

Passion-led learning

We need to bring passion back into learning, in teaching and all around. Passion motivates. It makes a way out of no way. It allows students to overcome hardships to achieve a goal that is meaningful to them.”

Ainissa Ramirez

Introduction

It is rare to hear conversations about passion in education. It is hard for it to compete with current debate in Australia about curriculum, standards, assessment, back to basics and NAPLAN. We know, however, that the current model of schooling is not producing the outcomes require for our young people to be happy, healthy and successful and for our country to prosper.

Angela Maiers, world-regarded educator whose work focuses on closing the passion gap¹, refers to a column in The New York Times, where Thomas Friedman explains how “we need everyone to be innovating new products and services to employ the people who are being liberated from routine work by automation and software. The winners won’t just be those with more I.Q. It will also be those with more P.Q. (passion quotient) and C.Q. (curiosity quotient) to leverage all the new digital tools to not just find a job, but to invent one or reinvent one, and to not just learn but to relearn for a lifetime.”²

Thomas Friedman is not alone. Google’s senior vice president of people operations, Laszlo Bock wrote an open letter to university graduates recently. “Beware. Your degree is not a proxy for your ability to do any job. The world only cares about — and pays off on — what you can do with what you know (and it doesn’t care how you learned it). And in an age when innovation is increasingly a group endeavour, it also cares about a lot of soft skills — leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability and loving to learn and re-learn. This will be true no matter where you go to work.”

You will often hear educators ask how they can prepare young people for jobs that have not been invented yet. We may not know everything our students will encounter but we do know many of the skills and competencies young people need. “Developing these will support transferable skills for new work areas in the majority of circumstances”.³

Unfortunately many teachers mistake passion for something learners like to do in their spare time. These may be better defined as hobbies

So, if passion, a love of learning and curiosity are essentials in the world of work, how do we ensure that passion stays on the table when we’re talking about learning in Australia? How do we connect what young people are passionate about in the rest of their learning and their lives outside school?

The evidence base

The evidence base for passion-led learning has gained some momentum recently. This is, in part, due to the anti-standardisation movement but also and largely due to the increased focus in Australia on learner engagement⁴ and the role of expert teachers in motivating, challenging and deepening learning⁵.

Students are more likely to learn if they are captivated, motivated and engaged in their learning. Research now suggests that individual experiences of being engaged in learning contribute to growing motivation over time. In other words, being an

¹ <http://www.angelamaiers.com/2015/02/lets-close-the-passion-gap/>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/30/opinion/friedman-its-pq-and-cq-as-much-as-iq.html?ref=thomasfriedman&_r=0

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2014/may/07/measure-schools-success-preparing-students-future-skills-academic>

⁴ <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/learning-frontiers>

⁵ https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/proflearn/docs/pdf/qt_hattie.pdf

engaged learner is addictive: with every deep learning experience, you're more likely to become a learner for life.⁶

Others would argue that passion-led learning isn't just about the motivational aspect and that it's deeper than engagement. There are cognitive processes in the brain that are "turned on" by emotion – be that passion, anger, anxiety or other emotions – and this, in turn, leads to deeper learning outcomes.

Appendix 1 provides more detail about the emerging evidence base.

Models and practices for passion-led learning:

There are two pathways to passion-led learning:

1. Develop in teachers a passion that exudes and infects learners
2. Find out what each child is innately passionate about.

There are several pedagogical models that currently reference passion or interest:

- inquiry-based learning
- project-based learning
- design-based learning
- problem-based learning.

Each of these models has two consistent elements to the learning process:

1. draw students in
2. keep them engaged.

There is a diversity of approaches. You can hook a student's attention if they get their hands dirty (inquiry-based learning); have learning interactions with other students (project- and problem-based learning); or need to perform a specific task (problem- and design-based learning).

Each of these models is a way (with their direct discovery, problem-solving, hands-on learning and collaborative methods) to keep the embers of passion for learning alive. But, how do we ignite them and identify them in the first place?

When examining the literature it is often noted that, although a messy endeavour, helping learners find their passion is well worth the challenge. This often involves teachers finding ways to allow individuals to create their own pathways to learning, rather than the teacher finding different ways for everyone to access the same curriculum.

This is not about a technological solution. This is about the great value teachers bring to a learning environment, helping students to find their passion by providing a wider place to look.

