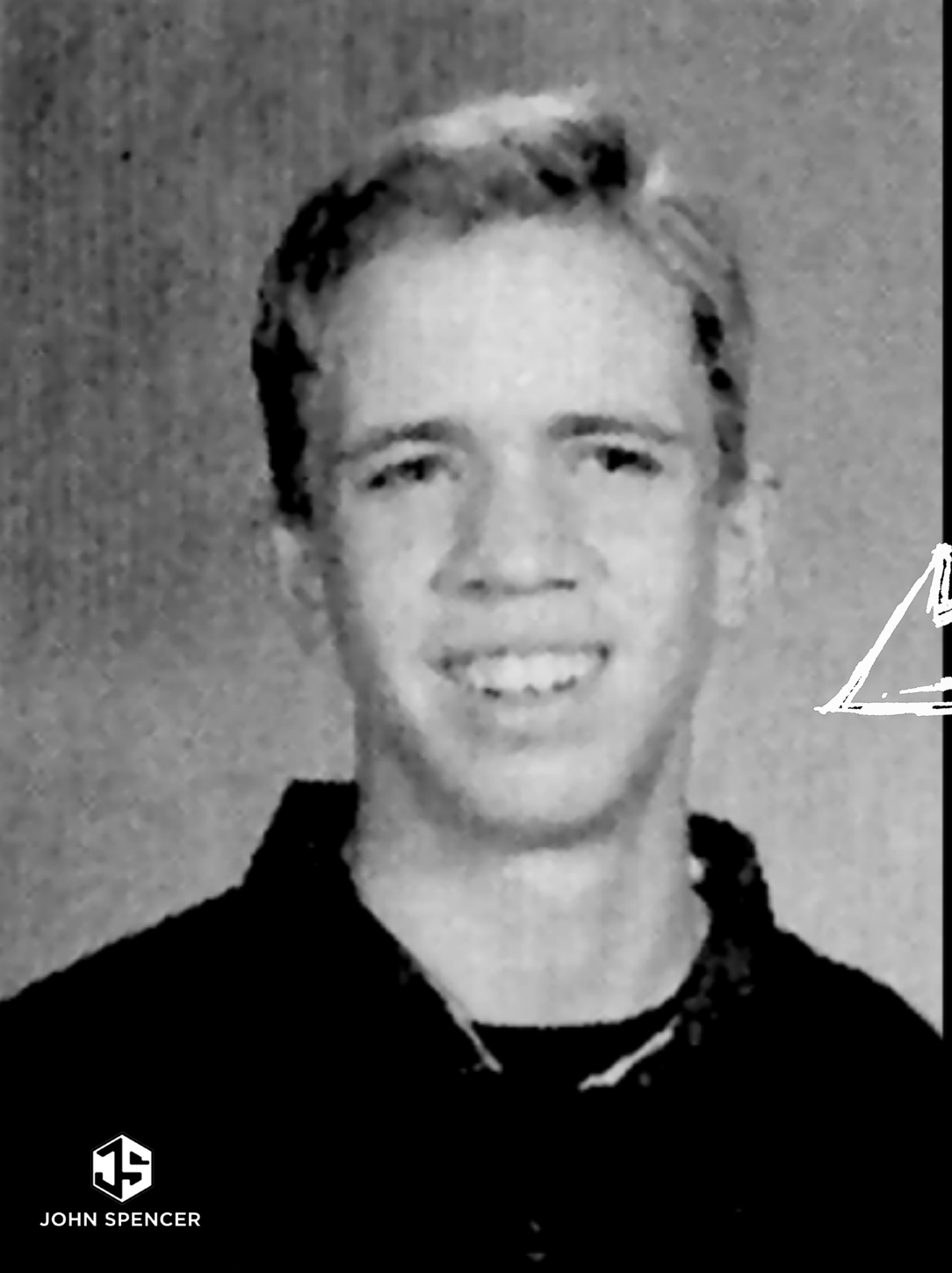
THE EPIC GUIDE TO EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS

JOHN SPENCER

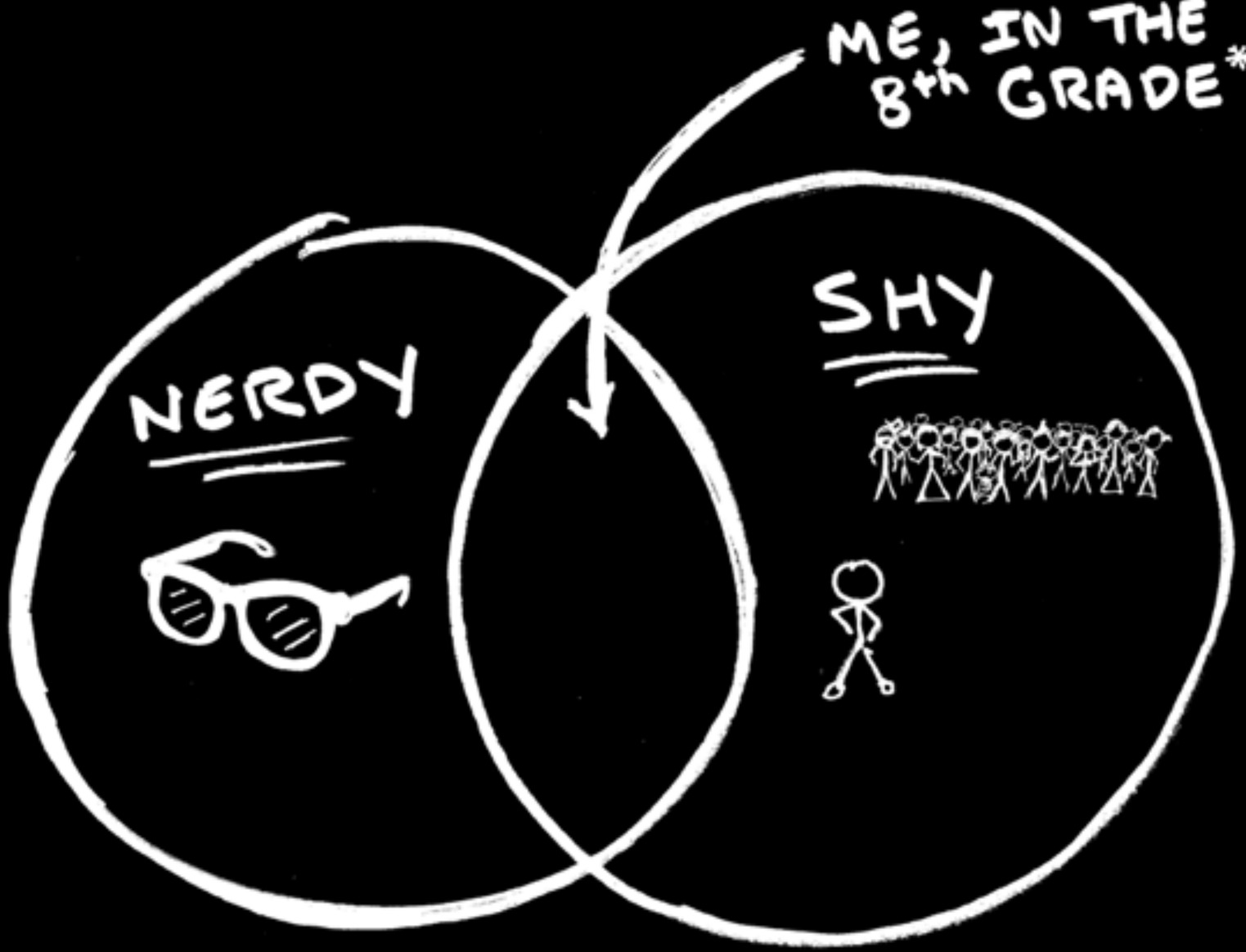
MY STORY AS A STUDENT

JOHN SPENCER



THIS WAS ME IN THE 8TH GRADE

JOHN SPENCER



JOHN SPENCER

When I was in the 8th grade, I was a combination of shy and nerdy. My whole goal was to remain invisible. I had one friend, this kid named Matt. We were two nerds in a pod. And, fortunately for me, he had perfect attendance year after year. Until, one day he was sick. I stood in the cafeteria, looking out at the sea of students, someone would invite me over. But it didn't happen. I hid in boy's restroom for the next 24 minutes.

