A summer art class. The United States Army. The halls of an urban elementary school. A colored high school in Apartheid-era South Africa. The streets of Philadelphia. A church basement. And three separate classrooms where it was impossible to hide.

As these stories remind us, the best learning experiences are never the easy ones. It’s only when we’re challenged beyond our usual limits that we have the possibility of discovering something new about ourselves, each other, and the larger world.

Meaningful learning can be risky, difficult, and sometimes painful. It can also be the moment when we first discover what we’re capable of, and why we can never go back to the way we were before.
When I was seventeen, I went to the Rhode Island School of Design for a summer pre-college program. I went there to see what it would be like to be an art student and to experience life away from my family for the first time. I was a fairly sheltered child, a do-gooder who thrived on pleasing the adults in my life. As a strong student, I was unaccustomed to failure or, really, even challenge. So, understandably, many things happened that summer that would qualify as powerful learning experiences. But the one that sticks with me to this day happened in the drawing class of Bo Joseph.

Bo was an almost stereotypical artist-teacher, with his exclusively black wardrobe, passionate but sparse speech, and infuriatingly mysterious instructional style. He would give us enigmatic assignments like: “Go outside. Find something. Make a...
drawing with it.” In my quest to please my instructor I would stress over the specifics of each direction, vacillating between thinking I was supposed to take them literally and searching for the higher symbolic meaning in his words. My peers did not seem so encumbered. They’d return in minutes with dog feces and popsicle sticks, creating bizarre abstract pieces that always seemed to get Bo’s nodding approval. I would sit in a corner trying to draw a bird’s nest with a broken twig and he would hardly give me the time of day. “That’s not quite it,” he would frequently say of my pieces. “I’m not seeing your inspiration yet. Keep looking.”

My anxiety about his class grew and grew with each assignment as I agonized over how to create what he wanted—and fell flat every time. I was baffled by the ease with which it seemed my colleagues were grasping Bo’s ideas and my apparent inability to create anything that would warrant even a grunt of approval.

Finally the last day of class came, and we were to work with a live model for the first time. Bo’s instructions were predictably vague: “Create.” Nearly in tears, I gave up. I found my favorite corner; pulled out a large sheet of paper, a jar of gesso, and some crusty watercolor paints; looked at the model for a few moments; and started to move the paint around the paper. For the first time all summer I lost track of the students around me, lost track of time, lost track of that tall figure in black for whom I’d failed in every artistic performance. It was just me, the model, the paint, and something in my head that was telling me what to do. “Finally,” said a voice out of nowhere. I awoke from my reverie to see a familiar shadow across the page. I looked up at Bo and cowered in anticipation of his critique. He lowered himself to my level and looked straight into my eyes. “You’ve heard your inner voice,” he said. “Now don’t you ever, ever, stop listening.”

Years later, after being a teacher myself, I know that Bo took on a brave experiment with me. I like to believe he knew it would work, but I shudder to think what I would have become without the breakthrough he inspired. He saw that my desire to please was hampering my ability to create and he pushed and pushed and pushed until I got past the quest for outside approval and found my inner self. The picture is nothing outstanding. It’s a reclining nude made of thick gesso with green and blue watercolor paint that has fallen into various scratches and recesses along the form. But I consider it the first piece of art I ever created.
In 1987, when I was a very young man, I joined the army and went to basic training at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, and then advanced individual training at the signal center in Augusta, Georgia. I did well on the Army Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and chose to train as a single-channel radio operator, which was a combat military occupational specialty that also gave me access to both the GI Bill and the Army College Fund. I was also chosen to learn International Morse Code (IMC), which was an additional skill identifier. That course was one month long and consisted of sitting at a desk wearing headphones and armed with a Morse code tapper of Vietnam War vintage. I proceeded to embark upon an amazing inner journey.

