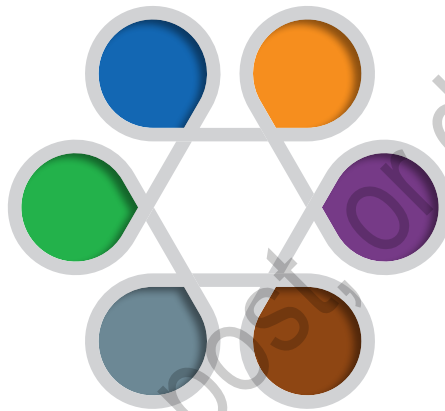


# Highly Educated Useless People

# 1



“It is possible to store the mind with a million facts and still be entirely uneducated.”

—Alec Bourne

## Introduction

Ian had just finished speaking at a major international conference when a delegate approached him. What the man said took Ian by complete surprise, not only because of *what* he said but also *who* he was.

“Our students are amongst the very best academic performers in the world,” the speaker described the learners from his country. But he quietly added, “The problem is that most of them [the learners] couldn’t think their way out of a wet paper bag even if their life depended upon it. They’re nothing but highly educated, useless people.”

The commentator was the Minister of Education of a very high profile, high performing country. Ian was speechless. Hmmmm . . . highly educated useless people? What was the Minister telling him?

The minister was suggesting that his nation's high-achieving learners had school smarts and, thus, could excel at academics. They had developed special abilities that allowed them to move smoothly through the school system. They had cultivated the essential skills needed to cram for and successfully complete tests. He was implying that most academically successful learners do well, in large part, because they have learned how to play the "game called school."

But in describing his country's learners as "highly educated useless people," what he was also suggesting was that while many of these learners, particularly the brainy ones, had school smarts, they did not possess what is generally known as street smarts. For him, being street smart was about having practical intelligence (Sternberg, 1985). Practical intelligence is about developing skills needed to solve real-world, real-life problems in real time. This type of intelligence requires developing the necessary higher-level thinking skills and competencies to live and work in the world beyond school. Practical intelligence skills go well beyond those needed to do well on a written examination.

Ian became curious. What were the distinctions between being school smart and street smart?

How could so many learners who performed well in school and were able to excel on tests, at the same time be so inadequately prepared for life?

After much debate around our expectations related to the who, what, why, where, when, and how of learning, we believe we finally have an answer. Our mandate is to help our children become lifelong thinkers and learners.

When children first attend primary school, they are entirely dependent on their teachers to tell them what to do, who to do it with, how to do it, when to do it, where to sit, and even for how long. The primary focus is on mastering content and learning through memorization within a tightly controlled, structured instructional environment.

In this educational landscape, mastery of content is frequently valued over thinking critically about the content. The teachers tell the learners what they need to do to pass the test, to pass the course, to pass the grade, to move to the next level, and finally to graduate. All the answers are prearranged, preformatted, and ready for absorption by those who are willing and able to play the game called school. These are the academically successful students. These are the learners who are comfortable operating in a culture of dependency—dependent on the teacher, dependent on the textbook, dependent on the test.

Then after graduation from school, having spent 13 or more years in the system, the intellectual scaffolding that has held the learners up for all their years in education is suddenly removed. When this happens, and they enter the real world, many of them fall flat on their faces. As educators, we cannot understand why our formerly well-performing learners are unable to succeed in life beyond school. We find this confusing even though, as educators, we are responsible for creating and maintaining this culture of dependency on the teacher, the textbooks, and the test. And it's not just teachers who are bewildered. Parents are also baffled when many recently graduated adult children continue living at home, needing to be supported, because of factors such as the global pandemic, social upheaval, and the precarious nature of the global economy.

In today's world, school success does not necessarily guarantee success in life. So what is the problem? The answer lies in our continued focus on ensuring compliance in our learners rather than cultivating independent thinkers, doers, and lifelong learners. Somewhere along the line, we have lost sight of the need to develop both school and life skills.

If our children are to survive, let alone thrive in a 21st century culture of technology-driven automation, abundance, and access to global labor markets, independent, creative, and divergent thinking must hold the highest currency. If our learners are to be successful in making the transition, our mission as educators must be to move from demanding the compliance of learners, to progressively shifting the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner.

This shift sounds simple, but in fact, it is an incredibly complex task. For this change to happen, it must occur in the hearts and minds of every single educational stakeholder, including politicians, policy designers, educational leaders, teachers, parents, and learners.

This new and different paradigm for teaching and learning is that of progressive withdrawal. The educator's job is no longer about standing up in front of their students and showing them how smart the teacher is. Rather, the educator's role is to help learners discover how smart they are and to progressively shift the burden of responsibility for learning from the teacher, where it has traditionally been, to the learner, where it truly belongs. Good teachers create positive environments for learners. Good teachers create environments where learners feel safe to share their thinking, ask probing questions, and participate intelligently in conversations.

Our responsibility must be to ensure that learners no longer need us by the time they complete school—rather like a parent. We want to

The educator's role is to help learners discover how smart they are and to progressively shift the burden of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner.

ensure that our kids are independent and can stand on their own. Think of your child's first attempts to ride a bike. Many times, the bike falls over. Or when learning to walk, they lose their balance and fall to the ground. Or their Cheerios slide off the spoon as they attempt to eat.

