

Outschool.com Takes Education Out Of Schooling

Supporting education beyond schooling is a key feature of many educational technology platforms. While some may be integrated into conventional classrooms, complementing a traditional curriculum, emerging technology is increasingly helping to separate education from schooling and catalyze new models of K-12 learning. As its name implies, Outschool.com is focused on out-of-school learning that helps families and organizations to access high-quality content in an array of subjects. Its flexibility and variety engage learners around the world and facilitate the expansion of new learning communities outside of standard schooling.

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Founded by Amir Nathoo in 2015, Outschool now offers over 10,000 live, video-enabled classes for young people ages three to 18. Connecting online in small groups with dynamic instructors, learners select content ranging from typical academic subjects to more adventurous classes such as pet trick training, forensic science, engineering with Minecraft, and wilderness survival skills.

Prices vary by topic and course length, but the introductory wilderness survival class, for example, costs \$45 for a total of three, 45-minute classes. Instructors choose to join Outschool to share their knowledge and passions, and they are publicly rated by participants, offering transparency and accountability. They undergo background checks and are then free to offer whatever courses interest them while catering to learner, and parent, demand. Teachers set their own prices and Outschool takes 30 percent of the enrollment fee.

Supporting Passion-Driven Learning

Trained as an engineer, Nathoo's inspiration for launching Outschool was tied to his own childhood experiences.

My parents were both teachers and although I had an amazing standard education in the U.K., my most impactful learning happened outside of school,

he says. In the early 1980s, Nathoo's parents bought him a computer, a BBC Micro, and he spent hours tinkering with it. "They gave me unlimited screen time," recalls Nathoo. "I loved playing computer games and I became inspired to try creating games myself."

Spotting their son's burgeoning passion for computers, Nathoo's parents found a retired economics professor who liked computer science and offered to mentor Nathoo. "That learning experience based on my interests has turned into a career in technology," he says.

When I think of the skills and learning that I use today, so much of that happens outside of school. Being a technologist and an entrepreneur, it's always been my idea to apply technology to enable more of the out-of-school learning that has been so valuable to me.

Prior to starting San Francisco-based Outschool, Nathoo worked as a project lead for Square, the payment processing company. He was intrigued by how technology-driven marketplace models such as Airbnb, Lyft, and Etsy revolutionized entire industries, and he was dissatisfied that the same level of transformation was not occurring in education.

As Nathoo began to create the Outschool digital platform, he was intentionally looking for models outside of the existing education system. "The real lightbulb moment came when I learned more about homeschooling," says Nathoo. He was introduced to this type of education from a San Francisco friend who was homeschooling her children. "There are a bunch of presumptions about homeschooling that I really didn't see among the homeschoolers in the Bay Area," says Nathoo.

I found that there was this group of people customizing and curating their kids' learning and giving them a lot more freedom than they would typically have. And they were doing it socially, hiring teachers, forming groups and creating a much more dynamic style of learner-directed education. To me, this looked like the future.

Nathoo realized that this was the learner-directed education model outside of schooling that he was seeking to support and scale. The path forward became clear: create a product that served this existing audience, build a business around it and then use this business to make the ideas of learner-directed education mainstream.

I had the belief that once other parents had seen the power of this model, at first after school and on weekends, we could cause a big change in how people saw kids learning,

he says.

Global Reach, Local Impact

With a product plan, bold vision and seed capital from Y Combinator and others in 2016, Nathoo and his team built the Outschool platform and launched the first Outschool class in 2017. Since then, more than 60,000 learners worldwide have attended Outschool classes.

During his initial days incubating the Outschool idea within California homeschooling networks, Nathoo contacted Julie Schiffman who had been actively homeschooling her children for years and was very involved in the local homeschooling community. A former public school special education teacher, Schiffman left teaching because she was distraught by what she saw as a widespread practice of over-labeling and over-medicating many children with disabilities while offering limited support to children with serious emotional and behavioral disorders.

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"It was insanely depressing and I had to leave the profession altogether in order to preserve my health," says Schiffman. She began wondering how she could help to fix the problems of conventional schooling. At first, she believed that change could come from within the system, but after she started researching alternative education models, like homeschooling, she became convinced that lasting change would need to come from outside the system, by embracing and helping to expand new and better models of education.

When Nathoo called Schiffman on the phone one day in 2015 to tell her about his Outschool idea, she was spellbound. "I had to literally sit down and stable myself," Schiffman recalls. "I fully recognized from the moment he told me what he was working on that this was the education revolution." Schiffman's children have used Outschool for some of their interest-based learning, including classes on building their own YouTube channels and video-editing. The relevant content and global reach mean that learners frequently take classes with peers and instructors all over the world, often retaining connections long after a class ends.

Outschool continues to expand, raising \$8.5 million in Series A funding from Union Square Ventures and Reach Capital earlier this year. Nathoo expects Outschool's digital platform to grow quickly, but he is also focused on helping to support co-learning communities, micro-schools, and other experimental education models.

Our goal is to provide a service to these types of in-person learning

centers so that the kids there can get access to teachers and content to pursue their interests and to fulfill their learning goals.

Schiffman is in the process of opening one of these in-person community centers in Marin County, California, where she plans to rent out space to various instructors and vendors offering a host of different classes. She has been getting advice from Nathoo on how to make her community learning model, known as Home Base, scalable and replicable, with the aim of growing to multiple locations within the next two years. Nathoo explains how Outschool can help:

Local learning centers can focus on providing a great, local, social environment while not worrying about content, and kids can access far more teachers and content globally through this combination of online and in-person learning.

Ultimately, Nathoo's vision is to make interest-based, learner-directed education a mainstream option for many more young people. He wants more children to have the opportunity he did to pursue passions outside of a conventional classroom that can ultimately lead to fulfilling lives and livelihoods. Now as a parent himself, Nathoo can relate even more personally to what parents want for their children's education and well-being. He says:

When parents realize that letting kids pursue their interests is a way to get them excited about learning and is a better way to help their kids thrive in the world, that's really powerful to see.