

## Opinion: The Value of Changing Our Perspective on Learning



*Why do I have to go to school? It's so boring and so hard. Ugh, I hate school.* How many of us have heard these comments from our friends and classmates? I know I've heard these complaints numerous times and have also said some of these exact same words. However now when reflecting upon highschool where these complaints are commonplace, what comes to mind isn't that school is drag but rather a compelling thought. *What would it be like if students instead chose having a passion to learn?*

Being a recent highschool student, I still remember the struggles and frustrations I both experienced and heard of while learning in school. For me, these challenges peaked

during my junior year where everything felt fixated upon solely achieving two aspects: test grades and gpa. As a result, school quickly spiraled into a monotonous process. Everyday, it was the same: wake up early, walk to class, listen to something that I often felt had no relevance to my life, then return home and grind through a pile of homework.

During that year, I had teachers who couldn't control their temper and because of that they left their students unengaged. At times, I also spent hours studying and felt like no progress was being made towards understanding the material. I experienced welling doubts about whether I'd be able to juggle the amount of school work I had or even if I would be able to understand some of the complex topics. I remember feeling disappointed by several exams I studied so hard for only to receive a grade that I felt didn't reflect the effort put in at all. I remember sometimes being surrounded by students who toxically discussed grades which created an unhealthy grade focused atmosphere to other times feeling so overwhelmed with work that it left me feeling burnt out by school and desiring a break.

These were some of the challenges I remember enduring and because of these obstacles it's understandable that students turn away from the prospect of learning in school and moreover develop a negative impression of it. But despite these various experiences struggling through difficult classes and teachers, my mindset towards school positively changed, all thanks to one other student I met in life. Her words made me completely reevaluate my way of seeing school as well as reevaluate my attitude towards the

learning process in general. As a result, my life transformed for the better and I hope her words will help you too.

It was a summer evening. Warm winds washed over my skin, as I sat outside my dorm, engaged in conversation with a friend I had met a day earlier during my summer camp. After a period of time joking around and laughing, I decided to ask a follow-up question on what she had just said.

*“So Yasmin,” I started. “Other than roller coasters, what do you like to do?”*

As she paused to think, the sounds of crickets chirping and the muffled conversations of other students filled the outdoor air.

*“Well,” she smiled, taking a breath. “I love math. I LOVE physics. And I love STEM overall.”*

And it were those several words which left me in awe and changed the direction of my life. When was the last time you heard someone say these several words of *I love math* or *I love writing* or *I love some other learning subject*? For me, I can’t even remember if I *have* heard those words spoken in highschool or even before. It was so new, the prospect of someone actually enjoying simply learning for the sake of *learning*. All these years, school was the root of complaints and groans and I never heard anyone claim they loved this or that subject. It was so uncommon and nonexistent especially coming from a year of highschool where numbers such as grades, GPA, test scores, SAT scores, ACT

scores seemed to be all that mattered. Yet, Yasmin's genuine love for learning a subject was and still is the wake up call I believe students need to hear. For me, it was as if a wave had taken all my previous negative expectations and assumptions about school and washed them away. And afterwards, I began to see with fresh eyes all the possibilities of what could be. *Could I also be able to attain my own passion to learn?*

From that experience, I walked into senior year of highschool with that goal in mind and life lit up. School, before then, had felt heavily grade-oriented yet Yasmin helped me remember what learning *should be like*. The learning process shouldn't feel like being muddled underneath work, but should be fun and rewarding. The focus should be upon noticing what you as a student didn't know before to then realizing how far you've come since the beginning of class. To me, this learning shift came my senior year, and my before indifference and groans towards school became one of being enamored with the subjects. Even though the same circumstances surrounded me such as students complaining about grades and the considerable workload, I loved each of my classes such as psychology, calculus, and physics. This excitement towards learning motivated me past the typical senioritis and burn out associated with the last year of high school and with my new outlook I was able to make the most of my situation and thrive.

For students who are like my friend Yasmin, falling in love with a subject might come more naturally, whereas for others a wake up call or a simple reminder to shift the focus away from grades might be all that is needed. And for all students, I hope this piece serves to help you do that. Imagine your own life, what would it look like if you

reworked your mindset and focused on obtaining not the end result of grades, but rather the learning process. What would happen and how would your life transform?