I WAS INVISIBLE

BUT NOT TO MRS. SMOOT OR MR. DARROW

THEY KNEW ME

They took the time to see me and realize I was more than just a shy nerd. They knew I cared about social justice and baseball and history, so they invited me to do a History Day project.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

BASEBALL

HISTORY

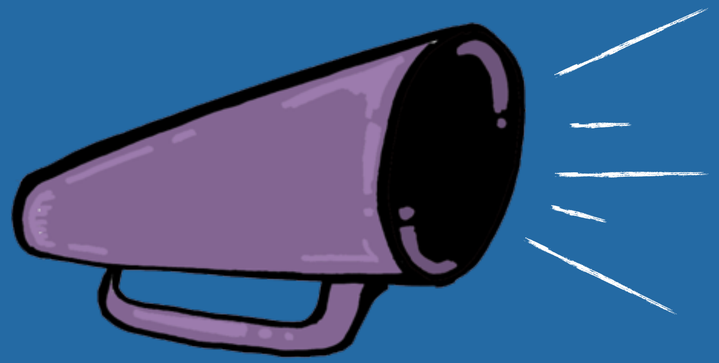
I WAS TERRIFED

Although it was fun, it was also terrifying. I had to plan the entire project and track my own progress. I had to figure out what questions to ask and where to find the answers. I had to narrow down my topic to something I cared about—in this case, Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. I wrote letters to newscasters and made phone calls to former players. I remember picking up the phone, my hands trembling, as I read aloud my pre-recorded script and waited for the stranger to respond. I eventually worked on a slide presentation.

The most nerve-wracking moment occurred when I sat in a radio studio recording my script. When I listened to my voice for the first time, I hated it.

At one point, I threw my hands up in the air. “I’m not doing this,” I said.

But she said something that stuck with me forever.



"WHEN YOU HIDE YOUR VOICE, YOU ROB THE WORLD OF YOUR CREATIVITY."

- MRS. SMOOT -

JOHN SPENCER

I ended up sharing it with my class and then in the district competition, state competition and eventually in Washington D.C.

CREATIVE THINKER AND PROBLEM-SOLVER

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Mrs. Smoot was why I became an educator. That project helped me grow into a creative thinker and problem-solver. And that experience is why I ultimately embraced project-based learning.

I BECAME A TEACHER
SO THAT MY I COULD
EMPOWER STUDENTS

BUT IT DIDN'T HAPPEN AT FIRST . . .

MY STORY AS A TEACHER

It was my (John) first year of teaching and this was supposed to be my greatest lesson of the school year. I had planned it for hours, revising every element until it looked flawless.

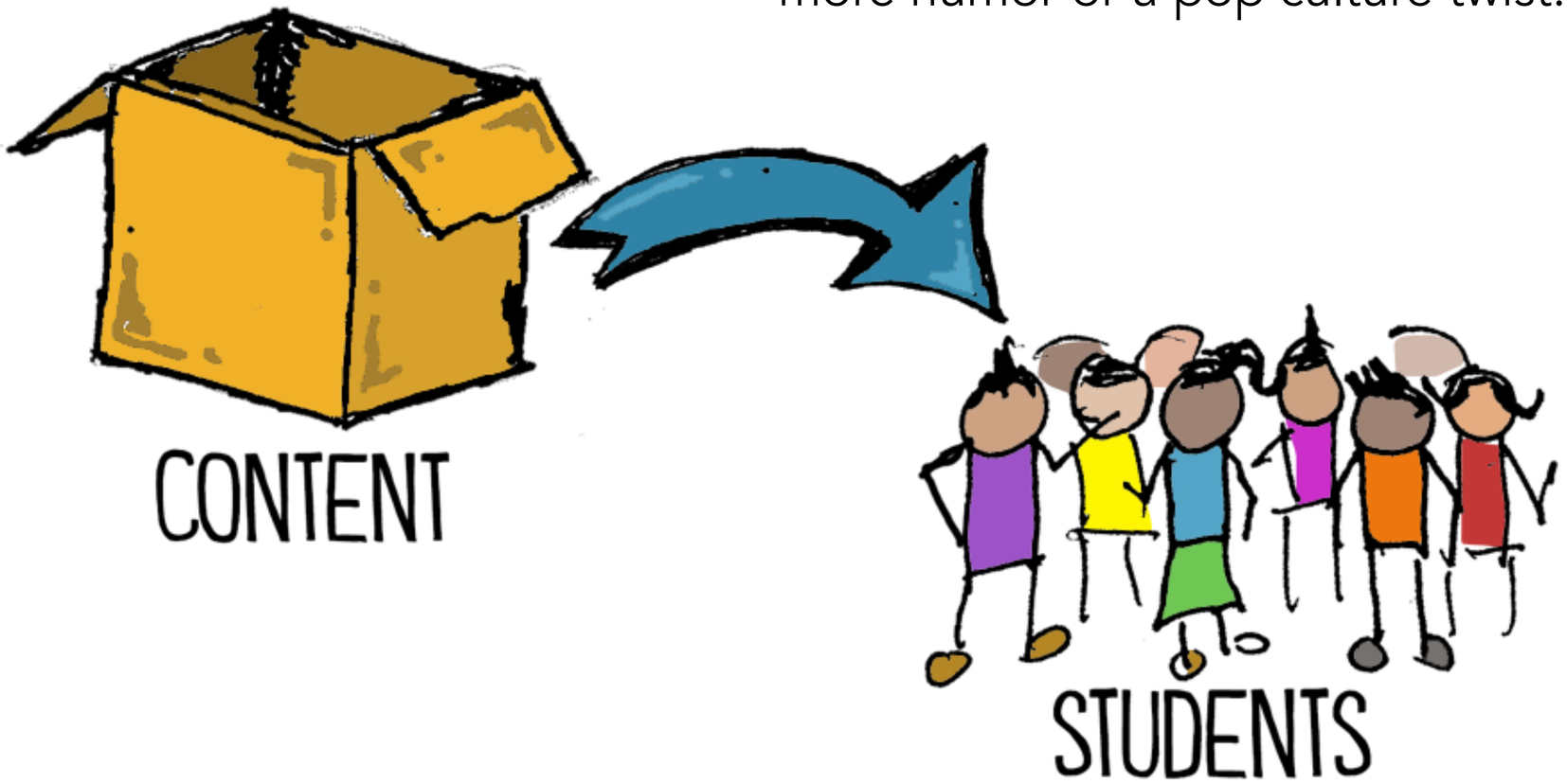
On paper.

But now, in third period, the reality sunk in. My lesson sucked. Students weren't engaged. They didn't want to create Civil War newspapers.

A few students looked engaged on the surface. They were listening, answering discussion questions, and participating. A few of them even got excited about drawing Civil War political cartoons. Still, I knew something was missing.

Students didn't own the learning.

At the time, I viewed teaching as a content delivery system. I worked tirelessly to create content that would be meaningful, fun, and challenging. When students seemed disinterested, I would try and dress it up with more humor or a pop culture twist.

