

Reading

To try and keep up to date with our educational literature we have set aside this part of the site for us to summarise any reading we have been doing. I hope you enjoy!

What's the point of school?

Alex Wallace

I spent part of my summer holiday reading Guy Claxton's book, "What's the point of school?" It was a fantastic read and thoroughly enjoyable and insightful. I read the book whilst on holiday in France with my wife and one year old son. To give a very brief summary; Mr Claxton believes that in the current education system we are not preparing our students for life after school.

I have to say that much of what he said I totally agreed with. He talked about schools focussing entirely on exam results and thereby removing any of the fun of learning. He goes on to suggest that all we are creating is very knowledgeable people however, we are not creating great learners. When people start their first day of work in the big wide world they get dressed up in their smart suit, shiny shoes with a whole host of A-levels, AS levels and GCSEs but rarely is their first question, "what date was the Spanish Armada?" If it is of course, then fantastic and your boss will be mightily impressed and also think you're a little odd. You might be better equipped for your new job if you know the latest non celebrity to be kicked out the Big Brother House, at least you will have something to discuss during your lunch break.

The workplace does not want just knowledgeable employees but they want their employees to be imaginative, creative, collaborative and resilient. They want to be able to trust them to be able to get on with a task, to be able to research, share and adapt. And yet many companies are let down by their employees, however, often it is not their fault as they have not been taught these skills.

I agreed with many of Claxton's views and I feared that many schools do knock the creativity and imagination out of our students. It was suggested that on average a secondary school student asks only one question a month. Having a one year old child who is the most inquisitive young man I have ever encountered I started to wonder how long it will be before he loses his enthusiasm for learning. Maybe by playgroup he will be put off by being told what fingers to use for his finger painting and then in Primary School he will be instructed to learn all the dates of the kings and Queens when in fact he is more interested in what they actually did and by secondary school he'll probably have all his teachers dressed exactly the same, using the same powerpoint designs, drinking the same decaffeinated coffee and all complaining about the same thing which is everything!

We need school to be able to excite students, to unlock their inquisitive minds. Teachers need to be unique, they must not be afraid to show their personality.

The most pleasing experience about reading this book was when I finished and I thought about our school. I fully believe that we do create motivated, hard working young men who are also curious, collaborative, inspiring, imaginative and positive.

Today I showed a colleague from another school around various classes. We went into about 5 different rooms without warning and in every single one of those classes I saw everything you would want to see in an ideal school. Collaboration, questioning, imagination and inspiration were present throughout. There was also a smile on the faces of all the teachers who were in the classroom. Guy Claxton has written a great book, it seems like we are already acting it out!

Dr Carol S. Dweck – Mindset – a summary

Anton Machacek

Chapter 1 – Mindsets – The author was staggered to find children who enjoyed a learning challenge when she set them some really tough questions, and this inspired her work. The fixed mindset – my qualities are unchangeable, so they can be measured and expectations formed, and I must strive to prove that I have the ‘right stuff’. The growth mindset – I can cultivate my qualities through my effort. Potential can not be measured. I may not be able to become a Beethoven, but no-one can predict how good a musician I could be if I made huge effort. Example – I get a C in a mock exam. Fixed mindset says ‘I’m a failure – so I may as well give up and save myself the pain’. Growth mindset says ‘I need to learn from this and improve’. Growth mindset folk tend to be better at estimating their performance.

Chapter 2 – Inside the Mindsets – In the fixed mindset, you set about proving yourself. In the growth mindset, you set about improving yourself. Someone with the growth mindset is less likely to play safe the whole time because they don’t mind finding it tough and occasionally failing – this is how they learn. The fixed mindset is a barrier to learning. What’s your priority – success & validation [fixed] or challenge [growth]? Should a CEO implement a short term fix and surround themselves with admirers or turn the company round? You quickly see who has a growth mindset when you make the work harder. The fixed mindset folk complain, the growth mindset folk love it. Is smartness being able to do it perfectly, or when you know you’re learning? A test might be able to measure something, but not how smart you are, and definitely not your potential. NASA never selected an astronaut who hadn’t failed something. Chuck Yeager “There is no such thing as a natural-born pilot.” Only fixed mindset people allow failure to label them. For some, trying hard is a big risk (if I still fail, I’ll feel really bad), others regard not trying as the big risk. With the growth mindset, you don’t need as much confidence when you start something.

Guy Claxton, *What’s the Point of School* – A Summary

Anton Machacek

Chapter 1 – Stress – children stressed more than ever before, this can be caused by a world they see themselves as ill prepared for. School seems to give little help in preparing them, and the pressure of exams can add to the stress. A child either develops or engages in a displacement activity like fantasy, procrastination or fundamentalism. Development requires the resources of curiosity, resilience, balancing imagination with pragmatism, co-operation (e.g. asking for help, and responding to feedback), as well as a resistance to impetuosity.

Chapter 2 – The point of school – Something’s rotten if many children can’t read or count, and many stay away from school. The ‘remedy’ has involved assessment and rigorous testing. Levels of reading ability have risen, but children are less prone to read and find it fun. By concentrating on outcome, the process of learning has been sapped of its power and enjoyment. Curiosity and creativity are stamped on. Children rely on the teacher to

'get them through' rather than learning how to overcome difficulties. Better 'subjects' might be empathy, managing risk, healthy skepticism, statistics.