As for what happened for me, I believe reminding other students what learning has the potential to look like would be a benefit to their life and I write this to encourage and care for other students who might be encountering a similar slump as I did in high school. Despite the challenges we might all experience going through school, from a teacher who doesn't teach the material in a way that makes sense or a difficult overwhelming course, to external pressures which prioritize our attention elsewhere, an attitude shift of choosing to focus on the process of learning rather than the product of learning is what I believe can make all the difference.

With the focus now on the process of learning, classes would become more enjoyable and fun as you intrinsically become more interested in each subject. New feelings of accomplishment would arise as you become aware of how much you did not know before to now acquiring new knowledge. And more often than not, with the focus on learning the material, grades would come as a by-product when the curiosity of learning takes over.

Envisioning this change in your own life as a student is the first step. And the next is determining how you can cultivate this passion to learn which is a personal decision you choose to make. From my own experience, I can offer some suggestions to try in building a love for learning, but the choice will still rest in your hands.

- 1) **Begin by realizing the opportunity for an education:** First, beginning with understanding the opportunity we have for an education would help us resee learning. For instance, there are students around the world who might want to pursue an education, but have barriers preventing them from the time or ability to do so. One educator in California, Jaime Escalante who was the subject of the film *Stand and Deliver* puts it this way: students in the US take learning as a punishment whereas other students in other parts of the world take learning as a privilege. For example in Syria, [too many young school girls who want to go to school to learn are barred from doing](#) so due to early marriages. Similarly in Guatemala, [many girls are unable to access or complete their education](#) due to obstacles of poverty, distance to school, early marriage and gender stereotypes that limit their educational opportunities. Moreover, numerous other [countries lack trained teachers, inadequate learning materials, makeshift classes, and poor sanitation facilities](#). And many students come to school too hungry, sick, or exhausted from work or household tasks to benefit from their lessons. But, we also don't need to look too far internationally to realize that not every student has this opportunity to spend time to sit down and learn. Other students may be working 40 hours each week on top of their academics and juggling multiple responsibilities. Thus, from recognizing our opportunity and privilege that we have in spending the time to sit down, focus, and learn, hopefully will stem an appreciation and desire to make the most of the time and opportunity we are provided.
- 2) **Frame things differently:** Drawing inspiration from my psychology teacher and the psychology concept of framing, which is impacting decision making when

something is said in different ways, we can frame an exam as rather an opportunity to show what you've learned which again shifts the focus off the grade number and onto your personal growth. Or instead of having to do homework or go to school, we can frame it as you having the opportunity to do homework and the opportunity to go to school.

- 3) **Engage with material:** What this means is to be curious. Curiosity can't be taught, but it is something that comes from within. Can you encourage curiosity about what you are learning by making connections to your own life. In other words, make it relevant to you. Ask the whys as opposed to the surface level whats: Instead of what does this mean, strive to push past and ask *why does this matter? Why does this have relevance to my life?* Can you make the material come alive for you?
- 4) **Spread work out:** A separate action that will help in cultivating a passion for learning is spreading out work and not leaving it to the last minute to cram and finish it. What cramming does is create more opportunity for feeling burnt out and by working in chunks and managing your time better, your brain can absorb material more effectively and will make school more manageable.
- 5) **Ultimately, focus on the learning.** How has your brain grown before and after? What did you NOT know before coming to class, and what do you now know? It also may be helpful to know that every time our minds encounter something challenging or a problem just beyond our current skill level, we can have comfort in knowing that [our brain is growing in the process and furthermore is physically changing in becoming "smarter" each day.](#)

While the above steps are several ideas to explore in becoming more appreciative and excited about the learning process, I also hope you try what makes it possible for you to gain your own passion to learn. Ultimately, while the way we experience learning will inevitably be influenced by our school environments and personal circumstances, I believe the choice lies in our hands as students to discover the joy and fun in learning. And through taking the initiative and being proactive, our curiosity will flourish and learning will become a process of both appreciation and enjoyment.