundance of documents and testimonies that confirm the Holocaust are dismissed as contrived, coerced, or forgeries and falsehoods.

If students ended up doing this assignment, I imagine that many of them would find Web pages dedicated to this line of thinking, needed to inform any analysis that their teacher expects of them.

Even if the Albany High School teacher harbors no antisemitic feelings, as I would like to believe, I am equally upset by the ignorance behind the assignment. As a college junior, I remember attending an event at Boston University, where Wiesel teaches. I don't remember Wiesel's exact words, but I do recall his talking about ignorance and persistent antisemitism.

I surf the Web and stumble upon a 2011 story by journalist Jill Garbi in the *New Jersey Jewish News*, ["Elie Wiesel warns about persistence of anti-Semitism."](#) I am reminded that Wiesel delivered a similar message when I heard him speak, more than five years ago:

"We live in a democracy in America. Our voices can be heard," he said.

"Even if we cannot cure hatred universally, we can make people aware."

I spent five years of my life studying Polish history, the Holocaust and other atrocities throughout the ages — often resulting in nightmares that would cause me to wake in a cold sweat.

I wholeheartedly support Wiesel's stance, but for me, becoming truly aware of the nature of raw hatred took a huge emotional toll. In fact, it's a main reason why I didn't want to pursue a doctorate.

I wonder to what extent I should blame the Albany High School teacher, who, in all likelihood, lacked anything close to my privileged education.

Of course, this teacher is an adult, and "I didn't know" is no excuse for wrongdoing. But I do worry how difficult it seems to effectively educate, or simply raise the awareness of certain individuals on sensitive topics.

Upon learning of this story, I first felt intense anger that this unknown Albany High School teacher is still unknown. But after dinner last night with Fred Truby, a fellow teacher and one of my closest friends, I concede a logical explanation for

such well-guarded anonymity.

At the time, Florida Atlantic University Professor Deandre Poole made national headlines after he had students partake in a controversial assignment. I read *Sun Sentinel* reporter Scott Travis's piece, [“FAU puts ‘stomp Jesus’ instructor on leave.”](#)

“During a March 4 class on the Davie campus, Poole asked students to write Jesus on a sheet of paper, throw it on the floor and then step on it,” Travis writes. “It was part of a lesson on the impact of words included in the instructor’s guide of the class textbook, written by a professor at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin.”

Travis also reports how Poole, “who is black, has had death threats and racially charged messages left on his voice mail and in his email.”

I hold immense disrespect for the Albany High School teacher. Even still, in light of this FAU incident, I would never want to harm this person or put the teacher in harm’s way.

I want teachers to push the envelope, so to speak, and to engage students in worthwhile discussion. But at the same time, academic freedom is not a free ticket for race baiting. In trying to educate young people about delicate matters, some teachers cross the line. I’m not sure how to solve this problem, or even if it can be completely solved.

All the same, educators should promote understanding, not misunderstanding. On that score, these teachers failed.

Consider your practice

Before using a provocative lesson, how do you distinguish examining a harmful belief from asking students to perform or defend it? Whose perspective could help you notice a risk you have missed?

Essay 4.4

Responding to Trump’s Language in the Classroom

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[Related version at HuffPost](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

A change of mind within this essay

This 2018 essay begins with my commitment to political neutrality and follows my reconsideration of what that means when public language harms students. The question is how to respond while protecting students' freedom to disagree.

Editorial date note: This essay predates Gordon S. Wood's death on June 7, 2026; present-tense references reflect the time of writing.

As a high school history teacher, I had always felt strongly about remaining politically neutral.

For the following reasons, I justified my stance to my students.

1. Indoctrination. I believe that much of the nation automatically identifies teachers as liberals. While there might be some truth to this stereotype, as with all stereotypes, there are exceptions. Moreover, a teacher who may hold liberal sentiments is not necessarily out to recruit new party members. That is ludicrous thinking, but to avoid the headache of defending against accusations, I have refrained from sharing my personal views.

2. Perceived bias. Each year, I'm aware that many new students assume I lean left, an impression for which they have no evidence, other than that I am a teacher in Massachusetts, a liberal state. Still, I am unwilling to provide ammunition for those of any political affiliation, who, unhappy with how I assess academic work, might point to my political views rather than a student's struggles as the reason for a lower-than-expected grade.

3. Independence of thought. A more compelling rationale for retaining the appearance of political neutrality is my larger concern that outing myself politically would tempt students to agree with me. I am fully aware that as a high school humanities teacher, I have significant influence over how students think and feel about anything under the sun. I am not in this business to foster like-minded young people.

But we've never had somebody quite like Donald Trump in the Oval Office, who makes frequent use of racist, sexist, and xenophobic language. With his election, I came to the conclusion that I had a duty to speak out against his behavior, or else risk students taking my silence to mean apathy or support. Unless I expressed my own stance clearly and firmly, I risked creating a gap between me and my students, who, understandably, wouldn't feel as safe or supported in the learning environment — or having me as their teacher.

Curious for his take, I reached out to Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Gordon Wood, also affectionately known as the dean of American historians.

“I believe that teachers should not reveal their political leanings no matter how much the students want to know,” Wood told me in an email exchange. “They want to know a lot of things about a teacher (their love life, their eating habits, etc.), but we don’t indulge their desires. I think we can talk about the early Republic without the students knowing what our political views of the present are. It’s a challenge, I know, but I believe it is essential that they see their teacher as above the current political divisions.”

Wood isn’t wrong, but after reflecting on his words and my own practices, I don’t know if he is entirely correct either.

I gained valuable insight from reading an award-winning book, [The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education](#) by academic researchers Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy. In the introduction, they touch upon one of my biggest concerns: “Many teachers choose to avoid using political deliberations and discussions with students, often because they are unsure about how to negotiate accompanying pedagogical challenges. Further deterring teachers is the polarized climate outside schools. Fear of parental and public backlash leads some teachers to retreat to lectures and textbooks.”

While I embrace students’ engaging in political deliberation, I often fear the possibility of backlash from what is or isn’t said in my classroom. For her advice, I recently spoke with McAvoy, a professor of social studies education at North Carolina State University. I didn’t pull any punches, immediately asking if I am justified in feeling rattled about doing the right thing, and what, in our political climate, “the right thing” even means.

McAvoy said that teachers have competing and often shifting responsibilities, depending on the students in front of us. Moreover, she said, teachers have an obligation to prepare students for democracy, and how to engage in the deliberative process. At the same time, teachers are also constantly thinking about following school policy, which may or may not permit them to express differing views, while weighing that against their beliefs of what constitutes effective teaching.

“To teach is to sit between these competing responsibilities,” McAvoy told me. “What teachers are constantly doing is trying to think about what’s the best

choice in any given situation. Sometimes, it's, 'Okay, I have to follow policy because that's the policy.' Sometimes, it's 'No, there's room here for judgment, and I'm going to go this way.' This is just the challenge of teaching."

McAvoy's words provide equal comfort for those who decide to share or conceal their political leanings, but I still worry. Right now, feelings about politics are so heightened that everything that comes out of my mouth might be perceived as partisan or unfair. I told McAvoy about my frustration, and once again, I was soothed by her response.

McAvoy says, "It's one thing for a student to say to a teacher, 'What do you think of Trump?' or 'Did you vote for Trump?' That's very different than a teacher's standing before a class, without invitation, saying, 'I can't believe what this guy just did yesterday.' I don't think teachers are on solid ground very often if they're standing in front of the room and just being part of the partisan rhetoric."

Still, a teacher sharing their political views in class is a tightrope to walk. As Joel Sohn, Director of Community and Equity at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, recently wrote me, good judgment extends far beyond what teachers say in the classroom.

"If we acknowledge that bias exists within our own teachings, then can any classroom ever truly be apolitical? Depending on what language I use, what texts I select, or what topics I bring up in the classroom, each one of my choices stems from a political ideology," he writes.

Sohn shares his political beliefs with his students, but always in the context of the learning environment he has fostered, one in which students challenge and explore each other's beliefs, while searching for a greater understanding of truth and underlying issues. Sohn tells me that he wouldn't simply come out and urge students to share his convictions. "Absolutely not," he makes clear to me. But he sees value in the open exchange of opinions, including affording sufficient time for productive dialogue and research about why individuals hold distinct beliefs. According to Sohn, this has gone a long way toward making his students more politically aware, and more invested in their own learning.

In line with Sohn's philosophy, McAvoy's research reveals that most students want to know where their teachers stand politically. But what's most important, she told me, is that students know that teachers care about them: "Teachers need

to be on the side of their students, and I don't mean political side. I mean that it's clear to students that I'm here. I take my role as a teacher seriously, and I care about your growth and development," she said.

McAvoy's research also reduces my fear that if I did share my political views, students would feel pressured into echoing my opinion for a higher grade. Mostly, McAvoy said, students who report that they hear their teacher's views also say that the instructor expresses those views responsibly, without alienating or penalizing students who disagree.

After speaking with McAvoy, I feel more confident about how to hold political discussions in the classroom, while doing my best to avoid partisan, polarized behavior in the classroom.

"We can't make the world seem as simplified as the parties do," she tells me. "High-level academic talk is what we're going for."

That's something I hope all teachers, regardless of political affiliation, can agree on.

Consider your practice

How can you challenge demeaning language while making clear that students may disagree with your political views? What would reassure them that disagreement will not affect how you assess their work?

Essay 4.5

Why Student Tracking Is Just Plain Wrong

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[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

After two years at another independent school, I returned as a junior to Brimmer and May, where I had spent the majority of my lower and middle school career. I looked forward to reuniting with my friends, but scheduling differences required that I take more advanced courses.

As a sophomore, I had taken non-honors American History and American literature, courses Brimmer and May requires of its juniors. If I wanted to return, I had to take AP English Literature and Modern United States History, both senior electives with talented but demanding teachers. Even as the only junior enrolled in them, I would receive no special treatment.

Needless to say, at the time, I lacked faith in my academic abilities. I couldn't write very well, and I couldn't imagine being able to keep up with academic juggernauts. Having taken only non-honors courses, I thought that I had a fixed potential — that no matter how hard I tried or how much I wanted it, I would never get to be one of the “smart kids.”

Teachers posing as soothsayers had decided the limits of my future potential, and I dared not question them.

Once the new academic year arrived, my teachers stayed true to their word. They didn't offer special treatment, but they did do something much more beneficial — they pushed me to my limits every day. These magnificent professionals demonstrated an infectious love of learning, encouraging me not only to master a deeper level of proficiency for my own intellectual benefit, but also to prove to myself that labels like “honors,” “regular” or “college-preparatory” are good for nothing.

I also benefited greatly from my classmates, whom I admired deeply. Never before had I engaged with such curious and respectful kids, who cared as deeply for their own success as I did for my own. I am grateful for their support, and while time and distance have separated most of us, I am forever in their debt for helping direct my path. My great distaste for labels aside, I eventually earned high honors that year.

Here are my top-five reasons why tracking students by ability does more harm than good.

1. Tracking instills psychologically damaging labels

Schools do students no favors by labeling courses. Before returning to Brimmer and May, I truly believed that I had below-average potential. Why else would I be placed in all non-honors courses? Worse still, for a time, I believed all the falsehoods about what I could and couldn't do in the classroom and beyond. I cringe upon thinking of the innumerable driven, capable, and curious students taking courses that don't ask or expect them to reach beyond a certain, preconceived barrier. I also feel for students in honors courses, who have a different burden of always being expected to excel at whatever they pursue.

2. Tracking creates unhealthy competition

Tracking fosters a culture of condescension and social stratification, one in which “smart kids” can justify a sense of superiority over their non-honors counterparts. As a freshman and sophomore, on several occasions, I recall being made fun of for my supposed lack of intelligence — and for “dogging it” by taking only easy classes. I also fear that tracking encourages cheating by students wishing to move up to and remain in more advanced courses. Unfortunately, some parents also attribute their status to the success of their child, and often feel embarrassed without a “my-child-is-an-honors-student” bumper sticker. These children are then encouraged to appease their parents, even by dishonorable means.

3. Tracking fails to acknowledge true and varied intelligences

I question how my teachers designated me as “non-honors,” given my tremendous future academic success. In many cases, a teacher who instructs freshman English, for example, decides what students will take honors or non-honors history for the following year. But what if an English teacher is just plain bad at her job, and even after a year, she can’t accurately assess a student’s growth or potential? Likewise, what if a science teacher failed to deliver effective, varied instruction and different assignments? In such a case, it would be impossible to accurately place most teens.

4. Tracking rewards good behavior, not academic ability

I fear that sometimes teachers connect honors recommendations with good behavior, not academic ability. True, it’s easier and often more enjoyable to instruct students who possess both positive characteristics, but a crucial distinction exists. Moreover, perhaps misbehaving students, however defined, are misbehaving more for reasons having to do with lazy, ineffective instruction than any true character flaw in the student. As a sophomore, I had my share of bad teachers, whose flagrant apathy drove me to lose focus, daydream, and goof off.

5. Tracking prevents students from learning

Students, just like athletes, improve best and most easily when training with more advanced partners. At Brimmer and May, I learned as much from my peers as I did from my teachers. These remarkably insightful students supported my ideas, asked for my opinions, and when appropriate, respectfully criticized my contributions. I wanted to show my older and more academically advanced peers that I respected them, and I conveyed this by coming to class each day prepared

to engage in scholarly debate. By not sharing my unique understanding, I thought, I would deprive others of my unique interpretation, as well as fail to contribute to the learning process.

Exception

Subjects with more inherently distinct levels, like math and foreign language, ought to consider making certain exceptions to the no-tracking principle. A student ready for calculus, for instance, won't benefit by being placed with others still mastering trigonometry, and vice versa. Still, my view holds that all classes should shed the "honors" distinction.

Takeaway message

I strongly encourage all schools to do away with tracking, which has the potential to inflict psychological damage on otherwise smart, capable, and innovative students. Instead, let students of all abilities and intelligences benefit from each other by placing them in the same classroom.

Consider your practice

Which students might be capable of more than their current placement suggests? What opportunities and support would let them demonstrate that potential?

Essay 4.6

How to Help Increasingly Stressed-Out Students

June 5, 2018 (original version) · PBS NewsHour

[Original version at PBS NewsHour](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Once during an exam on the Civil War, one of my 11th graders burst into tears, fearful of what a low grade on the test might do to her future. "I'll never get into college now," she told me, as I tried to console her. "I might as well give up now. What's the point?"

Another time, when presented with irrefutable proof of her having lifted portions of her research paper, an otherwise strong student started crying hysterically: "I know it was really, really wrong, but this anxiety I feel to be perfect, it's overriding my normal behavior and better judgment." She told me that in an attempt to balance her AP classes, sports and social life, she had become stressed

and saw no other way to earn a good grade.

I've heard countless similar stories from colleagues who teach at all types of schools. Students push themselves daily to unhealthy and unsustainable limits, often to get ahead, seek approval or both.

This behavior is having a harmful impact on student stress, depression and anxiety — including for those already enrolled in top colleges and universities. In extreme cases, as I learned from watching a recent PBS NewsHour segment about [students who attend MIT](#), this may lead to thoughts or actions of self-harm.

All of us feel sympathy for students who experience anguish and who make poor decisions. I don't understand all the underlying causes of complex and difficult emotions, but I have done my best to reach out to experts for ways to help my students learn from setbacks and then move on.

1. Give frequent low-stakes assessments

Failure on big tests suggests to anxious students that growth is unattainable, and that it's easier to give up. To combat that thinking, I favor frequent low-stakes assessments, where a few bad performances don't devastate an individual's overall grade.

A few years ago, I spoke with Mark A. McDaniel, co-author of “Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning,” and co-director of the Center for Integrative Research on Cognition, Learning, and Education (CIRCLE) at Washington University in St. Louis. McDaniel told me that frequent low-stakes assessments signal to anxious, grade-worried students that, “we're not testing, we're helping you learn.”

It's also important to remember that just like adults, who sometimes experience bad days in the so-called “real world,” a student who has a headache, who is hurting from the loss of a friend or loved one, or is dealing with any other outside struggle, might not perform at optimum levels during an exam. We need to hold students accountable for their learning, but we also need to show compassion.

“I want my students to feel comfortable being a little uncomfortable, which reinforces risk-taking as an important part of successful, lifelong learning.” · [Essay 4.6](#)

2. Allow for full-credit retakes

If teachers must give high-stakes assessments, outside of state-mandated tests, allow for full-credit retakes.

I learned as much from Rick Wormeli, author of my favorite book on education, “Fair Isn’t Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom.”

This approach certainly involves more work, but it’s worth it. When students know their teachers care about them and their learning, their anxiety diminishes.

3. Promote healthy amounts of stress

All of this isn’t to say that teachers should demonize stress and anxiety. I had an earlier email conversation with Jessica Lahey, author of “The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed.”

Humans learn best when we struggle a bit to apply our knowledge to new contexts, according to Lahey, or work to figure out how to apply knowledge to a problem of a slightly higher level of difficulty than we’ve encountered before. If two kids of similar intelligence show up at my classroom door, Lahey went on to say, the kid who is comfortable with frustration and confusion, and consequently more able to take a moment to think rather than give up, will learn more — it’s that simple.

With that insight in mind, I often tell students how stress in healthy amounts helps me rethink ideas, meet deadlines and improve upon my work. I want my students to feel comfortable being a little uncomfortable, which reinforces risk-taking as an important part of successful, lifelong learning.

When it comes to student mental health issues, there is no single magic solution. But that doesn’t mean teachers can’t make immediate and long-term changes to offer students relief. In this respect, I’m trying my best.

Consider your practice

Which assessment practice in your classroom creates useful challenge, and which creates avoidable fear? What could you change while keeping the learning goal demanding?

Essay 4.7

What I Want My Students and My Son to Know

As an educator and a new parent of a son, I intend to do my best to raise him into a caring, responsible individual. In this endeavor, my wife and I are aware of the current political climate, especially the growth of the #MeToo movement, and what that means for treating women, and everyone else, for that matter, with respect, equality, and thoughtfulness.

Unfortunately, those three crucial traits are sorely lacking in American culture today, and our elected representatives, who should strive to embody all things decent, seem to prefer partisan squabbling, name-calling, and behavior so poor that calling it “juvenile” would be overly generous — giving too little credit to children, who know better than many adults in Washington.

As I see it, my role can help to make a difference on that score.

Respect

Teachers must call out leaders who show indifference or worse toward women. This isn’t a practice in political brainwashing, but rather an effort to help young people think and behave kindly and humanely toward each other. With this in mind, I can’t help but think of recent headlines.

President Donald Trump’s claim that he respects women is one thing, but it seems he doesn’t care about how his treatment of them is perceived. As much was evident when he mocked Palo Alto University Professor Christine Blasey Ford, who, after the leaking of a confidential letter, demonstrated outstanding bravery, publicly alleging that when they were teenagers, new Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her.

For the record, I believe Ford. Anybody who would put herself in the middle of a political firestorm, with nothing to gain (and everything to lose), has the right to be believed. But that’s beside the point. At the very least, Ford has the right to be respected, but Trump thinks otherwise, as he made plain at a “Make America Great Again” rally in Mississippi in October 2018, before Kavanaugh had clinched his confirmation.

“‘How did you get home?’” Trump said, mocking Ford at the hearing, as the crowd laughed and cheered. “‘I don’t remember.’ ‘How’d you get there?’ ‘I don’t remember.’ ‘Where is the place?’ ‘I don’t remember.’ ‘How many years ago was

it?” “I don’t know.””

As a human being and as a teacher, I was truly shaken by Trump’s words and the responses they elicited from so many. I would tremble if my students or son responded in a similar fashion, and I write this certain that some (or many) readers will find this suitable cause to accuse me and others in my field of hoping to indoctrinate impressionable young minds. I plead guilty, but only to actively promoting and modeling kindness and respect, including a curiosity to understand new and different views of the world around us. Other than this, I would never tell my students what or how to think, and I value the uniqueness of each of them.

At the rally, Trump also said, “A man’s life is in tatters,” referring to Kavanaugh. Along with respect, I want my son and students to empathize with Ford and her family, who have received death threats, prompting them to move to safer locations. “My greatest fears have been realized — and the reality has been far worse than what I expected,” she told the Judiciary Committee. I would prefer that my students dwell on these words — not those of Trump, or of Kavanaugh, both of whom have everything to gain by another political win.

Equality

Of course, politicians aren’t the only ones lacking in common decency. I also want to help young people become aware of when and how the media treats men and women unfairly, and what to do about it.