The training regime was relaxed. In the first week, we were responsible for tapping out and being able to interpret three groups, repeating what we heard in our headphones. Each group consisted of five dits and dashes (didadadidydadadyda) that represented numbers and letters. The second week we were responsible for three more, and so on, until the final group of ten that we had to learn in order to pass the course and become certified in IMC.
The first week was simple enough. I was, along with everyone else, progressing normally, and we made our quota. Then, late in the second week, something happened: I progressed from three to twelve groups in the space of fifteen minutes. The sergeant, who had been teaching there for twelve years, could not—would not—believe I'd never learned Morse code before. I remember the room was dark, our desks were side by side, and the groups blended together like a song. One moment I was listening and tapping code, understanding some and having to think to get the meanings of other letters and numbers, engaging in the reminiscence and recognition pattern that typifies all rote memorization learning methods. And then at some point I entered a mode of reverie, where the dits and dashes were only audible as echoes, as my mind blurred the distinction and what had been aural became graphical—there was an actual, physical bending of mental space as if I'd flexed a previously unknown muscle and switched over to another mode where, suddenly, there appeared a depiction of Morse code in a perfect pattern of resonance and harmonics. It was as if I'd entered a hidden space that was infinite in nature.

I remember the sensation of openness, impossibly deep within my mind, and of texture and depth beyond my current needs available and waiting for input. As I was listening and experiencing this, my fingers moved faster and I instantly knew the code, could see the code, and could utilize this precious insight to cement my understanding. Coming out of it, that unknown muscle flexed once again, leaving me drained but utterly clear, and excited beyond belief.

Watching the instructor walk over to me with a confused expression was confirmation that something strange had indeed just occurred. I've never returned to that space since. I've also never been challenged like that since. But knowing that it exists, having experienced it, is like a tantalizing glimpse into possibility, into the potential of the human mind to access capabilities that normally lie dormant and unused.

It is like this for us all, in every situation that leads to learning. Our ability to concentrate and utilize our innate gifts is either challenged or left unused, depending upon our desire. Whether it is in our secondary, postsecondary, community-oriented or personal educations, the choice to learn is always a choice, and our minds are often an underutilized resource, subject to distractions that engage our egocentric tendencies to the detriment of our inherent capabilities. A classroom setting can be either helpful or not, but real learning originates and comes, always, from within.
My primary school in an upwardly mobile neighborhood of a small western town in the early 1950s was new and clean. The floor was vinyl, the walls a pale pastel. Dim round ceiling lights produced what was said to be the correct amount of light without glare. With our desks in rows, we were arranged in alphabetical order. Paragraph by paragraph, we read aloud from basic textbooks cleaned of excitement and controversy. Work completed, we were allowed to read the faded orange biographies on a shelf at the back of the room—Louisa May Alcott, Clara Barton, Daniel Boone, George Washington Carver, Henry Clay. School was one of the places I learned the virtues of compliance and obedience, what most families expected of white, middle-class American girls in that era. My classrooms represented the values of my town. Maybe this is the reason I pay a lot of attention to the physical space in the schools I visit.

At one time I assumed that school buildings that appealed to the imagination, that sparked curiosity and intellectual rigor, were settings for the education of the wealthy, but I now know that is not true.

At Chicago’s Harold Washington Elementary School, hallways display collections of prints and lithographs. Along the primary wing hallway, “Harold Washington Boulevard,” the late Chicago mayor’s polished black Cadillac sits parked against a wall mural of a police station, fire station, and the city hall. The old building, not an
up-to-date space by any means, is Principal Dr. Sandra Lewis’s canvas for displaying the school’s values and painting high expectations. One stairwell displays framed photographs of every one of the school’s families. As the old staircases turn up three floors, the “dead” spaces are filled with dioramas, the most memorable a tribute to the black cowboy and filled with a real, though somewhat wrinkled, cactus and a mangy stuffed coyote. A prominent marquee hangs over the entrance of the Margaret Burroughs Performing Arts Theatre, the old-fashioned, two-story auditorium filled with the original 1915 black varnished wood seats screwed to the floor. It is painted pink with life-size panels of black performers lining the walls—Duke Ellington, Aretha Franklin, Andre Watts. Dr. Lewis announces, “Our school’s band, orchestra, vocal group, and dance troupe perform here.” At monthly assemblies in this same space, all students posting perfect attendance enter a lottery for a new bicycle.

