

Note: This is the first chapter of *Empowering Students for the Future: Using the Right Questions to Teach the Value of Passion, Success, and Failure* by Eric Yuhasz, with revisions and developmental editing by Ken Walker. Release date May 23, 2023 by Routledge.

1. How Can We Evolve Education to Create More Successful Students?

If you are searching for answers, you have come to the wrong place. Only you can provide the answers. This book is just a conduit to the right questions. Unfortunately, most of the questions you have asked thus far in life have been the wrong ones. Let's remedy that now. It is never too late to start asking yourself the right questions to cultivate success in your own life. Depending on where you are in your personal journey determines how easily these ideas can blossom. As with so many things in life, the sooner a person begins to reflect over the right ideas and concepts, the easier they can be integrated to truly redirect someone's life. Therefore, I have chosen to teach them to my students.

What proceeds are ideas that are appropriate to all, but these lessons are especially applicable to teachers. Because of this, I will present how I integrate thought-provoking questions and discussions in my classroom to nurture students' thinking about success. Thus, at first glance, it appears I am targeting teachers and students. With further examination though, I am targeting you: the reader. The person who wants to start a ripple of personal, student, or global change. The change I am referring to is a paradigm shift in the way we think about success. It is deconstructing what has always been taught or—more aptly put—what has not been taught. Also, it dives into our prior knowledge and preconceived notions around the topic of success. In its essence, the change occurs by us authentically defining what success means. That is something not currently being taught in most schools.

Regrets come from the moments in life we could have added value to ourselves but failed to do so. If that statement is even partially true, then what happens when the one institution in charge of adding value to our lives misses the mark? What happens when we trust that institution to provide for us the value needed to succeed in life, but we are left to our own devices to fill in the gaps? What happens when traditional education has failed us?

You don't have to look far for the answers to those previous questions. A survey conducted in 2018 points toward the average American only using 37 percent of what they learned in school. This survey reveals Americans desire to learn other more applicable topics in school, such as time management, how to manage emotional/mental wellbeing, and understanding credit.¹

Do you agree with that survey? Try conducting a quick inventory of what you learned in school. My guess is you could rattle off item after item of topics you learned about that have no particular value to your life outside of school. Here is just one example of something I had to learn in school that has no relevance to my life whatsoever.

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licóur
Of which vertu engendred is the flour . . .²

That is part of the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, the legendary English literature collection of twenty-four stories penned between 1387 and 1400. Yes, I had to memorize that in school and for some unearthly reason I still remember it. As your brain continues to marinate over the topic of items you learned but never used again, it is an easy transition to contemplate the things you wish you had learned. In his book, *Future Wise: Educating Our Children for a Changing World*, former Harvard University education professor Dr. David Perkins dives into this topic. He writes, “Just as educators are pushing students to build a huge reservoir of knowledge, they are also focused on having students master material, sometimes at the expense of relevance.”³

Sorting through Content

I am willing to bet you have already come to that same conclusion about education. You have sorted through what was relevant and what was not and had to somehow learn the more valuable content through living. The cost of learning through living can be very high, whether the currency is time, money, or even happiness.

If you and I can agree what we learned—or more importantly, what we didn’t learn—in school has impacted our lives, then we are on level playing ground. Now, we have the foundation to move forward, together. Before we go any further, it is imperative to know this book is not about destroying the education system. It is about helping education evolve. It is about redefining education and filling those learning gaps that have been plaguing Americans for decades. It is about adding value to the learner’s life that has been absent from most traditional school settings. Before we discover how this content can and will change the way learners view life and will propel them to living a greater, more success-filled life, there is another short self-assessment I would like you to conduct.

At first glance, this is going to seem unrelated, but I assure you it most definitely is. Think of the five closest people in your life. How many of them would you say have a growth mindset? Meaning they are always striving for improvement while not allowing the emotions of the past to dictate their future. Are you lucky enough to have one among those five who possess such a mindset? If we are the summation of our five closest friends, then do you have a growth mindset?

