

4 Things That Ninth-Graders Can Teach You About Risk-Taking Design

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IF YOU WANT TO BE MORE CREATIVE, TAP INTO YOUR INNER TEENAGER, WRITES STUART KARTEN.

If you're like me, you discovered design as a career option later in life--in college, or even after graduating and working in another field. By that point, most of us had already lost the mindset most beneficial for creative design. I find that life teaches us some bad habits as we grow up that get in the way of our creativity. Chief among them are perfectionism and professionalism. They have their proper place and time, but such control-based habits need to be put aside during the early phases of an innovation project, when raw creative power is essential.

“THIS TYPE OF RAW HONESTY LEADS TO AUTHENTIC DESIGN THAT RESONATES.”

We start to learn these habits in school. Leading thinkers such as Ken Robinson have reported extensively on how schools kill creativity. With an emphasis on performance and mastery, they encourage perfection at the expense of the ability to experiment and possibly fail. Then comes the workplace, where corporate professionalism requires that business be dealt with rationally and dispassionately. Before I founded Karten Design, I worked as an in-

house designer in the corporate world. I quickly realized that to succeed in this type of environment you couldn't display any type of emotion. People never got mad or excited in meetings. They wore tightly controlled masks that hid their core, unpolished selves--their source of creativity.

With perfectionism and professionalism instilled in people early in life, how do we ensure that designers of the future enter the profession with the right mindset? Catch them while they're still young, before they learn many of those inhibiting rules in schools and in the workplace.

Recently, I decided to do something about it. Karten Design partnered with the **Da Vinci Design High School**, an independent charter school in the South Bay of Los Angeles with a hands-on, project-based learning model, to teach the freshman class about product design. In a project aimed at combining physics curriculum in electromagnetism with a humanities unit on social-change poetry, we presented students with a set of driving questions: What would headphones look like if they were meant to transmit a message of social change? How would they look if they were intended to appeal to a certain target audience, so they could

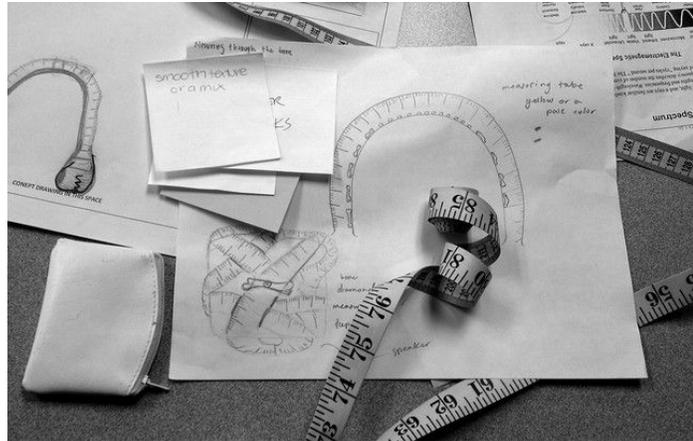
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deliver their message to the right set of ears? To answer this question, students would design and build a pair of working headphones to address those questions.

A TOTALLY FOREIGN CHALLENGE MAKES EVERYONE EQUAL

While we taught them the framework of the innovation process, these ninth-graders taught me something in return. They reminded me just how important personal passion and emotion are in successful product design, and how much working adults hold back.

Sixty-four students sat in the brightly painted physics classroom on the day we first met them, their chairs crowded around the work tables and spilling over into the aisles as two classes combined for their interdisciplinary learning session. Some students wore chunky, polished headphones around their necks like jewelry. "Music is our passion," they'd told us as we worked with a small group of students to plan this project. "It's who we are."



These 14- and 15-year-olds, all at a phase of life where they're exploring the boundaries of their own identities, understood as well as any marketing professional how headphones and the music they play can help define someone as an individual. But as freshmen in high school, most of the students had not yet experienced their first internship or summer job. In their naïveté, they approached this project from a fresh perspective--their own personal passion, which they expressed with surprising intensity.

"NONE OF THE STUDENTS HAD DESIGNED HEADPHONES BEFORE. PERHAPS THAT'S WHY THEY DID IT WELL."

None of the students had designed and made working headphones before. Perhaps that's why they did it so successfully. Giving students an audacious goal, making working headphones in six weeks out of \$1.50 worth of copper wire and found materials, put typical high achievers and more hesitant students on equally shaky footing. No one could rely on previous knowledge or success; everyone had to jump in and take creative risks if they wanted to succeed.

EMBRACE FAILURE

During our first session with students, we encouraged them to embrace failure as just another part of the creative process. The idea of "fail forward fast" was a liberating discovery that students embraced with enthusiasm for the next six weeks as they experimented with different designs and materials, playing with shells and tennis balls to transmit sound to their speakers, and bringing in adornments through flowers, feathers, and even handcuffs.

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Student Karen Escobar related how she played with many dead-end ideas to visualize age-ism from adults against teenagers before taking a walk through a garden: “A rose bush stood out to me. Roses are fragile yet strong, soft yet tough, beautiful yet dangerous; and this is the perfect definition for teenagers.” Karen’s headphones grew from this insight, employing a rose whose stem wound from one side of the headband to the other before erupting in a vibrant bloom over the right ear, symbolizing the growth that teen’s experience. I consider it a success that in their final presentations students highlighted their creative journeys--the iterations and frustrations as well as the final results.



LET YOUR GUARD DOWN

Students weren’t just willing to take creative risks. They put their emotions on the line. Many designs were inspired by personal stories as students tackled social injustices like abuse, eating disorders, bullying, and discrimination. I was amazed when, during a design review, one young woman got up to present her headphones that symbolized domestic abuse. “I know about abuse because I experienced it firsthand,” she admitted in front of her peers before telling her story. This student’s experience as someone going through abuse, and then achieving freedom, inspired a very personal and powerful metaphor of a bird escaping its cage, which she incorporated into her headphones’ design.

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I questioned whether I or my colleagues would have the bravery to bring up something so personal in a professional setting, where we try to hide the darker parts of our existence to keep up an image. But this type of raw honesty leads to authentic design that resonates with our shared experiences. It connects us where we’re the most isolated. As I’ve written before for Co.Design, I believe good design must address the beautiful and the ugly, taking into account the full spectrum of human emotions.

YOUR DISCARDS CAN BE TREASURE

Nathand Carter, whose headphones represented rising above injustice with a design inspired by the Phoenix, shared a story that I see as a perfect microcosm of the creative process. “Every time I made a headphone, they fell apart or stopped working,” he said. “But then I stepped back and looked at everything: trash, broken pieces, ripped cords scattered on the

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floor. I took broken parts, connected the severed wires, glued, taped, and attacked my way out of failure into something beautiful. My headphones came from trash and failure and became a masterpiece.”

In the end, many student works were masterpieces, and their presentation was very professional. They addressed their parents, teachers, and peers dressed in suits and skirts and spoke eloquently about electromagnetism and poetic technique. But before that, they knew how to keep their guard down, remaining open with their whole selves.

I’m more inspired than ever to embrace all of my emotion and experience, put it on the line, and turn it into a masterpiece. Our challenge as adults is to let our guard down, to let go of the controlling habits we’ve built up throughout our lives, and to think like ninth-graders. If we could work with the openness and willingness to take risks, then design would come a hell of a lot easier.

Published in Fast Company’s Co.DESIGN Blog, June 20, 2012