Even though control and order are paramount at this school—students walking to the gym or the library in straight rows, students reciting in unison a memorized creed about values, respect, and expectations—Dr. Lewis announces, “At our school we have fun.” The working jukebox in the principal’s office makes me believe she is right. Sometimes when I’m awake in the night or driving in traffic, my mind wanders to Harold Washington Elementary School. How would I be different if I had been lucky enough to be part of such a place? How will their time at this school shape the lives of the children there? What seems sure to me is that Dr. Lewis knows that to transform the lives of her school’s children, she must fill their days with much more than basic reading and math and the drilled-down test prep that is being driven by the federal No Child Left Behind Act. At Harold Washington Elementary School, education is an act of joy.
My most memorable learning experience came as a result of being a student in Mrs. Benn’s fifth-grade classroom. Despite being in a de facto segregated school overcrowded with baby boomers, Mrs. Benn was a no-nonsense, challenging teacher who wanted students to know that they were capable of learning anything and everything because they came from a nation of people who had overcome immeasurable odds.

In Mrs. Benn’s class, we learned to sing in Latin, Italian, French, and German. She took our ragtag group of poor and working-class African American students all around the city of Philadelphia to sing concerts at nursing homes, community centers, and churches. However, more significant than the singing opportunities was Mrs. Benn’s focus on the history of our people.
Most of us thought she must have been making things up. How was it possible that a black man had earned a PhD from Harvard? How could it be that a black man had performed open-heart surgery? Who on earth would believe in a black explorer?

Mrs. Benn assured us that these were aspects of our history that we needed to know. They were powerful reminders of who we were called to be.
In a Cape Town colored high school rife with the inequalities of apartheid, Mrs. Hilda Levin, my English teacher, represented a beacon of hope and encouragement. She was a white teacher venturing each day into the colored neighborhood where I lived (apartheid’s success was evident in our tendency to think in terms of racial categories)—a courageous act in the volatile 1980s, when such teachers were compensated with danger pay.

Barely five feet tall, she made great demands on me and my classmates. She urged me to write creatively and often. She proposed thought-provoking topics—or no topic at all. Once she got to know my interests and abilities, she offered suggestions of books to read. She taught me the rules of English grammar and assorted writing styles—all of which stood me in good stead when, three years later, I entered an American university and was able to edit papers for fellow students.

Mrs. Levin’s support extended beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Amidst the many disruptions generated by student boycotts, she remained at school late into the day to assist us with our lessons. Other times she would load a bunch of us...
into her car and drive us to the University of Cape Town to get a sense of campus life. From her we clearly got the message: higher education was possible for all of us if we kept working hard. She also took us to the hospital where her husband worked as a neurosurgeon to give us a taste of career possibilities. By the time I left high school, I was ready to enter university, armed not only with the skills to read, write, and analyze, but also the conviction that I could succeed.

The oppressive political regime had worked hard to convince many of us that we were second-class citizens. Mrs. Levin’s words, actions, and support provided a different lens through which to view our world, one that stressed achievement, possibility, and hope. It is that vision that continues to sustain me and inform my continued involvement in the world of education reform. And whenever I return to Cape Town and reconnect with old high school friends, within moments we are recalling something Mrs. Levin taught us or said. Her voice lives on in my head, and her actions and caring attitude remain my yardstick for what a true educator really is.
I tell this story because I think you won’t want to use it, but you should. I went to one of the country’s best private schools and one of the best colleges. Then two years in the army. Classes in the army were the only ones I ever took that were actually designed to be effective. It’s amazing how much you can teach, and how quickly you can teach it, if you just say, “Here’s the right way to do this; follow me.” So much of modern educational theory ends up being mere sophistry, positing as it does reasons for delay, reasons for different approaches, reasons for divisions in the class.

