

An A+ student regrets his grades ... By Afraj Gill

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The purpose and meaning of education is widely misunderstood and wrongly presented.

This is why the education system needs “reinventing, not reforming,” according to Harvard Innovation Education Fellow Tony Wagner. We’re creating a culture – reinforced by society and habitually drilled into students from an early age and well into their teens – that revolves around textbooks, lectures, GPAs and exams, where failing or not doing well are either unacceptable or wrongly considered a sign of weakness or a lack of intellect.

Education is not confined to the walls of a classroom; it stretches well beyond that. Valuing success above all else is a problem plaguing the schooling systems, at all levels, of many countries including Canada and the United States, and undermining those very qualities that are meant to foster an educated and skillful society.

This very issue took a toll on my own educational career, not in terms of academic performance, but other aspects considerably more important.

Less than three years ago, I graduated high school. I was a driven student who scored a 100 per cent average, served as the students’ council president and class valedictorian, earned over 16 scholarships/awards, etc. The bottom line is that I was a high achiever, but I mistakenly defined achievement in a way most do: with my GPA. It was only until a couple of years ago, when I began to question my own educational career, that I realized something profound: The academic portion of my high school life was spent in the wrong way, with cloudy motivations. I treated schooling and education synonymously. I had been directed not by my inner voice, but by societal pressures that limited my ability to foster personal creativity.

The system teaches us that if you get ‘As’ across the board, you’ll be successful. And if you fail a course, you’ll be labelled incompetent or hopeless. These pressures force students to regard education as a mere schooling tenure where the goal is to input a sufficient amount of work to output the highest possible grades. We sacrifice learning

for schooling. One of my professors once said, “Writing exams isn’t a measure of intelligence or knowledge, it’s about getting inside your prof’s head to figure out what’ll be on the exam.”

Information is propelled into students without teaching them how to practically utilize it. This is senseless. Regurgitating facts, memorizing figures and formulas, compressing course material in our short-term memory for the sake of doing well on an exam; they are all detrimental to the learning experience. But students still do it because they don’t want to fail. Instead, we should be fostering a culture where, to paraphrase Arianna Huffington, “Failure isn’t considered the opposite of success, but an integral part of it.”

One of the few classes that effectively taught me how to take information from the classroom to the real world was instructed by Doug Wightman at Queen’s University. The course covered concepts from how to start a start-up, build business models and prototypes, to venture deals, stock options and term sheets. But it didn’t end there. Toward the end of the course, many students had working prototypes, and a few managed to execute and launch their ideas. This course taught me something important: We can’t allow learning to become passive. We need to teach students to learn how to learn – to become independent, innovative thinkers capable of changing the world.

Finland’s nonconformist education system – the best in the world – should serve as an example of how students ought to see their educational experience. Finnish students don’t start school until they’re 7; they aren’t measured for the first six years of their education; and they rarely take exams or do homework until they are well into their teens. These students aren’t raised to see school as a measurement cycle where everything comes down to standardized testing, graded assignments and exams worth large portions of their final grade. Their educational culture is substantially different from the evaluation-driven Western world.

Culture is a problem, and we need to fix it – from the ground up. There’s a psychosocial dynamic of not questioning current practices of education. But we can’t let this get in the way. Embrace education with all your heart, and remember that schooling is only a small part of the puzzle. The remainder is what you’ll have to discover and solve through your own journey.