Primer: Progressive Education

The more I read and write on progressive education, the more I find myself insulated in a bubble of radical thinking that I can't escape. Teacher workroom discussions become increasingly out of touch, as I've dug into this line of thinking so much, I no longer recognize the same problems or solutions. However, to explain this line of thinking — I fear it will be too long of a conversation to make a point, or come across as elitist and "finger-wagging."

Therefore, I've spent a lot of time dissecting what progressive education is — as its simplified form: it's about student agency, and many of its extended facets. We wrote an introduction in **our existing Primer**, as well as extended thoughts in a **progressive education guidebook**, but we wanted a quick glossary to send people to (although I am pulling most of this from there, so for more detail — check them out!). Something easy to understand, well-organized, and simple to navigate. Below is a summary of our thoughts and, as best as I can, an explanation of everything progressive ed.

Progressive education is rooted in the late 1800s, inspired heavily by philosopher John Dewey as an objection to classical model of "academic thinking." Essentially, it's a conversion of traditional, rote-learning to that of student experiences — a graduation of shifts such as:

- Lectures, worksheets, and testing. -> Hands-on application, experiential learning.
- Scheduled, separated coursework. -> Integrated, student-relevant choices.
- Skills of logical reasoning and memorization. -> A focus on reflection, creativity, problem solving, and other "soft skills."
- Competitive, rank-based academics. -> Collaborative, cooperative learning communities.
- Primary goal on standardized academics. -> Primary goal on social/emotional well-being.
- An assumption of student skills via tracking. -> Acknowledging outside skills and building upon them.
- An educator is presumed to drive their teaching. -> A student is presumed to drive their learning.
- Preparing everyone for a common role. -> Preparing each student for finding/achieving their life's purpose.

This catch-all of ideas tends to manifest itself against all ideas that traditional education has morphed into: standardized testing, standards-based curriculum, and data-driven learning. It has been assumed, even though the modern education system is quite young, that most elements of school are a "necessary evil." But — there is another way, a way to drive students to succeed without demeaning or coercing them to.

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Inspirations

Progressive education is a result of many great minds pushing against the system. As stated before, **John Dewey** (1859–1952) was the founder of progressive education in the United States, writing *Democracy and Education* among many works to define **experiential education** — which, in summary, explains that students should learn by the experiences they have — not through an out-of-touch workbook. By teaching hands-on, relevant projects to each student, there's no longer prep-work for the future, instead — motivation is inherent as each student is presented coursework relevant to their daily lives. Overtime, this has been rebranded to project-based learning or problem-based learning (**PBL**).

At the same time, **Maria Montessori** (1870–1952) was advocating for **free choice** and **intrinsic motivation** in her *Children's House*, a school model which became the well-regarded "Montessori Schools." Montessori found that young children, when presented with many activities to do — most of which mirrored activities they'd do at home (e.g. cooking, taking care of animals, chores, arts/crafts) — that students would be motivated to learn without any reward. In fact, they achieved independence from learning; working without being told what to do or how to do it.

Soon after, **Paulo Freire** (1921–1997) in Brazil formulated his idea of **critical pedagogy**, which reframed education in the hands of students rather than a top-down authoritarian system. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire explained the colonial nature of schooling — its "**banking model**" where students were seen as deposits, with nothing to offer, to be "banked" by the teacher — and how schools must invoke humanity, offering a place where children can work in their community to think for themselves.

In the modern era, celebrated writers continue to push-back against traditional systems, including **John Holt, bell hooks, Deborah Meier, Jonathan Kozol, Tony Wagner, Ted Dintersmith, and Alfie Kohn**. In each of these accounts, it is clear that by diffusing standardization, we can develop an empowering experience with authentic discourse through student perspectives, communal relations, and actualization of a child's desires.

