

Advising Your Children about Learning in the Era of “New Abnormal”

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You who are on the road
Must have a code that you can live by
And so become yourself
Because the past is just a good-bye.
Teach your children well...

“Teach the Children Well” Crosby Stills



Every generation has its struggles; certainly, I grew up in a troubled time: the nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement. I was grateful for my parents’ clear advice about learning:

Achieve high marks in school and outstanding scores on the high-stakes tests. Get into a top-ranked college, and attain excellent grades there, then gain admission to an elite graduate school. That path will enable you to become a professor, as you have always wanted. Don’t let war and injustice and the threat of imminent death distract or lure you into neglecting your education.

At that time, this was good guidance. I participated in anti-war activities and civil rights marches, but I followed my parents’ blueprint for educational success until I graduated from college. After that, I ignored my family’s counsel and invented my own future—but that shift was empowered by the solid foundation of knowledge I had learned.

Although this path worked for me, I give my children radically different advice about learning, because they are growing up in a world my parents would find incomprehensible, a context in which their blueprint is no longer a guarantee for success. As [Preparing Students for a Lifelong Disruptive Future: The 60-Year Curriculum](#) discusses, the future will be quite different than the immediate past. We and

our children face a world-wide interdependent civilization shaped by economic turbulence from artificial intelligence and globalization, failure to reach the [UN Sustainability Goals](#), climate change, and advanced social and immersive media. We stand on the brink of an epic half-century, equivalent in its challenges and opportunities to those faced by the [Greatest Generation](#).

Education is our most powerful lever for systemically shaping the future. However, typical classrooms at every level are now dominated by one-size-fits-all presentational/assimilative instruction. Beyond literacy and numeracy, curriculum standards are filled with data easy to memorize and measure, but useless in a world of search engines. In a schooling system dominated by drive-by summative assessments, our children cannot learn capabilities and dispositions vital for the disruptions they must overcome. Strengths as resilience, perseverance, self-regulation, collaboration, conflict resolution, and forging opportunity from uncertainty cannot be attained in classrooms where compliance and not-making-waves are the central behaviors demanded of teachers. Nor are students provided with scaffolds to help [transfer](#) what they learn in school to its application in the real world.

As for measuring success by high-stakes tests, as described in Luckin's 2018 book, [Machine Learning and Human Intelligence](#), such an approach prepares students for jobs deskilled by artificial intelligence (AI). Instead, as discussed in Fadel's 2019 book, [Artificial Intelligence in Education](#), children should learn what AI cannot do, preparing themselves to roles upskilled through intelligence augmentation (IA) in which people working with smart machines accomplish more than either can unaided.

As documented in the [Silver Lining for Learning](#) initiative, many educators are now heroically surmounting these challenges, striving bottom-up to develop [remote-learning solutions that work for all students](#). In doing so, they are transcending our collective [denial](#), the first stage of grief for a cherished past that is no longer sustainable. We must face that we are moving into an historically unprecedented "new abnormal" and [unlearn](#) our habits and assumptions, shifting our vision beyond the mirage of high grades and elite schools leading to guaranteed success in life.

In his 1969 book, *The Future of the Future*, John McHale coined this epigram:

*The future of the past is in the future
The future of the present is in the past
The future of the future is in the present*

While those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, the first line indicates that we are constantly reinterpreting history; for example, in many localities Columbus Day has shifted to Indigenous Peoples Day. The second line acknowledges that trends and structures from the past, such as the traditional school curriculum, constrain what we can do in the present. But the third line highlights that we have the power to invent the future, rather than simply see it as an extension of the past and present. In the shadow of the pandemic, which has undercut the dead hand of the past and the compliance mentality of the present, we should seize the opportunity to focus on the future of the future.

I tell my children we need a younger generation of heroes to shape the coming half-century:

As advised in Georgia Tech's 2018 report, [Deliberate Innovation, Lifetime Education](#), declare goals for your life rather than a major based on fields and disciplines. Focus your learning on what is meaningful; don't be distracted by what is tested. Given that you will have five to seven careers,

think of yourself as an evolving suite of skills rather than as a role; Ed Dieterle models how this can help you [find your Compass](#).

I try to walk my talk, seeing myself not only as a faculty member, but aspirationally as someone who is adept at explaining complex things to a wide variety of people, a mentor with decades of experience to share, someone with social capital to connect and convene, and a researcher who, in collaboration with colleagues, is able to inspire through [creative designs and scholarly findings](#).

Of course, my children don't pay much attention to my advice; that is a perennial challenge for parents, yet consistent with young adults taking authority and responsibility for their decisions. More than my guidance, I hope my children are implicitly influenced by what I model in my attitudes and behaviors. In these troubled times, I do my best to project resilience and tenacity, finding opportunity in uncertainty, and inventing a bright future that transcends the mistakes and injustices of our recent history.

Because the future is undetermined, the core curriculum in and out of school should provide a new framework for what children should learn, so they can invent and shape our epic journey into the "new abnormal." Carpe Diem!

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