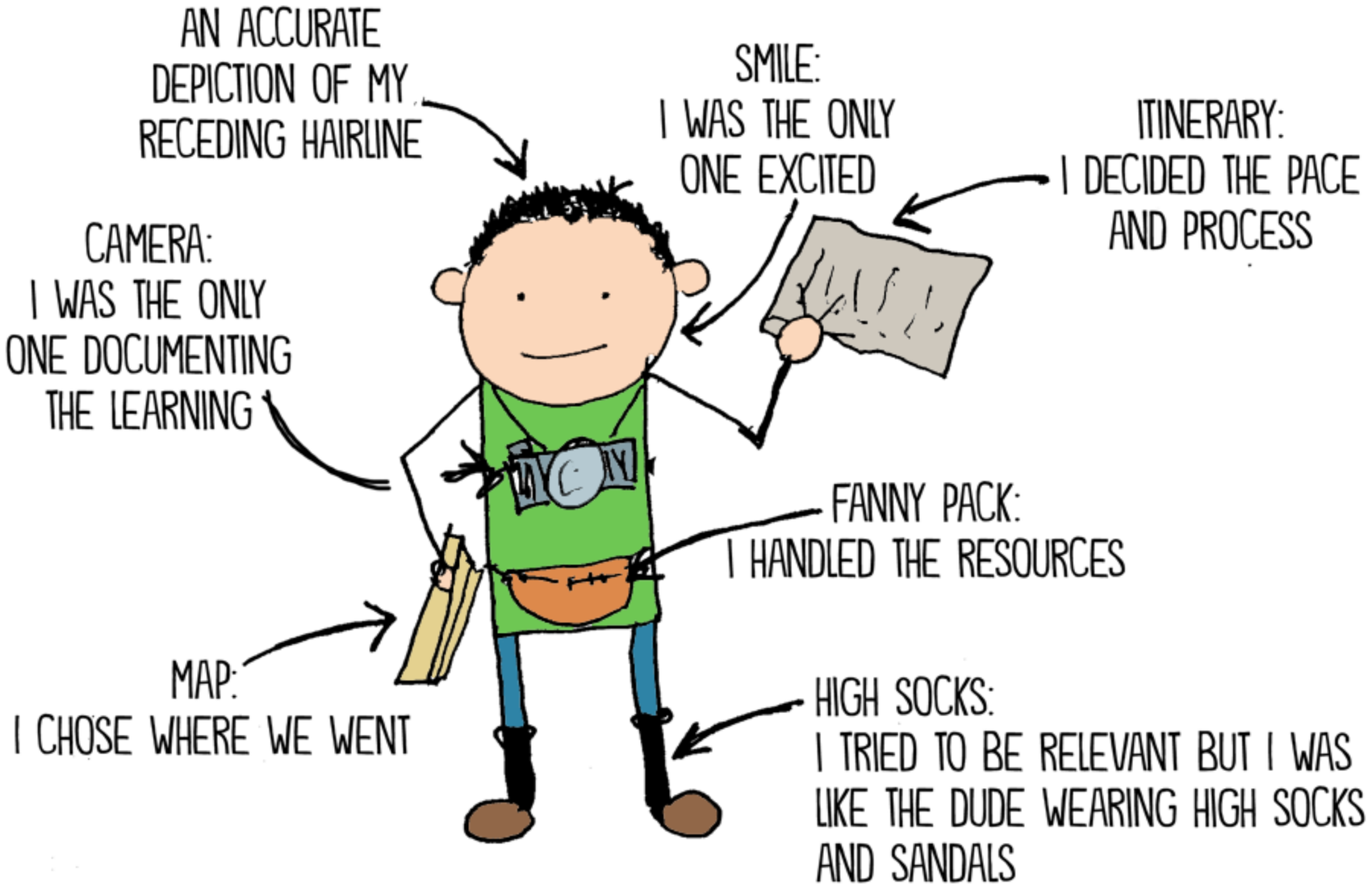


Our classroom projects looked nothing like the kinds of projects people do outside of school. I had strict rules on everything from formatting to strategies to pace to style. I handed students project papers that were essentially paint-by-number instructions. It never occurred to me that students could paint their own pictures.

I had the best of intentions. I wanted students to know what they were supposed to do. So, I provided clear instructions telling them what to do. But I left out a critical ingredient: choice. Looking back on it, I was acting like a tour guide, leading my students through the content. Each lesson was a carefully packaged presentation, where I would entertain my students and point out areas of interest. A few students might ask questions and, on a good day, we would have a discussion.

But we never left the tour bus. We stuck tightly to the route spelled out by the curriculum map, stopping every few days to take on a new standard and tackle a new objective.

I WAS A TOURIST TEACHER



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I WAS TERRIFIED

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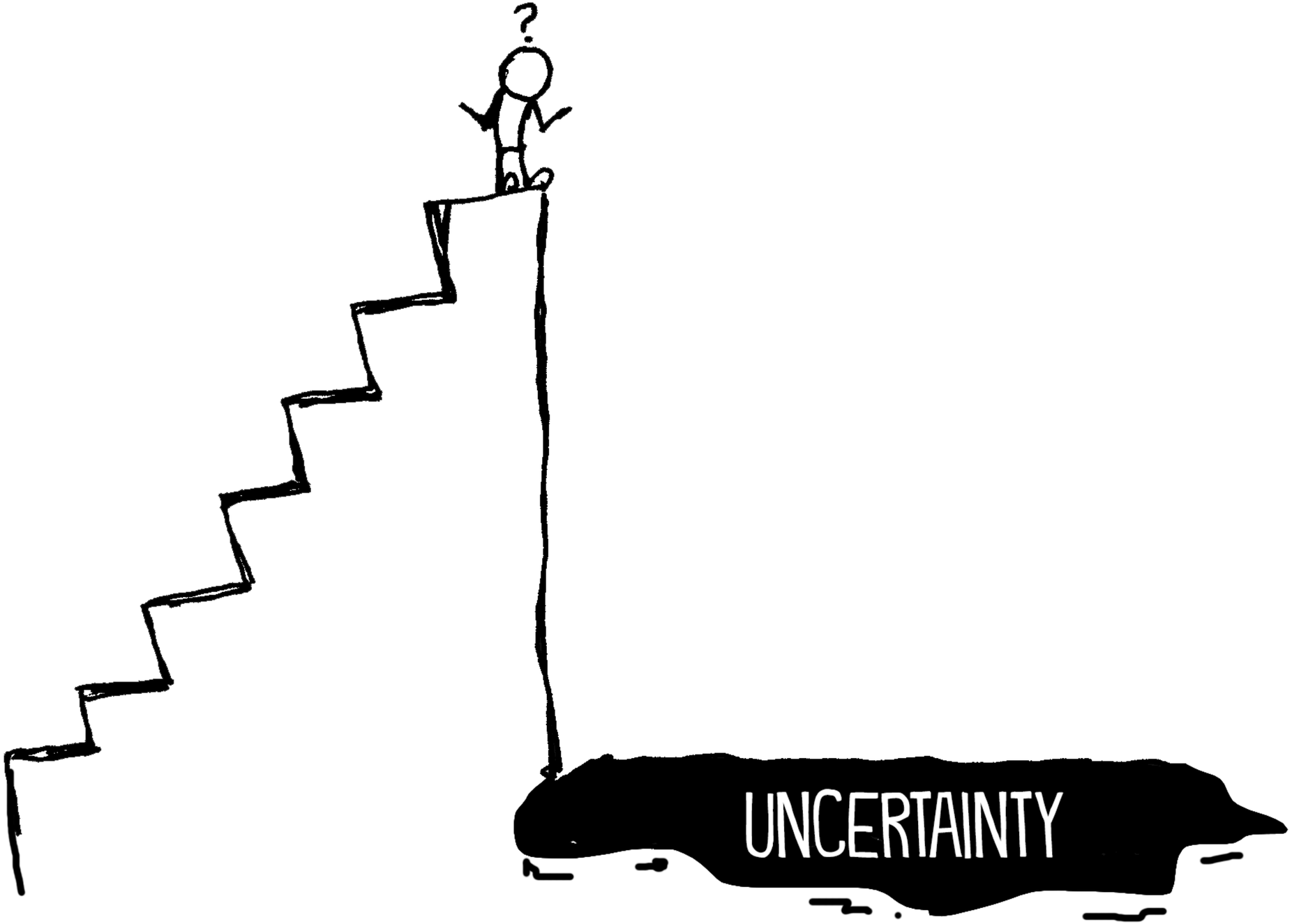