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Elements

Below are a list of key *elements* in most progressive classrooms. Note: **progressive education is not a standardized curriculum**. There is not any "one way" to be a progressive teacher — it's a mindset, not a structure. By viewing education to enable student learning experiences through their voice, we are enacting progressive ed. Every school will look different — and that is how it should be. Place is incredibly important to rationalizing what a student learns, how they learn it, and what is relevant to them. Educators should work with their community: families, businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and of course, students, to build a framework that suits them best.

Vision

Is a school's vision clear and actually enforced? Does it contradict itself (e.g. "rigorous" college prep with PBL)?

A shared, unified vision is paramount. Every single staff member and student must know what the school expects of them. And, all policies should reflect that expectation. It's not enough to have a blanket statement (e.g. "prepared for the future") — a vision must mean something with actual implications for student learning. This is developed in partnership between students, the community, and staff.

Progressive schools will have a vision that's aimed to developing a learning community. We often confuse "rigor" with an endless supply of trivial work. The vision should incorporate safety, happiness, creativity, and critical thinking. This focus on soft skills is important for any child, regardless of future plans. It's important that the vision doesn't become diluted by trying to tackle every single buzzword. Contradictory statements complicate a staff's ability to hone their teaching practice.

- Portrait of a Graduate
- XQ Education: School Mission & Culture

Aims

Is the school actually progressive, or simply progressive politically or in statements made?

"Progressive" schools, sadly, can be in name only. Despite stating they want their students to be comfortable in a school setting, they also promote standardized test preparation or other demeaning practices. **Going against these norms require risk.** Progressive education is not readily accepted by all communities and the populous must be educated on the goals of the school — going as far to offering libraries or reading materials for families to reenvision what learning can be.

In addition, progressive schooling does not mean progressive politics. There is nothing inherently pro-liberal about progressive schools, and this philosophy can be fulfilled in any way (public, for-profit, non- profit). All learners and staff members should be accepted at progressive schools as long as they agree to and practice its vision.

- The (Progressive) Schools Our Children Deserve — Alfie Kohn

Experiential

Do assignments have real world applicability, value, and interest?
Experiential learning (or, as it's often regarded in modern terminology, "PBL") is essential for fostering knowledge. Coined by John Dewey in the early 1900s, experiential learning is hands-on — learning by "doing" — and then reflecting on what

one's done. Reflection includes growth from failure and documentation of what's been learned.

Strong elements of experiential learning include students having a voice and choice in what they do (beyond contrived "faux choices" — for example, a poster or paper), connecting with the community, and projects with real-world value. Experiential learning mirrors what actual people do — and, if possible — is simply what one does (e.g. not a "fake assignment" — but an actual end product with value.) Experiential learning is not learning then doing, it is learning while doing.

- The Human Restoration Project PBL Guidebook
- High Tech High Example Projects

Voice

Are students participating in classroom design, management, and assessment? Are they invited to staff meetings and curriculum design?
Are teachers authoritarian?

Voice implies that students can drastically change school policy if warranted. Giving up control is a difficult thing to do for anyone, so empowering students is challenging. In the classroom, voice is centered on being able to change assessment, content, and philosophy based on the needs and desires of students. Students should feel welcome to ask driving questions that change the pre- built notions of the course, with a teacher who guides and inspires their growth.

Beyond the classroom, voice is encouraged and structured into staff meetings and curriculum design. Students need real opportunities to express change. Notably, many schools would face dramatic differences if students had this power — a statement that resoundingly shows a problem in education.

- Buck Institute Blog: Student Voice and Choice: It's Not Just for Projects Anymore
- TNTP Blog: Using Student Voice to Transform the Classroom

Assessment

Is the focus on learning or on grading? Are students engaged without assessment or do they only care about the grade? Are grades being used or some equivalent?

Grading must be eliminated. It's a broad measure, but research showcases how much grading implicates students to seek out a reward rather than be intrinsically motivated to learn (one doesn't see kindergartens asking if something will be on the test.) When one eliminates grading, motivation increases. Similarly, faux grading scales such as mastery-based are well-intended, but fall into problems with a student's desire to achieve. Whenever a grade system is introduced, students have been conditioned to focus on achieving growth in that system, rather than on learning for themselves.

