

# 10 THINGS SCHOOLS GET WRONG

AND HOW WE CAN GET THEM RIGHT



“Thoughtful &  
provocative...”

*-Howard Gardner*

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# CHAPTER 10

## PURPOSE – THE PROBLEM WITH NARRATIVE

*“FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION.”*

– LOUIS SULLIVAN

Though undoubtedly an oversimplification, it wouldn't be wrong to say that architecture (especially landmark architecture) has historically been driven by the motto *Form First*. In other words, practical utility has classically played second fiddle to aesthetic considerations. This is why it's not uncommon to hear people say of St Peter's Basilica, 'It's lovely, but I wouldn't want to attend Mass there,' or of Versailles, 'It's beautiful, but I wouldn't want to live there.'

Louis Sullivan was one of the first architects to buck this trend. Working in the late 19th century when skyscrapers were new and there was much debate over how best to design these unprecedented tall structures, Sullivan argued that it was time for architects to break with tradition and forge a new identity under the motto *Form Follows Function*. In other words, he believed that the practical utility should be of primary concern and drive all aesthetic decisions. This is the reason why skyscrapers the world over look the way they do: the hive-like layout reflects the easiest and most efficient way to balance the many competing needs that arise when massive commercial buildings are constructed on compact plots of land: needs like moving people through the building, circulating air within the building, and moving waste out of the building.

Lest you worry that using function to drive form can only ever produce ugly, utilitarian architecture (as many have accused skyscrapers of being), it's worth remembering that one of Sullivan's protégés was Frank Lloyd Wright – designer of some of the world's most beautiful and celebrated buildings. Rewording his teacher's motto to read *Form Within, Outward*, Wright made it clear that beauty and style are crucially important; they simply must emerge from a deep, unambiguous deference to utility. Once it is clear how a space is to be used, then aesthetic decisions cannot help but elegantly reflect this.

A wonderful example of this philosophy is Wright's Guggenheim Art Museum in New York City. Wright built this structure, whose function is to publicly

display works of art, as a single continuous ramp. Here, an undoubtedly beautiful structure springs directly from utility: patrons need only walk in a straight line to pass every single piece of art on display in the gallery. This is unlike the Louvre in Paris, which, although undeniably gorgeous, feels more like a maze and leaves visitors with the sense that they missed more art than they saw.

Why this seemingly irrelevant digression into architecture?

Most readers will recognize that the previous 9 chapters of this book have assumed a ‘form first’ mentality: What should we be teaching? How should we be organizing the day? Which tools should we be employing? In fact, educational discussion over the past six decades has almost exclusively been concerned with issues of form in the guise of how to teach most effectively.

Perhaps this is why debates among educators have been unceasing, academic crises have proved unsolvable, and fad cycles have become overbearing. When arguing about matters of structure, there is no ultimate benchmark against which to measure merit or determine success. Without a clear foundation upon which to base thinking and debate, form itself becomes a source of pride, and educators concern themselves with defending methods and techniques.

Although it’s certainly worthwhile to debate the effectiveness of varied teaching methods, the ultimate and enduring question remains: effective for what?

Once we assume a ‘form follows function’ mentality, then we are forced to consider what precisely the function of school is. By this, I do not mean to question the function of education, which is a pervasive, lifelong, and ever-evolving endeavour. Rather, I mean to question the institution of school itself. What is the ultimate purpose of a structured K–12 and tertiary schooling system?

This is not an engineering question to be solved through technical measures; this is a metaphysical question to be solved through a deep consideration of purpose, intent, and meaning. This is not a question of *means*, but of *ends*. Only after the ultimate function of school has been made clear and explicit will we ever be able to make meaningful decisions concerning form.

This is why it’s exceedingly rare to hear about educational crises or teacher strife within military academies, art institutes, or fundamentalist religious schools.

These institutions embody an unambiguous function, and the type of human being each aims to forge is never in doubt. Educators in these schools almost certainly debate pedagogical strategies – but, with a clear function upon which to base decision-making, these debates take on the flavour of experimentation and evolution rather than rebellion and revolution.

So, what is the function of school?