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THEN EVERYTHING CHANGED

THE DOCUMENTARY PROJECT

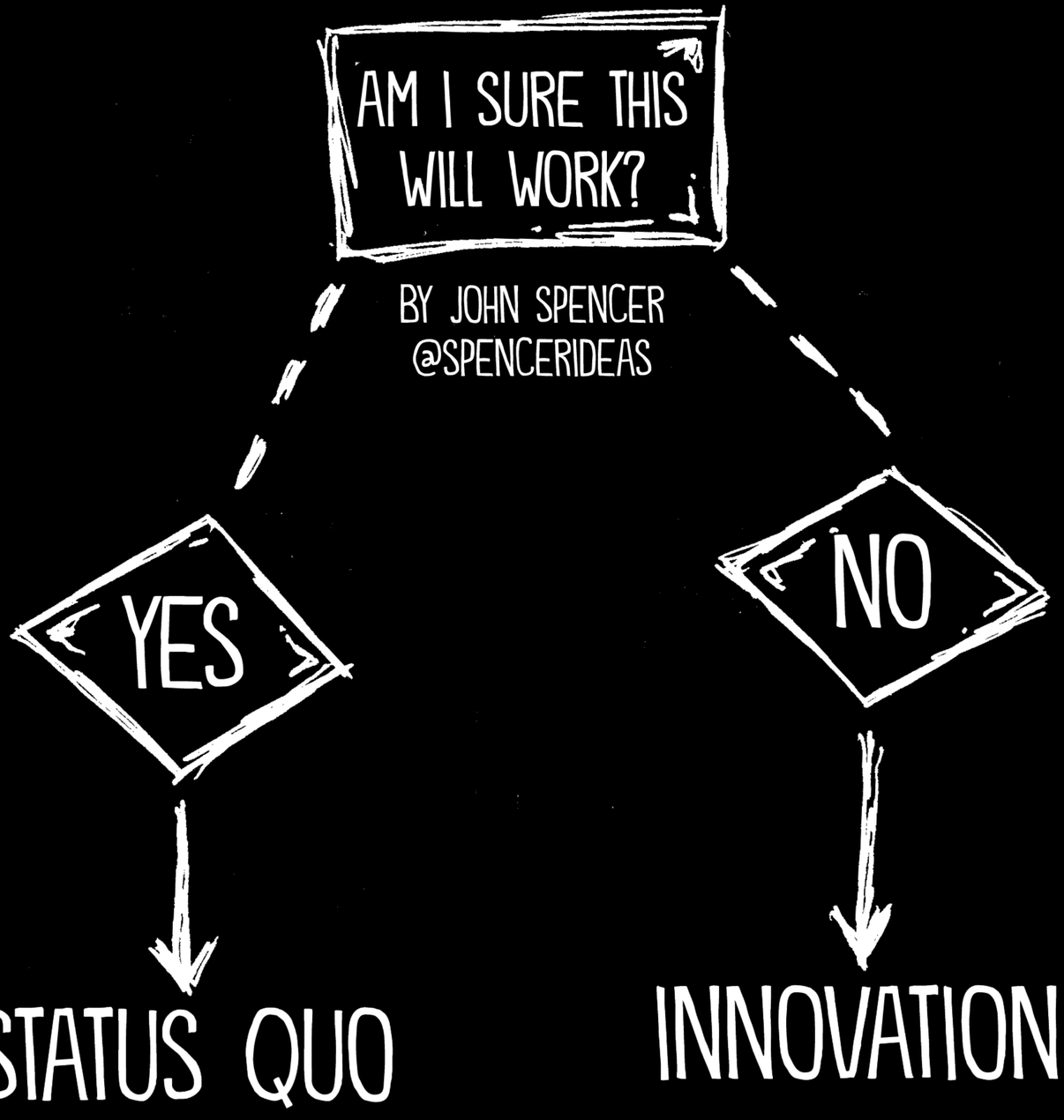
It was a “lame duck” week during state testing. I had one social studies class for three hours each day, and we didn’t have a curriculum map.

So, I asked my students a simple question, “What do you want to make?”

After a short class discussion, we landed on a documentary project about immigration. Students formed small groups and began researching the topic. What happened next was a mess. I gave mini-lessons on how to conduct interviews, how to shoot video, and how to tell a non-fiction story. I met with students one-on-one to go over how to find more credible sources. We shared scripts back and forth on a shared document.

But I was still afraid.

WHAT IF IT FAILS?


AM I SURE THIS WILL WORK?
BY JOHN SPENCER
@SPENCERIDEAS
YES
NO
STATUS QUO
INNOVATION

IT WASN'T PERFECT

I knew that there was no guarantee that it would work. But that's the the nature of innovation. The truth is, things didn't go perfectly. But things didn't go smoothly. A few students didn't finish their parts. We never launched it to a real audience. Some of my highest performing students were more frustrated and more afraid than ever before. They had never failed like this. A few kids were in tears when they couldn't get something to work.
Still, something emerged from the mess.

The secret ingredient wasn't a new maker space or a fancy studio (my students shot the videos on their cell phones). It wasn't a new program or a district initiative. No, the secret ingredient was freedom. Without the curriculum map, we were forced to go off-road. And, although the road was rocky (hmm . . . rocky road) it was also an epic adventure.

My students were different.

Students who had never turned in homework before began voluntarily shooting videos of immigrants in their neighborhoods. Students who had never asked questions in class were asking hard-hitting interview questions. Students who had once told me, “I’m not very creative” were setting up storyboards and editing videos.

They were making history — literally, by recording interviews, adding their own scripts, finding visuals, and then working collaboratively with other teams to create one larger documentary.

They were also empowered. They were excited. They were passionate. They were makers.

Everything changed!