And it is definitely worth stressing that this is not about teachers abrogating their responsibility in the learning process. It is, as argued by Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach, "about the use of an appreciative strategy that says students learn best when we have them work from their strengths to accomplish the outcomes, rather than having to work from their weaknesses. Which means that as a teacher, I'm going to have to be a master of the curriculum. I've got to know exactly what I want the end result to be in order to allow these kids to approach what we need to learn from their own

⁶ <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/learning-frontiers-resources/insights-and-ideas-issue-2.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

passion or their own personal interest. Instead of me having all these preconceived ideas of what they should doing, saying and producing, I have to be open to what I find in each student. I have to discover – and help each student discover – their talents and interests and create a learning environment where they can use those gifts and passions to learn from a position of strength.”⁷

See Appendix 2 for more information about teacher pedagogy and disposition.

Models of learning that focus on passion (with time allocated)

1. Genius Hour Adaptation

There are also some industry practices and models that privilege passion that have made their way into classrooms and schools around the world. In Google 20% time Google encourages its employees, in addition to their regular projects, to spend 20% of their time working on what they think will most benefit Google, what they are passionate about. They believe this empowers their employees to be more creative and innovative and have been so bold as to have stated that many of their significant advances have happened through this manner. It is worthy to note that the 20% piece may be anomalous (as Google management widely acknowledge that until an idea shows impact, it’s likely to be 5 or 10%) but what’s important is the idea.

AITSL and Innovation Unit profiled⁸ the use of this model for teacher professional learning and state that teachers are already applying the idea in classrooms, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that 'Children worked hard on their other work to ensure 20% time and their standards were higher.'

The major movement that has evolved in schools is *Genius Hour*⁹. During genius hour students of all levels are empowered to explore their own passions. The same genius hour principles apply in the classroom as they do in the corporate Google environment. The teacher provides a set amount of time for the students to work on their passion projects. Students are then challenged to explore something to do a project over that they want to learn about. They spend several weeks researching the topic before they start creating a product that will be shared with the class/school/world. Further information on this approach can be found at:

- [10 reasons to try 20% time in the classroom](#)
- [20% time](#)
- [The Guardian: Google 20% time in schools](#)
- [Google’s "20 percent time"](#)

2. Big Picture Learning

Big Picture Education (operating in Australia, the US, Netherlands) has generated and sustained innovative, personalised schools that work in partnership with their greater communities.

Their philosophy is grounded in educating 'one student at a time.' They promote and create personalised education programs that are unique for each student. They believe that true learning takes place when each student is an active participant in their education, when their course of study is personalised by teachers, parents and mentors who know them well, and when school-based learning is blended with

⁷ <http://plpnetwork.com/2011/04/22/passion-based-learning-in-the-21st-century-an-interview-with-sheryl-nussbaum-beach/>

⁸ <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/public/innovative50/index.html?page=Google-20percent-time#sthash.en7gKQl2.dpuf>

⁹ <http://www.geniushour.com/>

outside experiences that heighten the student's interest. In countries obsessed by 'test-score accountability,' we promote 'one student at a time accountability.' on these outcomes.

Big Picture's rigorous and highly personalised approach to education combines academic work with real-world learning. It focuses on educating 'one student at a time' and inverts the traditional education design by placing the student, their passions and their interests, at the centre of the learning process.

3. New York City Department of Education iZone – personalised learning
In Spring 2010, the New York City Department of Education launched their ambitious and intentional innovation strategy with this simple rationale: "New York's schooling system perceives a need for its young people to be enabled to achieve higher-order standards that prepare them for post-secondary success by emphasizing higher-order critical thinking, real-world application, and collaboration that will necessitate developing instructional capacity that our schools currently do not have."

The overall aim of the strategy was to transform the learning for the 1 million students in NYC public schools through replacing the 'industrial model', by designing schools round the needs, interests and motivations of individual students, by personalising rather than standardising the model of schooling and learning. Students enter schools as individuals, often now tech-savvy, with a diverse set of needs and capabilities. Therefore, the new logic went, schools needed to reorient themselves to treat students as individual learners, where every child has a unique education plan with his or her own path to personal and academic success. The plan was to make personalisation the central approach to educating students – where learning would be about each student mastering skills and capabilities in her own way, at her own pace.

Personalised approaches and mastery-based assessment became new foundation stones. In iZone schools, schooling would no longer be about advancing students through grade levels based on age and time spent in class, but about supporting students in building the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they need to be successful. During the 2010-11 school year the high-level vision for 'personalised mastery learning' was articulated one level further, identifying four pillars or principles:

- Personalised learning plans and progress
- Flexible and real world learning environments (multiple learning modalities, learning anytime, anywhere, on- and off-line, project-based)
- Next generation curriculum and assessment
- New student and staff roles (advisor, tutor, mentor, designer, facilitator, peer-tutor etc).