Great assessment is one that incorporates common, one-on-one, feedback. Tools such as a portfolio of learning (e.g. Seesaw) allow educators to provide quick, authentic feedback to students.
- TG2 (Teachers Going Gradeless)
- Podcast: Restoring Humanity to Assessment

Discipline

Does the school practice restorative justice? Are students encouraged to think about the consequences of their actions on others, or just assigned blanket sentences? Are students cared about as individuals with personal issues or treated as a number?

The policies of most school systems do nothing to remedy or discourage behavior of students. "Zero-tolerance" mandates, which punish students for certain behaviors through automatic suspensions, often hurt those who are most vulnerable.

It's incredibly important that aggressors are dealt with promptly. By embracing the practice of Restorative Justice, one can empathize with the aggressor to talk about, reflect on, and find a solution to their behavior. Children act out due to greater problems at home, school, or from mental illness. To find and diagnose the root of each problem, schools can embrace a more loving, caring community.

- Podcast: Restoring Humanity to Discipline
- Seeing Things Differently: Restorative Justice and School Discipline by Sally Varnham

Passion / Purpose

Does the school embrace discovery and inquiry in a child's interests? Are lessons focused more on curriculum that "must" be done or is the child's best interest at heart? Does scheduling and school policy reflect student interests?

At many times when students are asked what they want to be when they grow up, especially as they grow older, they respond with blank stares or prestigious jobs they know little about. Students consume content more and more, with little to no time spent creating work of their own. Because school is taxing and possibly not connected with real learning opportunities, students lack the drive and energy to explore their own interests.

Schools must schedule for students to inquire and put their passions into practice. This must be multifaceted: ample amounts of self- discovery (e.g. a "genius hour"), encouraging teacher passion in the classroom, and allowing for community voices to showcase opportunities.
- Podcast: Restoring Humanity to Purpose

Homework

Is homework engaging, worthwhile, and make sense to why it would be homework rather than something done at school? Do students have any choice in performing homework or deciding if it should be assigned? Is it designed to "drill" information?

A common sentiment of progressive education is "do less." By scheduling every moment of time into well-beyond the school day, we're leaving little room for students to reflect on their lives, play, socialize, and de-stress. Research shows that "practice-based" programs designed to drill content, typically through worksheets after school, has little to no gains in a child's growth.

Typically, well-regarded homework assignments consist of work that is due after an extended period of time, with ample amounts of work- time given at school to complete it. Children already have crammed schedules as it is, and an overindulgent amount of busy-work will lead to increased academic and emotional issues.

- When is Homework Worth the Time? by Adam Maltese, Robert H. Tai, & Xitao Fan

Relationships

Are relationships core to the school culture? Do staff and students encourage relationship building before anything else? Are relationships authentic and continue outside of the classroom to other student activities?

Fundamental to education are relationships. Without a strong connection between students, teachers, and administration, learning can simply not occur organically. Central to the dogma of progressive education is a constant focus on relationship building — content is secondary.

Strong relationships are built on authentic empathy and care. Teachers constantly engage students in conversation, seek out their passions and interests and incorporate them in the classroom, and act as mentors in every step of their lives. Relationships are much more than icebreaker activities, they are the fuel to everything.

- The Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships by Emily Gallagher

Inclusion / Critical Pedagogy

Are people of all backgrounds accepted and valued for their perspective? Are issues of race, sexuality, gender, socioeconomic status, and more spoken openly about in the classroom?

First and foremost, schools need to feel safe. If not everyone is accepted and seen as equal, then the institution is harming the community. A school's staff needs ample training on how to deal with all issues of inclusion, tolerance, and empowerment.

