

## THE JOY OF LEARNING

*Creating a Meaningful Piece of the Human Mosaic*

**This book is written for . . .**

. . . people who believe that education should be an uplifting, life-changing proposition designed to enable the individual to think more effectively, and create and connect ideas to make greater meaning through an ever-evolving mindset that allows one to persistently flourish.

. . . people who see themselves as students—whether their formal education is unfolding in front of them today or disappearing in life's rearview mirror—people who are committed to embracing empathy and open-minded doubt in the noble pursuit of improving their world by first improving themselves.

. . . people who enjoy practicing effective thinking through brainteasers that help generate new insights and original solutions to both the whimsical puzzles within these pages as well as the far more important puzzles within their own lives.

**This book was inspired by . . .**

. . . a half-century journey through formal education that began when I was a struggling young dyslexic student, then as a tutor, instructor, scholar, professor, author, online video math semicelibrity, and university president. Today I apply all these experiences as I continue to create educational growth opportunities with the hope of lifting the lives of others.

Every aspect of our education should be viewed as offering a meaningful piece to the living mosaic that will inevitably define our self. The goal of that creative process is not the indoctrination of specific points of view, but rather becoming a truly independent and wise thinker and *making up your own mind*—that is, creating yourself.

This volume includes essays on this perspective of learning and living, on how academic institutions can change and challenge the educational status quo, and on how these philosophies and my colleagues have inspired an unusual course entitled *Effective Thinking through Creative Puzzle-Solving*. This book also allows the reader to experience personal growth by mindfully delving into the puzzles offered in that course. However, unlike traditional puzzle

books, the ultimate goal here is not to solve the puzzles but rather to practice a way of thinking through the puzzles.

Engaged participation is essential in your learning—you must have agency over your own, ongoing education. Thus, to realize the greatest impact from this tiny book, you must intentionally use the puzzles ahead as a playground in which to practice elements of effective thinking that can then be applied to all of life's challenges and opportunities.

The two chapters following the puzzles offer thought-provoking prompts and deeper insights that arise from effective thinking. However, given the unusual expectation of active engagement, those two chapters are formatted so that reading them requires unusual effort. The first is printed upside down and the second is printed as a mirror image. Those chapters hold the promise to model effective thinking in action but will have maximum utility only after you have invested the requisite time and patience to first engage with the challenges by practicing the suggested mindsets.

As in my classes, I want you independently to generate your own "A-ha!" moments of excited discovery. So please do not be deterred by the inevitable frustration generated by the puzzles themselves or the puzzling format of the two epilogues . . . they were deliberately designed to provoke greater thought.

Hence, your mission—should you decide to accept it—is not to quickly solve these classic puzzles and move on, even if you have seen similar such puzzles before, but rather to explicitly practice the templates of thinking offered herein. So look upon these puzzles—previously seen or otherwise—with a fresh mind's eye and with a goal of applying the practices of effective thinking to see everything—the foreign as well as the familiar—in novel and richer ways. That is, thinking *through* these puzzles offers an opportunity for impactful learning and personal growth—the ideal and ultimate goals of a meaningful education. *Enjoy the mindful opportunities that await.*

## The Academy

### *Making Meaning through Impactful Education*

Today we hear much talk about the economics of formal education (especially within higher education), in particular, the ever-mounting costs together with existential questions of dwindling *demand*. However, absent in the din of these debates is the basic issue of *supply*. What does formal education offer, and is that offering truly worth the investment of both time and money? In fact, it is interesting to observe that the phrase “formal education” is not even well defined.

Formal education has become a paradigm in which the goal is a diploma with (*idealistic*) Latin words embossed into an elegantly encased rectangular parchment. That certificate and the degree it implies—high school, associate, baccalaureate, and other degrees—then lead to a starting job with a starting salary. That parchment is necessary in order to cash in on that initial income and thus has devolved into today’s practical

currency for formal education. Students demand that return on investment, and faculty, administrators, parents, and the curriculum oblige. Even the language that students and instructors speak reveals this basic axiom: *I have to get this requirement out of the way. I need to get through this course.* This language reveals a sadder truth: Formal education has become an obstacle course of mostly mindless hurdles and barriers we must traverse just to land that first job.