I’m no tennis star (in fact, my forehand is almost as embarrassing as my serve), but I enjoy watching the sport. I have nothing kind to say, however, about how the media covered the recent U.S. Open women’s final, especially Serena Williams’s so-called “meltdown” while arguing with chair umpire Carlos Ramos over repeated code violations. Other media outlets used different unkind words — including “[outburst](#),” “[furious rant](#),” and plenty more — for Williams’s behavior, which left her with a \$17,000 fine.

I’m not nearly as concerned about whether Williams was justly or unjustly penalized as I am about how, responding to her attempt to defend herself, the media portrayed her as mentally unstable. As an educator, I shared my disappointment with the media, including foreign news outlets, especially the Australian Herald Sun, which published a horribly racist cartoon of the tennis star.

Slamming Williams doesn't simply stink of racism; it's also misogynistic, telling females to remain silent in times of hardship and real or perceived injustice — that their feelings and sense of truth don't matter, and that nobody wants to hear from them.

I'm in good company. In a powerful opinion piece for [The Washington Post](#), former tennis champion Billie Jean King, now a champion for equality, said, "I understand what motivated Williams to do what she did. And I hope every single girl and woman watching yesterday's match realizes they should always stand up for themselves and for what they believe is right. Nothing will ever change if they don't." As a teacher, and as a father, it's my job to help girls realize the wisdom in King's words, and to help my son grow into a staunch supporter of female empowerment.

Accordingly, I teach students how to write their own opinion pieces, which they can share online or with their local newspapers. My students have powerful voices, and it's my job to help them realize that they can use them to make a difference.

Thoughtfulness

All of this comes back to the current toxic discourse polluting our interactions in every imaginable way. It's not just that we don't want to listen to each other. That would be an improvement. Today, we don't even want to hear from others who, just maybe, hold different views, and somehow, to too many of us, that equates with offense or anti-Americanism.

For example, look no further than politicians, on both sides of the aisle, seeking to block debate on too many matters to list. On college campuses around the country, students are protesting speakers, however controversial and offensive, from even appearing. People have a deep desire to be heard, at the very least. Preventing that from occurring, no matter how offensive the speech, leads to more callousness.

I won't shield young people from potentially offensive or upsetting ideas and events, especially when they appear in the media. Hearing doesn't equate with consent or agreement, a truth that too many of us have forgotten.

No doubt millions felt uneasy, even threatened, during the Judiciary Committee hearing and the testimony of Ford. I want my son to know that opening one's ears

is never as dangerous as closing them. I can only hope that he gets to come of age in a nation where people do more than tolerate hearing, but actively listen to each other with the respect and kindness we all owe one another. I remain hopeful that such a day will come, if not in my lifetime, then in my son's.

Consider your practice

How do students experience respect, equality, and thoughtful listening in your classroom? What do you model when someone says something you strongly disagree with?

Rethinking Grades, Tests, and Rewards

Certainly, teachers should always treat students like adults — and grant them equally deserved respect. At the same time, students are still kids, and it’s sometimes illogical and impractical to hold them to adult standards when they lack adult life experience.

Essay 5.1

Homework: Reconsidering Its Purpose, Amount, and Weight

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[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

To get a clearer understanding of the purpose and value of homework, I recently read Dr. Cathy Vatterott’s engaging book, [Rethinking Homework: Best Practices That Support Diverse Needs](#). She addresses my concern about the utility of homework directly. “The attempts of researchers to answer that basic question have led to conclusions that are inconsistent at best and contradictory at worst,” she writes. “Instead of being apologetic, teachers who don’t give homework should simply explain that they do such a good job of teaching that homework is not necessary,” she later states.

In the class described here, I heeded Vatterott’s advice. I assign nightly homework only when it’s most necessary, instead having students work in class on larger writing and research projects, or study for upcoming assessments. On occasion, I also encourage students to think up their own assignments to convey deeper, more meaningful understanding. I’m a big proponent of self-directed learning, and I look forward to continuing these efforts in the near future.

I spoke with Vatterott and discovered that we think even more alike than I had realized, especially with respect to limiting the amount of homework students receive. Vatterott tells me she had appeared on Minnesota Public Radio, discussing school with a “pro homework” advocate:

She was saying, well, it's good for kids to learn to delay gratification, and it's good for them to do boring tasks. I was like, are you kidding me? Don't you think there's going to be enough boring tasks in their life that they have to do? Do you think that we have to give them boring tasks? I guess I don't look at that as the job of childhood. I worry more about what we're doing to kids' natural inclination for learning.

In trying to make learning relevant, I also strive to make it enjoyable. My students learn to ask critical questions and form coherent thoughts not only through essays, quizzes, and tests, but also by learning and showing an interest in mastering emerging Web 2.0 tools and 21st-century technologies.

In an earlier course, my American government students learned basic video editing software to film a debate on the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act. While technologically impressive, their performance impressed me all the more in its substance and civility. [Watch the student debate.](#)

Another group of students built their own website, [*Making a Difference: Give a Hoot about Learning*](#), which featured their thoughts on an array of education topics.

Vatterott reaffirms my convictions: “I’m more interested in helping kids stay excited about learning and creating a task that they want to do, that makes them feel smarter and that makes them excited about the topic that they’re learning,” she says.

Vatterott and I also discuss the purpose of homework, and whether it should count: “Why would we grade homework? If you’re sending it home to check for understanding and they don’t understand it, then we shouldn’t penalize them,” she says. “If it’s for practice, and we’re just checking to see that they’re practicing correctly, why would we put that as part of their grade?”

This makes a lot of sense. After all, not all coaches record a player’s statistics during practice, nor do they always penalize individuals for making mistakes. Instead, the most effective coaches encourage athletes to recover from failure so that these individuals can excel during competition. Increasingly, I believe the same should hold true for the classroom. Teachers should treat homework as practice, which boosts student confidence to excel on formal assessments.

“There has to be a way for it to be okay for a kid to not complete or not

understand an assignment,” Vatterott tells me, as I nod my head in agreement. “I think there’s not enough communication going on between the teachers and the kids about the assignments, about what didn’t you understand, why didn’t you complete it. I think we have this rigid rule that says you need to complete this, and if you didn’t, there’s going to be a penalty.”

More schools are doing away with grading homework, Vatterott says, noting that she’s seen an upward trend in the last few years. I’m equally interested to hear Vatterott’s take on why many students don’t complete their homework, and if motivation, or a lack thereof, really plays that huge of a role in those instances.

“I think sometimes kids don’t do it because they’re burned out, because they’ve got homework in four different subjects, and they’ve already worked a six-hour day by the time they come home, and they’re ready to give up,” Vatterott says. “But when you look at the concept of motivation, let’s get real here. Motivation — who wants to do something that makes them feel stupid?”

If teachers must assign homework, Vatterott suggests that tasks should be time-based, not task-based.

“People who work at a slower pace, they’re coming home and they’re looking at the work in front of them, and they’re seeing no end in sight, and it’s really depressing to them,” she says. “They’re saying, ‘Oh, my God, I’m going to be working on this all night.’ If they knew they only had to work on a particular piece for ‘x amount of time,’ I think you would see a lot more compliance from kids with what they’re doing.”

Moving forward, I encourage all teachers to contemplate what homework they assign and what purpose it serves. I know I am thinking hard about those things.

Consider your practice

What is one homework task asking students to learn, and how long does it actually take different students? Would knowing those times change what you assign or how you assess it?

Essay 5.2

The Differentiated Classroom: Doing What’s Fair

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[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

A change of mind within this essay

I begin with a grading decision I came to regret. The change is from treating a missing assignment chiefly as a reason to punish toward asking what would help the student demonstrate learning.

It was my first year of teaching, and I had assigned my 11th-grade history students their first take-home essay. After two weeks and several check-ins, one student (let's call him John) failed to submit anything. I gave John a "0," which plummeted his grade along with any sense of hope that he could recover in my class, much less excel.

I had made the real mistake, as Rick Wormeli, one of America's first National Board Certified Teachers, makes clear in one of the most impactful education books I've ever read: [*Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*](#).

"Differentiated instruction teachers do what's fair and developmentally appropriate for the students they teach, and those students change every year," he writes. "They respond to the students in front of them rather than generic middle or high school students. Because instruction is inseparable from assessment, differentiating teachers' grading policies are also responsive to the individuals they teach."

I failed John. I should have investigated why he didn't complete the assignment. Was it because he didn't understand the material? Was it because life got in the way? Whatever the reason, six years later, I refuse to imagine that "laziness" had anything to do with it. I firmly believe that all students want to do well. By giving John no way out, I deprived him of the real learning experience. This is made even clearer when I speak with Wormeli, among our nation's most revered and accomplished educators:

A kid doesn't do any assignment, no matter how large, and I just give him a zero? One, he doesn't get competent. He remains incompetent. Is that really the legacy I want to carry forward? Incompetence, but be able to tell all my colleagues in the larger society, "Oh, I caught him. He couldn't get past me with missing a deadline, let me tell you."

Or is it, "Hey, you screwed up, child. Let me walk side by side with you and develop the competence and the wisdom that comes from doing something a

second and third time around, where you'll get your act together.” Both of those are greater gifts in the long run, than simply labeling a child for a failed deadline.

I also failed John by allowing a 16-year-old's lack of emotional or mature development to hold his learning hostage. Certainly, teachers should always treat students like adults — and grant them equally deserved respect. At the same time, students are still kids, and it's sometimes illogical and impractical to hold them to adult standards when they lack adult life experience.

As a younger teacher, I would frequently have these discussions with Adrianna Truby, a close friend and colleague in the English department. I couldn't ask for a better mentor than Truby, one of the most talented, effective and beloved teachers I've ever known. She would often caution me against holding students to unrealistic expectations, while always challenging them and striving to help all pupils reach their full potential. Wormeli would no doubt love to observe Truby, a masterful teacher, who epitomizes the ideal of differentiated instruction.

But Truby and I are lucky to work at Palmer Trinity, a wonderful independent school where most teachers teach four sections, and everybody has an average class size of 14. I ask Wormeli how public school teachers, with significantly more students, could possibly manage to practice differentiated instruction.

“I think it's preposterous to think that you can differentiate all the time with every kid,” Wormeli says. “You really can't because most schools are set up to be the factory model, but [can you do it] 51 percent of the time or more? The majority of the time, yes When people say they don't have time to differentiate or it's impractical, they're really saying, ‘I don't have time to teach well.’ You probably wouldn't say that, but you would say, ‘You know what? I'll do the best we can within the parameters, and once in a while I'll deviate from the schemata we set up for ourselves, so I can live up to the promise to really teach everyone. Not just the easiest ones, but everyone who is in our democratic society.’”

In my short career as an education reporter, I have never spoken with somebody as practical and impactful as Wormeli. I can't recommend his work highly enough, and I wish his books were essential reading for all teachers.

Consider your practice

Think of a student whose grade fell because work was missing. What did the

grade tell you about their learning, and what opportunity could help you find out more?

Essay 5.3

Creativity: What the SAT Doesn't Assess

Original date unconfirmed · July 10, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

When I was a high school junior, like any well-intentioned mother, mine enrolled me in a Kaplan SAT preparation course. To this day, I can think of no greater scam or bigger waste of money. I took a mock exam on the first day while the “instructor” read the New York Times and placed his feet on the desk.

“You’re guaranteed to score better before the end of the course,” he said, as I submitted my answer sheet.

For the next several weeks, under the guise of valuable educational development, I learned to trick the exam. In many instances, I could find correct answers without ever understanding why they were correct. On the last day, my instructor gave us a final pep talk before distributing the final mock exam — the same exact one we took on the first day.

Well, I want my money back. I scored horribly on the exam, barely breaking 1,000. All the same, I managed to graduate summa cum laude from Brandeis University, among the finest places of higher learning in the entire country. Because of my developing reporting skills, I also managed a coveted freelancing gig with The Boston Globe. Oh, and I earned a master’s degree in comparative history, also from Brandeis, while studying under Antony Polonsky.

I embraced three qualities that no standardized test can ever hope to measure: creativity, adaptability and good old-fashioned work ethic. I’m dismayed at how many others aren’t afforded a better higher learning experience because of poor test scores. I’m hugely appreciative that Brandeis took a big risk on me, but I fear that I’m the kind of student that too many colleges pass over.

I spoke with Andrew Ferguson, author of [*Crazy U: One Dad’s Crash Course in Getting His Kid into College*](#). I respect Ferguson to high-heaven, even though he holds a different view:

“I don’t know if I’d say I’m pro-SAT, I’m anti anti-SAT,” Ferguson says. “There

is pretty good, established data now that the SAT is one fairly good predictor of how kids are going to do in the first year of college. The predictive capacity fades as the kid goes through school, but it is something that actually tells you something about how the kid is going to do. It's simply a fact."

I am always cautious of invoking anecdotal evidence, fearing that readers may perceive my own experiences as indicative of a larger truth. All the same, I imagine that people reading this article know of others, or perhaps themselves who support my assessment.

Ferguson and I disagree, but I find solace from education researcher Tony Wagner, author of [*Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change The World*](#), and among our nation's most eminent education reformers. I ask him if America has gone test crazy:

"I think that we sometimes talk about No Child Left Behind as being No Child Left Untested," Wagner tells me.

Instead of testing kids on "who-cares" content-based knowledge, let's test them on something that truly matters — creativity. As we prepare kids to succeed in the 21st century, I can think of no more coveted skill.

I search the Web and look for creativity tests. [I stumble upon a fun but non-comprehensive quiz by Mind Tools, a nifty website.](#)

I dig deeper and discover the [Torrance Center for Creativity and Talent Development](#) at the University of Georgia, which, according to its website, seeks to "investigate, implement, and evaluate techniques for enhancing creative thinking and to facilitate national and international systems that support creative development."

I'm intrigued to learn of the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, a test typically given to "gifted" individuals. I find a few [sample questions from The Daily Beast](#).

I'm glad that at least some students are being assessed on something that truly matters. I don't know much about the Torrance test, including how it's administered and evaluated, but it appears extremely subjective.

I enjoy listening to "More than 50 Years Of Putting Kids' Creativity To The Test," an insightful NPR podcast :

[Listen: More Than 50 Years of Putting Kids' Creativity to the Test](#)

In comparison to the SAT, this certainly seems like a more worthwhile exam — but alas, it's still an exam.

Still, I'm thankful that students aren't going to Kaplan, paying huge amounts of money to fake being creative.

Consider your practice

What important ability in your students is least visible in the tests you use?

How could you give that ability a serious place in your assessment?

Essay 5.4

Rethinking Student Award Ceremonies

Original date unconfirmed · June 22, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Editorial date note: The author had not yet become a parent when he wrote this essay.

We live in a trophy-obsessed culture, constantly seeking public recognition for what we should be doing well in the first place — whether that's our jobs or home life. All of this is just as true in the school setting, and at the end of each year — sometimes, more often — I read or hear about students honored in lavish, over-the-top athletic and academic award ceremonies.

Here is why, for the most part, I don't support award ceremonies:

1. Most schools already use grades, and thereby function on an incentive-based platform. I don't like that system, but I do my best to work with it — as well as to find some redeeming rationale for its existence. Whatever your thoughts, I urge you to consider whether the line gets crossed when schools also champion academic and athletic awards — or any other additional external motivator. As it stands, too many students care too much about the grade, and far too little about engaging in the learning process.
2. Most people (parents, teachers, administrators, students, and even athletic coaches) know who excels at what. With each announcement, ceremony-goers sarcastically say to themselves, or those sitting nearby, “Wow, that's another surprise!” There is merit in public recognition, but if the public already recognizes the merits of the person being recognized, what's the point? I don't believe that students are so insecure that they require a

ceremony to affirm their accomplishments and contributions. I grant the need for rare exceptions, but only if a student has accomplished something unbelievably fantastic, original, and moving. In that vein, I think of Jack Andraka, who at 16 made significant contributions to cancer research.

3. Too often, award ceremonies celebrate straight-A students for “going above and beyond,” “inspiring others to improve,” “constantly demonstrating expert-level mastery,” or something similarly impressive and affectionate. But what if a subject comes effortlessly to the bright-eyed student walking to the stage to receive her award, to the sound of thunderous applause from a crowded auditorium? In such a scenario, it’s important to know what one is really celebrating: hard work, perhaps, but to an equal or greater extent, also an innate intellect, granted to the recipient at the moment of her conception. To be blunt, why stop at celebrating only the child?
4. Along those lines, I’m nearly as convinced that award ceremonies are more for parents than anybody else. Let me say that I’m not a parent, and that I couldn’t understand the pride that comes with bragging (in the best sense of the term) about one’s child. All the same, when parents arrive with an array of recording devices, more concerned with documenting the event than truly being present in it, I wonder certain things. Will this be the only time that their child wins something, so that for posterity, they must keep the camera flashing? Or do the parents simply want more photos to covet, to help them live vicariously through their child’s accomplishments?
5. Conversely, what does the student think of her family’s making such a big deal of her awards? What if next year she doesn’t win an award? Will her parents be angry or disappointed? Will that student consider taking steps, honest or dishonest, to ensure continued success? Will this affect how she goes about learning? Will this student feel equally safe in taking risks, and learning from failure? Or will she do whatever she can to play it safe, all to win some award?
6. What about the vast majority of students who never win anything? Do they feel reconciled to their inadequacies? How does never winning impact how they approach learning? Thirsty for an award, are they more likely to cut corners or take fewer risks? What long-term effects will this have? What about that student who, after working harder than anybody else, still can’t get

it? Will he give up? What if he can't afford a tutor? What if he works after school to help support his family, and he can't stay late to receive extra help?

“As it stands, too many students care too much about the grade, and far too little about engaging in the learning process.” · [Essay 5.4](#)

I don't mean to argue that award ceremonies are never warranted. However, they shouldn't be reserved for only the brightest students and most talented athletes — with a few awards sprinkled throughout for kids who, lacking such praiseworthy attributes, still try hard.

Consider your practice

Who is repeatedly recognized at your school, and whose growth goes unseen? What would recognition look like if it helped students value learning without turning classmates into rivals?

Essay 5.5

Newsflash: Punishment Doesn't Change Student Behavior

Original date unconfirmed · July 9, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I'm a new teacher, and while reading my first batch of research papers, I'm struck by one student (let's call her Jane) who uses unusually high-register prose and analysis. Jane is a different student from the one whose plagiarism I did not report in [Essay 3.4](#).

I copy a few of Jane's sentences into a Google search, hoping nothing suspicious will appear. Unfortunately, I'm directed to a word-for-word match from a Wikipedia article on America's Revolutionary War. The next day, I confront Jane after class and ask her to come clean. Contrary to all logic, as well as incriminating evidence against her, she professes her innocence.

Jane goes before the dean, and eventually the honor council. She receives an "F" on the assignment, and she's also placed on academic probation for whatever remains of the semester.

For a short while, Jane shows renewed determination. But before too long, I hear word that she's involved in another cheating incident — this time on a science

lab.

It's seven years later, and it takes Alan E. Kazdin, the John M. Musser Professor of Psychology and Child Psychiatry at Yale University, to make me rethink whether punishment is an effective deterrent.

“When it comes to parenting, the first thing to bear in mind is that most of us rely too heavily on consequences — punishments, especially, but also rewards — when trying to change a child's behavior or mindset,” writes Kazdin in his brilliant and accessible new book, [*The Everyday Parenting Toolkit: The Kazdin Method for Easy, Step-by-Step Lasting Change for You and Your Child*](#).

I recently spoke with Kazdin, who also serves as director of the [Yale Parenting Center](#), to learn about behavior modification. It's not long before I realize that even though Kazdin writes about small children, his reasoning holds as much water for teens or adults.

In fact, his work should be required reading for teachers, coaches, administrators, and disciplinarians. He tells me that there exists a natural tendency to react to the negative, all in an effort to stop a certain behavior in its immediacy.

“You scream at your child, you reprimand your child, you hit your child, you shake your child — whatever you do to punish, leads to an instantaneous stopping of that behavior,” says Kazdin. “Whatever it is, they just stop. What the research shows, is that after that stops, it doesn't change the rate of that behavior for the week, for the month, for the year. It has no really enduring effect beyond that moment.”

I still think it's critically important to hold students responsible for their misdeeds and to penalize accordingly — especially to maintain a sense of academic fairness. I am far less certain, however, that any consequences deemed appropriate by deans or honor councils have a lasting impact on changing offenders' behavior. I think of Jane, my former history student. Even after facing disciplinary action, she continued to demonstrate academic dishonesty.

It's foolish to think that punishment will ever induce enduring change in one's behavior. As Kazdin shows in his book, there exists a much more effective way to help not just children, but students of all ages to embrace genuine transformations.