In my experience, it’s better to decide what students need to know and then tell them. Respectfully, for sure. Entertainingly, if possible.
I grew up going to my mother’s after-school tutoring program in a church basement on the South Side of Chicago. It is the best learning community I’ve ever been a part of and the best learning experience I’ve ever had. That is high praise, because I have been lucky enough to attend extraordinary schools and to have great professional development and learning experiences as an adult.

My mother created a unique culture. Everyone was challenged to do their best, every single day. It was the ultimate in high expectations, both for individuals and the group as a whole. There were no shortcuts or excuses. We did lots of things in teams and groups. These collaborations created positive peer pressure where we encouraged one another. Folks who were strong in one thing were helping ones who were weak in something else. We had a sense of camaraderie. We were all in it together.

Everybody was both teaching and learning. Ten-year-olds taught five-year-olds, and fifteen-year-olds taught ten-year-olds. At every stage, you were expected to continue to learn and improve, but you also were expected to help others. The older students took great ownership for how the younger children were doing. At a very young age, children felt like leaders, role models, and teachers. It also had the benefit of helping students understand what they were learning because one of the best ways to learn something is to teach it or explain it to someone else.
Because everyone was both a teacher and a learner, we were constantly pushing each other’s limits. There was no valid excuse for not working hard or for misbehaving. We had clear rewards for working hard, and there was a sense of teamwork and support across age groups. Finally, there were adults in students’ lives who would stay with them for the long haul. They were there day after day, week after week, year after year, through good times and bad.

Schools should combine all of those things: passionate, caring adults; teams of students learning together by helping each other and pushing each other; students constantly both learning from others and teaching others, and having the highest expectations for everyone. If every child had the chance to have that kind of learning environment, education in this country would reach an entirely different level. It would change students’ lives.
CHAPTER ONE: Challenging

My most life-determining learning experience happened in the eleventh grade in Mrs. Eli’s class in my West Texas hometown high school. I remember the first day of the school year in her class. At first—in the brief moments before class was to start—it seemed like any other eleventh-grade class. That is, pretty normal.

Then Mrs. Eli came stomping into the classroom, angrily, did a quick visual survey, and commented that we were not the class of students she had expected. “I always
teach honors!” she exclaimed, before stomping back out of the classroom while mumbling something loudly about having to leave in order to go and talk to the principal about straightening this matter out.

Perhaps we were not supposed to take her attitude toward us personally, but the chill in the air was palpable. Humiliated, we all gazed at each other through the corners of our eyes and shrunk in our chairs. I attended a large comprehensive high school, so I knew only a handful of the students in the class. It remains the most silent beginning of any class I have ever taken in my life.

Mrs. Eli’s return entrance was just as startling as her exit. She walked back into the classroom huffing and puffing. With her mouth twisted in anger and frustration, she continued where she had left off fifteen minutes earlier. After stirring our deepest insecurities about whether any of us could possibly “make it” in an honors class, she loudly asserted, “Well! I am not going to teach you any differently than I teach my honors students!”

That day turned out to be a turning point in my life. I read my first novel. I wrote my first twelve-page term paper. I made my first visit to the local university library. I read and memorized extended passages of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and was given the opportunity to read—and fall in love with—the romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau.

My family, church, and community imbued me with a strong, positive sense of self. Where I was lacking was in academic self-esteem. Not only did I begin to genuinely cultivate a bona fide college-going identity, but this class also empowered me to imagine that I, too, could thrive in that environment. Mrs. Eli’s class liberated me from a subterranean, subaltern fear that I would never be “college material.”

