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Encouraging Students to Imagine the Impossible

Dreams inspire learning, according to the founders of The Future Project, a venture for social entrepreneurship in high schools

JESSICA LAHEY | JUL 23 2013, 9:30 AM ET

VIDEO

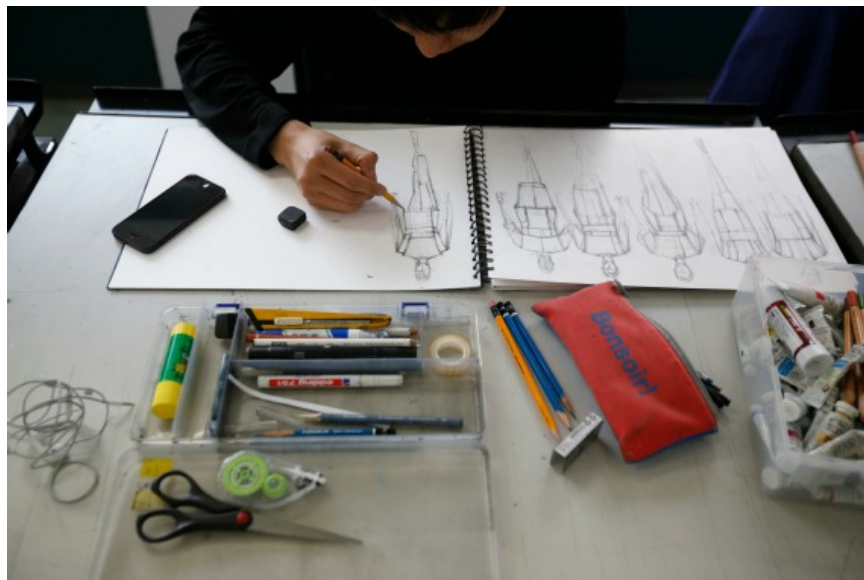


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The first time I visited the website for [The Future Project](#), I was asked to name my dream. For most people, the question, "What is your dream?" never comes up. We do what is expected of us from day to day, and get on with the business of living our lives. For most of us, dreams are just that; fantasies, relegated to sleep, idle daydreaming, and Disney movies. But the founders of The Future Project have made it their mission to ask children to name their dreams.

You might expect this would be some kind of whimsical feel-good exercise. But dreaming has never looked like such a practical, powerful step: What recent research is telling us and what The Future Project founders Kanya Balakrishna and Andrew Mangino are betting on is that dreams inspire learning - not the sort of rote, superficial learning that will help students pass state standardized tests but then disintegrate, but *real* learning that inspires deep, meaningful, life-changing mastery and purpose. Learning that inspires positive change both for the individual and their community.

The Future Project 'Dream Director' Tim Shriver says the idea for The Future Project was born out of Balakrishna and Mangino's observation that "students have become disengaged from their own education, and education policymakers are missing the point in the debate over school reform." The Future Project returns students, rather than curriculum and governance, to the center of the discussion about education. In Tim Shriver's words, "Student transformation is critical, but it's only the first step in what we hope will be a social movement and the transformation of education. When human beings are passionate and exploring their dreams, when those things become a part of a person's life, they can do the impossible." To that end founders Mangino and Balakrishna, along with a team of twenty-five staff members including so-called "Dream Directors," mentor over one thousand students in campaigns born out of that simple question, "What is your dream?"

The men and women of The Future Project aren't alone in feeling that, as American education become more rigid and assessment-driven, our society is losing a vital economic resource: creative, resourceful thinkers. The most successful innovators in the American economy, such as Google, understand the creative, intellectual, and economic value of dreaming, and have made passion projects a part of their corporate culture. Google funds dreaming in the guise of its "20 percent time" rule. Google encourages employees to spend one day a week working on projects that don't necessarily fall within their job descriptions, because Google has read the scientific research: dreaming is not a waste of time; it is an essential tool for problem solving and creativity. The freedom to dream has certainly paid off in both employee satisfaction and productivity for Google; Google was listed as number one in [CNN Money's "Best Companies to Work For"](#) 2012 list, and 50 percent of Google's products, such as [Gmail](#), [Google News](#), and [many other products](#) are the tangible (and profitable) results of time spent dreaming at Google.