As one example, Kazdin and I chat about antecedents and challenges —

especially with respect to encouraging kids to try new things.

You say, “You’re a little too young to brush. Actually, I bet you can’t brush your teeth because you’re so young.” What the child does then is he smiles and says, “I can brush my teeth. I can...” “No, no, you don’t have to. Wait until you’re bigger. When you’re bigger child, when you’re bigger, a little more grownup, you’ll be able to.” “No, no, I can do it. I can do it.” “OK, let’s just try it once, but I don’t think so.”

I also coach cross country, and Kazdin’s example reminds me of how I sometimes use negative suggestions to empower my runners. Three years ago, I told a talented athlete, Luis Asensio, that he wasn’t developed enough to sustain a 5:40-per-mile pace. Of course, we both knew that this wasn’t the case. I had every confidence in him. But all the same, he needed an edge to prove to me that I was wrong, that he could indeed compete with the best.

Guess what? It worked. [He finished at States with an impressive 5K time of 17:30.](#)

I return to Jane’s experience. Certainly, she committed a serious offense, but I wonder if I’m also to blame, at least partially, for not offering a clearer antecedent. Prior to the paper’s due date, I should have explained what constitutes plagiarism, as well as encouraged students to avoid it. Instead, I falsely assumed that Jane’s behavior would change after the fact, and that immediate consequences would definitely set her straight. Put simply, I thought that she would get the message.

But as Kazdin tells me, getting messages does not change behavior. “There are a bunch of myths. One of these is the teaching moment — it’s a myth. Three strikes and you’re out — the effectiveness is a myth. All these things don’t change behavior. I wish they did. I would love it if they did,” Kazdin says.

Teachers can learn plenty more from Kazdin, including how modeling and pointing out effective behavior has a positive impact on others.

“Parents have this very effective tool that they’re not using as well as they could, and that is modeling,” Kazdin says. “We know that when you model things, it changes the child’s brain. . . . It’s a very powerful tool parents have, and they kind of carry a hammer around not realizing it’s a hammer.”

This psychology is supported by “massive research,” Kazdin says, and I can’t

help but wonder if enough schools are trying to adapt this scientifically proven way of instilling real, deep change in student behavior.

This academic year, I aim to make a more concerted effort to highlight effective student work. If a student composes an especially strong essay, I hope that my sharing it will motivate others to reach similar mastery — and encourage more students to seek my help.

Of course, it's important to realize that behavior modification takes time. It's impractical to think that one's mindset will change overnight. As educators, we should rethink how disciplinary action helps students learn and become better people.

Consider your practice

After a student breaks a rule, what do you want them to do differently next time? Does your response teach and support that behavior, as well as hold them accountable?

Student Voice Requires Adult Courage

I shouldn't have to feel lucky to work at a school that trusts students with real journalism — where they can ask hard questions, publish uncomfortable truths, and put their names on work they truly own. That should be standard practice, not a rare privilege.

Essay 6.1

The Dead or Dying State of Student Journalism at Independent Schools

March 8, 2019 · Age of Awareness (Medium)

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

Editorial note: The subscription prices and school expenses in this essay are historical figures from its 2019 publication, not current quotations.

From the fourth grade on, and now as a high school teacher at my alma mater, I've been privileged to belong to the independent school community. Not only have I experienced firsthand what makes our small but vibrant community special, but I've also connected with colleagues and peer institutions to hone my craft — as well as learn more about the values our schools share. Across the board, I've found that independent schools pride themselves on offering one-on-one attention, smaller class sizes, and a caring and nurturing environment for students to reach their potential.

Many independent schools also share similar mission statements, which emphasize critical thinking, communication, and creativity. Moreover, the word “leadership” comes up often while scrolling through private school admissions materials — and while I believe that our collective school community upholds many of its core values, as a whole we are deficient at offering and teaching journalism, including newspaper production, essential for fostering those values.

What's more, in the so-called “fake-news” era, with divided politicians unable or unwilling to agree upon a common set of facts, and with President Trump calling

the media the “enemy of the people,” more than ever it’s critical for schools to invest in building robust journalism programs. As I write this article, I can almost hear administrators, who say that their schools already teach media literacy through existing curriculum. I maintain that unless students are also creating and disseminating their own news on a frequent basis, meant for public consumption, this is wholly insufficient.

Measuring Lack of Student Media at Independent Schools

Beyond a handful of the nation’s most prestigious and oldest independent schools, I fear that too few independent schools offer journalism programs or foster student publications. Where they do exist, they are likely to be on life support. This is a shame, especially because of journalism’s increasing centrality to everything that private schools hold dear about education, not the least of which is equipping young minds with skills to succeed after graduation.

Several years ago, I spoke with Mark Briggs, a former Ford Fellow of Entrepreneurial Journalism at the Poynter Institute, who told me how experience in the newsroom gives students a big advantage in an increasingly competitive job market.

“If you can produce students who command a very diverse set of skills, who can also present themselves and create ideas and get behind them, and even sell those ideas — that’s the entrepreneurial spirit that we need in journalists,” says Briggs, also author of *Journalism Next: Practical Guide to Digital Reporting and Publishing*. “To me, that’s kind of the Holy Grail right now of journalism education.”

I couldn’t agree more, but I would add that while many students know how to create content, too few know how to produce high-quality content, the kind that makes them stand out to not only college admission officers, but also potential employers. We need to teach and encourage students to create and share original, quality content to brand themselves and their abilities in an ocean of increasingly indistinguishable resumes.

Beyond journalism’s capacity to foster an informed citizenry, the discipline might also help students achieve academic success. A comprehensive 2008 study commissioned by the [Newspaper Association of America Foundation](#) found, among other benefits from supporting student voice, that “students with

journalism experience in high school did better than non-journalism students in terms of both high school grades and ACT scores.”

The independent school community must take a difficult first step in acknowledging that when it comes to supporting student voice, in which journalism and student media play essential roles, we have serious work to do; 200 institutions claim membership in the [Association of Independent Schools in New England](#), the geographic epicenter of the private school world. Yet Helen Smith, who serves as Executive Director of the New England Scholastic Press Association (NESPA), recently told me that the organization’s membership usually includes fewer than a dozen independent schools, compared to 70 or so public schools.

In New England, as elsewhere around the country, public schools far outnumber private schools, which likely accounts for the disparity in NESPA membership. Still, no math justifies any New England private school’s not paying an annual \$50 membership fee, especially if that school wishes to stay true to its mission. In addition to providing a network of other advisers and student publications, NESPA provides consulting services and award recognition.

“I can’t imagine how any school, private or public, can be serious about student voice and not belong to NESPA, the region’s premier scholastic journalism body,” I told Smith.

“In any school, I think an awful lot of what determines the strength of student media depends on what administrators and department heads are ready to encourage,” Smith said.

Her words ring true, and I wish that more private schools had the foresight to encourage student media.

But it’s not just on a local level that support for private school student media falls short. I spoke with the President of [the Journalism Education Association](#) (JEA), Sarah Nichols, who oversees the nation’s premier scholastic educational body for student media and advisers. She told me that her organization doesn’t keep track of public versus private school membership, “but comparatively, the private-school number is quite low.”

All of this reveals a simple but brutal truth — unless a private school is working to establish a dynamic journalism program, it’s not doing all that it can to support

students or sustain its philosophy. Furthermore, at least in Massachusetts, many schools are about to break the \$50,000 tuition ceiling, making any financial excuse for inaction completely unjustifiable.

To learn more about the quality of student media at private schools, I connected with Erica Salkin, a professor of communication studies at Whitworth University (WA), who is writing a book about the subject. She has spent the previous several years reaching out to different kinds of private schools, learning about the strengths and weaknesses of their journalism programs, or if they exist at all. In reviewing her findings, Salkin said she found three chief reasons why administrators decide against taking action.

We Just Don't Have the Money

“One was we just don’t have the money,” Salkin told me. “We don’t have the funds. It’d be great, but we don’t have the money.”

Upon hearing this, I cringed, telling Salkin, “this is a lazy and illegitimate excuse.” I didn’t share these words lightly, and I couldn’t hold back my frustration. I advise [*The Gator*](#), the multi-award-winning online student newspaper of Brimmer and May School (MA), and here is an exact rundown of the School’s total expenses for student journalism, costs which we control by operating mostly on digital platforms. Not only does doing so incur only nominal costs, but it’s also green, which comports with many schools’ philosophies.

A yearly subscription option to WordPress, the industry standard among website-construction software services, is \$300, which includes access to live-chat support, for schools with questions about settings or controls. Members also don’t need to worry about updating security patches, which is done for them. This plan also gives them access to several special templates, which they can enhance with additional coding. Last spring, *The Gator* outsourced programming for several design modifications to [Codeable](#) for a fair price, but I argue that aesthetics should come second to content quality.

There can be bumps in the road for digital media; this fall *The Gator* was hacked by an unknown entity, resulting in inappropriate and offensive headline changes. My students published a [special notice](#) to readers, and WordPress responded quickly by updating security settings on the backend, and urging my editors to take advantage of two-step password authentication. No significant controversy

ensued, and the School seemed to appreciate the transparency and quick action.

No other expenditures are essential, although *The Gator* has purchased memberships to other platforms, all easily embeddable to the site. These include a \$63 subscription to [SoundCloud](#) Pro to host podcasts, [Vimeo](#) Plus for \$59.95 to host video, [Shorthand](#) for \$500 to produce creative layouts, and about \$100 worth of credit on [Bigstock](#) to feature non-student-taken photographs. Those users who need to limit costs can easily upload video and audio content directly onto their sites.

If you can't think of anybody at your school with the technological know-how to learn WordPress, I would encourage you to ask for student input. I would bet that tech-savvy, dedicated students could take the lead, as they should with all aspects of scholastic journalism. Regardless of how much help is needed, I'm impressed by [SNO Sites](#), which specializes in helping schools launch and maintain WordPress scholastic journalism sites for \$400 a year, plus a one-time setup fee of \$250.

If this is too much money, Nichols reminds me that schools don't have to pay a dime.

"You do not need to host and build your own website if you can't," she says.

"Even if you want to have a newspaper or a news magazine that is traditionally laid out like a magazine or a paper, you can just go on [issuu.com](#) and present it online, not actually printed."

Teachers can also work with students to share quality content on Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube, Nichols tells me, adding that students are putting themselves out there whether we're paying for it or not. "We might as well work together for a really educationally sound experience with some training and some resources to do it their way," she said.

Anecdotally, I've also heard from colleagues at peer schools who argue that even with minimal or no publication costs, they wouldn't be able to find and hire a person to teach and advise student media, without needing that individual to also teach other courses. My reply is that if schools can hire and pay for athletic coaches, as well as help to oversee other auxiliary programming, they can also hire and pay somebody to oversee student media initiatives. It's all about priorities, and I question any independent school that does not move mountains to support student media.

It's also worth noting that many new journalism teachers lack experience. Many helpful and affordable resources exist (which I explain later on). All that needs to happen is for schools to place an adult in the room. All the same, students should assume as much of the responsibility as possible. Now, five years into advising *The Gator*, I'm practically invisible. What readers see online is entirely student produced, even as I stick around if students request help editing, or want my thoughts on ethical considerations.

Curious about how often schools look to hire journalism teachers, I reached out to [Carney Sandoe & Associates](#), the largest teacher-placement organization in the independent school world. According to Director of Communications Julie Landis, in the past decade, only a handful of journalism jobs have been listed with the company each year. "In our opinion, a job like that is often not listed externally," Landis wrote me via an electronic exchange. "Instead, a current English teacher might take on such a role, so we might not see the full picture. It is indeed still quite a small number."

There is nothing wrong with an existing hire also taking on a journalism position, even if that individual lacks experience in the subject. Even so, when it comes to assessing the priority of student media at independent schools, I'm not comforted by what Landis shared with me; quite the opposite.

It Doesn't Align with Our Mission

Even if money did pose a legitimate barrier to schools' launching successful journalism programs, which it does not, I was even more shocked when Salkin told me that several schools she reached out to reported that student media programs don't align with their missions.

"There are schools that don't understand the valuable role that student publications can have in student development — in the development of voice, the development of identity, the ability to engage a public, to understand community issues," Salkin said. "There is so much documented benefit to working on student press that, unless your mission is, 'We don't want to teach, and we want them to come out incredibly compliant,' you cannot claim that you're living by your mission statement."

Salkin explained that her surveys of schools were anonymous, making it difficult for her to dig deeper into specific cases. In my anecdotal, less scientific

experience, I can't help but think that too many schools claim mission misalignment as an excuse for fear of being criticized by young journalists. Why else would schools fight against scholastic journalism, which caters so well to student agency while also cultivating an array of highly transferable communication skills?

Such fear is entirely misplaced, especially as independent schools emphasize the importance of community, and I can't think of any successful community that doesn't coexist with a thriving press, keeping its leaders honest and accountable.

"Transparency is really key," Salkin tells me. "I think that people are more open to that now than ever, because they're seeing other places without transparency. There's an argument to be made that 'you don't trust us, or you don't think this is how it is, let us show you. Let us put it all out there for you.'"

Even a quick glance at *The Gator* reveals overwhelmingly positive coverage, an impression that is justly deserved. In fact, before I wrote this essay, the National Scholastic Press Association (NSPA) published *Expressing Ourselves*, a featured piece about the School's strong arts program, on a shortlist for [Digital Story of the Year](#). However, student publication should not be a mere arm of the public relations office. My students don't shy from controversy.

Gabe Bryan '19 recently won NSPA's Opinion Story-of-the-Year for [Speak Truth to Power Amid Sexual Abuse Claims](#), an honor akin to a Pulitzer Prize in student journalism. He doesn't pull any punches: "Something is rotten in America, and the stench is emanating from our political leaders and media elite, who either don't know how or refuse to treat women with dignity and respect," his lede reads. "Let's start at the top."

The Gator has also featured controversial stories about the immediate community, including a touchier but important piece last spring, [Brimmer Not Immune to Vaping Trend](#). While reporting, students acted responsibly by speaking with administrators, who requested that the online publication neither identify nor provide pseudonyms for sources, worried about harming an individual's potential prospects for the future. The editors agreed, and the story ran on the front page, where it became the most read article for over a month.

More recently, *The Gator* ran another critical story, [Admin. Unveils Additional Midterm Policy Changes](#), which highlighted inconsistencies over the last three years. The editors, seeing that the administration felt uneasy about the piece,

assured them that the article would be fair, balanced, and thorough. To assure administrators that this would be the case, the editors even made the decision to share the article with the head of school in advance. It's important to note that students chose this course of action, and that the School never threatened to censor the piece. In the end, the story appeared without a storm — or at least one that I'm aware of. The students kept the community informed on an issue of major substance, and they felt proud about holding the School's proverbial feet to the fire.

At times, *The Gator* is also critical of School policies in its opinion pages. Last spring, Camille Cherney won a local scholastic journalism award for her piece, [*It's Time to Rethink Graduating in White*](#). One passage is worthy of quoting at length, as it exemplifies how scholastic journalism has the potential to foster eloquent and passionate writing:

As the end of the academic year quickly approaches, some students and faculty are questioning the strict dress code for graduation.

Since before the merger of the Brimmer School and the May School in 1939, female students have been required to wear white dresses to graduation.

The tradition was instituted long, long ago, and it's time to examine the relevance of the dress-code. White is traditionally a symbol of virginity, innocence, and goodness. These traits are antiquated in a time when both women and men are defying gender stereotypes.

The color white also symbolizes marriage, implying that female graduates are ready to find a husband. Purity should not be idealized as an essential feminine quality. Instead, the School should encourage individuality and recognize that femininity can be expressed in many different ways.

Moreover, the dress code does not address the concerns of students who do not identify as a woman or a man. Some do not want to express themselves in a purely feminine or a purely masculine way.

It remains to be seen whether graduating seniors in 2019 will be able to wear non-white colors at commencement. But what's clear is how much Brimmer supports student voice, even thoughtful, civil dissent. Whether because of or despite this reality, our Pre-K–12 community continues to flourish. In fact, we had completed a multi-million-dollar addition, featuring a high-tech science

classroom, media center, Maker Space, and Innovation Center.

Lack of Student Interest

Brimmer’s impressive improvements to the physical plant have transformed our small school of just under 400 students. It’s worth noting that *The Gator* wrote an [editorial](#) praising those involved in the effort. Equally noteworthy, with an average of only 32 students in each high school grade, journalism is consistently one of the most popular electives and meets three times a week.

Last spring, 27 students in grades 9–12 enrolled in the class, which is dedicated to producing *The Gator*, making it the second most popular elective in the School, right behind chorus. This fall, to make things more manageable for our student-editors, we had no choice but to limit the class size to 18. When it gets down to it, all of this is to say that no matter the size of your school, scholastic journalism should exist, and thrive.

I was dismayed, then, when Nichols told me that a lack of student interest also dissuaded private schools from offering journalism, including the chance to work on a student newspaper. I cringed as she did her best to summarize her findings: “Our students are trying to do so many things that student media is just not on their radar, because they don’t see it as getting them into the elite colleges and universities. They would much rather do rocket club, or they would much rather do debate or student council — the things they feel are the big-money activities that are going to give them more recognition.”

If students don’t consider journalism a “big-money activity,” the independent school world is in deeper trouble than I originally thought. I trust Nichols’s research, but I refuse to believe that students actually feel this way. Nichols agrees, and we both feel that any assertion of a lack of student interest is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nichols puts it best: “‘Our students aren’t interested, so we won’t have a newspaper.’ We don’t have a newspaper, so how are students supposed to get interested in it?”

However, even if most students at a given school lack interest in journalism, schools have a responsibility to bring in teachers trained to instruct students in essential disciplines — like math and history. Of course, many students detest math and history, yet schools still require courses in those disciplines. I believe

this is necessary and proper, as young people must be exposed to various methods of thinking.

We shouldn't offer excuses for not having a vibrant culture of student media in our schools. If we know that something with documented benefit to students, like math and history, is required of students, regardless of interest or proficiency, there is no excuse for not making journalism at least an option.

Help Is Available

If you don't know where to start in fostering student media in your school, the best place to look is the JEA. Nichols tells me that her organization wants to be your partner every step of the way. This includes training teachers to become journalism advisers. The organization also offers a mentorship program, as well as an entire sample curriculum for journalism education. As Nichols puts it,

Any truly good administrator is a teacher, and any truly good teacher understands how kids learn, and who doesn't want a kid to learn? Who doesn't want a kid to be the decision-maker? Who doesn't want a kid to have to grapple with these really tough choices, and to get it right and to be held accountable to this huge, huge audience and to a team of people working day in and day out to do good? We want to help you do it right. All you have to do is offer journalism.

I also suggest looking into joining your state scholastic journalism association, which can be found with a quick Google search. [The Columbia Scholastic Press Association](#), as well as NSPA, in addition to offering terrific educational support, gives annual national awards in virtually every category of scholastic journalism.

Lastly, ask schools with established journalism programs for free advice. Along those lines, don't be afraid of contacting public schools with award-winning publications. I can't express how much I've learned from more experienced advisers, no matter from what type of school.

Of course, I'm more than happy to help however I can. Ultimately, I aim to spearhead a group of private schools invested in supporting quality student journalism. I envision that this process will play a critical role in helping to guide private schools, which have concerns and questions unlike those of the public and charter school sectors, in launching successful campaigns in student journalism.

We should not wait to get started. I'm filled with excitement upon considering the untapped potential in our wider community. Let this be the start of something special.

Consider your practice

If your school says it values student voice, what time, funding, and adult support does it provide for student journalism? What could you help put in place?

Essay 6.2

If a School Won't Support a Robust Student Newspaper, Don't Trust It

November 25, 2025 · Age of Awareness (Medium)

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

I advise an award-winning student newspaper at a small independent school. People keep telling me how “lucky” I am. They’re right — I am lucky. But that is exactly the problem.

I shouldn't have to feel lucky to work at a school that trusts students with real journalism — where they can ask hard questions, publish uncomfortable truths, and put their names on work they truly own. That should be standard practice, not a rare privilege.

[My role](#) is not to rewrite their work. It is to sit beside students staring at a blank Google Doc and ask, “What is the real story here? Where is your tension? What is your evidence?” I push them to think harder, dig deeper, and own every word under their byline.

Once a week, I walk in with a big box of Dunkin' Donuts. Not as a reward, but as a ritual — a reminder that we are in this together. We argue about edits, celebrate small wins, laugh when a headline completely whiffs, and then get back to work.

[Visit The Gator](#)

That is what it looks like to advise [The Gator](#) — and here is what makes me angry: after twenty years teaching in independent schools, and as a product of them myself, I know how rare this opportunity still is, especially at some of the most “prestigious” schools in New England that love to talk about student voice but have no real student press to show for it.

