

How to Deschool Yourself for Success and Satisfaction

Most of us spent at least 15,000 hours of our childhood and adolescence being schooled before we turned 18. Now in adulthood, we may need to unlearn some of what we were taught and embrace self-education for career success and personal fulfillment.

Much of what we learned in school was dictated by others, disconnected from our own passions and proclivities. We were taught what to learn, and we learned to be taught. With self-education, we take back control of our own learning, exploring topics and skills that matter to us, free from coercion. In many ways, pursuing self-education is the difference between learning in a library and in a school. A library offers abundant resources to support our learning, including tangible and digital tools, optional classes, and helpful facilitators, but it is free from compulsion. Unlike K-12 schooling, we are not required to learn there under a legal threat of force. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *Between the World and Me*, winner of the 2015 National Book Award:

I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library was open, unending, free. (p. 48)

Granted the freedom to learn, our true talents and ambitions can begin to emerge. But first, we need to deschool ourselves and shed some of the common myths we may have internalized about learning that could get in the way of our self-education and related success:

Myth #1: Color Inside the Lines

One of the first things most of us learned as a tot when we stepped into a classroom is to color inside the lines. Follow instructions, be neat, do what everyone else does. Now as we embrace self-education and discover our full human potential, we need to do the opposite. If everyone is coloring in the lines, we should be coloring outside of them. We should be looking at opportunities for creativity, not conformity. What do we see that no one else does? Where is the market possibility there? Coloring outside the lines may be messy, but it can lead to original ideas and novel inventions that make our lives and those around us better off.

Myth #2: Ask for Permission

In school, we quickly learn to ask for permission. Obedience is heartily rewarded, and non-compliance is swiftly punished. If we want to succeed at playing the game of school, we

learn to be led. Now, as a self-directed learner with personal and professional goals, we need to be bold! If we wait around for permission to pursue those goals, we won't get anywhere. Be intrepid.

Myth #3: Be Quiet and Stay Still

This schooled expectation is getting even worse than it was when many of us were kids. We were all taught to be quiet and stay still (especially when forming those straight lines in the hallway), but today young children are increasingly being diagnosed with and medicated for ADHD when they don't keep still and remain attentive. Aside from the tragedy of medicalizing what, in many cases, is just normal childhood behavior, we become conditioned to stay passive.

But to achieve our audacious goals in adulthood, what we need more than anything is exuberance. We need to be constantly moving, constantly questioning, constantly exploring new pathways. Energy and agility are critical characteristics for achieving success in a fast-moving, always-changing world.

Myth #4: Don't Read Ahead

Remember this one? We were often given reading assignments of certain pages or paragraphs with the warning to not read ahead. Now, of course, we need to be curious instead of compliant and seize all opportunities to read ahead! Digging deeply into topics that matter to us or reading a wide variety of different materials to broaden our worldview can help us to uncover our enthusiasms and crystallize our goals.

Myth #5. Winners Never Quit

One of the more pervasive myths we hang onto from childhood is the belief that we shouldn't quit. Yet, some of the most successful people are those who stopped wasting their time and energy in jobs or activities that were not meaningful to them. As Rich Karlgaard, the longtime publisher of *Forbes*, writes in his new book *Late Bloomers*:

"How can the curious and creative, the searchers and explorers, jump off the dominant culture's conveyor belt and begin shaping our own fates?" We do it by quitting. Quit the path we're on. Quit the lousy job. Quit the class we hate. Quit the friends and associates who hurt us more than help. Quit the life we regret. (p. 148)

Myth #6. Failure Is Unacceptable

Failure can be as valuable as quitting. Contrary to what we were schooled to believe, failure is an important part of risk-taking and experimentation. If we spend our adulthood seeking only gold stars and *Good Job!* stickers, we may find only hollow rewards.

The first step in taking charge of your learning and livelihood is to shed these schooled myths and become adept at self-education. Trade conformity for creativity, obedience for curiosity, and compliance for exuberance. Don't be afraid to quit or to fail. Setting your own path requires a great deal of coloring outside the lines. Don't wait for the teacher or the buzzer to tell you when it's time to go.