Tools for identifying passion

*"Helping students find their passion will lead them to achievement".
Marc Prensky*

There are a small number of tools currently in the market that help young people identify their passion. These range from extensive surveys conducted in schools to help identify suitability for higher ed courses or careers to technological solutions where parents can connect their children to activities they're passionate about outside of school.

Although a passion quotient is referenced in much of the literature, there is not currently a reliable standardised tool for assessing an individual's PQ.

1. Finding your element: Sir Ken Robinson¹⁰

The Element and Finding Your Element, introduces readers to a new concept of self-fulfilment through the convergence of natural talents and personal passions. Among the questions that this new book answers are:

- How do I find out what my talents and passions are?
- What if I love something I'm not good at?
- What if I'm good at something I don't love?
- What if I can't make a living from my Element?
- How do I do help my children find their Element?

2. Thrively Strength Assessment¹¹

Every child has a genius – that combination of passion and unique strengths in which they absolutely thrive. Thrively's mission is to uncover that genius in everyone.

Thrively began as a family website that helps kids discover and pursue their passions in life. Their approach is to focus on children's strengths and introduce them to those activities where they are most likely to Thrive. These are now tailored for teachers and students. The Thrively Strength Assessment identifies each student's individual strengths across 23 factors. Students receive a personal, uplifting profile that celebrates each child's unique talents. Instead of grades and test scores, Thrively enables teachers and administrators to see their students through the lens of each student's strengths. Thrively recommends personalized content and enrichment opportunities to each student based on his/her unique strengths and interests.

3. Integro Employee Passion Survey¹²

Integro believes that passion contributes more towards value creation than any other human capability. The more passionate your employees are the more value you will deliver – value your competitors cannot match. The Employee Passion Survey shows you how passionate employees really are.

The survey measures employee passion on two levels:

- a) Passion for the job: the degree to which employees are emotionally connected to their work and are committed to doing their best.
- b) Passion for the organisation: the degree to which employees are emotionally connected to the purpose, values and vision of the organisation and its leaders.

Survey results cover three areas:

- a) Employee's needs: personal importance and organisational performance
- b) Levels of passion across the team or entire organisation
- c) The Values that Build Trust: personal importance and organisational performance

4. Passion index and passion igniter¹³ by Career Point

The Passions Index and Passion Igniter aim to assist individuals to identify their core passions and match them to career paths where they can be both successful and happy. Career Point wants to encourage and support discussions about the value of education and increase interest in, and commitment to, high school graduation and to educational credentials after high school. They recognize the statistics that prove

¹⁰ <http://sirkenrobinson.com/finding-your-element/>

¹¹ <http://www.thrively.com/classroom>

¹² <http://www.integroleadership.com/au/products-services/trust-inside/employee-passion>

¹³ <http://passionsindex.com/about/>

higher educational achievement results in higher lifetime salaries and job stability, but also recognize that a 4-year degree may not be the best option for all students.

They believe those who see a clear career path that matches their passions, and plan accordingly, are more likely to achieve higher grades, higher graduation rates and have a higher likelihood of success and happiness over their lifetime. They also serve the millions of adults seeking better or different work, who have been displaced from the workforce, who are returning to civilian life from the military, or who want to re-enter the workforce after retirement. Their products help them narrow the scope of their search—and can be used to show potential employers they have the right passion and profile to succeed.

5. Nepris¹⁴

Nepris aims to make it easy for teachers to virtually invite industry professionals into the classroom to bring real world relevance to curriculum topics, to help evaluate student projects and to engage and inspire students in STEAM. Nepris is a web-based platform that makes it easy for teachers to connect with industry professionals while providing companies a way to scale education outreach. Teachers create a request based on a curriculum topic or activity that can benefit from an industry connection. Nepris automatically matches the skills of industry professional(s) with the teacher's request and manages the process of connecting them to the right classroom. Industry professionals virtually connect with classroom(s) for an interactive discussion with the students or to help evaluate projects.

There is also a range of diagnostic and learning analytic tools that can help teachers work with young people to identify their passion and what makes them curious. These tools work during everyday lessons as students consider and record their level of engagement in the learning. The teacher and the student can then conference to see what it was that sparked their interest – the content, the activity, the social interaction, etc. This enables the teacher and the student to backward map toward a passion or interest. Two examples are:

6. Improving Learning Power with the Crick Learning for Resilient Agency (CLARA) Self Assessment Instrument¹⁵

CLARA is a practical online learning analytic designed to stimulate improvement in learning and performance through rapid feedback of data to individuals, teams and organizations. It is also subject to the rigorous quality of social science research in terms of reliability, validity, trustworthiness and authenticity. CLARA measures the ways in which individuals regulate the flow of energy and information over time in order to achieve a particular purpose – their learning power. This is a necessary but not sufficient part of a learning journey which moves from purpose to performance over time, fuelled by learning power and the process of structuring and re-structuring knowledge. CLARA enables individuals and teams to reflect 'backwards' towards identity and purpose and to navigate 'forwards' to the achievement of purpose through knowledge structuring and problem solving. All stations of the learning journey are important in learning design and in becoming a resilient learner.