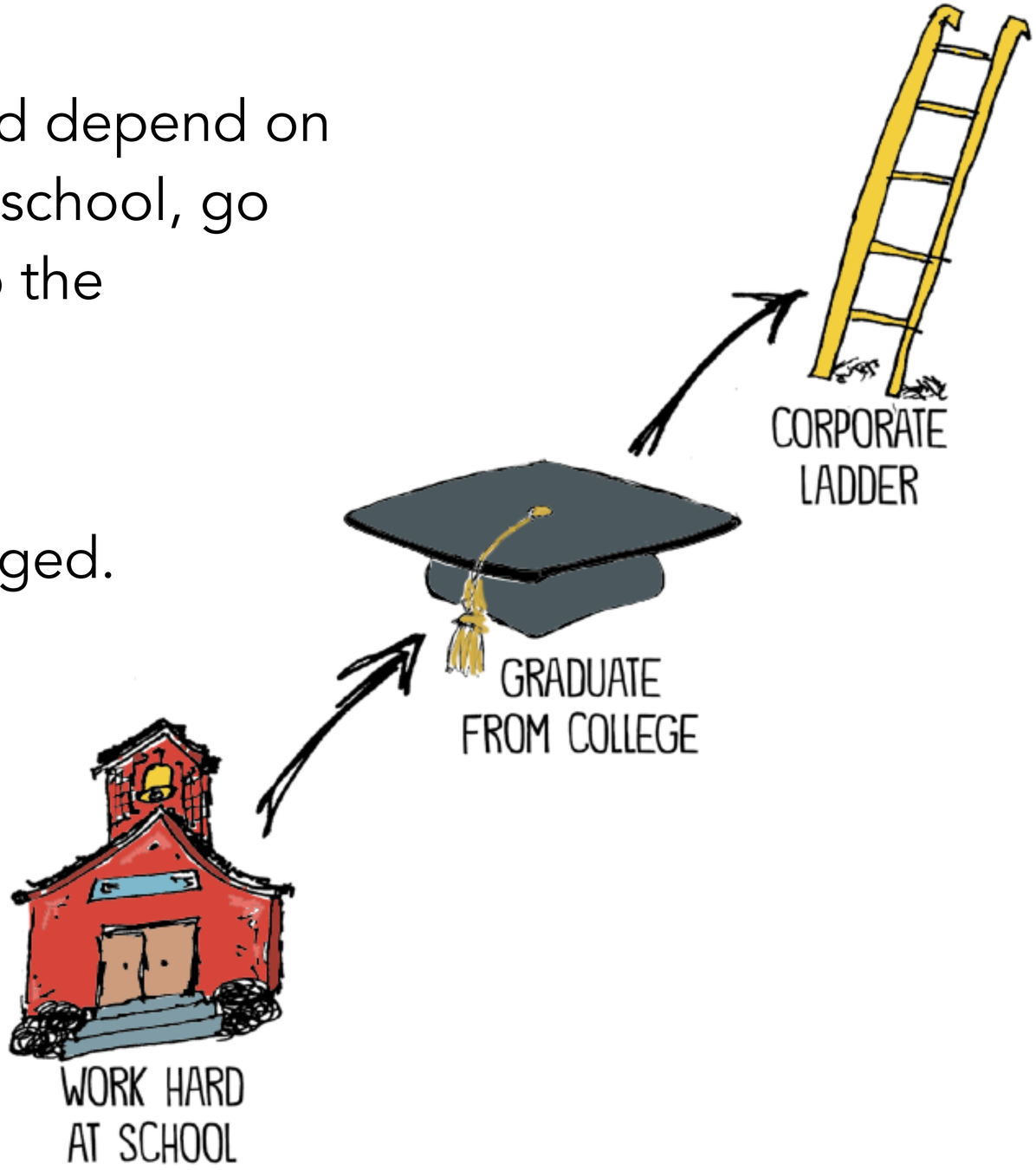
OUR WORLD IS CHANGING

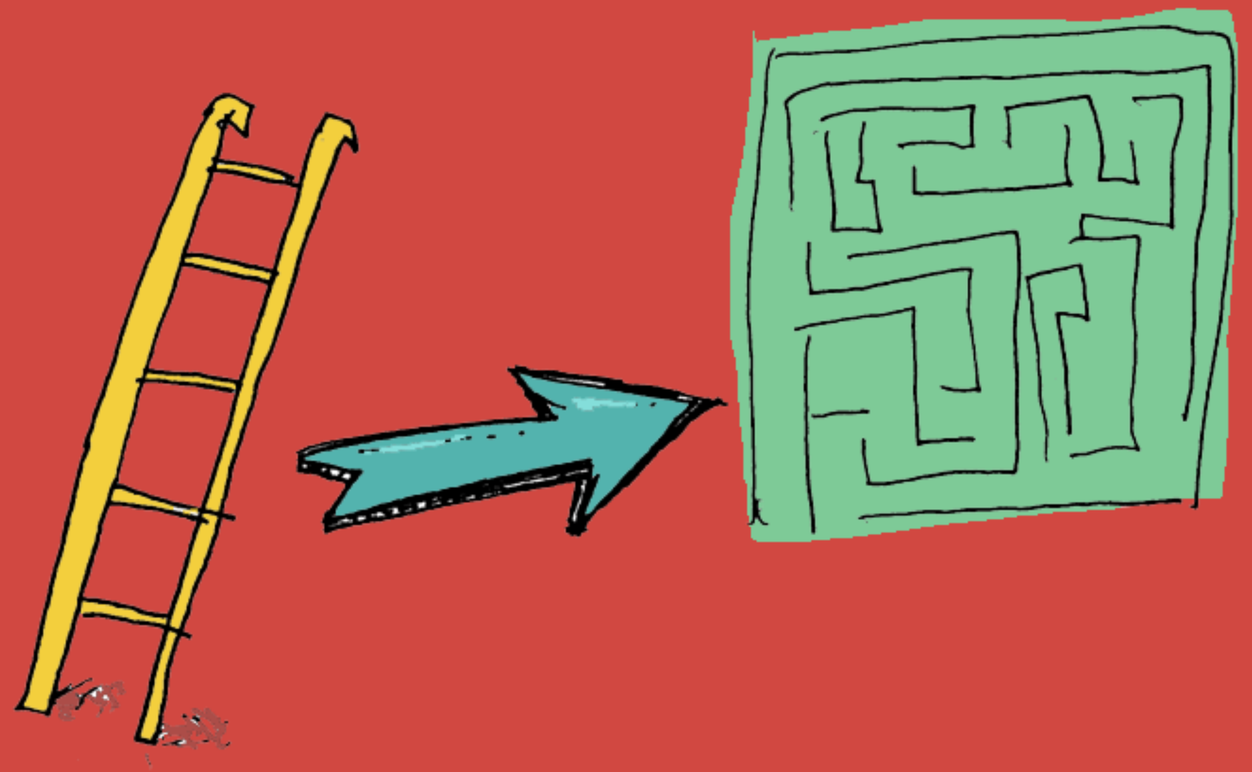
According to Moore's Law, technological developments tend to double every six months. Things that sounded like science fiction a generation ago are now so commonplace we take them for granted. We are in an era of rapid changes in social, technological, and economic systems.

We live in an era where robotics and artificial intelligence will replace many of our current jobs. Global connectivity will continue to allow companies to outsource labor to other countries.

At one time, we could depend on a formula: do well in school, go to college, and climb the corporate ladder.

But things have changed.





THE LADDER IS NOW A MAZE

The ladder is gone and in its place is a maze. Our students will need to know how to problem-solve and navigate this maze. As automation and artificial intelligence continue, they will need to know how to work within the Creative Economy. They will need to think like engineers and entrepreneurs. Our current students will enter a workforce where instability is the new normal and where they will have to be self-directed, original, and creative in order to navigate this maze.

This might sound terrifying but there's also a hidden opportunity. Our students will have the opportunity to build the future.

WE NEED TO EMPOWER STUDENTS TO NAVIGATE THIS MAZE.

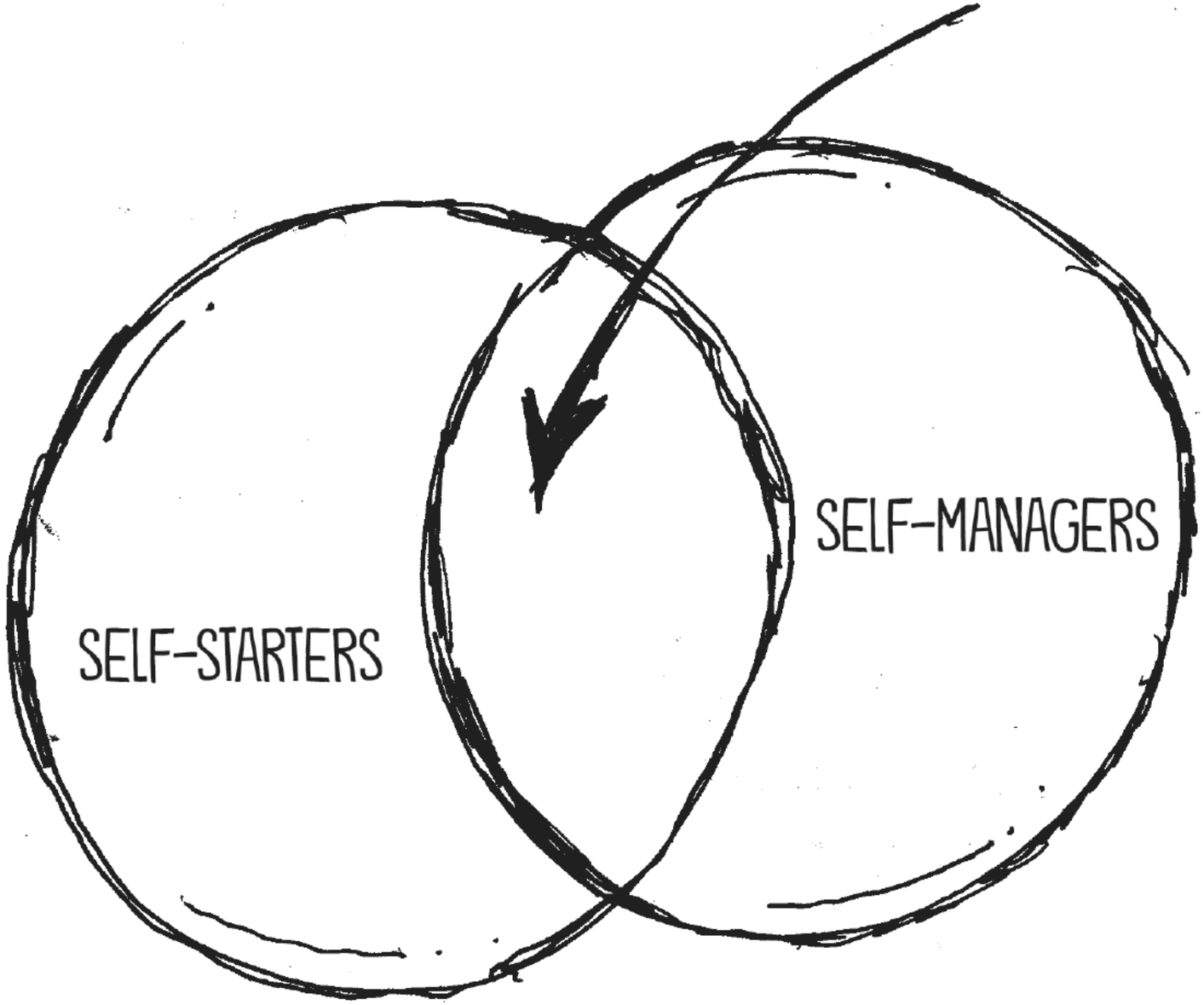
Not every student will create the next Google or Pixar or Lyft. Some students will be engineers or artists or accountants. Some will work in technology, others in traditional corporate spaces and still others in social or civic spaces. But no matter how diverse their industries will be, our students will all someday face a common reality.