## NARRATIVE

Paraphrasing educator Neil Postman, public schools do not exist to *serve* a public; they exist to *create* a public. Importantly, the answer as to what kind of public they are creating won't be found in the teaching methods employed, the homework assigned, or the uniforms worn. The answer will be found in the story used (knowingly or unknowingly) to imbue the entire endeavour with meaning.

In other words, the function of schooling is best identified by the Narrative that this institution serves. Here, I don't mean lower-case *n* narrative that takes the form of a vision statement or motto. I mean upper-case *N* Narrative that takes the form of an all-encompassing description of the world. Think Catholicism, Marxism, or Evolutionary Psychology. These Narratives do not merely enlighten; they supply the very meaning that sustains, guides, and propels adherents forward.

With such a hefty responsibility, an effective Narrative cannot simply be any old story. Instead, it must meet three key criteria:

### 1) Continuity

A Narrative organizes the past, present, and future into a coherent and consistent framework. It answers the question of how things came to be, which in turn gives clarity to the current state of the world and offers guidance as to how affairs can (and should) evolve.

### 2) Personal Identity

A Narrative makes clear the role of individual human beings in the prior and continuing evolution of the world. It outlines the elements of a 'righteous life' and supplies the paragon against which personal identity can be defined and established.

### 3) Social Organization

A Narrative arranges broader public affairs in a manner that privileges communal ideals. It establishes basic tenets of ‘civilized’ behaviour within the social sphere, and esteems collective principles that transcend the individual self.

As an example, let’s consider education at the birth of the United States. Spearheaded largely by Thomas Jefferson, public schooling in post-revolutionary America was established under a very specific and unambiguous Narrative: *the Democratic Experiment*.

Through this Narrative, history is understood as a series of struggles to maintain personal liberty in the face of increasingly tyrannical power structures. In other words, leaders left unchecked have always preyed upon the fundamental rights of their flock (*continuity*). Armed with this knowledge, students must recognize that they are inherently free individuals tasked with protecting and maintaining that freedom through the vigilant surveillance of emerging power structures. In other words, a virtuous life is marked by knowing why, when, and how to defend personal liberty against tyrants (*identity*). Thus empowered, students will embrace civic duties that safeguard the means of all citizens to check and balance the authority of power structures in all guises. In other words, citizens will develop essential norms, mores, and protocols that champion the ideal ‘all men are created equal’ (*social organization*).

From the outset, Jefferson made clear the function of education. As he unequivocally put it, ‘public schooling is the keystone in the arch of our government.’

Although the Democratic Experiment Narrative is incredibly powerful and deeply sustaining, there’s no question that it has long since faded. The idea of organizing history according to varying degrees of oppression still echoes throughout much modern political thought, but few people continue to believe that the function of public schooling is to churn out revolutionaries in the mould of Thomas Jefferson. Furthermore, it becomes abundantly clear that civic participation is no longer a driving force behind personal or collective identity in the US when you learn that nearly 50% of eligible voters did not cast a ballot in the last major election or that nearly 70% of Americans cannot name any current state representative.

Here's the rub: like nature, Narrative abhors a vacuum. When a story dies, the void left behind does not stay empty for long. Very quickly, a new story will rush in and establish a new function. This can be problematic as, without careful forethought and consideration, the new Narrative will likely be one that few people asked for, few people appreciate, and few people are even consciously aware of.

This is exactly what has happened to modern schooling in the West (and, one supposes, much of the East). A contemporary Narrative has risen and established a function that influences nearly every governmental and leadership decision. Unfortunately, most educators are unaware of (or underestimate) the immense gravity of what has occurred.

## ECONOMIC CONSUMERS

The Narrative driving modern schooling can be dubbed *Genesis of the Economic Consumer*. This Narrative has two primary maxims:

- I. You are what you do for a living.
- II. Worth is measured according to the goods you possess.

As alluded to in Chapter 3, if you ask 100 *non*-educators what the function of school is, there's a good chance the majority will provide an answer that reflects these two maxims. To the world at large, K–12 and tertiary schooling serves to prepare students for the workforce, which in turn will allow them to contribute to the national economy by purchasing goods and services.