If You Don't Support a Real Newspaper, You Don't Support Student Voice

Glossy viewbooks and slick mission statements promise student voice, leadership, and agency. Schools love to talk about critical thinking and civic engagement.

But many of those same institutions, including some of the most established, brand-name schools in New England, either do not have a student newspaper at all or keep the one they have on a very short leash. A “publication” that runs a few safe pieces a year and never makes anyone uncomfortable is not a student press.

I am still stopping short of naming schools; I am not interested in public shaming.

But here is a [directory](#) of New England independent high schools, and I have spent a lot of time digging through it.

[Browse the AISNE school directory](#)

A few schools have strong publications, including some excellent print papers, but far too many lack real digital, public-facing journalism that is updated regularly and willing to publish uncomfortable truths. If you care about this, check a school's website, see if it has a student publication, and, if it does, read enough to judge how real and independent it feels; that alone will tell you a lot about what the school actually values — or doesn't.

That is why this matters. You can hang banners about “student leadership” all over campus and flood social media with “empowering” stories. None of that means much if students are not trusted to publish thoughtful, timely coverage, including pieces that make some people uncomfortable, under their own bylines.

A school that seems never to have controversies, debates, policy changes, or student concerns is not a school without problems. It is a school that does not trust its students — or its own ability to guide them — to do the hard, ethical work of responsible journalism.

As a parent, I would run, not walk, away from any independent school, or any school for that matter, that does not have a real student newsroom or is not clearly building one. To me, that is a bright, flashing sign that students are not trusted or empowered by the people in charge.

What Real Independent-School Journalism Looks Like

I work at a smaller independent school in the Boston area, where I advise one of the most decorated student news sites in the country. I'm proud of the awards, but I'm even prouder of the work.

Most of our coverage is positive — and that matters. We are a strong, caring community, and that's newsworthy. Our reporters highlight [major campaigns](#), [people who rarely get attention](#), and the [big athletic moments](#) that define a season. Joy and progress deserve serious journalism, too.

[Student reporting: Girls' Varsity XC Win MBIL Championship](#)

Keep clicking through our site and a different layer emerges.

You will find editorials pushing classmates to think about [AI and integrity](#), and coverage explaining why [AI “humanizers”](#) are so tempting and what they jeopardize. You will see pieces on [political discourse](#) and [core values](#), challenging the community to debate with respect and live up to what it says it stands for.

On the news side, students treat campus life as real news. They report on [safety concerns](#), [policy changes](#), facilities issues, and [schedule decisions](#) that affect how students live their days. They talk to administrators, students, and faculty and explain what has happened, why decisions were made, and how people are responding.

[Student reporting: Academic Priorities Limit Club Meeting Periods](#)

They also publish deeply personal and vulnerable work — a student writing about [growing up with a stutter](#), an editor-in-chief reflecting on [belonging and identity](#). In a more cautious school culture, those pieces might have been discouraged or sanitized. Instead, they live on our site.

[Student reporting: Saying the Right Words: My Journey Through Stuttering](#)

The Gator doesn't choose between good news and hard news. It tells the truth about a community that is both special and, like any institution, not always perfect.

What Advising Actually Involves

Advising in this kind of newsroom is not about serving as the final censor or the school's PR safety valve. It is about building a culture of responsibility and trust.

On any given day, my work includes asking, “Who is missing from this story?” when a draft leans too heavily on one source; saying, “Show me your notes,” and making sure quotes match what people actually said; and walking students through how to phrase a tough interview question to a dean or Head of School in a way that is firm but fair.

[Related teaching resource: Ethical Decision-Making in Journalism](#)

We talk openly about harm, privacy, and consent when they are writing about peers or vulnerable subjects. I push them to send one more follow-up email or knock on one more door instead of settling for the easy version of the story.

Then I step back. My job is to coach, not control. Student editors make final decisions about coverage and content, whether they are publishing a breaking story, a sensitive editorial, or a deeply personal feature.

The donuts help, too. Newsrooms can be intense places. Community matters. We need humor and small celebrations alongside tough conversations and deadline stress.

Too many independent schools seem terrified of that energy. They want the awards and the PR value but do not want to relinquish any real control.

The Prestige Problem

I have spent years trying to be the upbeat colleague in the independent-school world. I have offered to share curriculum, visit classes, talk to heads and boards, and help schools launch or revive publications. I have tried to model what is possible when a school actually trusts its students and faculty adviser.

Some schools have responded. Many more have not. And, tellingly, some of the least interested are those most obsessed with name recognition and brand management.

How can a school brag about student agency, leadership, and voice while operating without a real student newspaper?

If a school can afford a new AP course or a shiny building, it can afford to invest in student journalism. If it can underwrite turf fields and cutting-edge STEM labs, it can underwrite student voice.

Graduates who become lawyers, doctors, business leaders, policymakers, journalists, or teachers will need more than polished résumés. They need to

understand how institutions work, what accountability looks like, and how to ask hard questions respectfully but directly. A student newsroom is one of the few places in a school where they can actually practice that.

“*My job is to coach, not control.*” · [Essay 6.2](#)

Prestige without student journalism is not impressive. It’s hollow.

What Prospective Families Should Be Asking

As tuition climbs, families touring independent schools should ask very different questions.

Instead of stopping at “How many APs do you offer?” and “Where do your seniors go to college?” ask whether the school has a student newspaper, whether it is updated regularly, who gets the final say on content, and whether there are examples of students covering controversial or uncomfortable issues on campus.

Ask if students are free to write editorials about school policies, national politics, and cultural conflict, or if that kind of writing is quietly off-limits.

[Student editorial: Prioritizing Respectful Political Discourse on Campus](#)

If the answers are vague, defensive, or buried under jargon, that tells you plenty. If one school has a lively student paper full of honest, sometimes messy coverage and another has nothing but flawless marketing copy, I know which campus I trust more.

If a school does not trust its own students to live the values it advertises, that is a red flag.

I’m Done Pretending This Is Optional

I am deeply proud of what my students have built at *The Gator*: that they report the good news with care, lean into hard stories without flinching, and are brave enough to put their names on personal pieces that expose real vulnerability.

If your mission statement trumpets student voice, leadership, and agency, you owe your students a real newsroom — not just carefully curated publications, Instagram feeds, or brochures run through the advancement office. Those all have their place, but they can’t exist in a silo. They need to stand alongside an independent student press that asks tough questions and tells the fuller story of

school life.

A real student newspaper is student-run and transparent. It is one of the best indicators of how well a school prepares students to communicate effectively and ethically, with a strong sense of responsibility.

If you do not support a thriving student newspaper, you do not support student voice. No amount of prestige, new APs, or capital projects can cover that up — and no prospective family should trust an independent school, even an established one, that pushes aside student publications. It's as simple as that.

Consider your practice

Could students at your school publish a carefully reported story that makes adults uncomfortable? What would your response teach them about the limits of student voice?

Essay 6.3

The Silent Censor: Why Student Journalists Are Putting Down the Pen

April 9, 2026 · Age of Awareness (Medium)

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

Our democratic republic thrives on inquiry, yet today's student journalists are increasingly choosing silence over scrutiny — a retreat that threatens the future of accountability in America.

I was recently honored with the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's [Gold Key](#), its highest award for "outstanding devotion to the cause of the school press." I take this recognition seriously. It gives me a platform, and I plan to use it, because what I see at these conventions is a generation of young journalists learning, right at the start of their careers, that the safest story is no story at all.

A high schooler in a [New Voices](#) state, where legislation offers greater protection for student journalists, recently shared his desire to cover local student walkouts protesting ICE activities in his community. However, he feels hesitant, fearing administrative backlash and potential consequences that could arise from drawing unwanted attention to his school amid the current political climate.

Another student at a private secular school wants to write an op-ed about being

pro-life in her progressive community. She decides not to. Every article is reviewed before publication, and she already knows what the response will be.

A third student at a large urban public school in Texas is too afraid to write about his political views. He worries not only about what his classmates might think, but also about how teachers and college admissions officers might judge him if they look him up online.

There are many more stories just like these. And as somebody who often meets with student journalists and their advisers at local and national conventions, I've heard them all. Their stories are similar, and it's worrying.

And yet, to be clear, student journalists *are* covering bold topics with bravery and exceptional skill. Just look at how young reporters have localized coverage of ICE in their own communities, including a powerful [editorial](#) from wlhsNOW, the student news site of West Linn High School in Oregon.

"ICE doesn't have any place in schools, and it should stay that way," the editorial board writes, not backing down.

Or consider [The Life of Keith LaMar](#) by Madilyn Shoop-Gardner and Caitlin Stehr of *Scot Scoop*, the student news publication of Carlmont High School in Belmont, California. The reporters do an exceptional job detailing the experiences of a death row inmate who maintains his innocence, using immersive digital storytelling, interactive graphics, and striking visuals to enhance the piece.

I was similarly struck by Laila Taraporevala's story in *The Standard*, the American School in London's student publication, ["I'm not slim enough": Athletic body stereotypes invade the student-athlete community](#).

Even with anonymous sources, its impact is undeniable. As one student says, "I'm constantly just looking in the mirror, not even to see how I'm playing. I'm just looking at how my stomach looks."

At the same time, self-censorship — stories never pitched, opinions never written, and questions never asked — continues to weaken student press freedom from within.

Even students who know their rights, including in New Voices states, still hold back, telling me that they don't want to upset anyone. They're also focused on college applications, want support from teachers and administrators, and fear being seen as troublemakers.

When I suggest that colleges should reward student journalists who report content responsibly, too many students just smile and disagree. They have already thought it through, and in their calculus, the risks outweigh the benefits.

But having legal protection is not the same as feeling safe. A student might have every right to publish a story but still choose not to, because the law cannot shield them from other consequences they fear, whether real or imagined. The gap between what students are allowed to do and what they feel comfortable doing is where self-censorship happens. And that gap is large.

Students and their supporters have spent decades building legal protections for student press freedom. Now, we must focus on something harder to create with laws — a culture that helps students believe these protections are real, that their journalism matters, and that telling the truth carefully, ethically, and responsibly is always worth the risk.

To get there, adults in positions of power must affirm that, as long as students report ethically, they will be supported — even when their coverage isn't always rosy. In some cases, they should even be celebrated. The alternative leaves students entering professional newsrooms afraid to hold power to account. That's a scary proposition — one I will fight against with everything I have.

Until then, too often, the most powerful censor in any school isn't necessarily a principal with a red pen. It's the student who chooses to never pick up a pen at all.

Consider your practice

How would you know if student journalists were censoring themselves before bringing you a story? What could you do to make ethical scrutiny feel supported?

Essay 6.4

Student Press and the Wake-Up Call for Private Schools

July 27, 2026 · Medium

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

As Director of the [Private School Journalism Association](#), I want to recognize the student editors of [The Augur Bit](#), who submitted an essay to [The Atlantic](#), for

their courage in speaking up about the culture of student journalism at their independent school.

“We want our publication to be like a small-town newspaper, one that gives its readers a comprehensive view of how our community thinks and feels, and one that advances the cause of seeking the truth and reporting it,” write student journalists Jacob Blane, Annabelle Garland, and Sam Gross. “But our readers cannot get a full view of the community when people are too afraid to talk.”

A caveat first: The Atlantic piece, “[The New Chilling Effect](#),” is one window into what happened, and we don’t know the full story of how student journalism is treated at the school. The standards we teach student journalists — get every side, minimize harm — apply to us too when we talk about each other’s schools. I hope this post is read in the spirit I intend: not as a final judgment of any one institution, but as a prompt for all of us.

Indeed, the underlying issue isn’t limited to one campus. The essay’s warning that “too many institutions are training kids to be silent” should give every independent school educator pause. These students wanted something any adviser would be proud of: a paper that honestly reflects its community and goes after the truth. By their own account, that became far harder than it should have been, because people were afraid to talk.

Wearing my multiple hats (as an online newspaper adviser, a history teacher, and the director of a national organization), I’ve heard the horror stories firsthand: students shut down for pursuing legitimate reporting, and advisers, some of whom have been fired or censured for standing up for student voice. This can’t be the norm. Just because private schools can legally censor and intimidate student journalists doesn’t mean they should.

And unlike their public-school peers, who increasingly have [New Voices laws](#) behind them, the vast majority of private school student journalists have no guaranteed rights at all. An administrator can kill a story for any reason, discipline the adviser, or shut the whole publication down. “Brand protection,” especially in more competitive areas, slides into quiet censorship more often than we’d like to admit. And the self-censorship it engenders in students is worse than spiking any single article: the real cost is the stories never pitched, the questions never asked, the sources who learn to stay quiet. More opportunities for student journalism should be available at our institutions, not fewer — especially if we

wish to further distinguish ourselves from other types of schools.

We must walk the walk of our school mission statements, which often promise student leadership, communication, and agency. Families accept those promises when they enroll. A school that markets “student voice” and “critical thinking” but censors its newspaper, or makes community members feel unsafe sharing their views, is breaking that promise.

I know firsthand what the alternative looks like. Whatever recognition [The Gator](#) and I have earned belongs equally to my head of school, Judith Guild. She has backed the newsroom for 13 years, never flinching even when real journalism gave her headaches. This spring she signed PSJA’s [Model Affirmation Statement](#) — the first action of its kind by a head of school in New England — giving our student reporters protections equivalent to what New Voices laws provide public school students in Massachusetts. For that leadership in protecting student press freedom, the New England Scholastic Press Association honored her with its [Freedom to Write Award](#).

An independent school’s health can’t be measured by enrollment, the donor base, the endowment, or the college list alone. It also reveals itself in how deeply a school trusts its students — and works to earn their trust in return — as responsible, ethical stewards of journalism. When members of a community feel silenced, that tells you something. As one of two recent recipients of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association’s [Gold Key Award](#) — given in recognition of devotion to the cause of the school press, encouragement of student editors, and support of the high ideals of scholastic journalism — I have a duty to elevate this issue beyond the walls of any single school.

I won’t render a final judgment here. But it says a lot that these students felt strongly enough to take their concerns to a national publication, and I hope the rest of us treat their courage as a reason to look hard at how we support student publications on our own campuses. When we trust our students, we don’t just avoid crises. We live up to what our schools claim to stand for.

Consider your practice

What protection does your school offer student journalists beyond a general promise to listen? What would make that protection dependable when a difficult story appears?

Who Is Doing the Thinking

The most important skill we can model for students right now may not be tool fluency. It may be judgment: knowing when a tool supports thinking and when it stunts it.

Essay 7.1

Lessons from Nintendo: Game-Based Learning

c. 2014–2015 (estimated) · archived July 1, 2018 on Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

A claim that needs qualification · 2026

Adapting practice to a student's progress is different from matching instruction to a supposed fixed "learning style." The latter claim lacks an adequate evidence base. This essay also overstates how reliably games prevent cheating. My later classroom limits apply here too: a tool must support practice, attention, and independent thinking. See [What I Reconsidered](#).

In the late 1980s, I remember playing the original Super Mario Bros. for hours on end, trying desperately to save the princess. I ducked, dodged, and jumped to complete levels of increasing difficulty, all while learning something new with each new life.

Failure — or in this case dying from an annoying, little cloud-like creature throwing spiky things at me — carried no consequences. I could try as often as I wanted to, with the resolve to figure out the timing of each projectile thrown at me. In a very real sense, I eventually learned how to be successful on my own terms and at my own pace. I learned from failure.

Don't get me wrong. Mario Brothers may be fun to play, but it has no direct educational value. Today, I'm thrilled with video games that not only motivate and excite, but also teach. More still, I admire how game-based learning champions self-directed learning, with students progressing at their own pace. As one example, DragonBox teaches basic algebraic operations in the same way that one learns to play Mario Brothers. Here too, players gain experience and face greater challenges as they advance through the levels.

Few understand the benefits and potentials of game-based learning as well as Prof. Jordan Shapiro, a leading authority on the subject, who has written extensively about education technology for [*Forbes magazine*](#).

At the [*Global Education & Skills Forum*](#) in Dubai, he spoke to a packed room about game-based learning — not just as instructional aids, but also as essential tools to fundamentally change how we approach and perceive education.

“Imagine classrooms of students around the world intrinsically motivated to learn reading, writing, science, art, mathematics, economics and marketing not because they want a good grade, not because they want a diploma, not because they want a better job, but rather because they want to understand how things work,” he said.

Too often, students are more concerned with the grade than any meaningful and lasting learning. Much of this is our fault as educators, especially in how we demonize failure, pressuring students to master increasingly complex ideas and material in shorter and shorter intervals. Of course, all of this runs counter to how most human beings learn. Deep, lasting mastery takes time. If I were to play Super Mario Bros. again today, some twenty years after my last power-up, I’m sure I would still have a terrific familiarity with the controls — and save at least a few princesses. How many people can say as much about solving a calculus problem, or about explaining the importance of 1812 in our history?

To gain deeper insight into the dynamics of game-based learning, I spoke with Shapiro, who says that game-based learning will lead the way in making failure and asynchronous learning acceptable again. “I wish I was my students’ only teacher,” he says. “I could say, ‘you’re going to write this essay all year until you get it perfect, because this is what I want to teach.’ We don’t go, ‘Oh, well, you can’t learn that. Now, move on to the next level, even though you never learned this level.’”

Along those lines, I remember begging my parents to buy me a Nintendo [*Game Genie*](#), a cheating device that, among other things, allowed players to skip levels on certain games. All of this didn’t improve my skill, even as I spent days trying to defeat final levels I had no business playing. I grew increasingly frustrated, resorting once again to entering more cheating codes into the Game Genie, such as invulnerability, flight, and enhanced strength. I could only “win” by cheating.

Of course, as a teacher I have a clear no-cheating policy. I take infractions

seriously, and I don't hesitate to submit serious cases to the student honor council. Still, I understand why some students are tempted to cheat. In most cases, they feel helpless in the face of the fast pace of a course, or the rigorous demands of an assignment. In a hyper-competitive academic environment, we have made cheating an alluring option — however risky.

In a game-based learning environment (in contrast to my Nintendo environment), this allure of cheating fades almost completely. According to Shapiro, in the near future, teachers will rely on even more advanced adaptive learning software, so advanced that it isolates precise areas of difficulties.

“Everybody doesn't have to be on the same pacing because the computer can adjust,” Shapiro says. “Every time you fail, all it does is tell the computer, ‘Oh, we should try a different way of presenting this problem.’”

As a result, Shapiro tells me, video games can isolate distinct learning styles to teach content faster. But there's still one thing that they can't do, no matter how advanced technology becomes. “What a video game can't do is put that content in context faster, in world context,” he says. Only teachers can accomplish this task.

All the same, Shapiro is quick to point out another important fact. “There's a lot more happening here than just checker games,” he says, adding that the way we think about knowledge and how it's used is shifting.

Consider your practice

What does a game let students practice through repeated attempts? How would you help them carry that learning into a new problem outside the game?

Essay 7.2

Technology: The Faustian Bargain

c. 2012 (estimated) · archived June 30, 2018 on Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

My view has become more cautious · 2026

I would now qualify this essay's broad support for one-to-one laptop programs. [Essay 7.4](#) explains my later limits on computers and AI during writing. The distinction is developed in [What I Reconsidered](#).

I sit down with Sean Murphy, the headmaster of [Palmer Trinity](#), the private school where I teach in Palmetto Bay, Florida. We debate the future of K-12 education and what role technology can and should play inside the classroom.

I had moved the student newspaper to an entirely online format. The following year, I purchased a semi-professional digital camcorder, green screen and advanced video editing software for my journalism and yearbook classes.

By my fifth year at Palmer, I have become known as a “techie.” Much of this has to do with the kinds of courses I teach. Still, I get the sense that some of my colleagues have branded me as a rebel, embracing technology and abandoning more traditional, pencil-and-paper pedagogy.

In part, I meet with Murphy to assure him that I have not gone nutty, and that I abhor using technology simply because it’s “cool.”

We agree on everything: technology can definitely enhance the learning process, but too many students are easily distracted by video games, social media, and an array of remote and online applications.

“Technology is a double-edged sword,” Murphy tells me. “On one hand it puts us in touch with each other and with an infinite array of information. But that flood of stimulation doesn’t help us choose the things that make our lives more meaningful or satisfying in the long run. In fact, the sheer volume of stimulation usually becomes overwhelming and disappointing.”

Murphy walks me to his bookshelf, jam-packed with works on education, writing and poetry — reflective of his extremely intelligent, inquisitive, and deep-thinking nature.