These issues cannot be ignored, as they will not disappear if not spoken of. All classrooms need to take a critical and open dialogue of multiple perspectives. The more students see perspectives of those disenfranchised, or of a different voice, the more they will fight for, and increase their tolerance of, those of different backgrounds.

- Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire

Reflection

Do students, teachers, and administration constantly reflect on their experiences and learn from them?

Reflection is the most important step of learning. Educators tend to evaluate their teaching based on test scores or how they've best "fit into the system." As a result, creative solutions and larger issues may be ignored. All educators must obtain feedback from as many sources as possible and reflect constantly on changing their behavior.

Students must be given many chances to reflect on their own learning experiences in the same way. Sometimes, students working in hands- on projects are not able to communicate what they're learning, as they're "just doing" — not recognizing the value of their work. Therefore, incorporating ample reflection gives time to communicate and express growth.

- How We Think by John Dewey

Integration

Are subjects cross-disciplinary? Are certain skills vastly overemphasized (math, vocab.)?

Silos are the best way to describe a school's classroom structure. Learn one subject, then another, then another. However, as anyone can recognize — people don't operate in this fashion. Students fail to see connections between their work as there's no emphasis placed on it. In fact, many teachers would be hard pressed to see a connection between their work and other teachers'.

Therefore, all classrooms must aim to, at minimum, collaborate constantly and infuse their content. If possible, schedules must be adjusted to feature all content with teams of teachers guiding work. This, of course, requires changing or de-emphasizing content standards to make work more authentic. In addition, it's important that certain subjects are not regarded (typically mathematics and science at the higher grades) over all others. This presents a hierarchy which warps a student's view of achievement and devalues growth in multiple ways.

- Edutopia: Deeper Learning: Why Cross-Curricular Teaching is Essential

Administration

Are teacher voices' valued and seen as experts? Is everything top down and authoritarian? Is there no control and, as a result, people are no longer practicing the vision?

The best form of administrator is one who empowers teachers while rigorously promoting the vision of a school. Administrators, just like teachers, are guides of their "classroom." There's no top-down micromanagement, long lectures, or extreme punishment. Administrators are the structural support and champion of their teachers.

Importantly, administrators are the chief enforcers of the school's vision. Not only are they "where the buck stops" — they continually need to keep everyone in-line to support the school's vision, which has been built by the entire learning community. An administrator must consistently reflect and understand, philosophically, why their school practices what it does.

- ThoughtCo: What Makes a School Administrator an Effective School Leader?

Grade Levels

Are all grades having the same experience of progressive ed.? Does this taper off in higher ed.?

Elementary communities, until recent changes in mathematics and reading standards, have been fairly progressive. Relationships have come first and students are exposed and encouraged to seek out what they love to do. Homework is typically at a minimum, and teachers encourage empathy over discipline. However, this tends to change as students grow older.

In middle and high school, learners become increasingly "drilled" to learn more and more content, often at the expense of their desire and willingness to learn. College-prep programs often siphon the soft skills needed to navigate an ever-changing world, instead opting for test preparation. The experience of progressive education must mirror the elementary style of learning, regardless of age.

- How Not to Get Into College by Alfie Kohn

Failure / Risk-Taking

Is failure seen as normal behavior where risk-taking is encouraged and improved upon? Are shortcomings transparent between all levels of the school?

Students are afraid of failure (teachers and administration too!) Years of disciplinary action, a narrow view of "success", and schooling culture at large has discouraged people from being open with their shortcomings. Success — however one defines it —

comes at the advent of many instances of failure. Those who succeed are those who push through.

All aspects of schooling must normalize and legitimize failure. One must be encouraged to take risks and learn from their mistakes. Teachers and administration must be open with their errors and communicate this with students. Likewise, students should reflect on their failures often.

- Failing Grades for Retention by Gary Natriello
- TeachThought: Helping Students Fail: A Framework

Self-Directed

Are students encouraged and expected to take charge of their own learning? Is the curriculum designed to cater to students developing their own interests and love of learning?