Whether you love or loathe these maxims is irrelevant; this Narrative persists because it effectively meets all three essential criteria:

- It offers *continuity* by organizing history into a series of increasingly complex interactions based on the goods produced and traded amongst various groups. This, in turn, serves to clarify the present and guide the future according to market forces.
- It constructs *personal identity* by causing students to identify themselves as economic units tasked with achieving the 'good life' as measured by salary (such that a higher salary signifies more meaningful work). Self-worth, subsequently, is defined according to human capital: those skills, competencies, and knowledge one acquires throughout life that make him/her better suited for high-earning employment.

- It drives *social organization* according to wealth classes, and ensures personal earnings are meaningful only inasmuch as they're used to purchase goods and services from others (thereby enabling all citizens to contribute to collective wealth). Ultimately, the growth of a nation's economy takes precedence – by improving the whole, we improve the individual.

Here's the problem: if you ask 100 educators what the function of school is, there's a high probability that none will provide an answer that reflects this Narrative. It's not that teachers are indifferent to employment or career paths; it's simply that these issues rarely embody the primary passions that lead one to become a teacher. In fact, most educators will report that the function of schooling is something along the following lines: to create happy, healthy, holistic life-long learners receptive to diverse viewpoints, capable of questioning standards, and willing to adapt personal opinion. School serves to build a confident and creative society capable not only of successfully navigating the world as it is, but also of changing it for the better.

So, how is it possible that the Economic Consumer Narrative has survived for decades when most practitioners neither endorse nor particularly care for it?

Look again at that traditional educator vision outlined above: those attributes teachers strive for (tolerance, confidence, open-mindedness) are non-specific ideals that do not cohere into a clear Narrative. This collection of traits says nothing about how the pieces of the world fit together, it doesn't outline a moral or ethical structure against which to construct an identity, and it fails to clarify the function of social norms in establishing collective aspirations. Put simply, it doesn't carry enough weight to effectively push back against the prevailing Narrative.

Don't get me wrong – I am not arguing against these traits. As an educator, I work every day to empower my students with a sense of confidence and capability. However, the ultimate question of function remains. *For what purpose* are students developing confidence and capability? *To what end* are they learning to be adaptable and open-minded? Without a clear function, the ceaseless and largely depleting debate over form will continue to rage unchecked.

Luckily, we are not beholden to the Economic Consumer Narrative. Though it is certainly effective, there are three glaring cracks in its façade that leave it vulnerable to rejection and replacement.

The first crack concerns sustenance. When ‘making a living’ becomes synonymous with ‘making a life’, many students tune out and begin searching for a Narrative that provides deeper meaning. Perhaps this is why fewer than 50% of students report feeling engaged with school, and why the number of families pursuing alternative schooling increases by about 5% every year. Currently, these trends are being debated from an engineering standpoint. (Can we increase engagement by decreasing class size? Will students stay if we implement project-based learning?) However, it’s more likely that they reflect a problem of psyche precipitated by an unfulfilling Narrative.

The second crack concerns curricula. Those research projects that quantitatively analyse teaching techniques (Visible Learning, High Reliability Schools, etc.) have by and large concluded that music, exercise, and dramatic arts programmes do little to advance academic achievement. These findings have, in turn, led many schools to abandon these programmes and, instead, focus only on those fields relevant to the current job market. Oddly, proponents of the arts and athletics have often combatted this shift by trying to prove their fields can, in fact, boost employability: they have moved away from the ideal of ‘art for art’s sake’ and embraced art as a way to boost numeracy, literacy, and other human capital skills. While it may be true that playing sport can boost academic outcomes, this argument serves only to embrace an Economic Consumer Narrative that runs antithetically to the broader values of health, teamwork, and creative expression that have historically driven these fields.

The third crack concerns validity. If the Economic Consumer Narrative was well founded, then one would reasonably expect to see a strong positive correlation between a country’s academic outcomes and its economy. Although this relationship appears to exist amongst low-income countries at or below \$20,000 gross domestic product per capita, such a correlation is absent among countries that surpass this threshold. In fact, of the world’s 10 largest economies, only two ranked amongst the Top 10 in maths performance (China and Japan) and reading performance (China and Canada) according to the most recent international PISA results.

