

A Review of Tony Wagner’s *Creating Innovators*

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Throughout the educational, political, and corporate sectors, people are paying more and more attention to cultivating young people’s innovation and creativity. In *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, Tony Wagner argues that if the U.S. wants to thrive in decades to come, raising more young innovators is crucial[1]. Parents should fulfill their role as helpful mentors using strategic ways, and the educational system must create a change to focus on each individual independently and make finding intrinsic motivation in students a primary objective.

Innovation is not just something that changes lives—it helps us make a living. There are no limitations to creativity and imagination; everyone can be innovative. Innovation only requires critical thinking and the development of problem-solving skills. Teamwork is also required, as many innovations must cross discipline boundaries.

1 Wagner’s Innovation Theory

Creating Innovators is organized into six chapters in total. In the first chapter, “A Primer on Innovation,” Wagner emphasizes the significance of innovation in society today. He analyzes a variety of interpretations of the term innovation and builds off them to create his own definition. Specifically, Wagner highlights Amabile’s study, which puts creativity and innovation at the bridge of expertise,

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motivation, and creative thinking skills. Wagner then asserts that there is a “developmental arc in [the] progression from play to passion to purpose” [1, p. 30] that ultimately leads to innovation.

Wagner carries his innovation theory to life in chapters two, three, and four by revealing play, passion, and purpose in action through his case studies of several young innovators. He first introduces Kirk Phelps in chapter 2, “a high school and a college dropout” [1, p. 31], who contributed to the development of the first Apple iPhone. Wagner then introduces readers to four different young STEM innovators in chapter three and three young social innovators in chapter four. In each example, Wagner points out how his case study subjects all had the opportunity to engage with ideas, cultivate a passion for their curiosities, and ultimately become seized by a sense of purpose that drove them onward.

In chapter 5, following his case studies of young innovators, Wagner explains what works—and what does not work—for training innovation in schools by offering five dualisms:

1. Individual achievement versus collaboration
2. Specialization versus multidisciplinary learning
3. Risk avoidance versus trial and error
4. Consuming versus creating
5. Extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation

Wagner rails against the former and advocates for the latter in each dichotomy. As exemplary learning environments that offer the best curricular structures for cultivating innovation, Wagner gives a gold star to High Tech High in California, Olin College in Massachusetts, the MIT Media Lab, the Entertainment Technology Center at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, and the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design and Bing Nursery School, both at Stanford University. According to Wagner, each of these institutions emphasizes collaborative, multidisciplinary, trial-and-error-oriented learning that concentrates its guidance on building rather than merely learning textbook knowledge stemming from intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivating factors.

The Education System

In his final chapter, Wagner discussed thoroughly the most important changes we could start from today: through family and school education.

Parents are the pillars for children to build their future selves. As seen

from many parenting examples in the book, it isn't hard to see how the parents who raised innovators focused on one key contributor: developing intrinsic motivation. They would give unquestioning support to their kids when coming to decisions, even if it seemed unconventional or risky. The parents of young innovators would allow their children to take risks and discover what is really true to them. However, what most parents struggle with right now is that they don't leave room to let their children fail. In other words, they don't like to see failures happening, so instead, they criticize their children. Although criticism might serve as extrinsic motivation, it does not help kids build up their intrinsic motivation; rather, it may make them feel forced into studying a particular subject. Parents should have confidence and courage in their kids and not be afraid to swim against the tide. By trusting their intuitions, judgments, and values, then putting the trust into their child, parents can develop a deeper understanding of being a mentor to their children and help lead them on the way to success.

Wagner also stood up against the current U.S. educational system, as he believes it is already dated. He suggested that standardized test-focused education is deeply flawed and that federally generated educational initiatives such as Obama's Race to the Top are actually "a race to mediocrity" [1, p. 151]. Educational innovation encourages teachers and students to explore, research, and use all tools to discover new things. It requires a distinctive way of looking at and solving problems. The thought process that enters it will help students develop their creativity and problem-solving skills. Using many various case study examples of individuals, Wagner carefully observed and concluded how those who get to play around with ideas freely and develop intrinsic motivation for certain things they like and turn them into passion eventually found a purpose for their endeavors and were not just doing what they were expected to do. This space free of restraints that these young innovators had was a key factor that led them to where they are today, and our educational system needs to change and do the same.

Conclusion

There are many things to like about *Creating Innovators*. Wagner is not only willing to make changes to benefit our society but he is encouraged enough to stand against our current educational system to benefit our future generation.

Furthermore, innovators, outliers, positive deviants, and a host of other creative types will find themselves relatable to the book itself as the case studies Wagner brought were convincing and real. It allows space for our imagination to foster but more importantly, it brings a change to our mindsets.

Creating Innovators is a book that not only emphasizes the necessity to promote innovation through education but embodies the spirit of innovation through a series of case studies, and it calls for change. If only Wagner's suggestions are taken into account by the general public, American students would have so much potential in succeeding and finding their purposes.

References

- [1] Tony Wagner. "*Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*". Scriber/Simon and Schuster, April 2012.