Every single one of them will need to think like an entrepreneur in order to thrive in a changing world. They may not invent a company but they will have to invent and reinvent their jobs in order to stay relevant. In other words, they'll need to be nimble.

For this reason, we've spent the last few years interviewing entrepreneurs in a wide range of industries. The two questions I've asked each time has been, "What do you wish you had learned in school?" and "What are the required skills to thrive as an entrepreneur?"

The two things I hear the most of often is, "they need to be self-starters" and "they need to be self-managers." In other words, they need to be self-directed.

ENTREPRENEURIAL MINDSET



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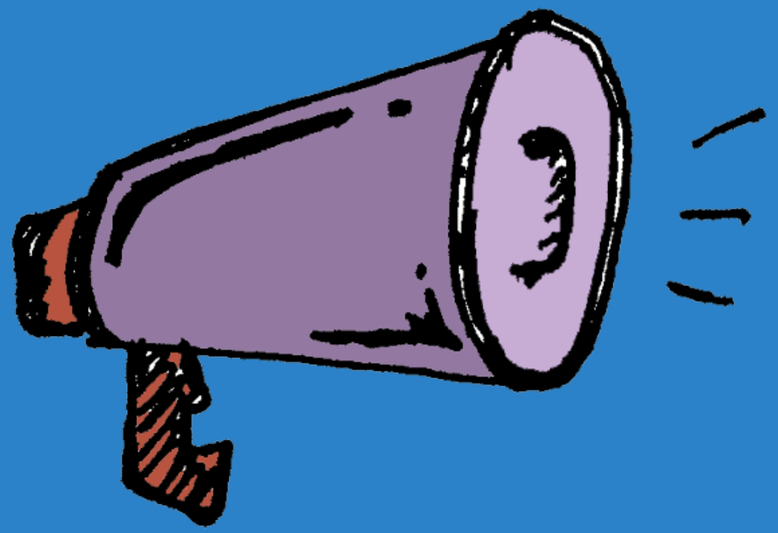
SEVEN WAYS TO EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS

1 2 3 4 5 6 7



EMPOWER STUDENTS WITH VOICE AND CHOICE

This is a great place to start on the road toward student ownership. Find ways to give your students voice and choice in their projects. Let them choose their topics and themes. Let them show their hidden knowledge about things like skateboarding or cooking or deep sea creatures.

Okay, but what about the standards? Well, it turns out many standards are topic-neutral, which means you can allow students to choose the topics as long as they are practicing specific skills and processes.

A CALL TO ACTION:

TRY OUT A GENIUS HOUR PROJECT

Genius Hour or 20% Time is modeled after the independent project time that Google gives its employees. This allows students to pursue their passions and ultimately create something they send to an authentic audience. I have included a Genius Hour student and teacher video in the Resource folder of this toolkit.

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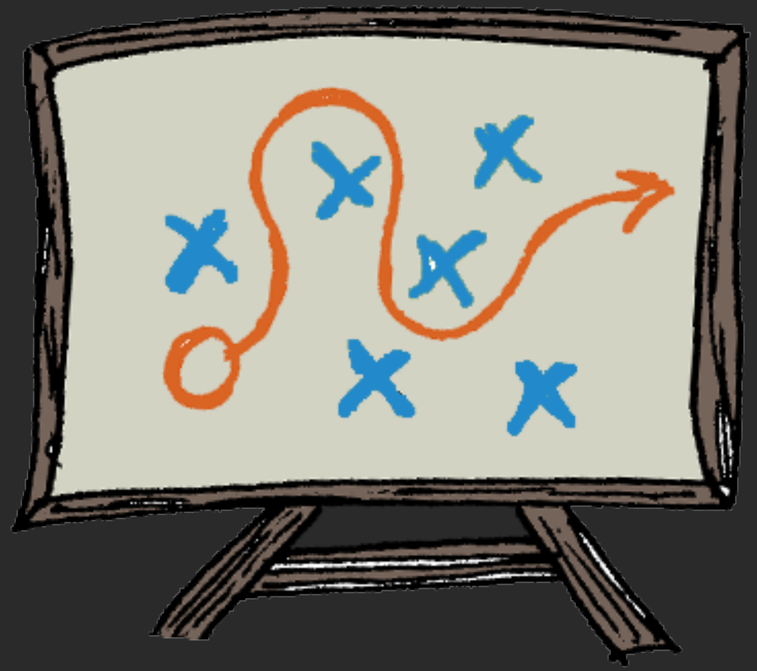


EMPOWER STUDENTS TO OWN THE PROCESS

What if our lessons, projects, units, and assignments were adjustable? What if our rules, procedures, and structures were flexible? What if students felt the permission to modify things on their own? What if we adapted the system for the students rather than forcing the students to fit into the system?

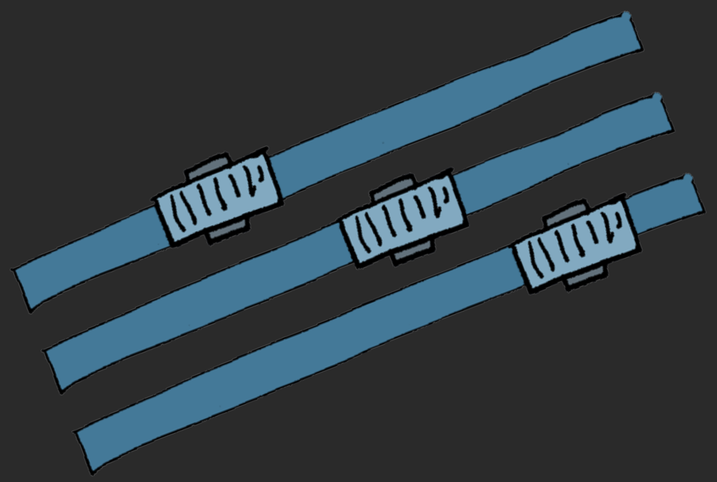
This is the idea behind flexible design. Instead of making things super tight, you find ways to make them adjustable. Instead of the five paragraph essay, you have some writing three and others writing ten paragraphs. Instead of having one way of doing research, you allow kids to choose which scaffolding works best for them.

It helps to begin with the question on the next page:

WHAT AM I DOING FOR STUDENTS THAT THEY COULD BE DOING FOR THEMSELVES?

A CALL TO ACTION:

DO AN AUDIT FOR ADJUSTABLE SYSTEMS



Make a list of every decision that you are making for students and then ask yourself, “where can I provide more choice and flexibility?” Then choose one area from the list and implement a single flexible system.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO ASK QUESTIONS

Student ownership must begin with curiosity. Students need the chance to ask questions and chase their curiosity. So, instead of answering a set of predetermined questions, students can ask their own questions based upon their own curiosity. Sometimes they will go out on their own and chase a question to find the answer. Other times, they would ask questions of one another and explore ideas as a group. But they should have opportunities to own the inquiry process.

Does this mean you can't ask questions? Absolutely not. You are still the expert. You can still ask great questions that get them excited about learning. But the idea is to implement opportunities for curiosity.

A CALL TO ACTION:

TRY OUT AN INQUIRY-BASED PROJECT

Inquiry-based projects begin with student curiosity rather than a teacher-defined problem. They can be a bit simpler than design thinking projects. I have included Wonder Week, an inquiry-based project, inside the Resource folder in this toolkit.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO OWN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

JOHN SPENCER

We often use the words “give” and “take” to describe assessments. But what if assessment is something you do? What if it’s an embedded part of the process?