Would students come to school if they didn't have to? In order for schools to successfully implement student learning, students must want to learn. Everyone innately wants to learn more about the world — it's a human trait. Therefore, if a curriculum encourages students to adapt and create their own curriculum — based on their interests — learning will occur.

During work, students can't be micromanaged. Students must understand (and be advised) on how to properly use electronics and other distractions. No one will look over their shoulder once they leave school (unless, of course, they're called into their bosses' office). This training of responsibility must be opened for children to succeed.

- How Children Learn by John Holt

Buzzword-Free

Are teachers constantly being hampered by "buzzword" initiatives in education? Is the staff incorporating "tips and tricks" without understanding underlying best practice?

Every year, new processes and buzzwords propagate the educational sphere. Teachers must understand best practice beyond a step-by-step guide on their implementation — they must understand the why of their use. This takes time and energy and not all buzzwords are worth exploring. Teachers should be encouraged to seek out, as experts, initiatives in education and share with the entire staff.

Often, buzzwords try to improve traditional educational practice which wasn't succeeding to begin with. Our schools need an underlying philosophical guidance that questions the system and works towards systemic change — something that cannot be accomplished with acronyms.

- Forbes: Grit, Optimism And Other Buzzwords In The Way Of Education

Growth

Are educators reflecting and questioning what they're doing? Are they talking about their schools vision and reimagining their practice? Are they visiting and improving each other's classrooms?

Educators can become bogged down and lose their passion overtime. Without constant ignition through their peers, administration, or students — they will burn out. Growth must be enforced through reflective activities and feedback from multiple sources. Feedback should not be a disciplinary process. Teachers should encourage others to view their practice and offer suggestions.

Students need to be viewed with opportunities to grow as well. Often, students are stigmatized as "bad kids" or degrading terminology — which puts them at a disadvantage before ever setting foot in one's classroom. As a result, the education they receive is from a negative perspective, reducing their chance at authentic learning.

- Response to Assessment Feedback by Anastasiya Lipnevich & Jeffrey Smith

Cooperative

Are people working together to solve problems or competing against each other (even in "review games"?) Are students encouraged to work together?

Our classrooms have become catalysts for competitive behavior. At the end of the day, it's all about "me." Contributing to this are graded assessments of individualized behavior and extrinsic motivators that reward some but not all. As a result, collaboration has become "who will ensure that I'm successful" instead of "how can we all work together to be successful."

Building a cooperative classrooms takes time, trust, and problem- solving. There will be many moments of trial-and-error of mediating students as they communicate and run into issues. This is paramount to students developing teamwork skills.

- Is Competition Ever Appropriate in a Cooperative Classroom? by Alfie Kohn
- Making Cooperative Learning Work by David Johnson & Roger Johnson

Authentic

Does student work go beyond the classroom, or is it made to be thrown away? Are students showcasing their work to potential business partners, community groups, or peers? Does the work they do matter at the end of the day?

Making work authentic is a challenging task. Not all content must be utilized outside the classroom, but many of it should be. At minimum, content must be applicable to students' lives. When designing projects, many teachers utilize outdated practice (e.g.

poster presentations, simple essays), which may be a strong fundamental beginning, but never build into authentic work.

Projects, and other large-scale work, must be presented to those outside the school. In addition, these resources should be utilized beyond the school community — ensuring that we mobilize young thinkers into recognizing they can change the world.

- The Power of Audience by Steven Levy (via EL Education)

Partnerships

Are there real connections to outside the classroom with parents and community members of all backgrounds? Are people constantly visiting, collaborating, and reflecting with students in and outside the classroom? Does the community know about the purpose and underlying vision of the school and what students are doing?

A school should be open to the rest of the world. Just as learning doesn't occur within four walls — the community must be allowed within. Staff must take every opportunity to invite and structure meetings with families and all others.