How did we respond? Good parents don't say, "C-, you fail, 36%, you're not meeting the bicycling standards, we need to develop a rubric for walking without failing," or "We need a Common Core curriculum to help keep their food on the spoon." Of course not! What did we do? We clapped our hands, helped them up, brushed them off, wiped away their tears, and encouraged them to try again. We understood that our job as parents, as complicated and challenging as it might be (particularly during the teenage years), was to help our children be independent, able to stand on their own as they begin to make their way through life.

So what should we do? Do we give up on helping learners become school smart and simply focus on assisting them to become street smart? Absolutely not, we need them to be both—it is not a matter of just either/or. We must ask, what do we want our learners to be, feel, think, and do that measurably demonstrates that they are willing and prepared to step out from school into the world in which they will work, live, and play?

Definitively answering this question is not simple, given that our present-day world is profoundly complex and in a constant state of flux. We live in the age of InfoWhelm and HyperInformation, where digital content is growing exponentially in both quantity and complexity. In this shifting landscape, information is instantly available. Learners must move beyond simple mastery of content recall to develop the capacity to interpret and apply both old and new knowledge to different situations, problems, and environments.

Access to information is not the only obstacle. Learning to become a discerning and creative consumer of information is an ongoing challenge. In the new digital reality, the application of higher-order independent cognitive skills learned within the context of real-world, real-life, and real-time tasks is essential. For learning to be meaningful, students must be able to transfer previous learning to new and different situations and challenges.

We firmly believe that invoking progressive withdrawal and fostering street smarts in school-smart learners requires a significant shift in the existing educational paradigm. To enable this shift demands that we rethink the design of our schools, classrooms, and related learning environments. At the same time, we need to rethink our assumptions about

instructional design, what constitutes learning, and even our definitions of what it means to be intelligent. And ultimately, we must also rethink how we assess and evaluate both instruction and learning.

Standardized tests can only measure a very narrow range of rational cognitive skills measured by bubble tests, multiple-choice questions, or fill-in-the-blank exams. Real learning is about assessing much more than simple information regurgitation. A student's competency or potential cannot be measured using a single test. That's why educators must also change the way learning is assessed to include authentic assessment using rubrics, journals, reflection, logs, feedback, feedforward, and so on.

The primary purpose of learning today must be about cultivating the essential long-term skills, dispositions, and habits of mind needed so our learners can construct their understanding of the world and how it works. These are the essential skills necessary to deal with adversity and conquer the many challenges learners will face in life. These are the skills, dispositions, and habits of mind that will last a lifetime. They are as important as, if not more important than, learning how to factor trinomials or calculate square roots. But these long-term skills are also substantially different from the content-focused knowledge and skills that were (and remain) the primary focal point of traditional education.

The bottom line is that schools must change if we are going to address the growing disconnect between being school smart and being street smart. If we are to make schools more relevant and prepare learners for the world that awaits them, there are at least five fundamental changes that need to be made.

1. *Acknowledge the New Digital Landscape*

Schools must embrace the new reality of the online, digitized world that has been severely complicated by the COVID-19 crisis we are experiencing today. Outside of schools, the digital world has fundamentally and irrevocably altered the way we work, play, communicate, shop, and view our fellow citizens (Jukes & Schaaf, 2019).

It must be emphasized that this is not about schools having high-speed networks or learners having constant access to laptops and handhelds. Even when high-tech resources are available, if the technologies are only used to reinforce old assumptions and practices about teaching, learning, and assessment, little will have changed. Instead, this is about developing the full spectrum of cognitive and emotional

The primary purpose of learning today must be about cultivating the essential long-term skills, dispositions, and habits of mind needed so our learners can construct their understanding of the world and how it works.

intelligence increasingly required in the culture of the 21st century. As such, this is primarily a headware (critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, etc.), not hardware (laptops, tablets, smartphones, networks, etc.), issue. It is all well and good to purchase and install new technology, but in and of itself this is not enough.

## 2. *Facilitate and Guide Student Learning*

The New Digital Landscape allows learners access to information and learning experiences outside of schools and classrooms. Learners can access almost anything, anytime—information, music, multimedia from multiple sources. As a result, learners can determine what they want to learn—something that contradicts the traditional model where teachers primarily determine what is learned, how it's discovered, how long it's studied, what tools are used, and how the learning is assessed.

Many adults, decision-makers, and traditional educators are simply not in sync with the new digital reality of today's learners. As a result, many schools and teachers continue to use new technologies to reinforce old mindsets. The lives of today's students are very different from the lives of students for whom the existing education systems were initially developed. To ensure that our students can navigate their way through an increasingly interconnected and complex world, it is our duty to equip them with the essential skills needed to do so. What we desperately need is a balance between our world and theirs—between traditional and digital learning environments.

As you finish reading this chapter, the questions you need to be asking are, how have you modified and how will you modify your instructional assumptions and practices to address the fact that learners have fundamentally changed and continue to change? Nothing is stopping us from changing the way we learn and how we teach, but if educators haven't changed their teaching approach markedly in the past 10 years, then they are just not meeting the needs of today's students.