He hands me a copy of Neil Postman’s [*The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*](#). I was first introduced to this seemingly clairvoyant author, essayist, and social critic at Brandeis University.

“It’s a little dated,” Murphy says. “But I think you might find some useful, interesting stuff in there.”

Several days later, I’m 40 pages into Postman’s work when a certain passage really catches my eye:

“The computer and its associated technologies are awesome additions to a culture, and they are quite capable of altering the psychic, let alone the sleeping,

habits of our young,” Postman writes. “But like all important technologies of the past, they are Faustian bargains, giving and taking away, sometimes in equal measure, sometimes more in one way than the other. It is strange — indeed, shocking — that with the twenty-first century so close on our heels, we can still talk of new technologies as if they were unmixed blessings, gifts, as it were, from the gods.”

Postman died in 2003, but his work remains truer than ever.

People often discuss what famous person, dead or alive, they would most like to meet. Postman ranks at the top of my list. I would love to ask him about one-to-one laptop programs and whether in trying to help by placing devices in students’ hands, we are taking away something more important.

Thankfully, Postman’s [*Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*](#), published in 1993, offers a good glimpse of what he might think. In a [C-SPAN interview](#) about his work, Postman grabs my attention:

America has developed a new religion, as it were, and the religion is its faith that human progress and technological innovation are the same thing — and that paradise can be achieved through greater and greater commitment to technology.

It’s no secret that I fully support one-to-one programs, and for good reason: Cutting-edge learning software, interactive web platforms for communicating and sharing ideas, and instantaneous information provide endless learning possibilities, which even Postman couldn’t possibly fathom before his death.

All the same, we must heed Postman’s warning. Paradise cannot be achieved by blindly embracing the next new thing, in this case technology. Simply giving students laptops doesn’t mean that the devices will be used correctly, or at all. Postman would certainly agree, and he warns about the dangers of individuals becoming overly enthralled with “crap.”

“One way of looking at the history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of crap,” Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner write in [*Teaching as a Subversive Activity*](#), published in 1969.

If it is integrated effectively, I wouldn’t use such language to describe technology — quite the contrary. Still, I am cautious about excessive and unnecessary use of it in the classroom.

Outside of my journalism classes, I rarely allow my students to use their laptops — only when they need to work on a project as a designated in-class activity. This isn't because my lessons are boring, or that kids aren't interested in learning. The temptation to check sports highlights, fashion blogs, and teen “news” sites is just overpowering.

It's the job of a teacher to show and promote proper use, but herein lies another problem.

Too often, I hear of teachers frustrated with the simplest technological tasks, such as turning on a projector or computer, playing a film or uploading content to a class page. While they struggle, their well-meaning schools encourage even more use of online learning and technology. Frustrated teachers burn time trying to work something that they know little or nothing about. Postman is spot-on: in this environment, no greater progress can be made.

Murphy and I agree that too often teachers view technology as a panacea for all of education's problems. But I find solace in that Postman admits that in moderation, technology isn't necessarily bad.

In this book, I mostly emphasize the bad part. But I admit, happily at the beginning of the book, that anyone who looks at technology as an either-or development, that is either as all good or all bad, is making a mistake.

When I was a college student, my journalism professor, Michael J. Socolow, assigned Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

I glance through my old, worn-out copy, when I stop at a particular highlighted passage:

In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches, and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.

I speak about Postman's legacy with my editor, Bruce Musgrave, who points me to another insightful remark by Postman:

Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of

amusing ourselves to death.

Decades before social networking even existed, he predicted the challenges we would face in retaining a sense of what truly matters.

Teachers have an obligation to help students sharpen the good side of the double-edged sword.

Consider your practice

For one lesson, what does a laptop make possible, and what might it interrupt?

Would you make the same choice if access to the device were optional?

Essay 7.3

Artificial Shortcuts, Real Consequences: The Costs of AI “Humanizers” to Learning

April 19, 2024 · Medium

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

A wise mentor once shared with me that “experience can’t be taught.”

This observation carries significant weight in today’s educational climate, where students face an onslaught of sophisticated marketing campaigns touting platforms that boast of their ability to outsmart AI detection. These ads offer what seems like an easy way out of the challenging yet rewarding experience of learning to think and write.

Among these services, [Phrasly.ai](#) emerges as a particularly egregious example. Just consider this transcript of [a social media video advertisement](#) for Phrasly.ai, starring what purports to be a high-school student.

I’ve been using this website called Phrasly to help me write my school essays, and I need to put you guys on it. In the past, there’s always been a little bit of a risk with turning in AI-generated content to my teachers because some of them have been able to detect that it was AI-generated. Phrasly’s useful because it can bypass any [Turnitin](#) AI detection. With Phrasly, I just copy and paste any AI-generated content in, and in just a few seconds, it will humanize it for me and make it so that no AI detector can detect anything. Thanks to Phrasly, I’ve gotten all of my essays done in almost no time using AI. Now I can put my laptop down and enjoy my Christmas break!

I reject the suggestion that teachers are antagonists for expecting their students to engage earnestly with their work. It promotes the destructive notion that taking shortcuts is not merely permissible but also clever, and that they should at all costs evade educators with the audacity to challenge their students to think, write, and learn.

This brazen promotion of a tool designed to enable student deception is an outrage. I detest how Phrasly and similar platforms peddle not just a product, but also a toxic mentality that devalues the importance of diligence, critical thinking, and personal achievement through mastering challenges.

The sense of powerlessness that educators experience in this David-versus-Goliath scenario is palpable. In our efforts to promote pedagogical integrity, we confront an industry eager to profit by actively encouraging students to cheat.

In response to Phrasly's advertising, I reached out to their online help desk, seeking to comprehend their justification for the product's existence. I received a response from somebody named "Mark," who replied: "Phrasly is dedicated to upholding academic integrity and actively contributes to blog writing for SEO [search engine optimization] purposes. Our company is committed to the democratization of AI, ensuring its accessibility without fear of external limitations. Moreover, with the rising incidence of false positives from AI detectors, our tool serves as an essential resource for those striving to maintain the authenticity of their human-written work."

This claim that Phrasly protects students from false accusations is farcical. Phrasly prides itself on using "advanced algorithms to modify AI-generated content," making it undetectable — the core of the issue here.

As we navigate the ever-evolving educational landscape, we must never divorce imparting knowledge from instilling values. Yet the advent of platforms that generate text designed to elude AI detection systems has already shifted my instructional focus. I spend more and more of my time addressing the ethical implications of using such tools rather than delivering content.

In response to this challenge, I have recently implemented strategies aimed at fostering integrity and honesty among students, despite the allure of AI's seemingly convenient solutions.

For instance, I now introduce discussions that explore the long-term benefits of

genuine learning over the expedience of achieving short-term academic gains. By presenting scenarios that demonstrate the value of original thought and the pitfalls of intellectual shortcuts, I encourage students to reflect on the importance of authenticity.

In my discussions with students, I consciously adopt a tone of understanding, acknowledging the pressures they face in an environment rife with shortcuts, such as those offered by platforms like Phrasly. I liken those temptations to low-hanging fruit — seeming within easy reach yet ultimately unfulfilling. My approach is proactive, focused on steering students towards integrity before they succumb to temptation, rather than chastising them post-transgression.

I advocate for transparency and honesty, reassuring students that while submitting genuine work is paramount, the courage to admit a lapse is also commendable. It is essential for them to recognize that acknowledging an error is a testament to their character and reflective capacity. I assure them that such honesty elicits respect and a supportive response, not punitive action. In taking the step to come forward, they not only preserve their integrity, but also embark on a path to rectifying their academic careers.

This is the greatest lesson we can offer: that the journey of learning, with all its inherent struggles and hard-won joys, is itself a profound source of wisdom — one that shapes not just how we think and write, but also how we live and grow as individuals. In embarking on this journey, we embrace the true essence of education.

Consider your practice

What would make a student feel able to admit taking an AI shortcut? How would you respond in a way that restores honest work and the learning they missed?

Essay 7.4

Generative AI Has No Place in My Classroom

August 9, 2025 · Medium

[Later version at PBS NewsHour Classroom](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I've never been anti-technology. I've even [written about ways AI can help students](#) when it's used with care. But my first real encounter with GPT-5 —

released on August 7, 2025 — stopped me cold. This is different. This is dangerous. And I'm finally sounding the alarm.

Since ChatGPT first debuted in November 2022, I've relied on a system.

Early in the semester, I got to know each student's unique voice through smaller, in-class assignments. Only later would I assign longer papers. By then, I recognized the rhythm of their sentences, the way they transitioned between ideas, even the little detours they took before circling back. If something came in that didn't match, I noticed.

That safeguard is gone. [The linked papers were produced by GPT-5 for several of my assignments — I annotated and graded them as if the program were an actual student.](#)

GPT-5 can now mimic a student's writing so precisely that I struggle to tell the difference. Feed it a few past essays, and it will flawlessly reproduce the quirks, pacing, and diction. It can generate a paper in that same voice — complete with accurate citations — polished to look as if it took hours.

Even a hard-to-find PDF or obscure text poses no challenge; upload it, and GPT-5 will read, analyze, and weave it seamlessly into the work. I'm not revealing any trade secrets here. Students know this. Teachers know it — or they should.

While many educators are working hard to integrate generative AI into their classrooms, I'm now convinced that when it comes to teaching writing and critical thinking, AI takes far more than it gives. The exchange isn't remotely equal. It's not a Faustian bargain — it's worse.

What it offers in efficiency, it erodes in depth. Students can lean on it before developing the habits, patience, and skill that real writing demands. The slow, sometimes frustrating process of wrestling with a sentence, choosing the evidence that best supports an argument, or discovering a new insight mid-draft — these are the moments when thinking happens, however time-consuming, inconvenient, and uncomfortable.

When generative AI shortcuts that process, it doesn't just "assist" — it replaces the very struggle that leads to growth. In my own classroom, that means AI isn't just a neutral tool — it's a detriment to helping students become confident writers and critical thinkers.

When calculators first showed up in classrooms in the 1970s, many teachers believed they would destroy math education. Suddenly, students did not have to memorize multiplication tables, slog through long division, or grind out multi-step problems by hand.

The fear was that basic numeracy would collapse. And yes, the disruption was real — tests had to be rewritten, lessons redesigned, and everyone had to figure out when calculators could be used without hollowing out learning.

But here is the key difference: calculators automated only one part of the process — computation.

They did not decide which problem to solve, figure out how to set it up, interpret the answer, or explain why it mattered. The student still had to understand the question, choose the right formula, and apply it correctly.

GPT-5 is an entirely different kind of disruption. It does not just solve a step — it can take over the entire process: brainstorming, outlining, writing, revising, even embedding accurate citations. That is not replacing a tool — that is replacing the thinking itself.

At this point, I'm convinced there's only one viable solution: more in-class writing. I'm done assigning large take-home papers. The tech is too advanced, too easy to use, and too aggressively marketed. Companies like Phrasly.ai target students directly on social media, openly promising to help them beat AI detectors and fool their teachers. Now, GPT-5 rolls all of that into one seamless package.

AI companies sell this as empowerment. Their ads glamorize “working smarter,” which in this case really means not working at all. They know exactly how to make cutting corners look cool — especially to already overextended teenagers juggling sports, jobs, social lives, and college applications.

Not every student will cheat, but it's naïve to think more won't. Expecting students to spend hours wrestling with prose and research at home when this alternative is just a few clicks away is wishful thinking.

Many educators — though in my circle, fewer and fewer — still argue that there is a place for “ethical generative AI use” in the classroom. I used to agree. But when a free or inexpensive tool can fully replace the thinking process, it stops being a support and becomes a substitute brain.

Yes, cheating has always existed — students could buy papers or pay others to do the work. That was bad. But this is worse: now the cheating is democratized, more ubiquitous, and easier than ever.

So, what now?

In my high school history classes, every substantial piece of writing will happen in class, either in old-school blue books or on Digiexam — a secure, locked-down digital platform that lets me monitor work in real time — so I can see the process unfold as it happens. The process will matter as much as the product.

Students will draft in class, brainstorm openly, and revise alongside peers. Big assignments will be broken into smaller, visible stages so I can watch their thinking evolve. I'm also expanding weekly seminars and debates that require students to prove — on the spot — that they've engaged deeply with the text. Something will have to give; with more time devoted to writing in class, I may cover less content. But I'd far rather accept that trade-off than watch anyone hand over their intellectual growth to a machine.

The point isn't to ban tools — it's to ensure students can think without them. A computer can churn out a paper in seconds, but what matters is whether a student can explain that paper's ideas in conversation, adapt them in debate, and defend them when challenged.

Because when students hand over the thinking to a machine, the loss isn't just academic integrity — it's intellectual independence. We risk raising a generation that trusts algorithms over their own judgment.

And that's not just bad for education — it's bad for the future of our world, and for nearly everything else that depends on it.

[What I Reconsidered: AI, 2023–2026](#)

Consider your practice

If more substantial writing moved into class, what would you need to give up or redesign? How would you use that time to see students develop ideas, rather than simply supervise a finished product?

Essay 7.5

Don't Let AI Climb the Hill for Our Kids

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

The Boston area just received nearly two feet of snow. The timing felt especially fortunate. My family lives directly behind a great public park, and the park includes a terrific hill for sledding. Early this morning, before other footprints appeared, my son and I bundled up and headed out to imprint our fresh tracks.

I did not expect that walk to shape how I think about AI and learning, but it did. Standing at the bottom of the icy hill, I watched my son size it up for the climb to the top and found myself thinking about effort — who expends it, who avoids it, and what disappears when struggle gets outsourced.



My son and I after he climbed the icy hill on his own. His face is blurred in the original photograph. Photo by David Cutler. [Original post](#)

“I think it’s very possible,” my son said as he powered up the small but mighty hill. Not too much later, he exclaimed, “Dada, I did it!” His seven-year-old face beamed with joy.

My son’s motivation also explains why I remain cautious about my students using GenAI at all — certainly without my supervision. I want them to know they can achieve their goals on their own, without relying on unnecessary support, especially before they have proven they can do so independently and unaided.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb gave a name to that phenomenon — to my son’s triumph, small as it seemed — terming it “antifragility,” a concept he developed in [Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder](#). Taleb argues that certain systems grow stronger through stress and small failures rather than in spite of them.

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff later applied similar thinking to childhood and education in [The Coddling of the American Mind](#), warning about shielding young people from difficulty.

Haidt articulated that idea directly to me during our interview in 2019, after the book's September 2018 release. Reflecting on how children learn, he told me, "There are two major kinds of learning... One is propositions given by adults. The other kind of learning is feedback from experience."

Haidt emphasized that learning rooted in experience, especially when it involves mistakes or minor pain, sticks faster and runs deeper. "The simplest kinds are times when you get hurt," he said. "That learning is extremely rapid."

That framework resurfaced immediately on the hill. Snow had softened the surface. Ice waited underneath. My son climbed, slipped, and slid back down. I could have stepped in. I chose not to. He faced no real danger, and the worst outcome involved another slide or a few bumps. Those bumps mattered. They delivered feedback and demanded adjustment.

My son tried again. He leaned forward. He changed his footing. He surveyed the terrain. After a few false starts, he reached the top. The moment felt commonplace, but it mattered. He proved something to himself. Effort worked. Failure did not end the attempt. Help did not need to arrive immediately.

“Used too early, AI replaces the work that builds capability.” · [Essay 7.5](#)

That moment reminded me of something else Haidt mentioned during our conversation. When I shared concerns about students missing chances to develop resilience — well before ChatGPT launched in the fall of 2022 — he immediately agreed. “Kids are antifragile,” he said. “They need a wide variety of exposure to challenges.”

Small bumps and bruises, physical or emotional, do not reflect harm; they signal learning.

That realization sharpened a concern I witness daily in my classroom in 2026. AI increasingly intervenes before students struggle. Like lifting a child up a hill, it delivers a faster result. AI could not climb for my son, but it could have told him how to avoid the hard parts. In doing so, it would have removed the very struggle that made the moment meaningful.

I notice the same pattern with students. When AI supplies structure, phrasing, or answers too early, learners complete their work without gaining experience. They skip the frustration that forces revision, the uncertainty that builds confidence, and the realization that they can troubleshoot without creating a crisis out of every setback.

To his credit, Haidt warned about this dynamic long before AI entered classrooms at scale. Children, he argued, learn best through feedback loops — thousands of small interactions that teach judgment, resilience, and independence. When those loops disappear in the name of protection, efficiency, or convenience, fragility replaces strength.

Developing antifragility depends on friction. Growth requires stress that challenges without overwhelming. Taleb warned that systems designed to eliminate volatility grow brittle over time. Haidt echoed that warning in education: If adults treat children as fragile, children behave accordingly.

I wonder what happens if, years from now, my son reaches for AI before testing himself. What if convenience becomes the default response to challenge, replacing effort?

The danger of AI does not lie in its existence, which I do not fear, but in the timing of resorting to it. Used too early, AI replaces the work that builds capability. The hill behind my house — and my son trying to climb it — offer a clear reminder.

Growth does not come from perfect solutions, laid out on a silver platter at the click of a button. Growth comes from effort, discomfort, and the willingness to keep climbing.

Consider your practice

Where does your help remove an obstacle to learning, and where might it remove the effort through which learning happens? How do you decide when to step back?

Essay 7.6

Teaching About AI Is Necessary. Teaching With AI Should Be Optional.

January 20, 2026 · Medium

I'm not anti-AI in education, and I'm not naïve enough to think teachers can just wait for it to go away. AI already reshapes how students find information, complete work, study, and even imagine their futures.

I offer that disclaimer not as the point of this piece, but because even a measured critique of AI these days seems to require one. Ready the trolls!

Here are my real claims: Schools should teach students about AI. Schools should not mandate that every teacher teach with AI. Ignoring AI isn't a plan, but neither is succumbing to its hype.

Since ChatGPT arrived in November 2022, the loudest version of this debate — especially online and in the so-called “room(s) where it happens,” to borrow a phrase from *Hamilton* — has largely ignored the space where teachers actually work: the complicated, high-stakes ground zero, inside the classroom.

What keeps me up at night is how often I hear this claim, particularly from people outside daily classroom life: AI literacy should be treated like reading and writing — and therefore integrated across all classrooms.

On the surface, that sounds logical. I get the simple appeal. But when I run that theory through classroom reality — students with varying abilities, limited time, accountability pressures, uneven readiness, and wildly different course demands — it starts to fray.

Not because AI literacy doesn't matter, but because the phrase “integrated across all classrooms” often smuggles in something else: an assumption that embedding AI tools into instruction should become the default.

I want students to understand what AI is and what it isn't; why it can confidently invent information; how bias enters outputs; what ethical use demands; and when using it strengthens thinking versus replacing it. None of that feels radical. It feels sensible.

What I'm pushing back on is the growing expectation — sometimes stated outright, sometimes implied — that teachers should embed AI tools into instruction as proof of modernity, relevance, or “future readiness.”

That expectation rarely originates in classrooms. It more often arrives through initiatives, policy language, and people fluent in phrasing that travels well online

and to the right ears. Those systems stay tidy. Classrooms are not.

I hear polished phrases like “intentional integration,” “ethical use,” and “future readiness.” They sound good. They fit neatly on slides. They perform well in posts and professional development meetings. But classrooms don’t operate on slogans. They run on time, attention, skill-building, and constant tradeoffs.

Teachers already work to...

- Protect the integrity of assessments
- Rebuild foundational reading and writing skills
- Support students with dramatically different readiness levels
- Manage cognitive load, motivation, and disengagement
- Adapt as expectations keep shifting

AI tools dropped into that environment don’t remain neutral. They reshape what students practice. They alter where they struggle. They change what they skip.

For example, when students depend too heavily on AI for writing, efficiency increases on the surface, but cognitive work often decreases underneath.

Instead of struggling to form ideas, select evidence, and construct sentences, students can move straight to a polished product. The writing looks complete, but the thinking that should have produced it often remains underdeveloped.

This shift adds instructional complexity. Teachers must determine whether missed understanding stems from conceptual confusion, weak skills, or reliance on a tool.

At the same time, evaluating student learning becomes less dependable — not because teachers lack ingenuity, but because confirming authentic work now requires more attention and energy than classrooms realistically allow.

Sometimes using AI makes sense. Sometimes it doesn’t. The problem starts when we pretend there’s no cost — and when we frame adoption as the cost of admission.

A crucial distinction keeps getting blurred, and it matters.

Teaching about AI means helping students understand...

- How responses get generated

- Why outputs can be unreliable
- What these systems routinely get wrong
- How AI shapes society
- Where ethical boundaries belong
- How to verify information and think critically in an AI-saturated world

Teaching with AI means embedding tools into instruction, assignments, assessments, and workflow.

