Nine and a 1/2 Things I Wish I Knew as a Student

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Editors’ comments: Neil Dougan gave a talk at a student conference and this is the text of his talk. It is written in a conversational style and not as an academic piece.

INTRODUCTION

I was delighted to accept an invitation from Psychology students to give a short presentation at a student-led conference in April 2016. Then I thought what on earth am I going to talk about to mainly young Psychology students? I had studied Psychology at A Level but that was back in 1743 when I was a teenager. That said I’ve always retained an interest in all things psychological due mainly to an inherent survival instinct distilled in Network Television over 24 years, where I directed and produced more dysfunctional personality types than you would encounter in the nine rings of Dante’s Inferno.

So there I was in the shower, the scene of many lightbulb moments, when it struck me. In class, I had been intuitively espousing ‘advice’ around issues of self-esteem, stickability (‘grit’) and even mindfulness so why not ‘share with the group’ all the things I wished I known when I was a student. Here, I mean the social and academic aspects of being at university, that would have made it all just a little more… enjoyable.

So enough of this ‘it’s all about me’ preamble (narcissism anyone?), please allow me to guide you through a run down of my totally non-REF2021, strictly anecdotal, subjective listing to help students. I should warn you that the following list may contain traces of inspirational quotes.

My Talk

Straight in at number 1: Try not to compare yourself with other people. Be yourself. Okay, yes, easy to say but it’s better than its’ opposite – the compulsion to constantly compare yourself with other people. Just relax, there is always someone much richer, better looking, more successful than you. Instead, just remember, you are in a one horse race with yourself. Your classmates around you are your future colleagues. Be yourself and people will, at the very least, respect you for it. As Zen Shin wrote, ‘A flower does not think of competing with the flower next to it. It just blooms’.

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At number 2, Find out who you are. Your precious years at university are not just about studying. It is a great opportunity to examine how you study, how you absorb and retain information and how you cope with the corresponding stress it can bring. Are you a supportive person? Do you like working alone or in groups? From the academic end it’s about multiple intelligences and learning styles but for you as students it is about discovering what makes you tick and, after you leave, carrying that knowledge into the rest of your life.

In the top 3, Develop your critical thinking. I am heavily involved in employability for students but I still believe in education for education’s sake. The tail doesn’t have to always wag the dog. This is your time to train your brain until it hurts with pain and then pleasure. Take the time to deconstruct the world around you, challenge paradigms, question theories. Become a clear thinker, not just a good learner. Good Old Uncle Albert Einstein said that ‘Education is not the learning of facts but training the mind to think’. So open up a Pandora’s Box of uncertainty and truthfully engage with our challenging but beautiful world. Where to start with the critical thinking malarkey, I hear you cry? Think RED – Recognise assumptions, Evaluate arguments and Draw conclusions (your own!).

At number 4: Take yourself seriously. Don’t self-sabotage. You don’t need permission from any institution to be an artist. Pretend that you have already written a book, sold a painting or published music. If you knew you had an audience waiting for your next act of creativity, wouldn’t you take your thoughts seriously and write them down? Well start doing that now. You don’t need permission to take yourself seriously, but you do need to be ready when that break comes.

But remember don’t be too cool for school or you’ll get nowhere. This is not a playground, it’s GrownUpLand where you have paid good money to join in, not sulk and pose on the sidelines. ‘If you are not willing to learn, no-one can help you. If you are determined to learn, no-one can stop you,’ Zig Ziglar. So don’t become a cliché and sabotage yourself by not trying hard enough, in case you find out you really can’t do what you want to do. You probably can and, if you can’t, then now you know and you can move on. Simple.

In a society that profits from your self doubt, liking yourself becomes a rebellious act

Caroline Caldwell.

At number 5, Read, watch, listen…then read again! Read, watch and listen until your eyes and ears ache. The biggest regret I have heard from graduates is that they didn’t realise, until it was too late, how much time they really had to consume all the books, films, theatre and music that they could have. You will never have this much time again, so dive in before the responsibilities of the world devour your precious thinking and feeling time.

Number 6 is a Growth mindset v fixed mindset. I wish I’d known about this when I went to university. Then again Carol Dweck probably wasn’t even born in the 18th Century like me. You don’t need to know about learning theories (that’s our job) to know that we need to fine tune our inner monologues and understand where they come from, be it the voices of critical parents, carers or educators. So ditch, “I’m either good at it or I’m not” and “When I fail I’m no good” and instead embrace, “When I’m frustrated, I persevere” and “When I fail, I learn”. A new way of thinking about thinking. Metacognition. Look it up. It’s time to change the inner tape, CD, MP3. Keep the good stuff and throw away all the negative things that drag you down… which brings me to number 7.

At 7 is to Surround yourself with the right people…who will help fulfil your dreams.

That applies to inside and outside of university. Admit it, not everyone was pleased that you got to uni. Everyone is happy as long as you are not doing better than they are. You may have left someone behind by moving on. You may have shaken up some friends who feel threatened by being left behind. The number 1 piece of advice which millionaires under 30 give is, surround yourself with people who will help you make your projects/dreams/ambitions become real. Remember, those people may not be your friends but people who just get you and your idea. I show my media students the Millionaires under 30 video every semester, just to relieve my own frustration.

Number 8 is to deal with your procrastination. I’ve run out of time for this one. Wanted to write about time management. I knew that would happen.

In at number 9, Everyone is anxious - you are not alone.  No-one is as confident and relaxed as they look.  Being relaxed is hard work.  I’m not writing about anxiety as a medical condition, which it can be, but rather as the all too human quality of fearing the future, carrying the past and being unable to enjoy the present.  It’s an existential problem but it’s one we wrestle with.

And for number 9 ½, Make your own lists of inspiration. You don’t need me to give you neat lists of do’s and don’ts. Life doesn’t come in Top 5 do this and Top 10 don’t do that.
Take what suits you, form your own opinions (remember number 3) and create your own unique 6, 7, 8¾ things. That is my humble number 9 and ½ to you.

I’ll leave the final word with one of the greatest poet philosophers of our time, “Find out who you are and do it on purpose” – Dolly Parton.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.