These partnerships will flourish into authentic audiences for student work, experts in the classroom, and additional relationship-building which will drive and transform the school into a greater learning center.

- Edutopia: The Importance of Community Involvement in Schools
- Center for Global Education: How Schools Can Successfully Partner with Local Businesses

Creativity

Are students encouraged to take risks in creative pursuits? Is classwork designed in a way to allow for multiple solutions and displays of knowledge? Are resources available for students to express themselves?

Innovation is the fuel that drives our society forward. Without creative people, we will never progress. Creativity can be discouraged — stating that one's "head is in the clouds" or praising someone who is "down to earth." However, the more we encourage outlandish thinking, the more success stories we see.

Schools must design projects that allow students to answer in any way they see fit — even if it may challenge or disrupt a teacher's viewpoint of education. Furthermore, schools must invest in a plethora of ways for students to be creative (e.g. art materials, computer programs, and makerspaces).

- Edsurge: How to Build Your Makerspace
- Creativity as a Habit: Robert Sternberg

Literacy

Is reading seen as an act of pleasure with no extrinsic reward? Is reading forced at certain times? Does every student need to read the same canonical literature?

Reading is proven to increase a child's intelligence more-so than any other factor. The way that schools often teach literacy discourages future reading, and as a result, people grow up disliking books. A draw of extrinsic rewards for — what should be — the joy of reading results in decreased motivation. Furthermore, classrooms assign "deep-reading" activities for novels they may not enjoy (depending on the teacher's taste.) Students become disinterested as a result.

Reading for pleasure should be encouraged. Silent reading at certain points during the day and ample amounts of relevant books do well at promoting literacy. Notably, reading should not be enforced as long as others are not being distracted. Literacy should be promoted for its innate joy, rather than any other motivator.

- Readicide by Kelly Gallagher

Scheduling

Are frequent breaks established to allow students to decompress? Does the school's schedule best reflect a student's brain development? Is collaboration mandated?

It's one thing to talk progressive education, it's another to actually put it into practice. A school's schedule is its underlying structure. Without a schedule that reflects progressive education, a school is not truly embracing innovative practice.

A schedule must allow for mental and physical breaks for students and staff. People do not operate at 100% consistently. Furthermore, schools should consider moving to a later start time (e.g. 9AM), as young children through adolescents are not neurologically compatible with starting before sunrise.

The schedule can enforce collaboration by setting aside large amounts of block time for multilayered classrooms. By structuring class in this way, creativity, innovation, and teamwork is automatic as it is dictated structurally.

- Redesigning American High Schools for the 21st Century by Patrick Cook-Deegan
- Harvard Business Review: Your Brain Can Only Take So Much Focus

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The Transition

What you will need to begin this process is a comfortable quiet place, and five minutes. Sit yourself down (comfortably), and relax. Close your eyes, breathe, and imagine yourself emptying your head of all the thoughts and clutter. It is so incredibly difficult

to fill a mind with new ideas when that mind is already brimming with old routines, embedded "truths", and outdated traditions. What more, it can be seemingly impossible to suggest progressive or innovative ideas to a mind that is not only full but unwilling to receive.

It's not that progressive ideas are new: it's probably what you went into education thinking you were going to do. Sadly, the system has programmed many of us to reconsider what it is we're doing. Consider Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (our verbiage): *Imagine yourself in a cave, where they are three prisoners. Each prisoner is tied to a rock, with their legs, arms, and head bound so they can only look in front of them. They can see a large stone wall. These prisoners were placed here since birth and have never seen anything outside of this view.*

Behind the prisoners is a stairway, illuminated by a large fire, which is often trespassed by traders with animals, plants, wood, and stone. Therefore, each prisoner sees the shadows of objects being carried by these traders on the stone wall. However, to them these shadows are "real" — they don't know any better.