Indeed, the Economic Consumer Narrative is weakened by evident (and increasingly urgent) shortcomings that make it susceptible to replacement. This begs the question: what counter-Narratives exist that might realistically mount a challenge while simultaneously elevating educational discourse and imbuing school with a more fulfilling function?



Below I outline three, but please do not take these to be comprehensive. There are dozens of viable Narratives ripe for discussion and potential adoption.

## ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

### Planetary Stewards

*Let us be good stewards of the Earth we inherited... If we are to go on living together on this Earth, we must all be responsible for it.*

**Kofi Annan**

During the summer of 2019/2020, Australia suffered through one of the most devastating bush fire seasons on record. In just 4 months, over 18 million hectares of land burned, over 9 thousand homes and businesses were destroyed, and over 1 billion local animals were killed. Needless to say, when students returned to school following the summer break, the world was no longer the same for many of them. This fact hit home for me personally when, before storming out of class, one of my students turned to me and asked, ‘Why do I need to get a degree when there won’t even be a planet for me to practise that degree on?’

Between protests, sit-ins, and strikes, students the world over have spent the last decade clamouring for a better school Narrative; and they’ve not hidden which particular Narrative they feel is most important. Climate change is forcing us to re-evaluate nearly every human endeavour, and is quickly becoming a primary driver of public discourse. So, what are the maxims of Planetary Stewardship?

- I. The Earth is not eternal and, like all things, will some day die.
- II. Human action serves to either accelerate or delay this process.
- III. Enduring survival mandates a relationship of mutual beneficence and growth between humanity and our home.

This Narrative organizes the past according to interactions between humanity and Earth, with the defining characteristic being the impact these interactions have had on the health and sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants. This historical continuity greatly clarifies issues of the modern world and helps paint a picture of how the future can (and should) play out.

From this, a moral compass is constructed around the premise that every action has consequences. Tasked with Stewardship, identity develops according to a

recognition and refinement of behaviour in support of a personal equilibrium with the environment. Beyond this, the collective ideal of maintaining and improving the planet for future generations becomes paramount. It's not enough to merely change personal behaviours; we must ensure proper social structures and norms are established that enable all people to change behaviours (such as organically grown foods not being priced beyond the means of average consumers).

In addition to being incredibly fulfilling, this Narrative would prove powerful within schools because it neither constricts nor dictates curricula. Seeing as all actions reflect the basic humanity–environment relationship, Stewardship can serve to provide fundamental meaning to any and every field of academic study. In addition, this Narrative presents the world as dynamically evolving, which fosters a sense of openness and invites everyone to leverage their respective passions to contribute to collective betterment.

### Giant Climbers

*If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.*

**Isaac Newton**

History is a veritable graveyard of once promising theories that were discarded in the face of evolving knowledge and thought. But knowledge and thought can only ever evolve through a conscious deference to those abandoned theories of the past.

Once this virtuous cycle is recognized, then it becomes clear that the theories we hold as gospel today will also change – and herein lies the Narrative of the Giant Climbers. The maxims of this story include:

- I. No idea is everlasting: knowledge is transitory and will always evolve.
- II. Each generation is tasked with pushing beyond the ideas of the past, which requires a deep and nuanced understanding of those ideas and their genesis.
- III. The new ideas we establish today will dictate the starting point for the next generation.

This Narrative organizes the past according to a progression of theories, including the social, environmental, and psychological contexts that shaped this progression. History, then, is marked by stretches of stasis (when people fought

to maintain ideas in the face of contrary evidence) punctuated by periods of change (when a new idea bubbled forth and altered everything). Organizing the world in this way not only provides a solid foundation for modern conceptions of the world, but also indicates that these conceptions are not final.

