

Finding Meaning in Education: The Journey of Entrepreneurship, Learning, and Creativity

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Setting the Context

Recently, I helped organize and attend a small competition designed to nurture entrepreneurial thinking among young people. It was inspiring to see them confidently “selling” their ideas and aspiring to become entrepreneurs. After the event, one of the judges kept asking me, “What next?” Normally, I would welcome such a question and immediately start planning the next steps. But on that day, I felt unexpectedly uncomfortable.

Years earlier, as a PhD student in the UK, I had attended a similar program aimed at encouraging researchers and scientists to commercialize their work. It was an extraordinary experience: two days of listening to real-life entrepreneurs, financiers, and educators, followed by two more days of refining our own ideas with the guidance of mentors.

To qualify, each team needed a commercializable idea. My team’s proposal was to develop a molecule to treat celiac

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disease. We performed well, which motivated us to join two more competitions. In the final one, we were offered £4,000 to legally establish a company and begin our entrepreneurial journey. Unfortunately, my teammates declined, choosing instead lucrative positions in multinational corporations. I was very unhappy as my goal of starting up a pharmaceutical company was ruined. Was this the end of my journey—no more “what next for me?”.

The answer was no. That program taught me something profound: I did not want to be a “salary man.” I wanted to chart my own future, to work on my own terms. Entrepreneurship was the only path that allowed me to do so.

The Myth of Arrival

Psychology describes the “Myth of Arrival”—the belief that once we achieve success, wealth, or recognition, we will finally feel complete and permanently happy. In reality, we often reset our expectations and chase the next goal, a phenomenon known as the hedonic treadmill. Happiness arrives briefly, only to fade as we pursue the next milestone, the next achievement, the next dopamine fix.

A writer once told me that stories never truly end. The conclusion of a book is simply the point where the author decides to stop. As a child, I read tales that began with “Once upon a time...” and ended with “...and they lived happily ever after.” But in truth, every ending can be the beginning of another story. Goals are not ultimate destinations but pitstops along a longer journey.

Following this logic, we should not postpone happiness until after reaching some milestone. Fulfilment comes from a meaningful journey, not the destination. As John Maynard Keynes famously said, “In the long run we are all dead.” His words remind us to live and learn in the present, not defer life to tomorrow.

Redefining Success in Education

This principle is especially true in education, when learning happens in the present. If my competition were judged solely by the success of my idea, it would be considered a failure. But if measured by what I learned and how it shaped my future thinking, it was a resounding success. If its objective was to create inventions that changed the world, the competition failed. But if the goal was to create people who themselves change—and in turn influence those around them—then it was the most successful event I ever attended. Learning is not about immediate outcomes; it is about experiences that transform us along the way.

The famous Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu once said, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Every step is important in itself, and each carries an opportunity to learn.

The Nature of Creativity – Our Search for Meaning

Neuroscientist Rachel Barr argues that humans have an innate need to create. This is what distinguishes us from machines or AI. While AI may produce paintings superior to Michelangelo's or poetry rivalling Rumi's, it does so without need, emotion, or meaning. AI responds to prompts, assembles words, and generates outputs—but it does not create in the human sense.

We create not because of exams or external demands, but because creativity is an expression of our inner selves. It emerges from memory, emotion, and lived experience. True creativity is not taught; it is drawn out from the core of our being. The competition I attended revealed aspects of myself I hadn't known existed. That, to me, is the ultimate measure of success for any educational program.

Creativity in Everyday Life

Creativity can take many forms. During my youth, David Beckham was a hero. His famous “banana kick” in football was not an invention he created, but an expression of his individuality. Creativity does not always mean producing something new; it can also mean owning and expressing something in a unique way. Innovation, by contrast, is creativity that introduces novelty.

I once met someone whose teacher only realized his impact years later, when a former student approached him at dinner to express gratitude. Creativity and influence often reveal themselves long after the moment has passed. We create, without any need for immediate validation.

Living Without Justification

Life does not need justification. Work does not need to make us rich, love does not need to complete us, and creation does not need to be important to others. Life becomes a game to be enjoyed moment by moment. Philosopher Alan Watts compared this to a child at play: the child does not ask about the meaning of the game or what comes next. She simply plays, learns, and moves on—step by step.

Scientists have shown that childhood is the best time to learn, yet perhaps adults can still learn from children—especially their ability to savour experiences without demanding justification.

The best endings to a story, or even to life – are not conclusions, but invitations: to reflect, to practice, to question, and to continue the journey. The story that never ends.

What Next? An Issue of Perspective

How do we optimize learning? Learning is more about formation than just information. Information may be the goal, but its formation is the process.

Achievement or goal-driven activities produces a feeling of euphoria. This, in turn, gives us the incentive to repeat the activity or pursue something similar. However, this type of stimulus provides only a short-term feel-good sentiment. While it is a good motivator, it is not sufficient on its own. For long-term impact, we must attach meaning to whatever we do. Meaning is derived from relationships, creativity, and selfless contribution.

Goal-based learning can be useful in motivating young people to engage with knowledge. Yet, for the educator, the goal is merely a tool to encourage students to embrace the process of learning. If the educator forgets the importance of the process and focuses only on the goal, true learning will not be optimized. Perhaps the time has come for us to ask: Do we measure success only through material things—things we can see and touch?

So perhaps now I am ready to answer the question from the perspective outlined above: “What next?” I will analyze the program we conducted, refine it, and run an improved version in the future. I will also conclude the program with an invitation for participants to continue their journey of learning—and then to “let go,” as a mother eventually has to “let go” of her child.

Returning to the Beginning of the Cycle

Eighteen years after leaving the UK, I returned for a conference in London. By coincidence, the finals of the very competition I had once attended were being held at the Royal Society. I think it was its twentieth year. I requested to attend, and they welcomed me. I thanked the organizers, feeling I owed them that much although much more.

And so, I pause my story here. Whether it ends or continues is entirely up to you—and the limitless bounds of your imagination.

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