The prisoners would spend their time betting on which object would appear next. When guessed correctly, the prisoners would declare that person clever and wise. Eventually, one prisoner escapes their bindings and, to their surprise, finds a whole world behind them and up the staircase. He cannot believe any of it is real. However, after he succumbs to his senses, he realizes his whole former view of reality was wrong. He understands the Sun, beauty, meaning, and more. The game of guessing the next object was meaningless.

The escaped prisoner then returns, informing the others of what he's seen. They refuse to believe him — thinking him crazy — and threaten to kill him if he sets them free.

To me, this allegory brilliantly demonstrates progressive education. Despite someone (you) understanding how much research, knowledge, and history has gone into the reformation of schools — there are still those who vehemently oppose it. These resources, and the thoughts we share, are here to help you acknowledge that your world-view isn't crazy — it's the truth.

Chances are, if you've read this far, you agree with one or more of the following:
- I know that something feels wrong in education.
- I need something different to shape the minds of others.
- I want something different but didn't know where to start.
- I am always wanting new ideas to formulate and test.
- I am looking for information to confirm my inclinations.

In order for progress to exist, you must be willing and able to make room for it. You must be ready to question what you once believed to be "core values" of education (such as common/standardized procedures and traditional frameworks). The following are situations that happen often — they may seem trivial or possibly frustrating - but give them a shot anyway!

A student has fallen asleep in your class while you are lecturing.
It doesn't seem to be bothering anyone. What is your reaction? Why? Was your reaction disciplinary? Does your reaction take the student's home life into account? Is your reaction grounded in any sort of philosophy or intrinsically positive behavioral understanding? Or...is your reaction simply that: reactionary?

You pose a question to your class, and no one seeks to respond.
No hands raise. No one speaks up. What is your assessment? Why? Do you believe the students are simply bored? Tired? Uncaring? Apathetic to the "importance" of what is being taught? Is it possible that the students simply don't find the question or lesson interesting? Or...maybe they do. Perhaps the question is head-scratchily interesting, but having grown up in system that discourages inquisitiveness and praises correct answers, the students are afraid to suggest any answer as it may be "wrong" and lead to a sense of failure.

A student spent many weeks on an assignment, but failed.
He is so incredibly proud of the work, but receives a failing grade. What has been learned? What was assessed? Was the student's passion assessed? Creativity? Ingenuity? Innovation? Self-determination? Is it possible that the project may have received a different grade from a different educator? Is it possible that grades are inherently subjective?

It is time to begin your lesson, but a student wants to tell you about her evening spent ghost hunting with her dad.
It has nothing to do with the lesson and will surely skew the planned time constraints. What do you do? Have the student sit down as that isn't important? Continue on with the lesson because you need the data? Why? Do you engage the student by completely redrafting your lesson for the day? Perhaps you have students all take a moment to write about their evenings and discuss (including you). Perhaps you have everyone do research on ghost hunting and present it tomorrow. Would this be okay?

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The point is — regarding those situations — to get you thinking in ways you haven't in quite some time. The point is to re-humanize not only you, but your relationship with your students and with education. While it's true that there are certainly a myriad working and functional methods of progressive education (after all, one size simply can't fit all), there is absolutely one way which simply does not work: traditional ed.

The proof is in the pudding. It's time to reform our current system. It's time to remind ourselves and our students: **We are human beings**. It is important to mention that students may also need a sense of priming before true restoration can begin. After all, some students (e.g., high school) have been in this archaic and dehumanizing system for nearly a decade! It will take some time, patience, trust, and developing of interpersonal relationships to ready your student body. Maybe you already have some ideas! That's great. Try them out. If you feel a bit stuck, try one of the following activities with your students:

Discuss, debate, and invite students on the purpose of school and what they want to do.

Ask questions:

- Why do you come to school? No, not why do you think you have to come to school. Why, personally, do you come to school?
- What (do you hope/believe), is the outcome of school?
- Why do you believe schools exist?
- Would you design school differently? How so? (Be specific. What would classes look like/be? What would the schedule be? Etc.)
- How does grading work? That is, how do you receive a "good" grade? What is required?
- Are there things you believe schools should teach, but don't? List as many subjects/ideas you believe to be relevant.