Despite our rough beginning, Mrs. Eli stood by her word. She treated us equitably, and she was a good teacher to boot. She was always well prepared; she encouraged discussion; and she shared her love of literature with us.

I have always wanted to thank you, Mrs. Eli, for helping a nondescript, small-framed Mexican girl in exactly the way she needed to be helped at a crucial point in her life. Gracias!
CHAPTER ONE: Challenging

My public life began my junior year in high school. I had a frustrating stutter. Frustrating in that I was embarrassed to speak in public and my self-consciousness made my stutter worse. It also was frustrating in that my speech was fluid when talking to my friends outside of classrooms. But inside the classroom, when called upon to speak by the teacher, my stutter would be pronounced. I was an okay academic student, fairly popular with my classmates, and even though I didn’t think my classmates would make fun of me, I became almost vocally paralyzed at the thought of having to answer a question from a teacher. I am grateful for the specialists who worked with me from childhood on how to work around my stutter by learning ways to position my tongue, using easy words with soft consonants to get started, and so on. But my frustrations remained and in my first two years in high school, I found that most teachers worked out an unspoken contract with me. I would do my work, complete all my assignments, and not misbehave and they would not put me on the spot by calling on me. This held true until I had Mr. Matheson for American history.

Mr. Matheson was a handsome, smart, young teacher that the guys admired and at least some of the gals had a crush on. His way of teaching was the discussion method and he provoked students to share their perspectives about events in U.S. history. But for me, he was the one teacher I dreaded the most. Why? Because he refused to play the hidden contract game, and he frequently called on me to speak.
up in his class. I tried various experiments to get him not to do so, such as sitting in the furthest row, avoiding his gaze, or feebly raising my hand while everyone else was frantically waving theirs. My tactic of last resort would be to misbehave so he would send me out of the room.

None of these tactics worked. In every class, he would continue to call upon me. I kept thinking, Why doesn’t he leave me alone? And then after one particularly painful response to his question when I fumbled and became red in the face, he privately asked me to stay after class for a few minutes. After the class session ended, he beckoned me to the corner and said, “Carl, I want you to know that I will continue to call upon you in class. I know it isn’t easy for you, but no matter how long it takes, I and your classmates will wait until you have completed your thoughts because what you have to say is worth listening to.”

The effect of what he said made me realize that my speech disability need not interfere with what I have to offer and that I should no longer shirk speaking in class or other public settings. Shortly afterwards, I decided to run for junior class vice president and was required to give a five-minute talk to the entire junior class of four hundred students. This was my first talk to a large captive audience and, though I did have a stumble or two, my teachers and classmates gave me a nice ovation, and many individually congratulated me afterwards.

It would be a nice closing of this story to say that from that moment with Mr. Matheson I was cured from stuttering—but it isn’t true. My stutter has been reduced over the years, but to some degree has stayed throughout my life, and it continues to rear up at unexpected times. But I did become a public speaker; teaching hundreds of college students, facilitating numerous school and business meetings, and presenting at large conferences to hundreds and at times thousands of attendees.

I wish that Mr. Matheson knew that his caring refusal to leave me alone was the confidence I needed to go public.
CHAPTER ONE: Challenging

A great teacher’s lesson can give you goose bumps and, if you’re lucky, mind bumps too.

Marlene was my English teacher and choir director in high school. She was everywhere. If your jacket smelled like stale cigarette smoke, she would let you have it. In the classroom, she shined some light into your lazy, dormant, misunderstood, overactive, apathetic or whatever-other-state your adolescent mind might’ve been in, and actually got you up in front of the class to act out a scene from George Orwell’s *1984*, guiding you to draw connections between your reality and Orwell’s fiction. In choir, she led diaphragm-strengthening exercises and taught us songs in a dozen different languages, once again guiding us to draw connections.