But student-centered assessment is different. Students don’t need to take a weekly quiz. Instead, they can engage in self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher-directed assessment. This is an opportunity for students to see their own progress, set goals for the future, and determine next steps. The assessment should be happening all over the place. Here, they are judging the quality of their product while also reflecting on the process and determining their mastery of the standards.

If you check out the Assessment Toolkit in the Resources folder, you will find specific assessments you can use to guide you along the way.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

It’s vital that students get the opportunity to engage in self-assessment surveys, reflections, and rubrics.

The following are some self-assessment options:

- **Tracking Goals:** Students create their own goals. Then they keep track of the progress. It might mean a graph, a progress bar, or simply a description of progress.
- **Self-reflections:** Here students answer reflective questions about what they are learning, where they are struggling, and what they need to do next.
- **Student Surveys:** Sometimes students struggle with open-ended self-reflection questions. Surveys provide a blend of the objective and the subjective. So, they might use a Likert scale, selecting specific words from a bank, or ranking items.
- **Self-Assessment Rubrics:** Students are able to look at the progression from emerging to mastering with specific descriptions in various categories.
- **Checklists:** These can be a powerful diagnostic tool that students use before, during, and after a task.

PEER ASSESSMENT

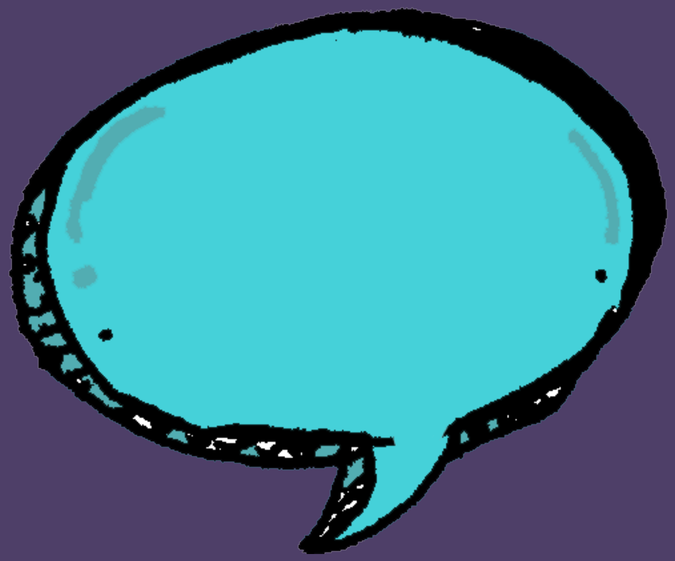
Peer assessment is a powerful way to prevent groupthink and help groups refine their work. I've included the 20-minute peer feedback system in the Resource folder.

The following are some peer assessment options:

- **The 10-Minute Feedback System:** This critical friends approach begins with one student sharing their work or pitching an idea while the other student actively listens.
- **Structured Feedback with Sentence Stems:** Here, you as a teacher provide specific sentence stems that your students can use to provide diagnostic, clarifying, or critical feedback.
- **3-2-1 Structure:** This is simple. Students provide three strengths, two areas of improvement and one question that they have.
- **Feedback Carousel:** Each group gets a stack of sticky notes and offers anonymous feedback as they move from group to group.
- **Peer Coaching:** Students interview each other about the process, using the coaching questions from the student-teacher conferences to guide them if they struggle to come up with reflection questions.

STUDENT-TEACHER CONFERENCING

You still play a vital role as a teacher in student-centered assessment. You can engage in one-on-one conferences. This might be coaching conferences, which help students reflect on their learning. Or it might be a consulting conference, where you give students feedback and advice.



The following are the three types of conferences I have used with students:

- **Advice Conference:** This empowers students to ask for advice. This conference is all about learning specific skills that students are missing. Each student must ask the teacher a series of questions based on an area where he or she is struggling. This is a chance for targeted one-on-one attention and explicit help with a strategy.
- **Reflection Conferences:** This empowers students to reflect on their learning. Instead of telling students what to do, the goal is to draw out student reflection. The teacher uses a series of reflective questions to lead students through the process of metacognition and into the setting and monitoring of goals.
- **Mastery Conference:** Unlike the reflection conference, the focus here is less about reflecting on the process and more about students judging their own mastery of the content. We use the Standards-Based Assessment Grid.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

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If we want students to navigate the maze, they will need to grow into problem-solvers. Unfortunately, school is designed to get kids to get the right answer quickly. Authentic problem-solving is slower and requires more struggle. For this reason, it helps to find projects where we can empower students to solve complex problems. Note that I am including a list of projects in each subject (problem-based and tied to design thinking). But there's also a project on the next page that you might want to check out.

A CALL TO ACTION:

TRY A PROBLEM-BASED PROJECT

It's easy to picture a math class being focused on solving algorithms. But math is actually a great place for problem-solving through projects. The Tiny House Project is an opportunity for this very approach. You can find it in the Resource folder.

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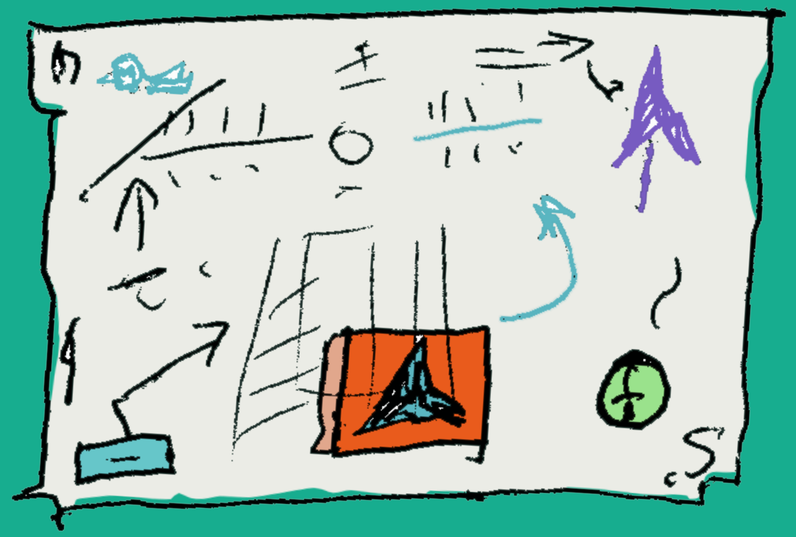

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO OWN THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

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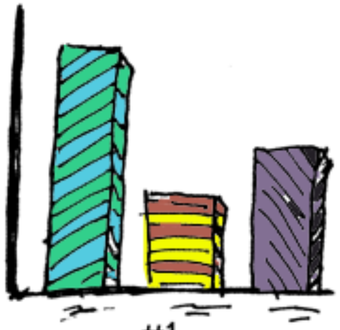
THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

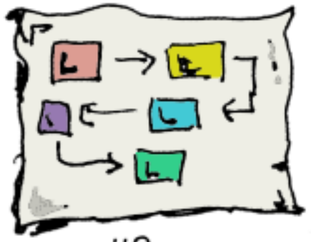


#1

SET GOALS AND CHART PROGRESS

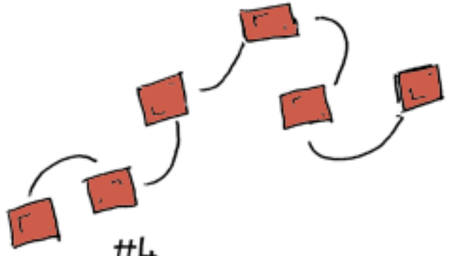
#2

BREAK DOWN TASKS AND SET DEADLINES



#3

CHOOSE AND IMPLEMENT SPECIFIC STRATEGIES



#4

MONITOR, ADJUST AND PROBLEM-SOLVE

NOTE THAT EACH OF THESE PHASES CAN OFTEN WORK IN TANDEM RATHER THAN SEQUENTIALLY.

A SKETCH-NOTE BY JOHN SPENCER

JOHN SPENCER

Self-managers are able to take a larger task and break it down into sub-tasks and eventually deadlines. They can think realistically about what is needed in terms of time, resources, and concrete actions. This is a critical piece of project management. It requires students to see the big picture, the details, and the complex relationship between the two.

Here's why it's important that students own the project management process. When they learn how to manage projects, they learn a transferrable skill that will help them to take ownership of the projects they will work on in the Creative Economy.