From this, a moral compass is constructed around an awareness of and tolerance for past and present thinkers, as well as a duty to engage in meaningful personal thought. Tasked with Giant Climbing, identity builds according to the practice of confronting, understanding, and pushing back against norms and structures put in place by those who lacked modern perspective. Importantly, this gives rise to the larger ideals of intellectual liberty and cognitive collectivism. All ideas supported by deep knowledge of the past are viable, while collective utility is ultimately determined by social diffusion and acceptance.

As before, this Narrative would prove particularly powerful within schools, as it does not discriminate. Every single field – from woodworking to calculus – has a history of ideas that can be drawn upon to provide clarity and purpose to current learning. In addition, this Narrative empowers to the degree that it does not cling tightly to notions of Truth, and encourages everyone to contribute to the world of ideas through learning, deep comprehension, and meaningful thought. In the words of Walt Whitman: ‘That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.’

### Toolmakers

*Without tools [humanity] is nothing, with tools [it] is all.*

**Thomas Carlyle**

Though many animals employ devices in their daily routines, only human beings have come to define their existence according to tools. Nearly everything we interact with – from chairs to contact lenses to this very book you’re reading now – is an unnatural construct cut from the mind of humanity. Importantly, as we explored in Chapter 3, tools are far from inert and each serves to shape our perceptions, our psychologies, and our societies.

This means that tools themselves can form the basis of an organizing Narrative. When technology becomes the object of inquiry, and not merely the means through which to undertake inquiry, then we can develop a new way of understanding and engaging with the ‘world of things’ around us. The maxims of this Narrative include:

- I. Humanity makes tools. Thereupon, tools make humanity.
- II. Human evolution can be understood through the tools created and utilized.
- III. The future of humanity will be written by the tools we invent and collectively choose to employ.

This Narrative organizes the past according to development. It not only delineates the most important tools invented throughout history, but also ponders the conditions that necessitated the creation of each and, more importantly, seeks to understand how each changed our thinking about the world, its function, and our place within it. Modern tools and contemporary worldviews consequently open themselves up to examination. Ultimately, a vision of the future can be rationally constructed alongside a judicious understanding of how tools should (and should not) be used to support this vision.

From this, a moral compass is built around the obligation to decouple intentions from implements. Tasked with toolmaking, identity builds according to our capacity to evaluate the long-term impact of emerging technologies and create tools which support (rather than dictate) personal drives. Tellingly, often the only reliable way to discern the full impact of a tool is to witness how it alters social norms and organization. This means collective behaviours must be elevated above personal experience and private interests when determining the ultimate utility of emerging technologies.

Again, seeing as tools exert influence over every aspect of our physical and mental lives, this Narrative does not dictate curricula and can be used to support all subjects and fields of study. In addition, this Narrative strongly delineates between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human-made’, which can serve as a powerful foundation for personal exploration and self-actualization. Finally, it’s possible that combining the Toolmaking and Planetary Stewardship Narratives will force us to extend considerations beyond human beings and consider how tools impact the Earth itself.

### **SO NOW THEN...**

Take notice the next time a student asks, ‘Why do I need to learn this?’ The answer we collectively supply (as teachers, administrators, and parents) reflects the true function of modern schooling.

Today, the most consistent answer is, 'Because it will help you pass exams, get into a good university, secure a good job, and earn enough money to provide for your children. You want to give your future kids the best opportunities in life, don't you?'

It is difficult to fault the insidious decisions of form that many schools make in the name of this particular function, such as ability streaming, selective enrolment, high-stakes summative exams, abandoning electives, and punitive behavioural management. Though these practices may not reflect the true goals and passions of practising teachers, they perfectly serve the Economic Consumer Narrative.

The fact that people around the world are pushing back against these practices suggests that we collectively recognize something is amiss. Unfortunately, many are taking aim at the wrong targets: 'Let's decrease school hours, increase play-based learning, and supply healthy lunches.' Although these are virtuous objectives, the true source of academic disillusionment does not spring from issues of engineering.

It's time to switch our aim back to purpose. It's time to reassess the meaning of school. It's time to move beyond generic calls for confidence, creativity, and critical thinking, and instead consider what Narrative we wish to define schools into the future.

The next time a student asks, 'Why do I need to learn this?', what answer would make us proud?

Form follows function.