These are different responsibilities. Yet public discourse often treats “not integrating tools” as evidence of being behind — or worse, resistant to progress. That sets up a false choice. Professional judgment still counts.

Every subject is different. Every classroom is different. Every group of students brings dissimilar needs. A journalism class grappling with sourcing and verification faces different risks than a computer science elective.

A ninth-grade history class still developing sentence fluency faces different challenges than a discussion-driven seminar full of confident writers. Treating integration of AI as a universal “must” flattens all those nuances into a single, convenient proposition.

Often the most responsible call is not yet, not for this task, not with these students, or not in this way. That isn’t fear. That’s professional care.

To me, the core problem isn’t individual teachers. The education system responds to certainty more than nuance. Universal claims travel farther than caveats. “All teachers must” spreads more easily than “It depends, and teachers should decide.” But mandates aren’t necessarily wisdom, and I feel fortunate to work at a school that understands the difference and operates accordingly, valuing nuance and amplifying the voices of students, teachers, and the wider community.

In the broad educational landscape, here’s what I want if we’re serious about AI literacy: restraint and humility.

- Teach students about AI before demanding widespread teaching with AI
- Support teacher learning without turning adoption into a loyalty test
- Acknowledge that some learning goals benefit from less AI, not more
- Treat integration as a tool choice, not a moral absolute

- Trust teachers to decide when AI serves instruction — and when it doesn't

AI exists. It isn't disappearing. But its mere existence doesn't always justify its use.

The most important skill we can model for students right now may not be tool fluency. It may be judgment: knowing when a tool supports thinking and when it stunts it.

That judgment should begin with teachers, where it should stay.

Consider your practice

What should students understand about AI even in a class that does not use it? Who should decide whether using it serves the learning goals of that particular classroom?

Essay 7.7

The Pedagogy of Presence

September 7, 2026 · Medium

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

This is the September 7, 2026 essay listed in my portfolio as “ChatGPT-6 Astra Can Do More of My Students’ Thinking Than Ever. That’s Why I’m Restricting It.” The title is shortened for this collection.

My encounter with GPT-5, described in Essay 7.4, changed my classroom. I delayed assigning substantial take-home writing until I could familiarize myself with each student's unique style. I moved more writing into class, where I could watch them think. I wanted to see the process, not simply collect the final product.

I also added culminating [one-on-one conferences](#), not to “catch” academic dishonesty, though that did happen on occasion, as when I questioned why students cited a paper about World War I while writing about something entirely different in World War II (an AI hallucination).

My goal, which I wrote about in a recent Edutopia post, was to better understand students' learning processes and offer live, immediate feedback rather than written feedback, which could be misconstrued as “mean” or “aggressive” (a different issue entirely).

I asked Astra to provide exemplars for a take-home [essay topic I assigned at the end of last academic year](#), and I was blown away by the results, which contain (as far as I can tell) accurate footnote citations and clear, analytical writing.

I also instructed Astra not only to cite directly from the resources I provided to students, but also to conduct its own independent research. Of note, I offered Astra no additional instructions or refined commands beyond what I provided to students in the assignment and the rubric.

The biggest stride forward from GPT-5 that I notice, however, is the AI's ability to embrace nuance. I was stunned, for example, by the first part of the conclusion to its first exemplar response:

Truman's decision should consequently be criticized without pretending that he possessed a painless alternative or perfect foresight.

Japan's leaders bore responsibility for aggression and continued resistance; American troops and occupied populations had urgent claims to protection. Those truths justified determined efforts to end the war.

They did not justify treating diplomatic uncertainty as evidence that negotiation was useless, military value as permission to devastate a population, or the first authorization as sufficient warrant for a second attack.

Agree or disagree with the conclusion, this is human-like, nuanced reasoning that makes this history teacher wonder what the technology could do at its highest capability level. My biggest (and growing) concern, though, is how much responsibility students can now delegate.

Generating an answer already lets them bypass the writing itself. An agentic system can take over the rest: finding evidence, organizing the project, producing files, and checking whether the result meets requirements.

But clearly, the biggest question writing teachers have to face now is why it's even worthwhile to teach writing anymore, when AI can write so well, and with such nuance. I can only answer that writing is thinking, and just because a machine can do something doesn't mean that it should.

To the critics who say I am ignoring the inevitable, and that I should instead teach my students how to use LLMs and now agentic AI, I can only say that we will certainly discuss the technology, its capabilities, and its implications for,

well, just about everything.

My role is not necessarily to equip students with whatever skills employers may covet next — which is an impossible feat anyway — but to help foster inquisitive, independent minds capable of thinking, questioning, and reasoning for themselves, so that however nuanced and intelligent AI becomes, my students will be equipped to question it and push back where appropriate.

I believe that capacity will remain essential.

A note on this collection (2026): I recognize the irony: I used Astra to help assemble this book while arguing that students need protected time to develop the skills it can perform. My [Author's Note](#) explains that distinction.

Consider your practice

How do you distinguish a tool that assists work you already know how to do from one that replaces practice a learner needs? What evidence of independent thinking would you want students to show?

What I Reconsidered

Games, learning styles, and the limits of adaptation

2026 note: I would keep the emphasis on repeated attempts in Essay 7.1, but qualify its claims for software. Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, and Bjork's review found no adequate evidence for using learning-style assessments to guide general classroom instruction. Adjusting difficulty or feedback is a different question. Enjoyment, time on task, and progress through a game do not by themselves establish lasting learning. I would now ask what students can explain and do independently after the screen is closed.

Evidence: [Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence](#), *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9(3), 105–119.

Daniel Herman: a criticism I would make differently

2026 note: I was too dismissive of Daniel Herman in [the 2023 essay](#). By 2025–26, I had come much closer to the concerns I criticized: protecting time for in-class writing and explaining why writing remains worth teaching when a machine can produce the finished work. I still disagree with parts of the early coverage,

but I should have taken his warning more seriously.

2023 excerpt: my early response to AI

September 1, 2023 · excerpt from “The Atlantic’s Doom-and-Gloom Coverage of AI in Education”

[Read the archived essay](#) · [Source details](#)

As we have always done, teachers must navigate with students how to make effective and ethical use of this new technology. It’s way too early to know how to do this or what this entails, though one thing is for certain — if we do nothing but lament how AI spells doom for education, we lose a sacred chance to help guide students into a brave new world.

This excerpt preserves my early position. The full essay’s personal judgments about Stephen Marche and Daniel Herman are omitted from this collection; their arguments deserved consideration on their merits.

The Class Companion disclosure

In the same 2023 essay, I wrote that I was “about to advise” Class Companion, an AI feedback company. That prospective relationship is relevant context for my enthusiasm at the time. The original statement does not establish whether the role began, how long it lasted, or whether compensation was involved; it should not be read as a statement of a current affiliation. My later classroom position is explained in the essays that follow the early technology pieces.

One-to-one laptops: support with firmer limits

2026 note: In [Essay 7.2](#), I wrote that I fully supported one-to-one laptop programs, even while limiting laptop use in my own classes. I would qualify that broad endorsement now. In [Essay 7.4](#), I put firmer limits on when students use computers for substantial writing: the work happens in class, on paper or in a locked-down environment. Access to a device does not settle whether using it will help a student learn.

The change across the essays

[2025 · Essay 7.4](#)

Many educators — though in my circle, fewer and fewer — still argue that there is a place for “ethical generative AI use” in the classroom. I used to agree. But when a free or inexpensive tool can fully replace the thinking process, it stops being a support and becomes a substitute brain.

January 2026 · Essay 7.6

Here are my real claims: Schools should teach students about AI. Schools should not mandate that every teacher teach with AI. Ignoring AI isn't a plan, but neither is succumbing to its hype.

September 2026 · Essay 7.7

I can only answer that writing is thinking, and just because a machine can do something doesn't mean that it should.

For my distinction between classroom restrictions and a universal ban, see [Essay 3.6](#).

Teachers Must Keep Learning Too

The experience of repeated failure had made me all the more receptive to learning from veteran teachers. I had also grown smart enough to act upon their advice, rather than just listen to it.

Essay 8.1

Rookie Teacher Confessions

July 11, 2014 (original publication) · Spin Education

[Earlier Medium copy](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

I was embarrassed by my first two years in the classroom. I was lousy at my job, and even though I had access to the greatest mentors a first-year teacher could hope for, I still screwed up at just about every turn.

What a shame that experience can't be taught. These were my six worst rookie teacher mistakes.

1. I allowed students to create their own groups for group projects. As a result, groups were almost always uneven with respect not just to work ethic, curiosity, creativity, and skills, but also along gender lines. Not surprisingly, groups also seemed more interested in discussing weekend escapades than focusing on the task at hand.
2. I tried to be that “cool young teacher,” accepting just about any old excuse for tardiness and absences. As a result, students felt they could simply slide by, put in minimal work, and still do well in the course. Often they assumed correctly. Whenever I tried to reclaim authority, or tell students they had to refocus, most didn't or couldn't take me seriously. It also didn't help that at 23 years old, I didn't make the extra effort to dress much differently. Appearance matters, especially when you and your students are separated by just six or seven years.
3. Similarly, I didn't monitor bathroom visits. If nature called, I told students to leave class quietly to do their business. As a result, a constant flow of students came and went, *supposedly* for an understood reason. I had assumed, quite naïvely, that juniors and seniors wouldn't take advantage of this policy.

In teaching, as in most professions, assumption is the mother of all calamities. Students always had an easy out, quite literally, if they didn't like or understand an activity or concept.

4. I didn't understand the difference between authority and respect, even as I lacked both in the classroom. Whenever I tried to have serious "talks" with students about misbehavior or poor performances, I tried to invoke a poor excuse for authority. I thought that simply holding the title of "teacher" magically granted me authority, especially when I put on a serious face. Without having earned respect from my students, though, I also hadn't earned authority.
5. My writing assignments lacked sufficient direction, not just with respect to guidelines about prose and structure, but also on how to properly cite sources. Unclear expectations also enticed otherwise bright, capable students to cut corners. I'm not excusing such behavior, but I certainly placed low-hanging fruit directly in front of them. I'm equally to blame for whatever infractions they committed.
6. I also didn't help matters by drowning student papers in red ink. I marked every little mistake, to the point where students felt (quite understandably, I should add) that I took some twisted pleasure in pointing out even the tiniest flaws. At times, I also provided comments that met or exceeded the lengths of submissions, making my students feel even more inferior, incapable, and insecure.

All of this wasn't for lack of listening. I listened intently to my mentors. Still, I insisted on making failure my greatest teacher. Looking back, my actions weren't too unlike those of teenagers who experiment, even as parents and adults warn against such behavior.

During my first two years, I relied more heavily on my mentors for consoling and support. They never turned me away, even as I neglected to embrace their advice and guidance. They listened to my frustrations and regrets, all the while encouraging me to try again and not give up. Without them, I wouldn't still be teaching today.

All the same, I only began to transform into a great teacher my third year in the classroom, when I matured a bit and wised up a lot. The experience of repeated failure had made me all the more receptive to learning from veteran teachers. I

had also grown smart enough to act upon their advice, rather than just listen to it.

Alas, I wish to apologize formally and publicly to anybody I may have taught during my first two years. Thank you for enduring my failures and shortcomings, and, at the risk of sounding haughty, take at least some solace in knowing that your collective suffering has helped mold me into a terrific teacher.

Consider your practice

Which routine or assignment would you handle differently if you were starting over? What feedback from students or colleagues might reveal a mistake you have not yet noticed?

Essay 8.2

What Teachers Should Learn from Legendary Cross Country Coach Joe Newton

September 8, 2013 (original publication) · Spin Education

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Editorial date note: This essay predates Joe Newton's death on December 9, 2017; present-tense references reflect the time of writing.

Anybody serious about education reform should stop relying exclusively on teachers, academics, and administrators for ideas, and start looking at how successful athletic coaches inspire and motivate greatness.

Consider the legendary Joe Newton, the most successful high school cross country coach in American history. In over 50 years of coaching, he has led [York Community High School](#) in Elmhurst, Illinois, to 28 state titles. That's one title more than the number of World Series championships won by the New York Yankees. Even this early into the cross country season, the York Dukes are the heavy favorite to claim victory number 29.



Joe Newton. Photo courtesy of Joe Newton. [Original post](#)

Newton has written several books about coaching and running, and a feature-length documentary, [*The Long Green Line*](#), chronicles his 2005 state championship team.

But beyond all of his trophies and successes, I'm curious to learn from Newton how he inspires such love, dedication and devotion — from his most fit, fastest runner, to his most heavy-set devotee.

"I've got three guys on my team that are like 250 pounds," Newton says. "They're out there in front of the whole team at the team meeting. I said to two guys, I said, 'Look at their bodies. They're not made for running and they're out here every day busting their butt.' I said, 'I just love guys like that. That's what our program is all about.' Then I gave them the old shot: 'You choose to be average. You choose to be good. You choose to be great.' Those guys don't ever score a point for us, but in my eyes they're great because they come out and they give me what they've got."

As classroom teachers, that's all we can ask of any of our students. Regardless of whom we teach and what limitations or gifts they bring, we should always aim to help each student reach his or her fullest potential. It's no wonder that so many students with so many different body types seek Newton's tutelage. Each wants to become the best possible version of himself. But with between 170 and 200 runners on his team in any given season, I wonder how Newton manages to reach so many kids on such a profound level — and how he's able to help them accomplish such amazing things.

Newton tells me that he doesn't have a special secret. "If you're a fraud, they'll

see through you and they won't do squat for you," he says. "But if they know you love them because your personality tells them that, that's the secret of coaching. They know I care about them and, as a result, when I ask them to do something special, they do it. That's the secret to coaching."

That's also the secret to effective teaching. The best teachers make obvious how much they care — not just about their students' academic success, but also about their happiness and wellbeing. When I was a student at Brimmer and May in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, teachers cheered me on from the sidelines, attended shows, volunteered to chaperone overnight trips, and even visited me in the hospital. I wanted to repay their kindness and sacrifice by studying that much harder and smarter to succeed.

I too coach cross-country, and I tell Newton that runners whom I also teach almost always give similar effort inside my classroom. He's not surprised to learn this, or that my most dedicated runners also tend to be the most successful students. As I talk with Newton, I think of one of my stars, an eighth grader who possesses more grit and determination than many adults. He not only runs a 19:01 5K, a gigantic feat for such a young person, but he also consistently earns high academic honors and much praise from teachers.

Newton says that his squad also has the highest grade point average of any team at York. "You would think not, because of all the work: They're running in the morning. They're running in the afternoon," he says. "This is a very academic high school. Yet, our guys are absolutely good students and, above all, good human beings. I'm talking about that constantly. Every day, I've got one or two thoughts for the day. It's nice to be great. It's greater to be nice. That's one of my all-time favorites. I tell our guys that you only get respect when you give it. And if you don't give respect, you're not going to get it back. So you better be learning how to give it. That's good for life."

Newton cares about winning, but he cares just as much about his teams' academic successes — and he enforces his expectations. "I tell them all the first day of practice, 'If you're ineligible two weeks in a row, you're not helping our team. You're done. You're going back into the classroom and start paying the price,'" he says.

Newton says that his team is full of scholars, willing and able to provide academic support. There's something to be said for knowing how and when to

ask for help, and I applaud Newton for fostering this ideal in his runners. Even at 29, I find that at times friends and coworkers have correctly pointed out that I need to ask for help more often. But asking for help is far from the only life skill that Newton imparts to his runners.

“If you’re in school, you’ve got to come to practice,” Newton says. “If you duck out twice, you’re done. . . . That’s training for life. If you go out in life and you’re tardy three days a week, and three other days you don’t come to work, you’re going to be fired. I’ve got two jobs when I’m coaching. First is physical welfare for all the guys. And second is train them to be a good person, a good human being — the value of hard work and punctuality.”

I’m also impressed with how Newton tells his runners they shouldn’t be afraid to fail.

Too often, well-meaning teachers do too much to ensure that students never fail. But if kids never encounter adversity in the classroom, it’s doubtful they will successfully manage it in real life. Teachers should encourage students to try daring new things, and rethink how failure can turn into even greater, more meaningful success.

After each practice, Newton leaves his students with a thought of the day. He shares with me one of his all-time favorites: “The greatest thing in life is not in never having fallen, but in rising up again.”

Teachers can learn a lot from Coach Joe Newton, who, through showing student-athletes just how much he cares — and he cares a whole lot — empowers them to recover from adversity and failure that much stronger.

Consider your practice

How do students know you care about them apart from their performance?

What small, repeated action could make that care more visible?

Essay 8.3

Fixing Bad Professional Development

Original date unconfirmed · June 30, 2018 (Medium archive) · Medium

[Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

One of the biggest challenges schools face is not just finding time for professional development days, but also finding common ground for making effective use of

them.

I hear from all types of teachers, from all types of schools, decrying how pointless and boring such meetings are — and how much they wish they could use that time for something (anything) else. But I also hear from all types of administrators, from all types of schools, wishing that teachers would show much greater pride, enthusiasm, and interest in learning about their profession.

As I see it, both sides share equal blame for making professional development something to dread, rather than embrace.

Administrators falter when they...

1. . . . return from an education conference, and without skipping a beat, call for a professional development meeting (or two, or three, or four) to share and inspire others with their newfound enlightenment — all in the hopes of instituting drastic and immediate change. It's great that they're excited about sharing, but attending one or two annual conferences does not make one an expert, and acting or being perceived as such only fosters animosity and doubt in their leadership ability. They're much better off taking time to digest their thoughts, and speaking with others before making any sudden calls for a meeting.

2. . . . expect, after one or two professional development meetings, that teachers finally make effective pedagogical use of their school-issued iPads. Technology is definitely transforming education. However, administrators shouldn't be naïve or foolish about holding unrealistic expectations. Change doesn't happen overnight, and a few meetings sprinkled throughout the year won't do the trick. In all likelihood, otherwise great teachers will continue to struggle, while complaining (and rightfully so) about the lack of vision, leadership, and administrative support. Administrators should consider appointing educational technology specialists, and reducing those individuals' course loads to work one-on-one with the most needy teachers.

3. . . . rely too heavily on outside education firms or “experts” to run professional development meetings. Certainly, those individuals can have much to offer. But too often, they are former teachers and administrators who have been out of the classroom for 5, 10, 15, or 20-plus years. Simply put, they've lost touch with being in the trenches. For the same reason, I place less stock in education authors who aren't also currently teachers. At Palmer Trinity, an independent school in

Miami, Florida, Bruce Musgrave, my former assistant head of school, would ask his teachers to lead workshops and discussions. Accordingly, my colleagues and I felt not only greater respect for the presenters, but also for Musgrave, who entrusted us with being wise enough to educate each other. He often said, “Professional development begins at home.”

Teachers falter when they...

1. . . . always think that professional development meetings are worthless, and that nothing can be gained from attending. Teachers do themselves no favors by behaving like their most apathetic students, and they would be foolish to think that administrators don’t take notice. I have heard of and seen teachers who text, doodle, e-mail, and watch movies, more concerned with any type of distraction than real engagement. They may very well learn nothing. Perhaps they could make much more productive use of their time. Still, not even feigning interest makes them look rude and arrogant — and no matter how many years they have under their belts, here’s a reality check: They’re never above learning something new. Never.

2. . . . assume that professional development days are all the support that’s offered or available to them. As in life, sometimes you need to be proactive and even a tad aggressive in seeking help. Don’t simply assume that help will always come to you. Try as they might, higher-ups can’t read your mind, nor can they always acknowledge your difficulties. If you need help, make an appointment with the respective administrator. If he or she is unhelpful or unresponsive, ask a colleague. If you’re both too busy during the day, find a time to meet after school or, dare I say it, over the weekend. If you’re still too busy, you need to reconsider your priorities or time-management skills — perhaps both. You should want to be the best teacher possible, and that means making some sacrifices, especially if you’re new to the profession. Trust me, it will pay off in the long run.

3. . . . complain rather than offer ways to improve professional development meetings. At most schools, walls have ears. Unless you’re very careful, whatever you say will eventually make its way back to an administrator. This almost always creates more damage than improvement. Be the wiser person by meeting with whoever oversees professional development. Politely express your feelings, but also offer ideas to advance your school’s professional development program. Administrators worth their salt will appreciate your honesty, as well as your

interest in helping the school cultivate even better teachers.

Consider your practice

What classroom problem would you most want professional development to help you solve? How could teachers shape the agenda and follow up on what they try?

Essay 8.4

Why Can't Public and Private Schools Get Along?

