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The 101 on Learner-Driven Education

How Acton Academies enables kids to teach themselves in community

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER)

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Some parents are counting the days until their kids can go back to school. But others are not so sure. We've known for a long time that the standards- and test-driven approach to education just doesn't work for some kids and probably isn't optimal for any of them.

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“What if you left kids alone with resources to learn? What would happen?” asks Steve Sakanashi, a homeschooling dad to boys ages 6 and 4 and an infant. After three months of pandemic-induced distance learning, it's a question a lot of parents have begun to ask. And the answer might be that kids not only have more fun, they actually learn more. As we consider what post-pandemic education might look like, an individualized approach that gives kids more agency in their own learning may be part of the solution. It's called learner-driven education.

“It is first and foremost a philosophy that every child is on a hero's journey to change the world. A learner has the knowledge, skills and abilities – all the tools – to drive their own learning,” says Jessica Gile, director of [Acton Academy Redding](https://www.actonredding.org/) (<https://www.actonredding.org/>). Gile is referencing the mythological hero's journey, described by Joseph Campbell, in which a character ventures forth to make allies and build skills that enable them to triumph over adversity.

The Acton Academies are an affiliate network of schools operated by entrepreneurial families whose own children participate in the program. The schools provide each other with feedback and resources, but each school remains independent and unique to its own community. One thing they all have in common – there are no teachers. Instead, Acton Academies employ Socratic guides who ask questions and provide assistance but do not explain or hover. Kids of all ages are responsible to stay on task and find their own answers.

“Humans want to learn and grow – especially kids. They have an innate desire to learn. So why is our kneejerk reaction to expect that if they are given freedom, they're going to squander it?” asks Sakanashi.

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Sakanashi has worked in traditional education, and he knew it wasn't a system he wanted for his kids. "You're on a conveyor belt," he says. A Seattleite who has lived in Japan for the last five years, he first heard about learner-driven education from Mike Ma, the founder and executive director of [Creator's House](https://www.creatorshouse.org/) (<https://www.creatorshouse.org/>), an Acton Academy located in Bothell. (The name Creator's House is a word play incorporating the faith journey and the Acton ideal that everyone has a creative calling. But the school's curriculum does not include a faith component.)

To Sakanashi, the learner-driven approach Ma described makes sense. "It takes the upper bound off learning. Rather than learners reacting to instructions or following a prescribed structural process, with learner-driven education, the premise is that you allow the child to take control of their own learning and growth."

That doesn't mean it's a free-for-all.

After a Bible story and exercise, each morning Sakanashi's oldest son sets up his own academic schedule. Since he's only 6, that means choosing the order in which he will tackle academic subjects. He earns rewards and privileges if he gets through everything by lunchtime. In a typical week, he will have virtual collaborations with another family (that will join them in person when the pandemic ends), Lego projects and YouTube-inspired afternoon science experiments with his dad.

At Acton Academy Redding, students follow the model of the hero's journey by undertaking science, engineering and entrepreneurial quests in small, self-directed groups. Students also engage in writers' workshops and Socratic seminars. At Acton Academies, older students' quests often involve mentoring younger students. This approach might better prepare kids for 21st century life than standards-based education does, because it builds organizational and interpersonal skills and strengthens creative thinking in the process of teaching core academics.

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“We offer testing with an opt-out choice. Students tend to average 2–3 years ahead of their traditionally schooled peers,” says Gile. “Our learners are well prepared for university. But our focus is not on university preparedness. Our focus is, ‘Where are you going on your hero’s journey?’”

For Sakanashi, that’s one of the most important aspects of learner-driven education.

“I want my children to grow. I want them to find the purpose undergirding their life,” he explains. “I want to prepare them for that Ivy League opportunity if that’s what they choose. But more importantly, I want to prepare them to make the best decisions for themselves.”

That has always been parents’ ultimate goal, but it’s one that often gets lost in the atmosphere of high-stakes testing and competitive admissions. For a lot of people, the pandemic has been a powerful reminder that school is useless if it doesn’t prepare us to deal with life.

With most kids still stuck at home for the summer, “This is a great sandbox opportunity to try it out,” says Sakanashi. “There’s a feeling of inadequacy for parents starting out. But there are easy, abundant resources, especially at the elementary level for the 3R’s.” There are some advantages to the homeschool approach, but both Sakanashi and Gile say learner-driven education is meant to be lived in a community where kids can build their own tribe.

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Here in the Puget Sound, membership to the Creator’s House tribe begins at age 4 and extends into elementary school, although everyone finished out the school year at home. Like parents everywhere, Creator’s House studio guides are still figuring out where learning will take place in the fall – at home, in multi-family neighborhood clusters or in person at a school building.

As the pandemic plays out, the enforced homeschool experiment may lead a lot of

parents to try learner-driven education at home; join or form Acton Academies; or even to advocate for a more learner-driven approach to public education. For Ma, they are all good choices. “The learner-driven education movement is really about a shift in mindset.”

Resources:

“[Courage to Grow: How Acton Academy Turns Learning Upside Down](https://www.amazon.com/Courage-Grow-Academy-Learning-Upside/dp/0999520504/?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20) (<https://www.amazon.com/Courage-Grow-Academy-Learning-Upside/dp/0999520504/?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20>)” by Laura Sandefer

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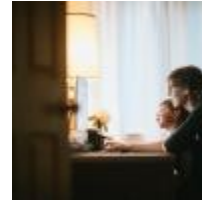
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