Chapter 3 – Why schools aren't getting better – Too much focus on trivialities e.g. class size, streaming {works when the teacher believes in it} and specific targets. Unhelpful 'pub neuroscience' such as left/right brain or KSA or Multiple Intelligence as often applied in a school environment. Unhelpful images of school as a 'monastery of revealed truth' or a 'factory' (where pupils 'work' and 'get it done'), or a rose tinted view of past educational practice. 'A thinker's apprenticeship' as a more helpful model.

Chapter 4 – The Intelligent child: old beliefs and new science – Intelligence historically thought of as a single commodity, intimately linked with rationality and fixed rather than learnable. More recently, the different facets and malleability of intelligence have been studied. Resilience and resourcefulness allow pupils to get smarter. So, why do we cling to the concept of 'ability'? It used to be useful in trying to see who would give most 'profit' if chosen for instruction, a tendency to see all aspects of character as unchanging, and that it makes it much easier for teachers to verbalize assessment. Please avoid 'gifted' and 'fulfill your potential' (how will you know when you've reached it?). The role of self-esteem, which will only be real if earned. Efforts to boost self-esteem make things worse

Chapter 5 – Knowledge in the Google age – Knowledge is provisional, but schools don't encourage that view. Knowledge is not what's true, but what helps. Knowledge is now more democratic and available. Studying canons of knowledge is not per se going to help you think like their creators. The oddity in valuing logical subjects as more prestigious. The importance (often neglected) of knowledge transfer between disciplines.

Chapter 6 – Learning about Learning – learning is good for you (and enjoyable), children are not unmotivated, there are massive differences between school learning and real-life learning (e.g. context, collaboration in real life, and careful gradation of difficulty in school). Children want responsibility, respect and 'real' learning, as well as choice, challenge and collaboration. The brain learns in a piecemeal, experimental, emotional, intuitive way. We can amplify this process by focus, exploration, play and practice. Imitation and inhibition (the brain prioritizing certain things by damping others down) are also important. Inhibition allows for imagination and simulation. Language expands our learning capacity. We need more questions such as 'How are you going to do that?', 'What is hard about that?', 'How could you help someone else learn that?'. Learning can be stunted by views that effort will not help, that the process is smooth, that you can build your learning methodically, and avoid failure. The need to encourage questioning.

Chapter 7 – Cultivating Successful Learners – Students need character and intellect. We need to cultivate confident lifelong explorers and navigators. 'Character curriculum statements' can be so broad that they are difficult to satisfy, and the exam system mitigates against their development.

Powerful learners

- are curious,
- have courage,

- explore and investigate,
- experiment (I wonder what happens if...),
- imagine,
- reason critically with discipline,
- are social, and
- reflective.

Caxton calls these the Magnificent Eight. The ideal school should be a learning gymnasium where learning power is exercised. Content is chosen for the learning exercise it provides. Formative assessment provides the function of a coach in a gym. The learning gym is an exploratory – to learn what to explore and how.

Chapter 8 – The learning power school: success stories of the quiet revolution – Teach questioning. Do projects. Shift the culture of a school by the way the school itself behaves. Displaying non-finished, non-perfect work demonstrates the learning process. Ask ‘what are you learning?’ in the classroom. Add TIB ‘this is because’ to WALT ‘we are learning today.’ When teachers use the word ‘learn’ or ‘learning’ in the classroom, what is the context – memorization or the development of good learning. The difference in pupil motivation when schools don’t refer to pupil’s ‘work’ (aka drudgery). Try saying ‘could be’ rather than ‘is’ when instructing. Learning skills comments are valuable in reports (refer to the Magnificent 8). Teachers should model learning by learning. Get students to spot where a teacher makes unjustified statements (inc. saying ‘is’ when ‘could be’ is more correct). These approaches are statistically successful. The use of the exploratory as a help and guide with learning difficulties. The solution to improving a school is in little parts (and attitudes), not a grand plan. Structuralizing it can destroy it – as when AfL merely becomes an exam improvement and student characterization tool.

Chapter 9 – How can parents help? – parents need to be explorers. Family debate is very educational. Involve children in family decisions – finances, health, being ‘green’. Share learning experiences with children ‘I learned ... by ...’. Don’t rescue children from learning challenges. Answer the question, but go no further unless the child wants to. Be careful with praise – do it infrequently, make it specific, only do it when it is merited and keep it real. Make the home an exploratory. Ask good questions of children about school ‘did you ask a good question?’ ‘What was hard for you today?’ Question your child’s school.

Chapter 10 – Bringing learning to life: rediscovering the heart of education – Schools must change, and must enable youngsters to become more confident, more resilient and more capable of facing challenges. Minds are malleable – boys struggling with maths improve dramatically when they have an hour a week for 6 weeks to talk about how they learn. Technology is great if you do things with it, but you need to also consider the effects of it (will this computer exercise make a more resilient, creative learner? Or will it simplify the problem so much that the problem’s value as a learning tool is lost?) Happiness is a good aim, but it comes as a byproduct of a challenge met.