## 3. *Change Mindsets*

We must address the shift in thinking patterns of digital learners. They live and operate in a multimedia, online, multitask, random access, color graphics, video, audio, and visual literacy world.

How have you modified and how will you modify your instructional assumptions and practices to address the fact that learners have fundamentally changed and continue to change?

As Steven Johnson (2006) pointed out in *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, these skills are generally not acknowledged, valued, addressed, or emphasized in our schools. They are not accepted because these abilities do not typically reflect the mindsets and skillsets of the older generations. As we explored in depth in *Reinventing Learning for the Always-On Generation: Strategies and Apps that Work* (2015), educators must acknowledge that today's learners not only think differently but also learn differently from the way previous generations learned. Only by recognizing that our world has fundamentally and irrevocably changed will we be able to begin to reconsider and redesign learning environments, instruction, and how we assess learning.

#### 4. *Assess Holistically*

We must broaden evaluation to encompass activities that provide a complete picture of what it means for learners to learn. As management guru Tom Peters (1986) wrote, "What gets measured gets done," and conversely, "what doesn't get measured doesn't get done." We must begin to measure more than information recall.

Dave Masters (as cited in Jukes, 2011) uses this analogy:

"You can get a good picture of a person's health by taking their height and weight, but would you go to a doctor who only took your height and weight and said here's a complete picture of your health? The answer, of course, is no. It would require a battery of tests—urinalysis, blood tests, blood pressure, cholesterol, checking for lumps, and so on to get an accurate picture of your health."

However, many schools act like the former doctors. Learners are tested using standardized instruments that primarily measure information recall and low-level understanding of concepts. The scores are then interpreted as representing a complete picture of a learner's abilities. It is highly presumptuous to say that current test scores are a complete indicator of what learners are learning.

A full picture requires authentic assessment strategies, including portfolios of performance that demonstrate learning. Assessment must also include evidence of the application of theory to solve real-world problems, not just recall of theoretical content.

### 5. *Develop the Whole Learner*

Last but not least, if we hope to increase the relevancy of the learning that takes place, we must increase the connection between instruction in schools and the world outside. The critical point is that students see the relevance of what they are learning. Understanding is facilitated when learners can make a connection between the content and context as it is applied to the world outside of schools.

For this connection to occur, schools must become less insular. We need to systematically work to bring the outside world into our schools, while at the same time sending our schools out into the community. New technologies and understanding of the New Digital Landscape can help us perform both. The online world creates virtual highways and hallways to both local and global communities. Whether educators are ready for it or not, we are already seeing this happen. Kids are on TikTok, SnapChat, and Instagram participating in protests and making their opinions known. They are no longer willing to accept adults filtering their exposure to the outside world. Today's generations are actively participating in the world around them, whether adults choose to acknowledge this or not.

If we hope to unfold the full intellectual and creative genius of all of our children; if we want to prepare them for the new and ever changing world that awaits them beyond school; if we're going to help them make their future, not our past; if we are going to march through the 21st century and maintain our tradition of success; if we want our children to have the relevant 21st century skills, then we need to acknowledge they have already created a bridge between their world and ours. They can develop both street smarts and school smarts necessary to survive and thrive in the culture of the 21st century.

For this to happen, there needs to be a fundamental shift in how teaching and learning take place in schools. We must look for alternatives to the traditional organization of schools. We need to uncover our long-standing and unexamined assumptions about teaching and learning, about what a classroom looks like, where learning takes place, and what resources are necessary to support it.

And we also need to reexamine the use of time—the length of the school day and school year, the school timetable, and the traditional methods used for instructional delivery. And, particularly in the light of the post-COVID-19 world we hope to be living in, we must reconsider the potential of online, web-based, blended, and virtual learning that



can be used to augment, extend, and transform the role of the traditional classroom teachers.

In other words, we cannot foster street smarts in school smart learners unless we ask the critical and relevant questions around our assumptions of what schools currently are and what they need to become.

### Summarizing the Main Points

- In addition to developing school smarts, many of today's students are developing street smarts independent of the existing school system.
- Street smarts can also be referred to as practical intelligence or the ability to deal with daily tasks in the real world using their acquired knowledge, skills, intuition, and creativity.
- Education must move from demanding the compliance of learners, to progressively shifting the responsibility of learning to students.
- The primary purpose of learning is cultivating the essential long-term skills, dispositions, and habits of mind needed so learners can construct their understanding of the world and how it works rather than continuing to operate in a culture of dependency.
- Five fundamental changes that need to be made to make learning more relevant for the future include acknowledging the New Digital Landscape, facilitating and guiding student learning, changing mindsets, assessing holistically, and developing the whole learner.

### Questions to Consider

- What is the game called “school”?
- How can educators help learners simultaneously cultivate both school smarts and street smarts?
- What are the implications for learners of progressive withdrawal helping to prepare them for their post-school lives?
- What are some changes schools can embrace to avoid producing highly educated useless people?
- What are some of the long-standing assumptions about teaching and learning that you would like to challenge?