Recent studies have found that the areas of the brain most involved in high-level problem-solving are engaged when we daydream, and as [one study on the brain and daydreaming](#) found, "When unoccupied by external demands, the human mind often works with particular rigor." That rigor, when motivated by passion that comes from within (so-called "intrinsic" motivation), is the key to learning. Everyone from Stanford psychologist and [Mindset](#) author [Carol Dweck](#), to the flow-theory creator [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), to my map-obsessed nine-year-old, know that passion-driven projects are where magic - not to mention true learning - happens.

Educators are slowly catching on to the magic of these dream-inspired passion projects and there's even an educational Twitter handle, [#geniushour](#), devoted to the movement. Poke around on the hashtag [#geniushour](#) and you will find classroom [junkyards for robot construction](#), [homemade hovercrafts](#), and



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Currently, my students are in the middle of the research process. Their excitement is palpable and the room feels energized even more than usual whenever 20% time rolls around. Students have greeted this opportunity with such enthusiasm that they are often clamoring for permission to work on 20% pursuits when they finish other work, and many have also chosen to investigate their topic at home. Recently, I was able to talk with parents during conferences and several of them came prepared with questions. It was as if they couldn't believe A) how excited their kids were and B) the fact that a teacher was actually allowing students to choose their own learning. All were supportive and very pleased with the level of student enthusiasm that has trickled over into the home environment.

Genius hour can be integrated in to the already crowded curriculum and be used to support those goals. According to teacher A.J. Juliani, "The best part of genius hour is that it covers the common core standards and specific skills we want our students to master. Genius Hour allows them to go above and beyond "the test" and choose their learning path."

Choice appears to be the key to the success of genius hour and other self-directed learning. When I spoke to these teachers and visited their genius hour blogs, they all recommended the same book: [Daniel Pink's Drive](#). Pink's book is dedicated to the study of what motivates human beings, and his TED talk, "[The Puzzle of Motivation](#)" has been viewed almost 6 million times. Pink points out that rewards offered for results actually *harm* performance, while projects driven by intrinsic motivation are the most successful. He posits that autonomy, mastery, and purpose are the three keys to success, and while his focus is the business world, the message rings true in education as well. The Future Project recognized the logic of Pink's argument, and today, Pink serves on their Advisory Board.

Our educational system could use a few more dreamers like Tim Shriver and Daniel Pink, people who understand that grades and test scores, the traditional carrots and sticks we employ in education, are poor substitutes for the true learning and intellectual growth that results from autonomy, mastery, and purpose. At the very least, the education reform debate, reeling from the citywide conflicts and high-profile cheating scandals that have dogged the tests-and-incentives movement, might benefit from considering what a motivation-driven approach has to offer. In The Future Project's short film, "[I am a Dreamer](#)," New York student Iltimas Doha defines a dreamer as, "a person who can look at a situation, no matter how bad or good, and say 'we can do better than this.'"



Romanticizing the Villains of the Civil War

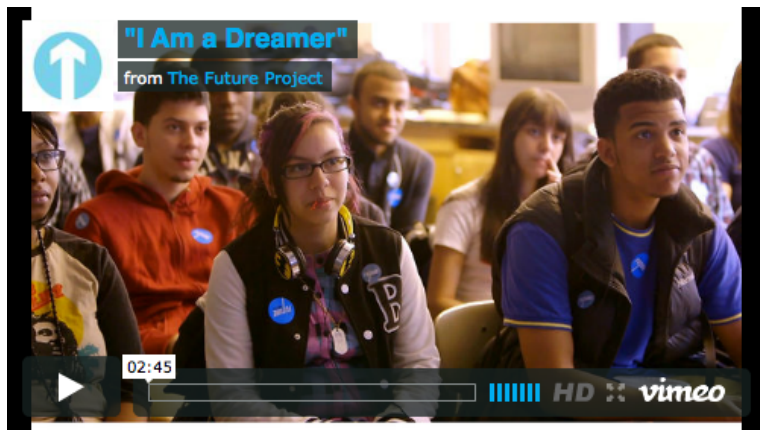
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"I Am a Dreamer" from The Future Project on Vimeo.

Doha and the other dreamers have their work cut out for them. They are going to have to look at "this," the current state of American education, and come up with a new way of educating future generations that's better than what we offer up now. If The Future Project, Daniel Pink, and Google are right, and the future of education will be the product of autonomy, mastery and purpose, we could do worse than to ask a simple question of every student that comes through the schoolhouse door: "What's *your* dream?"

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