Spring 2016 (original publication) · Independent Teacher (NAIS)

[Original publication at Independent Teacher \(NAIS\)](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

At the 2015 Annual NAIS Conference in Boston, Todd Bland, Milton Academy (Massachusetts) head of school, explained what he describes as a misconception about the independent school sector:

When the word private school is named, still for a large percentage of our country, there is not any understanding whatsoever of the commitment that many of us have to make stronger the educational opportunities not just for the students that we serve, but the students who surround us in communities near us.

Bland had arrived at his Massachusetts institution seven years earlier, eager to promote partnerships between different types of schools. His 2015 assertion seemed a direct response to a 2013 Slate article, “If You Send Your Kid to Private School, You Are a Bad Person.” The author, Allison Benedikt, then the site’s news director, wrote, “You are a bad person if you send your children to private school. Not bad like murderer bad — but bad like *ruining-one-of-our-nation’s-most-essential-institutions-in-order-to-get-what’s-best-for-your-kid* bad. So, pretty bad.” Had Benedikt bothered with some more news digging before writing her piece, she might have emphasized a different point — that a growing number of independent schools are helping public schools, whose students are benefiting from the aid. And this is not merely private schools paying lip service to noblesse oblige.

With many private high schools in New England charging over \$40,000 a year in tuition, at first glance it seems natural to ask, “Why bother with public school students?” Independent school teachers have also heard criticism that their sector

cares only about the bottom line and that their loyalties lie with those able to pay tuition or make donations. That is a gross generalization, and it needs to perish. Bland makes this case. He says he is passionate about helping public school students learn simply because it is the “right thing to do.”

For 38 years, Milton Academy has run The Saturday Course, an academic enrichment program where students from over 125 schools and 48 cities and towns participate in an array of learning activities. “All you need [to enroll in The Saturday Course] is to have a recommendation from the teacher and a passion and a desire to learn, and you can arrive at Milton at a very low cost on Saturdays for six weeks and be inspired,” Bland said.

Kristan Burke, one of the program’s directors, shared more about the program’s application process, which also involves working with participating school districts to identify high-achieving students who are “excited and motivated to be in a fast-paced learning environment.” Report cards, standardized test scores, and good behavior also factor into admission decisions. Five sessions (of six Saturdays each) are offered to students in grades 4 through 8, with about 1,000 students enrolled throughout the year. The program charges \$331 total for each student per session, but financial aid is available. Burke noted, “We don’t deny anybody if they should be in the program.” Affirming the positive impact of the program, Mary Gormley, the superintendent of Milton’s public schools, said The Saturday Course does a “terrific job with providing an unbelievable opportunity to children,” especially students interested in unique subjects.

To see all of this in action, one just needs to take Bland up on his suggestion to attend a session of The Saturday Course, where, during an earlier session, even the snowy inclement weather didn’t prevent around 240 students from attending. In a course titled “Speed Racing” and taught by Jeffrey Cateon — public school principal of Willett Elementary School in Attleboro, Massachusetts — students experimented with physics by building toy-sized racing boats made of rubber bands and styrofoam. Cateon, who has been at The Saturday Course for 19 years, helps students learn through trial and error. “When they ask questions, I don’t give them all of the answers. I want them to be able to discover on their own,” he said. Avoiding answering questions to which students can find answers by themselves leads to students becoming persistent, inquisitive, and open to learning from failure, affirming key qualities valued by teachers in both the

independent and the public school sectors.

Susan Barclay, a public school special education teacher at the Thacher Elementary School, also in Attleboro, Massachusetts, provides further affirmation for such private-public partnerships. In her “Bloodier and Guttier” course, kids find out more about the ways living things work. Recently, students were conducting a frog dissection to understand its digestive system. One might squirm at the sight of guts and organs, but the students marveled at the learning. They uttered “Oohs” and “Ahhs,” while looking on mere inches away from the incision. “Here, students want to know everything,” said Barclay, who has been at The Saturday Course since the program’s beginning. As she moved around workstations, students continued to examine their frog’s innards while learning about the digestive system.

Seldom is enough done to foster understanding and collaboration among teachers and administrators from different types of schools. That includes sharing ideas about lesson planning, assessment, and how to integrate new pedagogy and technology effectively into the classroom. All of this is of critical importance, as noted by John Chubb, the late president of the National Association of Independent Schools, the nonprofit organization that represents over 1,400 private schools in the United States:

Today, every school, whether public, public-charter or private, faces major challenges — preparing students for a rapidly changing future, blending technology with great teaching, serving a much more diverse population, living with fewer economic resources, and more. No school or sector has a monopoly on good ideas. It just makes sense for different types of schools to come together and learn from one another.

There is no better way to help break down those barriers than by encouraging and helping teachers gain experience (and comfort) in all types of educational settings, including having independent school teachers lead public school classrooms and vice versa. Coincidentally, when I spoke to them, Gormley and Bland had just returned from a yearly meeting with other school leaders from both the independent and public sectors in Milton, addressing how cooperation can benefit all students from all schools — and even a local college. “We brainstorm and we share,” Gormley says. “I don’t think you’d find many communities that have that kind of initiative.”

Milton Academy is not the only private school helping public school students succeed. In 2005, Punahou School (Hawaii), the largest single-campus private school in the United States, launched the Clarence T.C. Ching PUEO Program, or Partnerships in Unlimited Educational Opportunities. The program “identifies middle and high school students in neighboring public schools with high academic potential but with low economic opportunity.”

James Kapae‘alii Scott, the president of Punahou, noted that Punahou’s summer enrichment program, like The Saturday Course at Milton Academy, is not designed to recruit students away from public schools. Punahou recently received an additional \$6 million grant from The Clarence T.C. Ching Foundation to support PUEO — in addition to \$3 million donated in 2009. As Scott has noted, “We are blessed with strong demand for entrance, ample resources, and robust fund-raising.”

PUEO relies on the Hawaii State Department of Education for candidate nominations, notes Carl Ackerman, who, in addition to teaching history at Punahou, also directs the program. More than 300 students are enrolled in the seven-year summer enrichment track — from graduating fifth-graders to high school juniors — all at no charge. Several activities also occur throughout the academic year, and PUEO even provides free college counseling for seniors who have formally graduated from the program. “Ninety-nine percent of our kids will actually graduate from high school, which is a huge percentage,” Ackerman said.

Ninety-five percent of our kids are accepted into college, and then about eighty to eighty-five percent will be enrolled. Some kids will drop out of college, and the reasons for that are many, but the biggest is finances — some kids will be admitted to college, but they won’t get full packages.

PUEO students have matriculated at Princeton, Yale, Stanford, Williams, the University of Hawaii, and the Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania. In the spring, members of the program’s first cohort will graduate from college.

To cover the \$14,500 cost per student for seven summer sessions and an eighth year of senior college counseling, Punahou relies on a superior combination of funding, passion, and expertise. But even for institutions that lack one or more of those characteristics, an important truth should be gleaned from what Scott and Ackerman are helping to achieve. It is possible for independent schools to make a

difference beyond their institutional walls by helping public school students succeed.

Naomi Matsuzaki, who had retired as principal of Kahalu‘u Elementary School in Kaneohe, Hawaii, agrees. She worked in an impoverished community, where many students reside in neighboring housing or family homesteads and rarely consider the idea of attending college. “Many of these children aspire to just get married and have kids, that’s it,” Matsuzaki told me. PUEO is helping reverse that trend. “Parents are proud when their children are accepted into the program,” Matsuzaki said. “Being accepted into the program not only impacts the child, but their parents, who change their values and goals to help all of their children [attend college],” Matsuzaki said, explaining that this is a challenging adjustment — especially for parents who rely on their children working over the summer for support. “The family really has to make a sacrifice, but they are really committed to making education a priority and finding a way to make this work.” When PUEO launched, Kahalu‘u Elementary could send two new students per year. With more funding, that number is now up to 10.

As if Ackerman didn’t have enough on his plate, he also serves as a director of Private Schools with Public Purpose, which strives to “serve all our students by forming partnerships within school communities (private, public, charter, home-schools), non-profits, foundations, businesses, and any other entity that can support students.” The organization hosts an annual conference to support its mission. Milton Academy and Punahou School are also members of the National Network of Schools in Partnership, which supports collaboration between public, private, and charter schools.

Executive Director Blake Kohn said that after launching two years ago with 50 members, the organization has now grown to over 135 schools. “Strong partnerships are beneficial to all stakeholders,” Kohn said. “Not only do the students and teachers learn from one another, but the schools build solid relationships, and the community as a whole becomes more engaged in the success of all students.”

Kohn’s words appeal to reason, and Benedikt and her article’s supporters should listen. Perhaps then the misconception about independent schools that Bland outlines will begin to fade, and more people can focus on what really matters — helping students succeed, no matter what type of school they attend.

Consider your practice

What could you learn from a teacher working in a different kind of school?

What shared question would make an exchange useful to both of you?

Essay 8.5

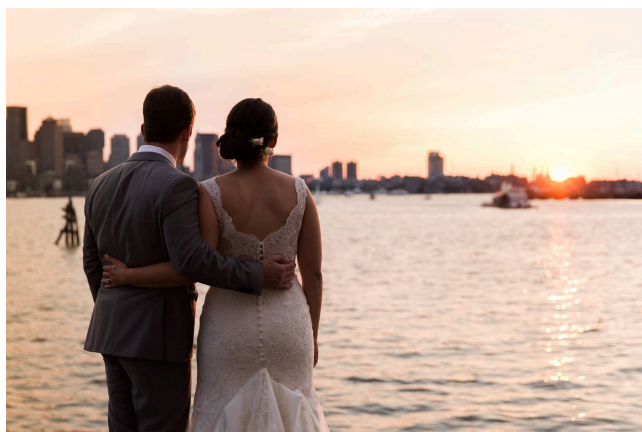
A New Twist on a Public-Private School Partnership

June 2016 (original publication) · Independent Ideas (NAIS)

[Original publication at Independent Ideas \(NAIS\)](#) · [Read archived article](#) · [Source details](#)

Coauthored with Elana Rome

David and Elana: As a newly engaged couple, we give new meaning to the term private-public partnership. For all that distinguishes our work environments, at the end of the day, we return home to support and listen to each other through our challenges and triumphs. We want our students to experience joyful learning. We want to improve our craft. We want to make a difference. We recognize that we share a unique relationship, but we believe teachers in all different kinds of schools can learn from the ways we communicate. Here are some of the ways we learn from and support each other — and our students.



David and Elana. Photo courtesy of David and Elana Cutler. [Source details](#).

In the Classroom

David: We both believe that modeling is vital. Elana works hard at modeling clear, step-by-step explanations of math problems for students to learn from and emulate. She has convinced me to continue modeling effective writing practices

for my students to adopt. I have seen across-the-board improvement, particularly with students who struggled previously.

To me, part of effective modeling means sharing my own work with my students. In American history, for example, I sometimes have students examine papers I wrote as a high school or college student. Meanwhile, I critique my younger self and discuss how I might have worded arguments differently. Thanks to Elana, I feel more comfortable being vulnerable in front of my students, which in turn helps them learn from their own mistakes.

Elana: One major difference between our jobs is that I must teach the Common Core State Standards, while Dave can set his own content goals for his students. As a result, it can be challenging to figure out how to incorporate more project-based learning into my lessons when I know there are only so many days before the standardized tests roll around. The innovative projects that Dave does with his students have inspired me to try new things.

In an earlier class, I introduced a new project that became the driving force behind my statistics unit. Students formulated a statistical question to survey their peers. They collected a random sample of data and analyzed it using the statistics content dictated by the Common Core. I modeled those steps with my own data before my students applied the skills to the data they had collected.

Integrating technology-based skills into the curriculum is another approach Dave models for me. In his government class, Dave had students create mock websites for presidential candidates, building essential technology skills while studying the primary election season. Throughout my statistics project, I taught my students how to input their data into Excel, and then use some of the analytic tools in the software, which is not something most sixth-graders learn.

Outside the Classroom

David: Elana and I both lead students by example in extracurricular activities and help each other see different sides of challenging circumstances. Elana, a talented singer, spends two nights a week rehearsing with two different vocal groups, and has helped direct the school's annual musical for the last three years.

Meanwhile, I'm a competitive runner and train over the summer months so that come fall, I am in shape to challenge my student-athletes to keep pace. In this non-academic setting, I want my young athletes to know that if they can push

through adversity and a manageable degree of pain, they will get faster. I urge my team to transfer this lesson to life beyond the sport. It's not surprising that my most committed runners are also stellar students.

Elana also helps me care for emotionally vulnerable students. While Brimmer is well-equipped to handle these matters, I hold equal respect for Elana's opinion and what steps she would take in a given situation. I'm always reassured that she would likely follow a similar protocol — including meeting with teachers, counselors, and parents to decide on a plan of action. This shared framework gives us a launching pad to learn from our schools' similarities and differences.

Elana: Dave and I talk frequently about our schools' distinct programs and gain new perspective. Two summers ago, I worked on the team that created the advisory program at Brown Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts, where I teach. The program's goal is for all students to establish a positive connection with at least one adult at Brown, and to create safe, small cohorts where students feel supported. Throughout the year, we focused on building relationships within a group of 10–12 students, fostering resilience, and developing life skills related to responsibility and reflection.

As we were writing the advisory curriculum, Dave and I talked often about the process. His school already had an advisory system in place, but it became clear that our programs would be very different. Brimmer's advisory meets as a cohort only once a week and serves primarily as academic advising — which makes sense for high school students looking toward college. Brown's advisory meets four mornings a week and focuses mainly on fostering interpersonal connections. Discussing the differences between our two schools' programs has helped us understand why each one fits each school.

Professional Growth

David: We're both always seeking to become more effective teachers. Elana is often enrolled in a course or workshop to improve her craft. Within the first five years of teaching in the Newton Public Schools, teachers must take a handful of courses. Currently, Elana is enrolled in "RETELL," or Rethinking Equity in the Teaching of English Language Learners, which is required by the state.

As Brimmer has a growing international student population, I often talk with Elana about ways I might better support English language learners. She shares

with me techniques for teaching tiered vocabulary, as well as reading and writing strategies to help students reach their language goals. She has helped me take advantage of optional professional development opportunities that Brimmer offers, including courses in teaching and learning. In June 2016, I planned to attend a five-day workshop for high school newspaper advisers, hosted by the New England Scholastic Press Association.

Elana and her colleagues have taught me about effective classroom management. She is in constant contact with her team, consisting of teachers in the other core subjects who all instruct the same group of students. They meet weekly along with the guidance counselor, inclusion facilitators, special educators, and the assistant principal to touch base about students' academic progress and emotional well-being. The group also facilitates cross-curricular connections for students, including using English vocabulary words in lessons and in general conversation with students.

As a result of learning about her process, now when I need to speak with a student about a test or assignment, I make the request in private. I'm also communicating more with my colleagues about shared students and how everyone can benefit from cross-curricular cooperation.

Elana: We never stop learning from each other — and our networks. Dave constantly seeks out opportunities to grow professionally, questioning and reexamining the way he teaches and assesses, as well as interviewing education innovators and leaders from all sectors. As we discuss these conversations, I am inspired to reexamine my own practices.

For example, I'm developing more ways to take the focus off grades. I allow students to correct their mistakes on graded homework assignments for full credit and make corrections on unit tests. I have adjusted how I give feedback to serve students better and foster a growth mindset. If my students score poorly on a test the first time around, rather than filling the page with X's and minus signs, I will write out questions for the students to consider. This encourages students to reengage with the problems and rethink their work, rather than being devastated by multiple red X's. Overall, my students have responded well to my new approach.

Dave and I also discuss the professional development at our schools. The entire faculty at Brown read excerpts from Carol Dweck's *Mindset*. Throughout the

year, we used the ideas from the book to frame discussion in our staff meetings. Our district-wide professional development efforts focused on closing the achievement gap. Teachers worked together in project teams to plan and implement systems to narrow this gap. One team implemented a new academic coaching program for struggling students.

Brown’s model for professional development — which emphasizes team-based collaboration to tackle problems and cultivate best practices — is something that teachers from all types of schools could benefit from engaging in together.

We hope our relationship can stand as a model for how educators from all sectors can learn from and support each other to benefit all students. We feel strongly that there is much more that unites us than divides us. Let’s focus on [cultivating that unity and sharing best practices that span all sectors](#).

Consider your practice

Who helps you think through the ordinary decisions in your teaching? What practice from another classroom could you adapt while respecting the differences between your students and theirs?

Essay 8.6

What Gordon Wood, Eric Foner and James W. Loewen Told Me About Teaching History

June 24, 2026 · Age of Awareness (Medium)

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

“They know who the Three Stooges are,” Gordon Wood told me, “but they don’t know that we have three parts to our government.”

He was talking about American students, and about what he called “the abysmal ignorance of American history.” By the time I interviewed him in 2017, he had spent more than half a century studying the nation’s founding, long enough to watch the country grow no more curious about its own past. Americans, he added, had “never been historically minded.”

Wood would know. He was, after all, the foremost historian of the American Revolution of his generation: a professor at Brown for nearly four decades, winner of the Bancroft Prize for *The Creation of the American Republic* and the Pulitzer for *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, and the recipient, in

2011, of a National Humanities Medal from President Obama. The legal scholar Akhil Reed Amar recently called him “[America’s greatest living historian](#).”

I keep coming back to Wood’s observation, though not only for what it says about students. It says at least as much about those of us paid to teach them.

As a veteran high school American history teacher, I’ve grown uneasy about something my profession rarely admits — many of us who teach history have not been asked to know enough of it.

It’s a hard thing to say, and I don’t say it lightly. It comes from years of watching the work up close, in schools, at training sessions, and in the online spaces where teachers gather.

The teachers themselves are not the problem, or at least not the root of it. Most work hard and care deeply about their students. But some of us, I think, have stopped learning the very subject we teach, or never learned it deeply enough in the first place.

I spend a fair amount of time in Facebook groups for history and social studies teachers, and what I see there unsettles me. The conversation runs heavily toward activities, worksheets, and simulations and, lately, AI-generated lesson plans, while the history itself almost never comes up.

Obviously, that’s not a scientific survey. A Facebook group shows you only the people who choose to post in it. Still, it presents a reasonable view of what many teachers prize, and what they prize tends to be method ahead of mastery.

I recognize that a degree is not the same as knowledge. A history major can forget what he crammed for an exam; someone who never majored in it can read seriously for thirty years and end up knowing far more. The second person is the one I’d want in charge.

I recently posted a photo of a [T-shirt](#) — sold by the thousands on Amazon, much to my chagrin — that pairs the words “We the People” with the year 1776. I pointed out the obvious: “We the People” opens the Constitution of 1787, not the Declaration of Independence.

Rather than engage the distinction, some commenters waved it off. They argued that since 1776 marked the nation’s birth, any patriotic phrase could fairly be attached to it. That dismissal bothered me more than the shirt did.

The sequence is the entire point. We declared independence in 1776, finished drafting the Articles of Confederation in 1777, and didn't write the Constitution until 1787. Each step was a fierce, real-time argument over what kind of country we were building. Flatten that out, and you lose the nuance of cause and effect. Wrap everything into 1776, and you treat everything that came after as if it were all but certain.

The disagreement itself did not trouble me; historians disagree for a living. What troubled me was the confidence of it — the certainty behind false or flimsy claims, and what that means for how history gets passed on to students.

Education schools have spent decades leaning into pedagogy, classroom management, assessment, and edtech, all of which matter. It's also worth noting that a brilliant historian is not always an equally brilliant teacher. But somewhere in there, knowing the actual subject slid down the list, and we ended up with a subset of teachers well drilled in how to teach and out of the habit of studying what they teach. And you can't teach what you don't know.

I heard a version of this some years earlier, in 2014, from Eric Foner, my favorite historian and the DeWitt Clinton Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia. His books have won the Pulitzer, Bancroft, Lincoln, Parkman, and Los Angeles Times Book prizes, and works such as *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* and *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* have reshaped how generations of readers understand the Civil War, slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction. He spoke highly of my profession.

"I respect what high school teachers do enormously," he told me. "They have a much harder job than we do at the college level." And he meant it; he had spent years on the road, teaching teachers at conferences and programs.

He was just as frank, though, about a flaw baked into the system. "We have to get away from the idea that any old person can teach history," he told me, and then described a pattern any teacher will recognize: the football coach who turns up at the front of a history class. "A lot of the history teachers in this country are actually athletic coaches," he said; students would tell him, "Coach Smith, he taught my history course."