She tended to different spaces that allowed learning, growth, and positive escape. She had high expectations and high energy. Sometimes she could be downright mean. She cared for you and took her job of helping you grow very seriously. She taught to your complexities. She had the ability to figure out what you needed and a fine-tuned ear for hearing the beauty and potential in your particular voice; if it was a roar, she showed you the merit of a whisper; if it was a whisper, she encouraged you to roar.
CHALLENGING: FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. Read How People Learn

*How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (National Academies Press, 1999) shares the findings of a two-year study conducted by the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning. In the book, a diverse coalition of scholars report that “the revolution in the study of the mind that has occurred in the last three or four decades has important implications for education” (p. 3). In particular, the book recommends creating a challenging environment via a set of teaching practices that “help people take control of their own learning” and encourage learners to “focus on sense-making, self-assessment, and reflection on what worked and what needs improving” (p. 12). Further echoing the ideas of this book, the scholars report that “learners of all ages are more motivated when they see the usefulness of what they are learning and when they can use that information to do something that has an impact on others—especially their local community” (p. 61).

2. Strengthen Your Commitment to Educational Equity

The National Equity Project (NEP) believes every child has a right to a quality education. To that end, NEP coaches people to become the powerful leaders who make good on that promise. At its Coaching for Educational Equity Institute, held twice a year in the summer for educators from across the country, NEP provides the knowledge and skills needed to build the organizational culture, learning conditions, and professional competencies needed for ensuring excellence and equity in districts, schools, classrooms, nonprofit organizations, and communities. To learn more, visit [www.bayces.org](http://www.bayces.org).

3. Equip Your Toolbox with Q.E.D.

The Q.E.D. Foundation is a multigenerational organization of adults and youth working together to create and sustain student-centered school communities.

Q.E.D. has developed and field-tested a set of tools that schools or community organizations can use to give students challenging, meaningful choices for how
and what they learn. These practices and protocols are arranged in response to the following six questions:

1. What does quality learning look like?
2. How do we design challenging, personalized learning experiences?
3. How do we assess and evaluate learning?
4. What does it mean to be college-, work-, and life-ready?
5. How do we design a learning community culture?
6. How do we measure growth and assess readiness?

To learn more and access Q.E.D.’s resources, visit qedfoundation.org.

4. Learn How to Promote Learning and Development for Students of Color

In The Dreamkeepers (Jossey-Bass, 2009), University of Wisconsin professor Gloria Ladson-Billings integrates scholarly research with the stories of eight successful teachers in a predominantly African American school district to illustrate that the “dream” of all teachers and parents—successful learning for all children—is alive and can be emulated. Similarly, Young, Gifted, and Black (Beacon Press, 2004) coauthors Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard argue that the unique social and cultural position that students of color occupy fundamentally shapes those students’ experiences of school, and that a proper understanding of the forces at work can lead to practical, powerful methods for promoting learning and growth at all levels. And Sonia Nieto’s The Light in Their Eyes (Teachers College Press, 2009), now in its tenth edition, considers recent theories, policies, and practices about the variability in student learning and culturally responsive pedagogy and examines the importance of student and teacher voice in research and practice.

5. Become Skilled in Critical Friendship

The School Reform Initiative (SRI) supports the development of professional learning communities in schools: groups of educators with a common interest in improving educator practice in order to ensure challenging learning environments, high student achievement, and equitable outcomes for all students. They do this
through the development of critical friendship focused on transformational learning and courageous conversations.

SRI members are committed to making their practice public to one another, being reflective, and holding each other accountable for meeting the needs and interests of all students. Through critical friendship, educators share resources and ideas, support each other in implementing new practices, and build relationships among colleagues characterized by mutual trust and freedom from judgment, while keeping a keen focus on issues of equity. They work most often in ongoing, collaborative groups, where they freely discuss each other’s practice with the intention of improving student learning. To learn more about SRI and access its rich list of dialogue protocols, visit www.schoolreforminitiative.org.