7. Flow – a measure of student engagement

In efforts to improve student enjoyment as a quality of engagement, the theory of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) made its way into educational dialogue. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff (2003) explored Student Engagement in High School Classrooms from the Perspective of Flow Theory, presenting a further

¹⁴ <https://www.nepris.com/>

¹⁵ <http://learningemergence.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Introducing-CLARA-April-2015.pdf>

“conceptualization of student engagement based on the culmination of concentration, interest, and enjoyment (i.e., flow)” (Shernoff, et al, 2003, p. 158). The “Flow” experience research suggests that, because the flow state is intrinsically rewarding, people seek to replicate flow experiences. The student and teacher must find that niche and help students enjoy their learning – to find ways that help learners become so engrossed in their work that they lose track of time.

Appendix 1

The growing evidence base for passion/emotion and learning

Peter Skillen has examined the literature and collated¹⁶ voices on the matter:

Eleanor Duckworth suggests "...you can't separate intellect and feelings in the work of the mind. They're both there all the time. Real learning "attentive real learning, deep learning" is playful and frustrating and joyful and discouraging and exciting and sociable and private all at the same time, which is what makes it great" (in *Teaching by Heart: The Foxfire Interviews*, Sara Day Hatton, 2005, p. 21).

Paulo Freire, a great Brazilian educator, often suggested that we must teach with both our hearts and our minds, while Lev Vygotsky recognized the limitations of trying to explain 'superior thinking processes' without addressing the effects of emotion.

Nellie J. Zambrana-Ortiz in Pedagogy in (E)Motion suggests that "emotions colour our ideas, move the reason, and stretch cognition." She says, "Emotions are related to body as well as mind. There is no cognition without emotions, or emotions outside the limits of a cognitive experience, and progressive explanations of human learning and development must take into consideration the fusion of both."

Antonio Damasio, a great neuroscientist, has researched this phenomenon extensively in recent years and has discovered that emotions are absolutely necessary in the decision-making process. He describes them as the "engine of the limbic system" – our "emotional brain."

Priscilla Vail in her article "The Role of Emotions in Learning," says 'Emotion is an on/off switch for learning...the emotional brain, the limbic system, has the power to open or close access to learning, memory, and the ability to make connections.' Skillen concludes "*mesmerisation trumps memorisation*". When students are passionately engaged in their learning – when they are mesmerised by their learning environment or activities – there are myriad responses in their brains making connections and building schema that simply would not occur without that passion or emotion.

¹⁶ <http://plpnetwork.com/2013/04/09/memorize-mesmerize/>

Appendix 2

Teacher pedagogical practices and dispositions

Teachers can discover and strengthen passion by¹⁷:

- listening – it is impossible to encourage or motivate students when we don't know what their passions are
- having high expectations – young people have far greater capabilities than ever before
- leveraging their professional autonomy – teachers know what learners need to equip them for their future, but often do what their told or asked
- showing vulnerability – showing students why they love a subject or topic, showing the human side and by giving students permission to do the same
- encouraging choice and agency – letting learners make choices about what they're passionate about, where their strengths lie and a voice in shaping their own learning systems
- facilitating learning beyond school – learning is no longer limited by time and space, nor is it an individual pursuit or purely between the teacher and the learner: show relevance to life outside of school
- connecting – learners to work that matters to them with other people that matter: parents, heroes, practicing professional
- changing the narrative – changing what is currently valued and rewarded: from control and standardisation to passion, and creativity.

Whatever the list of practices (and there are several lists¹⁸), these practices will require teachers to tap into the qualities that are present in every teacher – their deep personal commitment to students and their colleagues, a love of learning, reflective thinking about their practices and their commitment to professional learning and development.¹⁹

¹⁷ <http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2011/07/13/nine-tenets-of-passion-based-learning/>

¹⁸ <http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/25-ways-to-institute-passion-based-learning-in-the-classroom/>

¹⁹ <http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/mar03/vol45/num02/A-Passion-for-Learning-Begins-with-a-Spark.aspx>