

Is School Anti-Learning?

Jennifer Hurley

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<https://professorhurley.com>

More and more, I am coming to believe that school is a place that is, sadly, antithetical to learning. It is a place where students pretend to learn in exchange for a grade that certifies that they “learned,” and are thus qualified to move on in the system. School values performance over learning, standardization over the individual.

Instead of pursuing “outcomes” in education, we might be wiser to consider what types of behaviors are pro-learning and what types of behaviors are anti-learning.

Learning involves struggle, mistakes, confusion, clarity, and more confusion. It is not a linear process. We move forwards and backwards, sometimes at the same time. Just when I think I know something, I realize how much I don’t know. When I think about the messiness of learning, I think about my student Hao, an international student from Vietnam. In the time that he was in my class, he thought deeply and asked questions that showed real wisdom. As his ability to think grew, his mastery of English seemed to get worse. This often happens with non-native speakers—as they grapple with complex ideas, their brains are under so much cognitive load that they cannot simultaneously manage to express themselves fluently in English. With practice, this problem usually resolves itself, but school does not have time to allow Hao to practice. He must submit to frequent evaluation, which is going to be bad for him.

School punishes Hao for his mistakes in expression, ignoring his growth in thinking. Over time, Hao gets the message that school is not about actual learning. It is not about the opening of his mind to new and complicated ideas, but rather about the “appearance” of learning. He must produce a slick outcome, either on an essay or test, or else be penalized with a poor grade that might negatively impact his future.

Ironically, learning outcomes are anti-learning because they prioritize the performance of learning over learning itself. The real practice of learning is difficult to measure, but a good teacher knows when it is happening. She sees it in the sorts of questions students pose, or the way that a student engages with a text or an idea.

Learning makes me think of a drawing that one of my students did in response to reading Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He drew “school” as a perfectly round circle, next to “real life,” an angry tangle of scribbles. The student who did this drawing does not believe himself to be a good student because school told him he was not. But when I look at this drawing, I see a student who knows something. I see a student who knows that school has been lying to him about life. He knows what

many of us in education deny—that real life is a terrifying, knotted-up mess that cannot be separated into tidy curriculum categories and lesson plans. In short, he knows on some level that school is probably not going to teach him anything worth knowing—it is not going to help him detangle that knot.

Simply by looking at a graded Scantron or the teacher's marks on an essay, we know that school punishes mistakes (clearly anti-learning behavior)—but it also punishes individuality. My students complete a reflection log for every reading that they do, and their individuality shines in these pieces of work. No two logs look anything alike. You would think that it might be boring for me to read 30 logs on the same reading, but it's actually fascinating. That's because 30 different minds are at work, bringing unique perspectives and making surprising connections. But school wants my students' work to look the same. It wants me to set a standard for my "expectations" and judge students against some ideal piece of work.

It's true that some of my students do a better job on their logs than others. Some invest more time; some are more engaged. But I think that school is more to blame for that than the students themselves. Years of school has ingrained in them a certain anti-learning behavior, passivity. My students know all too well that school wants them to comply. It values following rules and directions over all other things. Why engage, why care, when school only wants you to submit to its authority?

Some of my students don't even try to engage with the reading I give them—they are simply trying to get the assignment done, quickly, with as little effort invested as possible. Students aren't naturally this way; school taught them to be so. These students have learned well the lesson of school, of expediency as a survival mechanism. "Just get the shit done," they are thinking—and why wouldn't they think this, when school clearly values the completion of seemingly endless, meaningless tasks? We as teachers might think that these tasks have purpose, but if students disagree, then that is evidence of a major disconnect between what we value and what students value. Who is to say that the teachers are right?

And this is yet another anti-learning lesson that students gain from school—that their ideas about what they should learn are not important. They must learn the Curriculum. "Learning" in school does not stem from any real curiosity about the world, but from what roomfuls of teachers (who are immersed in the values of school) believe is necessary.

My community college students, even the most cynical of them, do want to learn something. They are terrified about their futures and have no idea how to navigate the world or to maintain hope. Many are fearful of human interaction. Many labor under the expectations of their parents, who think that medicine and law are the only professions worth pursuing. Can we possibly teach these students something of value? Can we engage their minds and hearts?

I really don't know. Some days I feel it is hopeless, that our students have been trained for too long in anti-learning values and behaviors. Other days I open up my

students' reflection logs and I'm astonished by the curious minds that I encounter. I do know that I have to cast off the values of school if I am going to do my best work. I have to hold fast to pro-learning values and behavior: struggle, confusion, mistakes, perseverance, creativity, individuality, and uncertainty.

Interestingly, the place we often encounter true learning is outside of school. A student recently told me about how he wanted to do better at shooting clay pigeons, so he got help from an instructor. The teacher watched him shoot, made some suggestions, and demonstrated a few tips. There was no performance and no evaluation. The student was curious, and wanted to learn, and the teacher offered help without threatening punishment if the student didn't pass muster.

We're told that we must evaluate in school because otherwise we wouldn't know how effective we are as teachers. But evaluation ends up getting in the way of good teaching, corrupting the school environment with anti-learning values. I think it's sad that we think good teaching or good learning must be submitted to a process of evaluation. Instead, what if a system of mentorship and trust could help us grow, as teachers and as students?

I took a watercolor painting class recently, and the teacher was delightfully pro-learning. She painted short demos, pointing out her mistakes and then showing how she "hid" them, turning an unruly blob of paint into a tree or a bush. She said that when painting on location, we should only invest 20 minutes, and if our painting was no good, who cared? It was only 20 minutes. But if we were onto something, inevitably we would continue to paint longer. The teacher gave us all sorts of practical tips about the real experience of painting, how to unwrap our paints easily and how to carry our water, and how to paint in public without being bothered. She clearly understood the real problems that came up when painting out in the world, and she helped us deal with them. She assigned us homework, and we had to share our homework with the class, which made us accountable even though there were no grades. I learned a lot from seeing how other people approached the same subject. The teacher laughed a lot and often said, "Why do this if you're not having fun?"—something that no teacher in school has said, ever. In the end, the class made me excited to paint, the most pro-learning behavior there is.

We as teachers in school have a lot to learn from teachers outside of school. At the core of our problem is that students in school are not excited to learn. I believe that's on us, not on the students. What can we do to solve this problem? It is the biggest problem there is in education, and it can't be solved simply or quickly. But I do know that students learn better in a non-punitive environment, where they don't have to fear negative consequences for a mistake. Fake learning happens better in a punitive environment, where fear pushes us to get the work done, though usually in a disengaged manner.

Which do we value more?