This reality has led many individuals, from out-of-the-box entrepreneurs to legislators to students themselves, to dream of shortening the lengthy ordeal required to check off all the boxes necessary to receive that diploma. If that credential is the ultimate goal, then I offer here an efficient solution: Print out a diploma at birth and award it to the newborn right there and then—mission accomplished.

A high-impact formal education, however, should be a truly transformational experience and thus cannot be hurried. Such a mindful educational journey requires time and reflection, especially in today's age of impatience, in which information and disinformation are constantly distracting us through our personal devices. In my mind, a diploma and starting job are not the goals of one's formal education. Instead, the intellectual journey toward personal growth is the genuine goal of education. With impactful formal education, that first job is not *the thing*; the journey itself is *the thing*.

Thus, that starting job becomes just one important outgrowth of that larger, life-enhancing experience.

Moreover, the richer and more meaningful that intellectual journey, the better that initial job and the greater the opportunities for future success. We are living in an age of obsolescence in which any fixed body of skills today will become dated and perhaps useless tomorrow. The best way to flourish in your professional life is to allow yourself to flourish as your authentic self—and that requires you to explore a diverse landscape of human thought, see that panorama holistically, and then discover your genuine intellectual passions and beliefs.

One's formal education, with the correct focus and commitment, can offer this meaningful exploration into the world of knowledge and ideas. That focus cannot only involve *thinking about* a subject (which stops at the topic's edge) but needs also to include a focus on *thinking through* that subject, that is, first learning and absorbing the pathways of thinking that grew out of that study and then intentionally practicing and applying those mindsets to other areas of life to bridge ideas through a truly interconnected course of study.

But it is not enough for us to be merely presented with these opportunities; we must actively pursue them ourselves—which is neither straightforward nor comfortable. High-impact learning is often uncomfortable learning. We cannot pave over the rocky road to deeper

understanding so that the journey becomes smoother or shorter. A robust and meaningful journey cannot be a mindless checklist of things to do, cross off, and move on. Nor can that journey be a segregated and siloed collection of subjects, facts, figures, theories, algorithms, and methodologies that will, for the most part, be quickly forgotten.

The goal of a truly impactful education is to mess things up: to challenge the basic assumptions of how one views the world and one's self, and to emerge from that journey with deeper insights into both. We might arrive at our undergraduate education knowing with certainty that we want to become a lawyer. But we need to let the journey move us and discover where it leads—yes, our initial plans may be messed up, and we might become a mathematician, university president, or something else entirely. In fact, our brains are not fully physically developed as seventeen-year-old human beings, so it is problematic to be making long-term decisions for our future selves before we are even fully ourselves.

Throughout our lives, we must remain open to intellectual journeys carrying us in new and unexpected directions. The point of an impactful and meaningful education is to allow individuals to flourish, to continue to grow and thereby change. This personal change is not the disruptive type that reprograms one's DNA and makes one into someone else. Rather, it is incremental

and subtle improvements that might even be difficult to measure in the short term.

Southwestern University is artfully bucking the tide of conventional and lowered expectations in higher education and has embraced this novel commitment to the vision of impactful and meaningful formal education. With an unprecedented commitment to inquiry-based, active discovery-learning, and experiential education, we continue to craft distinctive programming that focuses on the life of the mind.

In February 2017, the Southwestern University faculty unanimously passed a new curriculum that includes a commitment to offer, in every course, intentional opportunities for students not just to think *about* the material but also to think *through* the material. By thinking through a subject, students discover the utility and power of that thinking beyond the subject itself. These different templates of thought offer different lenses through which to see the world in a richer, sharper, and more interconnected way.

Now, in every class, students are challenged to make connections between seemingly disparate areas by applying the thinking from one area to amplify their thinking in another. Perhaps the mindset honed to truly see works of art in an art history course will allow a student to see details otherwise missed within the plasma membrane of a cell viewed through a micro-

scope in a biology class. Perhaps the search for a pattern as practiced in a mathematics course will enable a student to see structure and nuance hidden within a poem studied in a literature class.