A CALL TO ACTION:
TRY THIS STRUCTURE

In the LAUNCH Cycle, we use a project management tool called finding the PARTS. I have included the PARTS handout in the Resources section of this toolkit.

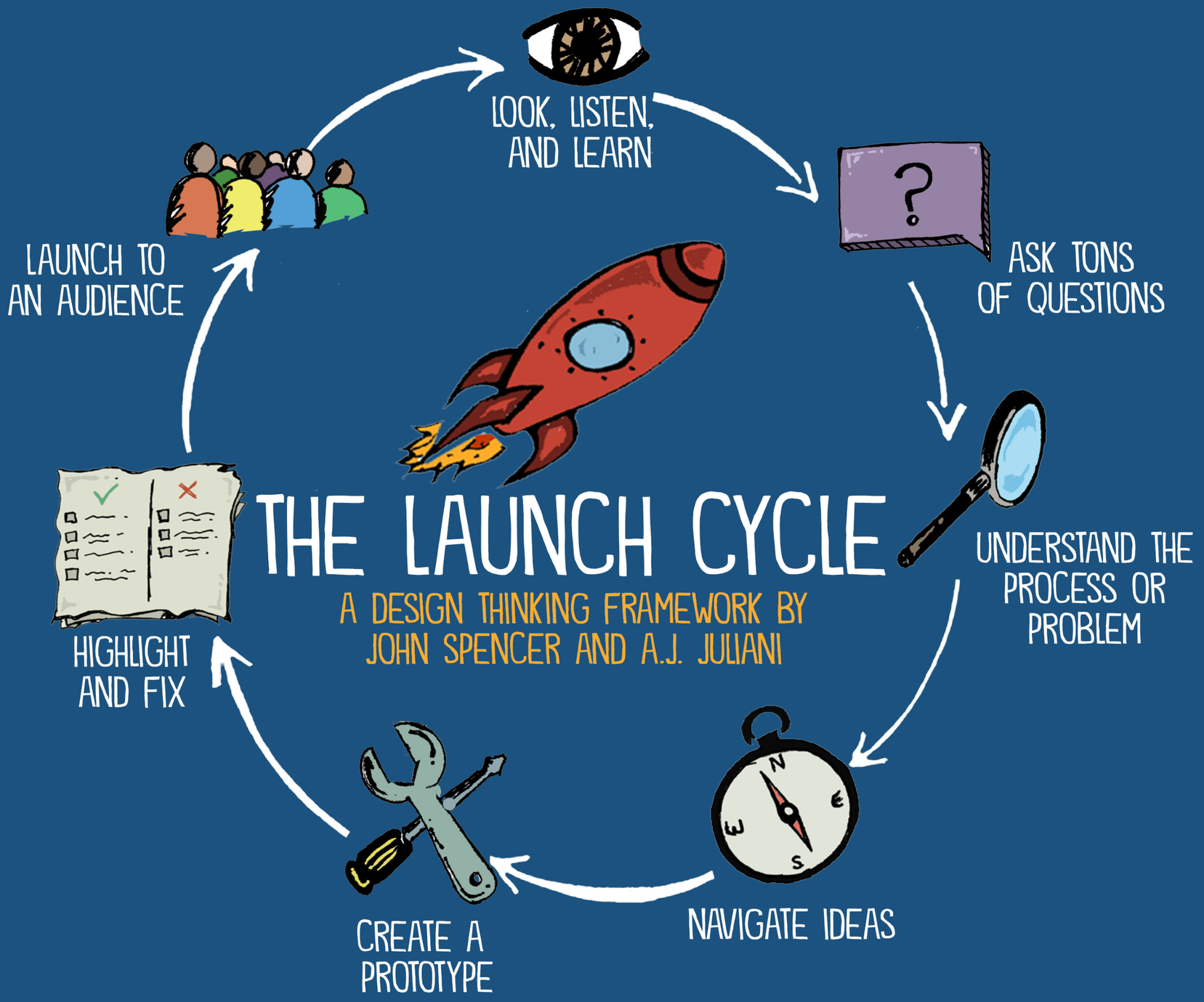
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

EMPOWER STUDENTS TO OWN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Sometimes creative work requires structure. Students often struggle with a completely open process. They rush into creating something new without thinking about planning or purpose and then they're disappointed with the results. They have a tough time getting started.

Structure isn't a bad thing if it promotes student choice. Sometimes you need a framework for your creative work or a road map to help you along the way. You still get to make the decisions but the structure actually amplifies the creative work.

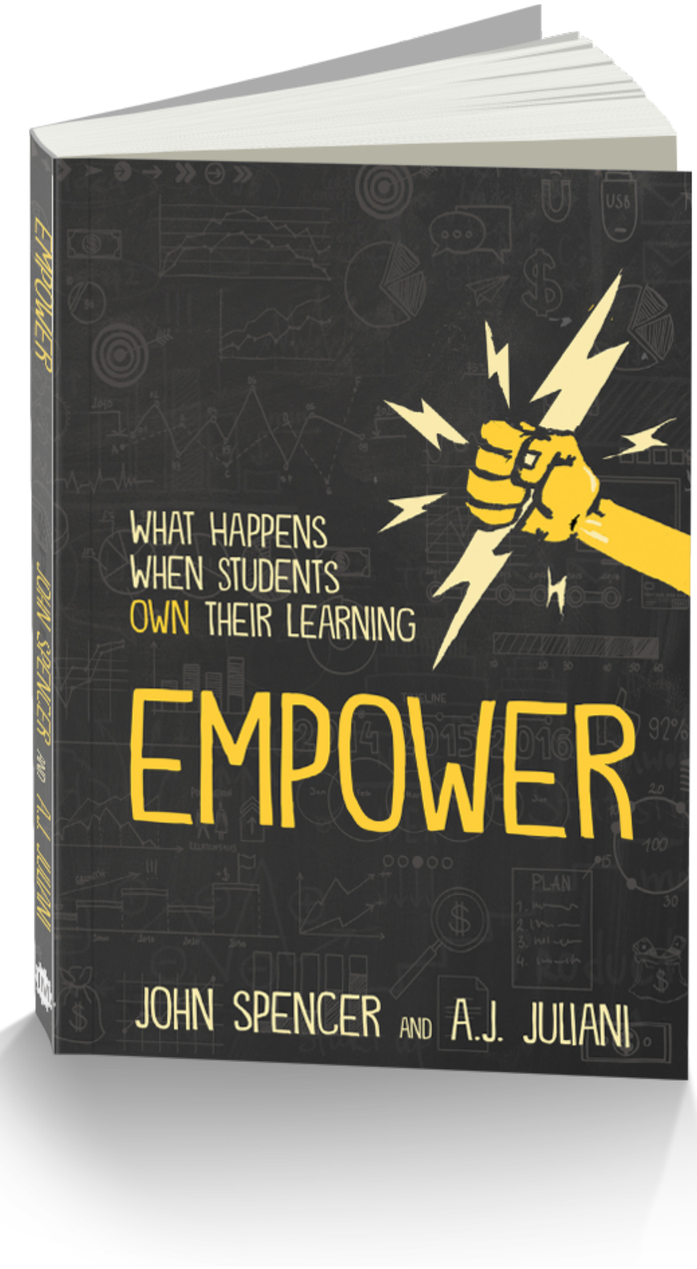
This is why we're passionate about design thinking. It's a structure that empowers, rather than limits, student ownership.


LOOK, LISTEN, AND LEARN
ASK TONS OF QUESTIONS
UNDERSTAND THE PROCESS OR PROBLEM
NAVIGATE IDEAS
CREATE A PROTOTYPE
HIGHLIGHT AND FIX
LAUNCH TO AN AUDIENCE
THE LAUNCH CYCLE
A DESIGN THINKING FRAMEWORK BY JOHN SPENCER AND A.J. JULIANI

A CALL TO ACTION:

TRY OUT A DESIGN THINKING PROJECT

Design thinking is a flexible framework that moves students from awareness into inquiry, research, ideation, and eventually prototyping. I have included two design thinking projects inside the Resource folder in this toolkit.



WANT TO EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS?

Check out *Empower: What Happens When Students Own Their Learning.* You can buy it on amazon.com or Barnes and Noble.