Please understand I am not casting judgment on you or your friends. It is not your fault or theirs. Instead, I circle back to the education system, which provides a very rigid, short-term view of success. If students begin to think outside the box in a classroom, they are typically met with opposition via the instructor. In describing her road to success and becoming the billionaire creator of the company Spanx, Sara Blakely (almost word for word) reiterates this concept. She describes how, despite sixteen years of schooling, she never learned how to think. Being an educator, recognizing this fact sends tremors through my soul.⁴

Teaching at an arts academy, the physical flexibility of the students in dance class always amazes me. There is no way they could succeed in that field without dedicated, determined, devoted routines of stretching and dance practice five, six, or even seven days a week. This is how they are able to perform at such a high level with such flexibility. For years, these students have been taught to increase their flexibility.

How great would it be if we taught them how to increase their mental flexibility in the same way? With the right instruction from you, students can discipline themselves to do just that. Why not instruct students at an early age how to be flexible of mind to reduce the likelihood of sustaining lifelong emotional injuries and direct them to a deeper understanding of success, all at the same time?

Helping Education Evolve

Using such a method means not only can we begin to help education evolve, but we can also be among rare individuals in our learners' lives who provide them with a growth mindset. And not only provide them with an example but teach them how to achieve it. Therein lies the genesis of this book: a step-by-step process of walking a learner through being reflective, mentally flexible, and forward-thinking. These are all skills that are imperative to creating a successful future in a rapidly changing world.

Although the signs of success and traits needed to obtain success are somewhat universal, success is a specialized, unique, exciting journey for the individual. This is why answering the question: "What is your definition of success?" poses such a challenge. Success cannot be genuinely defined until a person conducts a thorough self-audit.

There is one universal truth that must be accepted prior to any change, whether personal, classroom, or global. *There is no way to have authentic, life-changing, long lasting and self-improving change without first enduring a soul-searching, gut-wrenching self-reflection.* Please absorb that statement. I should warn you, acceptance of it comes with a cost. For you personally, it means revisiting your past mistakes, regrets, and moments you deem as failures. If you are an educator, it comes at the cost of investing your heart into these concepts and surrendering class time. On both accounts, the rewards are priceless and 100 percent worth going down those dark alleyways of your past or sacrificing a smidge of time devoted to your subject area. Those rewards only come amidst the iterative process of reflection.

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall . . . "

Reflection is such a fickle word. From birth we associate it with a mirror, much as the queen in *Snow White* did. For most of us that means a quick glance, coupled with a few adjustments, and we are off for the day. But to be a little bit cheesy in my wording, the deeper you reflect over the word reflection, the more it will take on new life.

To examine further, I came to education as a second career. I will reveal the full story of my past later, but for now, let's hop into this midstride. I worked as a news reporter. Yes, I was the

person standing out in the rain talking about a traffic accident. Think about what reflect means in that field: a quick glance in the side mirror of your vehicle before going live from the field, or a slightly longer glance in the mirror to make sure you look attractive to the audience. In such a fast-paced arena, “reflection” meant: how did I look? Once I finished a story, I was off to the next, with little time to reflect on the finished product.

When I landed in education, reflection took on a whole new meaning. As I progressed through the additional course work needed to make the transition to teaching, that word kept popping up repeatedly. Reflect on this. Reflect on that. I thought to myself, “Is this all teachers do? Reflect? That is so easy.” It wasn’t until I went through the process of getting my National Board Certification as a teacher that my understanding of the word “reflect” began to more fully develop.

I worked with the professor who literally wrote the book on how to pass the National Board Certification test. She sat with me and evaluated a few recorded teaching lessons I was going to submit as part of the application process. In the process, she kept pausing the video and asking me, “Well, why did you do that?” Each moment she asked that question, she wanted me to crack open the shell of my psyche and reveal my line of thinking. The majority of the time she pointed out the good instinctive things I did, which I did not realize I was doing. By deeply analyzing not just the good and the bad moments, but the “why” behind those moments, she helped to reinforce good teaching practices and release poor ones.

What Works

From that moment on, the true definition of reflection became apparent to me. It was more than a way of facing the goods, the bads, and the uglies. It was making a conscious effort to enhance the goods, eliminate the bads, and beautify the uglies. Essentially, it was a matter of routinely asking:

1. What worked well?
2. What didn’t work well?
3. What role did I play in things going well or poorly?
4. What would I do differently in the future?

As simplistic as these questions might appear, when was the last time you reflected over something and posed such questions to yourself? The journey to changing who we are and how we perform starts with a deeper understanding of who we are to begin with and what got us here. The above four questions just scratch the surface of the kind of reflection that is needed to produce a life that has endless possibilities. What decisions, actions, traumas, and events formed the way we think, feel, and live? How have we anchored current emotions to past events that we now carry with us into the future?