Creating connections requires practice, and the initial attempts are often modest and somewhat superficial. But first attempts should not be final attempts. Intellectual growth arises from practice and patience, and thus cannot be hurried. At Southwestern, we call this unique commitment to thinking beyond the course material and making intentional connections *Paidéia*. The ancient Greek word *Paidéia* (*paideia*) originally meant the education of the ideal member of society through what today we refer to as the *liberal arts and sciences*. At Southwestern University it is the name of the unprecedented commitment to think through the material within every course of study and connect that thinking with ideas and knowledge beyond the course itself. This practice of the mind offers lessons that last a lifetime. It is also one that can be adopted widely and applied at all levels of learning.

Today, on my campus, when students independently discover an otherwise unforeseen connection, they often exclaim, "I've just had a *Paidéia moment!*"—an exciting moment of meaning and deeper understanding. They reveal for themselves that which would otherwise have been hidden. They make the invisible visible—which is at the heart of original thought and creativity.

After actively engaging with these ways of thinking, creating, and connecting through every course of undergraduate study, students emerge from their interconnected intellectual Southwestern experience prepared to make meaning and make a difference—both within their world as well as within themselves.

I invite you to engineer your own *Paidéia moments* of discovery and always remember that with education and lifelong learning: *The journey is the thing.*

## The Course

### *A Lesson Plan for Life*

In the fall of 2015, I decided to follow Southwestern University's distinctive *Paidia* philosophy to its extreme conclusion. I created the course *Effective Thinking through Creative Puzzle-Solving*, although transcripts list it as *Effective Thinking through Creative Problem-Solving*, as employers value clever problem solvers and might not see their challenges as the puzzles they truly are. In reality, we all face puzzles every day in our lives—personal, professional, small, and existential ones. Some of them can be cast in the negative light of *problems*, but life's puzzles extend far beyond life's problems. The remainder of this book offers the opportunity for the reader to personally experience this course (with an expanded version of this course overview in the appendix).

Although this class is the most profound course I have ever taught, I playfully call it the “*Seinfeld* of the curriculum” because the course is about nothing yet

attempts to teach everything. It contains no short-term content; instead there is only a long-term goal—offering the answer to what I call The Teacher's 20-Year

**Question:** *Twenty years from today, what will my students still have with them from their experience in my class?* I hope that my students will joyfully practice mindsets that will lift their creativity, enhance their abilities to make connections, and strengthen their aptitudes to think effectively throughout their lives.

These mindsets are practiced through a sequence of puzzles, three each week: one relatively straightforward, one a bit more difficult, and one that is intended to be truly challenging. All, however, are designed to provoke thought. The ultimate goal is not to solve the riddle at hand, but rather to apply multiple practices of effective thinking to see that puzzle in as many different ways as possible.

Solving the puzzle is like receiving the diploma—it's *not the thing*. The mindful journey that led to an imaginative insight or solution is *the thing*. That journey will promote the intellectual agility to initially see features of our world one way and then apply practices of effective thinking to see those same features in a brighter light. However, moving from that natural temptation for a quick solution to an enlightened desire to embark patiently on a thoughtful journey and discover where that path leads is extremely challenging without cor-

siderable practice. These puzzles offer the practice needed to make that enlightened perspective less challenging and more natural.

And practice is the key word: As you will see in the next chapter, although many of the prompts offered to provoke effective thought initially appear straightforward, the challenge is to embrace them as one's own and incorporate them into one's patterns of creativity and everyday thought. I hope that as you move through this book and journey through your life, you too will commit to being open to new templates of thinking and modes of analysis. They hold the promise to carry you to even greater heights.

You are now invited to engage in this unique curriculum and enjoy the intellectual stimulation fostered in this class for yourself. You can explore different forms of mindfulness and practice effective thinking through the puzzles and prompts herein. Embracing the practices of an effective thinker requires individual agency and ownership. You cannot passively sit back in an entitled position and demand, “Educate me.” Instead you must intentionally generate your own opportunities to challenge and, over time, transform yourself. Your schools, teachers, professors, mentors, and even this book can play at most supporting roles in the story of your intellectual journey—you remain the central character and hero in that thoughtful adventure that continues to unfold . . . that adventure known as life.