No one would dream of putting that coach in a French or physics class, Foner noted, yet a history section gets handed over without a second thought. He went on to say, "The number one thing is, you have to know history to actually teach

it.” To be fair, I know of several coaches who are also excellent history teachers. Even the credentialed teachers, Foner added, often show up with “education degrees, which have not actually provided them with a lot of training in the subject that they’re actually going to be teaching.” They learn a great deal about methods, he said, and far too little about the past.

No one said it more bluntly than James W. Loewen, who passed away in 2021.

When I interviewed him in 2013, Loewen traced the steady bloating of the history textbook to the same failure Foner had named. The fat books, he said, “meet a certain need, but it’s a need that should not exist,” the need of teachers “who are not, first and foremost, teachers of history.”

Then he made it personal. Holding up his book in front of an audience, he told me, he joked that he might have subtitled it *Revenge Against Coach DeMolin*, after his own high school history teacher back in Illinois, who was really the basketball coach.

“He knew full well that he didn’t care how he taught American history, that the school system didn’t care,” Loewen said. The man was “hired and fired on the basis of the won-lost record of the basketball team,” and history was simply somewhere to park him. The cost, Loewen said, fell on everyone, the rest of the department included, but “most of all, of course... the poor hapless students.”

When I floated the idea that the door-stopper textbook had become a crutch for teachers who either didn’t know enough history or couldn’t be bothered to build their own lessons, Loewen agreed on both counts, though he wouldn’t let the teachers shoulder the whole blame. They should have been hired in the first place, he said, only if they had majored in history or a related discipline.

“You cannot imagine somebody teaching physics who never had a single course in physics in college, or somebody teaching math who never had a single math course in college,” he told me. “It just doesn’t happen.”

Loewen was describing teachers who never learned the subject in the first place. There’s another version of the same failure, though, and it may be the more common one: the teacher who learned it once and then let it slip away. Picture a biology teacher who stopped following new research the day she left college, or an economics teacher who never opened another journal. We’d find it alarming. Yet a history teacher is rarely expected to stay current, and almost never helped

to do so.

Our understanding of the past is constantly changing. Reconstruction looks different now than it did thirty years ago. So does westward expansion. So do immigration, labor, slavery, and the founding itself. A teacher still working from notes scribbled two decades back isn't lying to the students, exactly. But we must not simply hand them a past perspective that has gone stale — or was never quite right to start with.

Thin knowledge does more harm than getting the occasional date wrong, of which I am also guilty. A teacher who doesn't really know the material can't respond to nuanced questions, weigh one source against another, feel where the genuine knots are, or separate a living argument among scholars from an outdated myth. That teacher's students get a depleted, outdated education while being trained to memorize, repeat, and never ask why.

I have heard history teachers say repeatedly that they want students to think like historians. It's a noble goal, but it does not happen just because we hand out a document and march students through an inquiry worksheet. Real historical thinking requires knowledge of the material itself: context, chronology, cause and effect, and the ways historians have argued about the past over time. Without that, teachers are not helping students discover the truth about America's past. Unfortunately, they are more likely to repackage old myths in a newer language.

“A teacher who quits learning, in the end, has nothing left to stand on — and students can tell right away who knows their stuff and who doesn't.” · [Essay 8.6](#)

To be fair, many of us juggle five classes, multiple preps with over 100 students total, a sport to coach after school, and a paycheck that isn't enough — all while trying to spare time to be with family and friends. Tell a teacher buried under all that to go be a working historian on the side, and yes, you are going to sound ridiculous.

But the work doesn't have to be burdensome. I can't help but feel that more of us could read a history book now and then, follow academics who know the field better than we do, and ask, once in a while, whether the lesson we have taught for years still holds up.

For his part, Loewen spent a career showing what that looks like — arguing with the textbook instead of reciting it, putting real documents in students’ hands, sending them out into local and family history, asking them not what happened but what they would have done in the moment. “Don’t teach the textbook,” he told me. “Teach history.” Students deserve a teacher who knows more than the textbook does, who understands that history isn’t a tidy bundle of symbols and slogans but a living, contested, unfinished thing. If that’s a tall order, so be it. Teaching history has always meant more than teaching well. It means knowing the history you teach.

Foner, for all his sharp words, was hopeful about what good teaching really requires, and unconvinced that any gadget could stand in for it. “There is no substitute for a good teacher,” he told me; the bells and whistles missed the point. Asked what mattered most, he didn’t begin with method. “The number one thing is to have a real passion for your subject,” he said. “Real enthusiasm, passion, and to be able to convey that to your students.” Knowledge and love of the subject, for him, were one and the same. “The key thing is really to love the subject, to be able to convey that to your students, and if you can do that, I think you’ll be a great teacher.”

But passion has to rest on something. And history, Foner told me, “is never stable.” He went on, “There is no such thing as the final truth about any aspect of history. It’s constantly being re-evaluated, rethought, new perspectives added.” A teacher who quits learning, in the end, has nothing left to stand on — and students can tell right away who knows their stuff and who doesn’t.

Wood understood that better than almost anyone. When we last spoke, he reflected on how far his own field had ventured. “We know more about the American Revolution now than we ever did 50 years ago,” he said, “and we’re not going back. We’re not going back to what we understood. We know too much.”

Whatever a teacher absorbed years ago is no longer where the scholarship sits. The least we owe our students, and the memory of Loewen and of Wood, is to try to keep up. However imperfectly, I know I do.

Consider your practice

What has changed in the scholarship of a subject you teach since you first learned it? How could you make time to examine that change and bring it into

your classroom?

Conclusion

Concluding essay

Education Policy Has a Mic Problem

February 11, 2026 · Medium

[Read original article](#) · [Source details](#)

Too often, teachers sit in the audience while people who no longer teach tell them how to do their jobs.

One [Bored Teachers skit](#) captures that frustration. A full-time teacher plays both herself and the person leading a professional development meeting.

“How long ago were you in the classroom?” she asks in her teacher persona.

“Because, you know, classroom management kind of changes over time, so I’m assuming if you’re running a classroom management PD, you must have been in the classroom, like, last year?”

A quick camera pan shows the session’s host.

“I mean, I taught for three years before I left to work at the district,” she says.

“It’s been about a decade since I was in the classroom, but I keep up to date on all the latest research.”

Back in teacher persona: “Yeah, because research and working with actual children are totally the same thing.”

I teach high school history, government, and journalism. I get the frustration behind the joke. “Outsiders,” by which I mean people who do not currently teach (or have never taught), often lead professional development workshops, while those of us who teach students each day have little say in, well...anything. Still, we are the ones expected to put their advice into practice.

At the start of this book, I spoke about two kinds of authority. The first, *embedded authority*, comes from actually teaching—trying a lesson, noticing where students struggle, changing course, and answering for the results. The second, *extracted authority*, often (but not always) comes from people outside the classroom who conduct research, report, or reflect on teaching.

Both can help teachers. Outsiders can compare experiences across schools and

pursue questions that teachers may lack the time to investigate. But we teachers still must work out whether an idea will help the students in front of us, with the time and resources available.

To be clear, I've learned a great deal from outsiders. Rick Wormeli, a retired teacher, wrote one of the most influential education books I have read, [*Fair Isn't Always Equal: Assessing & Grading in the Differentiated Classroom*](#). Our conversation about missed assignments changed how I thought about helping students become competent without punishing them for their shortcomings.

I also loved reading [*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*](#) and interviewing its author, Susan Cain, who has never taught in a PreK–12 classroom. During our [*conversation*](#), she told me that well-meaning teachers can make introverted children feel that something is wrong with them. I still think about that warning because I never want to do that.

Still, being responsible for a classroom matters, and it matters that I am a full-time teacher who writes about instruction, assessment, and education technology. I don't sell a program or promise that my approach will work everywhere, but I hope it invites productive discourse among my peers.

Of course, teachers must remain accountable to students, parents, and administrators. When a lesson confuses students (and it almost certainly will) or an assignment fails in any way (and here, too, it likely will), teachers must respond to mitigate damage and repair trust. But critically, outsiders offer advice without sharing that responsibility, and when things go south, the teacher *still* must explain what happened and decide what to do next. That difference should carry weight when schools choose whose expertise to pay for and whose judgment to trust.

Yet a confident promise can be easier to sell than a teacher's qualified answer. Teachers know how much depends on the students, the subject, the schedule, and what happened in class the day before. Those qualifications deserve a hearing.

Schools can start with the expertise already on their faculty by giving teachers time to share their work. Allow them to lead professional development sessions. Include them in decisions about curriculum and assessment before those decisions are final. Education publications could commission more writing from people who still teach.

At the end of the day, teachers should not have to leave the classroom to become worth listening to.

Pass the mic.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Bruce Musgrave, my longtime editor, for always believing in me. Bruce hired me fresh out of graduate school for my first teaching job, taking a risk on a young kid who did not know what he was getting into. I am grateful for that opportunity, his guidance, and the faith he has continued to show in me and my writing.

I also want to thank my wife, Elana, and my son, Gabe, for always supporting me and teaching me that the only thing more important than my students is my family.

About the Author

[David Cutler](#) teaches history and journalism at Brimmer and May School in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, where he advises *The Gator*, the student news site. He leads the [Private School Journalism Association](#), which supports student publications at private and independent schools.

His education writing has appeared in Edutopia, PBS NewsHour, HuffPost, and publications of the National Association of Independent Schools. He received the Columbia Scholastic Press Association's Gold Key in 2026.

The Next Book

My next book explores how teachers can help students see the value in what they learn and apply it beyond an assignment or test. I want to build on fresh classroom material to make a deeper argument about purpose and application: how students connect knowledge and skills to questions and problems that matter to them.

Publishing Inquiries

Publishers and literary agents interested in this collection or my next book are invited to contact me through the [contact form at TeacherCutler.com](#).

Source Notes

The selections come from David Cutler’s existing articles. Credits identify original publications and earlier, later, or related versions where these could be verified. Each entry also links to the archive text used for this collection. An archive date is not necessarily the date an article was first published; where no earlier publication is listed, that history has not been confirmed.

Some articles first appeared on Spin Education, also known as SpinEdu. David Cutler moved that work to Medium in 2018 and later to [TeacherCutler.com](https://www.teachercutler.com). The old Spin Education site is no longer online. Its name and original publication dates remain as historical credits; the links with these selections point to their Medium versions.

Some selections are abridged, while others restore fuller passages from the author’s archive. Copyediting and limited transition changes improve clarity and correct errors. The brief chapter openings and dated excerpts in *What I Reconsidered* draw from the author’s existing writing. New notes identify later changes of view. The introduction draws on “The Necessity of Mentoring New Teachers”; its source record appears below. The former life-skills passage has been removed from the introduction.

Two selections were coauthored: *A Tale of Two Teachers* with Preston R. Michelson, and *A New Twist on a Public-Private School Partnership* with Elana Rome. Their contributions retain their attribution.

Chapter 1 · What Will They Remember

Introduction · The Necessity of Mentoring New Teachers

Another version: Edutopia, January 20, 2014. [Why New Teachers Need Mentors](#).

Archive version: Medium, July 9, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

[Return to the introduction](#)

1.1 · Rethinking How to Engage History Students

Original publication: Spin Education, September 24, 2013. Rethinking How to Engage History Students.

Archive version: Medium, July 9, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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1.2 · Allowing Students to ‘Figure It Out’

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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1.3 · Learning That Makes a Difference

Earlier publication: Spin Education, May 23, 2014. Real-World Learning That Makes a Difference.

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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1.4 · Top Five Life Skills Schools Rarely Teach

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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1.5 · Why School?: A Conversation Worth Having

Archive version: Medium, July 9, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Chapter 2 · You Cannot Cover Everything

2.1 · Discarding Textbooks: Learning by Doing

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

[Return to the selection](#)

2.2 · How Superhero Comics Enhance Learning

Earlier reporting: Spin Education, 2014. How Comics Enhance Learning.

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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2.3 · Using Pop and Rock to Teach History

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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2.4 · Beyond “Down With Textbooks”

Archive version: Educate. (Medium), January 29, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

Date context: Gordon S. Wood died on June 7, 2026. See [Brown University’s remembrance.](#)

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2.5 · Can Teachers Think Outside of the Box?

Archive version: Medium, June 25, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Chapter 3 · Writing Is Thinking

3.1 · Why I Teach Journalism to My High School History Students

Earlier version: Edutopia, December 8, 2017. [Why I Teach Journalism in My History Classes.](#)

Archive version: Medium, June 15, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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3.2 · To Teach Effective Writing, Model Effective Writing

Earlier publication: Edutopia, June 10, 2014. [To Teach Effective Writing, Model Effective Writing](#). Updated July 14, 2015.

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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3.3 · What I Learned about Teaching Writing from the Late, Great William Zinsser

Earlier reporting: Edutopia, June 6, 2013. [Teaching Journalism in the 21st Century: A Conversation with William Zinsser](#). The archived essay revisits this interview after Zinsser's death.

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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3.4 · How to Curb Student Cheating

Archive version: Medium, June 28, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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3.5 · Faking the College Application Essay

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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3.6 · AI Evangelists, Stop Calling Writing Teachers Luddites

Archive version: Generative AI (Medium), May 4, 2026. [Read the archived article](#).

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Chapter 4 · Teaching the Students in Front of Us

4.1 · How to Teach Introverted Students

Earlier version: Edutopia, April 12, 2016. [Quiet: Susan Cain on Approaching Introverted Students](#).

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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4.2 · A Tale of Two Teachers

With Preston R. Michelson.

Original publication: Independent Teacher (NAIS), Fall 2013. [A Tale of Two Teachers](#).

Archive version: Medium, July 25, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

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4.3 · When Lessons Are Harmful, Insensitive

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

Date context: Elie Wiesel died on July 2, 2016. See [Boston University's remembrance](#).

[Return to the selection](#)

4.4 · Responding to Trump's Language in the Classroom

Original title: *Teachers, Don't Keep Quiet on Trump's Sexist, Xenophobic, Racist, Abhorrent Language*.

Related version: HuffPost, August 18, 2018. [Should Teachers Share Their Political Views With Students?](#)

Archive version: Medium, August 29, 2018. [Read the archived article](#).

Date context: Gordon S. Wood died on June 7, 2026. See [Brown University's](#)

[remembrance.](#)

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4.5 · Why Student Tracking Is Just Plain Wrong

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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4.6 · How to Help Increasingly Stressed-Out Students

Original version: PBS NewsHour, June 5, 2018. [Opinion: Students are pushing themselves to unhealthy limits. Here's how teachers can help.](#)

Archive version: Medium, November 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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4.7 · What I Want My Students and Newborn Son to Know about #MeToo and Civility

Original publication: PBS NewsHour, October 16, 2018. [Opinion: What I want my students to know about #MeToo.](#)

Archive version: Medium, November 25, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Chapter 5 · Rethinking Grades, Tests, and Rewards

5.1 · Homework: Reconsidering Its Purpose, Amount, and Weight

Archive version: Medium, July 9, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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5.2 · The Differentiated Classroom: Doing What's Fair

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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5.3 · Creativity: What the SAT Doesn't Assess

Archive version: Medium, July 10, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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5.4 · Rethinking Student Award Ceremonies

Archive version: Medium, June 22, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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5.5 · Newsflash: Punishment Doesn't Change Student Behavior

Archive version: Medium, July 9, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Chapter 6 · Student Voice Requires Adult Courage

6.1 · The Dead or Dying State of Student Journalism at Independent Schools

Archive version: Age of Awareness (Medium), March 8, 2019. [Read the archived article.](#)

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6.2 · If a School Won't Support a Robust Student Newspaper, Don't Trust It

Archive version: Age of Awareness (Medium), November 25, 2025. [Read the archived article.](#)

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6.3 · The Silent Censor: Why Student Journalists Are Putting Down the Pen

Archive version: Age of Awareness (Medium), April 9, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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6.4 · Student Press and The Atlantic’s Wake-Up Call for Private Schools

Archive version: Medium, July 27, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Chapter 7 · Who Is Doing the Thinking

7.1 · Lessons from Nintendo: Game-Based Learning

Archive version: Medium, July 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Date context: The Dubai conference reference places this essay in approximately 2014–2015. Jordan Shapiro described talks at the forum in both years; the original publication date has not been verified. See [his 2014 account](#) and [his 2015 account](#).

7.2 · Technology: The Faustian Bargain

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

The “veneration of crap” quotation is from Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner’s *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), not *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). The attribution has been corrected for this collection.

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Date context: Approximately 2012, inferred from the reference to five years at

Palmer Trinity and the author’s account of beginning there in 2007. This is an estimate of the period described, not a verified original publication date.

2023 excerpt · The Atlantic’s Doom-and-Gloom Coverage of AI in Education

Archive version: Medium, September 1, 2023. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Included as an excerpt within Chapter 7’s reconsideration section, rather than as a standalone essay. The 2023 prospective Class Companion advisory disclosure is retained in context. No later status or compensation is established by that statement.

7.3 · Artificial Shortcuts, Real Consequences: The Costs of AI “Humanizers” to Learning

Archive version: Medium, April 19, 2024. [Read the archived article.](#)

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7.4 · GPT-5 Just Changed My Mind — Generative AI Has No Place in My Classroom

Later version: PBS NewsHour Classroom, October 18, 2025. [Educator Voice: Generative AI has no place in my classroom.](#)

Archive version: Medium, August 9, 2025. [Read the archived article.](#)

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7.5 · Don’t Let AI Climb the Hill for Our Kids

Archive version: Teachers on Fire Magazine (Medium), January 26, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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7.6 · Teaching About AI Is Necessary. Teaching With AI Should Be Optional.

Archive version: Medium, January 20, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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7.7 · The Pedagogy of Presence: Restricting ChatGPT-6 Astra to Protect and Cultivate Student Thinking

Archive version: Medium, September 7, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Portfolio title: “ChatGPT-6 Astra Can Do More of My Students’ Thinking Than Ever. That’s Why I’m Restricting It.” Book title: “The Pedagogy of Presence.” These refer to the same September 7, 2026 essay.

Chapter 8 · Teachers Must Keep Learning Too

8.1 · Rookie Teacher Confessions

Original publication: Spin Education, July 11, 2014. [Rookie Teacher Confessions](#). The linked earlier Medium copy records its original publication on Spin Education.

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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8.2 · What Teachers Should Learn from Legendary Cross Country Coach Joe Newton

Original publication: Spin Education, September 8, 2013. What Teachers Should Learn from Legendary Cross Country Coach Joe Newton.

Archive version: Medium, June 18, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

Date context: Joe Newton died on December 9, 2017. See [World Athletics’ remembrance](#).

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8.3 · Fixing Bad Professional Development

Archive version: Medium, June 30, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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8.4 · Why Can't Public and Private Schools Get Along?

Original publication: Independent Teacher (NAIS), Spring 2016. [Public-Private Partnerships.](#)

Archive version: Medium, July 23, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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8.5 · A New Twist on a Public-Private School Partnership

With Elana Rome.

Original publication: Independent Ideas (NAIS), June 2016. [A New Twist on a Public-Private School Partnership.](#)

Archive version: Medium, September 1, 2018. [Read the archived article.](#)

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8.6 · What Gordon Wood, Eric Foner and James W. Loewen Told Me About Teaching History

Also titled “The Subject We Let Anyone Teach” online.

Archive version: Age of Awareness (Medium), June 24, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Conclusion

Conclusion · Education Policy Has a Mic Problem

Archive version: Medium, February 11, 2026. [Read the archived article.](#)

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Edited for this collection to clarify the relationship between embedded and extracted authority. The social-media follower and teacher-count comparison has been removed; the skit remains an illustration.

Photograph Credits

David Cutler in his classroom at Brimmer and May School.

Photograph by David Degner. Image supplied by the author.

Published with [It's the People Who Matter](#).

David Cutler with student editors Jared Heller and Michelle Levinger in The Gator newsroom.

Photograph by Jody Weinberg.

Published with [Student-Driven, Real-World Learning in Broadcast Journalism \(KQED\)](#).

David and Elana.

Photo courtesy of David and Elana Cutler.

Published with [A New Twist on a Public-Private School Partnership \(author's archive\)](#).

Max Lehrer tries the robotic hand made by his father with high school students

Max Lehrer tries the robotic hand made by his father with high school students.

Photo courtesy of Rich Lehrer. [Original post](#)

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Teaching digital tools in the student newsroom at Columbia University

Teaching digital tools in the student newsroom at Columbia University. Photo by Evan Michaeli. [Original post](#)

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My son and I after he climbed the icy hill on his own

My son and I after he climbed the icy hill on his own. His face is blurred in the original photograph. Photo by David Cutler. [Original post](#)

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Joe Newton

Joe Newton. Photo courtesy of Joe Newton. [Original post](#)

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Link Notes

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