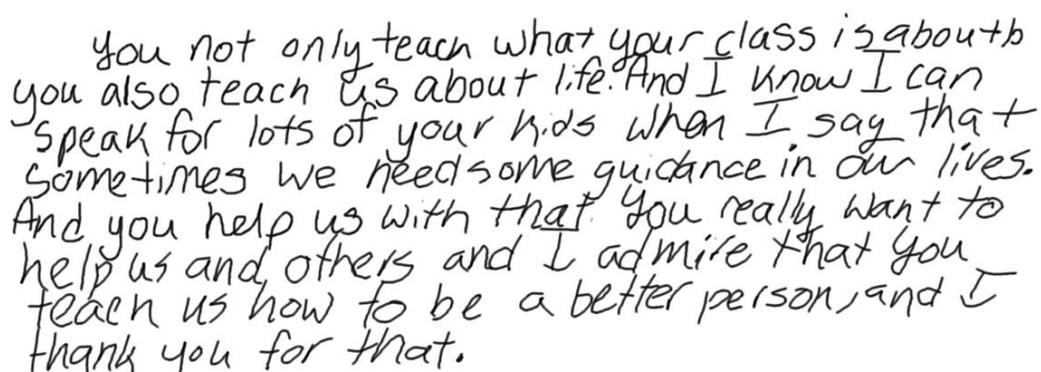
The only way we can understand ourselves is if we take the time to sort out the topic we claim to know best: self. No, I am not trying to talk in circles. We must rip back the curtain and admit who we are, how we got here, and then where we want to go. The right questions asked of ourselves, coupled with thorough reflection, can start us all on the path to a truly fulfilled life.

With age, we experience more of those actions, traumas, and events that can cause resonating emotions in our lives. It is the rigidity of our minds, which often perpetuates those thoughts and feelings from our past, that hinders us from grasping success in the present and the future. Deeply reflecting over who we are, how we got here, and who we want to be is a way of increasing our mind's range of motion. It is increasing our flexibility of thinking so when challenges of life roll our way, we are prepared to bend and not break. Imagine catching minds at an earlier age when they are more pliable. Imagine catching minds before the challenges of life detrimentally impact them. Imagine preparing those minds in such a way the challenges of life are viewed less like catastrophes and more like catalysts to a better life.

The value contained in this book is outlined in a way that teachers can easily share this information. However, when I use the term "teachers," it is in the sense of someone educating someone else. That can come in the form of teacher-to-student, parent-to-child, friend-to-friend, or any other format of facilitator of knowledge-and- learner. It might just mean you teaching you. Since I have been a teacher for over two decades, this information has been battle-tested in the classroom. I am disseminating it to you in the way I teach it to my students. Yet, you only need modest effort to apply this in a one-on-one or small group setting.

Journey of Self-Reflection

Bringing everything full circle now, presenting this information in a systematic way takes the learners on a journey through self-reflection. From that self-reflection, the learner is empowered to mold their definition of success and create a future full of endless possibilities. When your learners begin to process this information at a younger age, it will help to maintain the flexibility of their minds. With greater flexibility of mind, students are greater prepared to face the challenges of life. Through this process, we can help education evolve. However, you do not need to just take my word for it. Please read the words directly from a former student in Figure 1.1:



you not only teach what your class is about
you also teach us about life. And I know I can
speak for lots of your kids when I say that
sometimes we need some guidance in our lives.
And you help us with that you really want to
help us and others and I admire that you
teach us how to be a better person, and I
thank you for that.

Figure 1.1 This student quote captures the importance of teaching life lessons.

This student's comments and the other student quotes in these pages came to me unsolicited. At the end of the school year, the language arts department at my school has all the students write letters to adults at the school who have impacted them. The quotes I share come from those letters. But even a thousand quotes will not persuade you to move forward. You must change

your mindset and decide how much impact the ideas in this book will have on you and your learners. In a book all about asking the right questions, it begins with you asking yourself a very important one: Are you willing to deeply impact your learners' lives while redirecting your own through the process? If the answer to that is yes, then there is no limit to how much you can learn as you impact your learners. Now, let's take a look behind the curtain and get a sneak peek of what lies ahead.