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What Technology ISN'T Good At, Part II: Passion

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Last issue, in Part I of this essay, I offered the thought that the most important thing that technology cannot provide for teaching—and the true reason we require human teachers—is *empathy*.

For our students, though, the biggest thing that technology doesn't, and cannot provide is *passion*.

Passion—the intense interest and a desire to know and do more (an intensely biological trait)—is the most important element to promote and encourage in our students.

Passion is the students' true motivator. Once a student has a passion to know or do something—anything—the chances are excellent that he or she will do much, on their own, to follow it. It's actually hard to stop them—the best role for teachers in these cases is to get out of their students' way and subtly guide the students in directions where their passion can have the greatest positive effect on their lives.

Yet in today's schools, we often find passion in conflict with curriculum. This is because what was deemed important, until roughly the end of the twentieth century, was educational conformity: the same subjects, knowledge, curriculum, standards (and of course, behavior) for all. Any individual passion outside of these common areas was to be subjugated, relegated to the domains of "extracurricular" and "hobby."

But that age is now over. We now live in a time when technology is taking over most of the work that the "conforming" education prepared students for. We are now in an age where each person will succeed—no matter where they start—not by conforming, but rather though fine-tuning of their own individual lens on the world.

In this new environment, the greatest long-term assistance a teacher can provide to students is to help each of them find their passion, recognize it, feel supported for it, and feel worthwhile because of it. A teacher's most valuable contribution to today's students is to encourage each one to develop and direct his or her passion as far as that person is

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capable. The fact that passion is sometimes hidden from a student's own consciousness, or that passion may change several times over the course of an education, are only challenges along the way.

To do this, of course, teachers have to know what their students' passions are. And unfortunately, most don't, because teachers rarely ask. They weren't taught to, because in a "conforming" world, this was unnecessary. Now not knowing is a real barrier to teaching, learning and student success.

For once teachers do get this information, much of the conflict between curriculum and students' passions can begin to disappear, because there are ways to teach anything and everything our kids need to learn through the lens of their individual and personal interests.

And this is a place where technology can be of great help. After generations of systematically excluding individual student passions from our classrooms, we can now use technology to systematically help bring these passions in.

What technology offers education most powerfully is a new and better way to differentiate instruction and learning: not just by speed, or learning preferences, or instructor, or even intelligence, but by passion.

Doing this, though, requires a change in perspective. While teachers think, quite rightly, that their own passion for their subject is important, and hope to inspire their students by showing that passion, a teacher's goal now must additionally be *to bring each student to the material they are teaching through each student's* own *passion*, whatever it may be.

Teachers who are able to do this—to open the eyes of each student to how a school subject relates to a passion that the student *already feels*—are able to have an enormously powerful effect. The math teacher who convinces the sports-oriented, or musically-inclined kid of the power of math to increase their capabilities the fields they love; the English teacher who feeds each student inspirational stories in the area they are passionate about (and biographies of people who have succeeded in that field), affects every student in a way that will long be remembered and appreciated.

How can technology support and encourage learning all subjects through the lens of students' individual passions? One way is to use technology to offer equivalent-level materials (texts, articles, books, videos) in all areas of potential student passion. The Internet can (although it doesn't yet today) offer instruction on any conceivable topic in every subject through the lens of any conceivable student interest. This is the needed extension of Khan Academy—not just one good lesson for every topic (that's a start) but hundreds of good ones—each with a different slant. Musically-oriented math teachers can offer each topic filled with relevant music examples. Teachers of all subjects can create and post texts, lessons and videos that relate each topic—or standard—in whatever curriculum we use, to the passion each student prefers.

The crucial expertise in teaching and education has now moved from possessing and communicating common, standardized knowledge, to helping students learn whatever is wanted and needed through passion-inspired exploration and creativity. What this requires is that teachers who already share each of those passions create such materials—something that with today's tools and templates is becoming easier to do every day.

Approaching all education and learning though the lens of individual passions is not easy, but it is something we must do for our children's future. To pull it off, we will have to continually reexamine the evolving symbiosis of technology and humans, and get the tradeoffs right. That is what I call, in my new book, "The Quest for Digital Wisdom".

The good news for all of us is that because of the need for passion—that crucial educational element that technology can't provide—to get anything accomplished, people are here to stay in education, despite our fantastic technological advances.

And that is why passion is now the element our students need most to take away from an education—along with the empathy from teachers to help them shape it and apply it to positive ends.

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