From here, why not let students lead the way? Instead of designing everything for them, give them the tools to do so. It will definitely be a struggle at first. Doesn't that make sense? After all, they've been taught to listen to you! But if we want students to be independent thinkers, we need them to actually think for themselves. However, this may go against your curriculum standards, so...

"Wake up" to the current curriculum
Are you, as the teacher, absolutely positive that your curriculum is of utmost importance? It would make sense. After all, you did go to school for it for years! It would be seemingly absurd to think otherwise. It's only natural. We, as educators, are taught that our specific curriculum is of absolute and utmost importance. That said, how much of this curriculum would you say you truly know? As an English educator, do you know every mechanics, usage, and grammar rule? Most certainly the answer would be a resounding "no." But what does that mean? Well, it would seem that while you did study a specific field, there is still a lot left that you did not learn or remember, and there is so much more yet to come. When we teach, are we presuming our curriculum is of utmost importance, and that is what we are teaching? Or, more realistically, are we presuming that what we have learned is of utmost importance (to us), and we are teaching only that which we can recall?

What if, by some strange turn of fate, there is something in your standards or on a state test that you either can't recall or have never learned? Do you run, tail tucked, for the hills never looking back? Or, do you simply address a book or the internet and educate yourself so you may be of better service? Probably the latter, if you intend on keeping your job. Let's reframe this understanding of curriculum. It is quite unimportant what it is you are teaching (as this is subjective and tied to what one remembers), but it is of utmost importance that a student desires to learn!

If we believe grades determine education, and A's are of utmost importance, find a student you have taught during a previous school year: preferably a student who received an A in your class. If you teach seniors, find out who received an A the

following year and use them instead. Now, take that student, and give them that previous course's "final exam". You may have to ply them with food or drink.

How did they do? If they're anything like my experience (and maybe I'm a terrible teacher, but hopefully that's not the case!) — students perform fairly poorly. Blank stares. Moments of "how could you POSSIBLY not remember this!? And overall, a sense of dread and defeat. This *doesn't mean* that your work doesn't matter. It just means other aspects of what you do matter more: did they *enjoy* being in your class? What *did* they remember? I would venture it would be major projects they chose to do, experiences they had with their friends, and things they did for others. Those "soft skills" that develop overtime are what we hope we build on for students.

Give students real agency

Ask students...

- Would you design school differently? How so? (Be specific. What would classes look like/be? What would the schedule be? Etc.)
- Are there things you believe schools should teach, but don't? List as many subjects/ideas you believe to be relevant.
- What would assessment (grades) look like?

Students should spend a deep amount of time exploring and developing their thoughts to eventually combine and co-create a unique class, experience, and assessment. (Due to obvious time constraints, have students limit the course to potentially a week long experience leaving time for lessons, activities, and assessment.) They will develop a proposal and deliver it to the class for critique and feedback. With the feedback, they will reassess their unique educational experience creating a class that can be taught in your classroom! Now, students will present for a second time with the class voting on which group's course will come to life. While, as an educator, you want to give students a great amount of autonomy in this experience to build the reciprocated trust, feel free to move from group to group adding any assistance they may need in developing their very own curriculum.

Of course, this is just a building block to recognize that students **can run the class** with your assistance. In fact, overtime they can run all the learning themselves. That doesn't mean your job is done. We're changing the mindset that the role of a teacher isn't to *deliver knowledge* but to *assist students in learning*.

With all this in mind, there's still a lot of work to do! You'll be at odds with those transfixed or unaware on outdated practice: staff, parents, and students alike. But there's research on your side — and you've either accepted or are coming to terms with progressive education. Hopefully, these activities and resources help frame your mindset toward our movement, and **we hope you join us in transforming education for humanity**. See you soon!