



Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World

By Tony Wagner

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Tony Wagner's groundbreaking bestseller—"a road map for parents who want to sculpt their children into innovative thinkers" (*USA TODAY*) and a guide for "an employer looking to have a pipeline of creative talent" (Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO).

Harvard education expert Tony Wagner explores what parents, teachers, and employers must do to develop the capacities of young people to become innovators. In profiling compelling young American innovators such as Kirk Phelps, product manager for Apple's first iPhone, and Jodie Wu, who founded a company that builds bicycle-powered maize shellers in Tanzania, Wagner reveals how the adults in their lives nurtured their creativity and sparked their imaginations, while teaching them to learn from failures and persevere. Play, passion, and purpose: These are the forces that drive young innovators.

Wagner takes readers into the most forward-thinking schools, colleges, and workplaces in the country, where teachers and employers are developing cultures of innovation based on collaboration, interdisciplinary problem-solving, and intrinsic motivation. The result is a timely, provocative, and inspiring manifesto that offers crucial insight into creating the change makers of tomorrow.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A road map for parents who want to sculpt their children into innovative thinkers.”—**USA Today**

“In this fascinating book, Tony Wagner addresses one of our most urgent questions: How do we create the next generation of innovators? By telling the stories of young creators, and by taking us inside cutting-edge programs, Wagner shows that the answer isn’t to double-down on outmoded, formulaic solutions—but to embrace the principles of play, passion, and purpose. *Creating Innovators* is important reading for anyone concerned about the future.”—**Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind***

“In the equation of world success, superior innovation is the only factor that can keep America #1. Two passionate citizens, innovators in their own right, have produced a compelling prescription for our time. Read it, watch it, and spread the word.”—**Mitch Daniels, Governor, State of Indiana**

“To combat the competitive threat from economies like Brazil, Russia, India and China, we must develop empowered entrepreneurs and innovators. *Creating Innovators* is a masterful work that shows us how. Tony Wagner’s case studies reveal more about these fine innovators than he may have realized. World leaders, business executives, educators, policy makers and parents, take note!”—**Dr. Annmarie Neal Founder, Center for Leadership Innovation and Former Chief Talent Officer, Cisco Systems**

“Tony Wagner makes a compelling case for how our education system has to change if we are to create the innovators we need to face tomorrow’s challenges. If you are an educator, a parent of a child struggling with conventional education, or an employer looking to have a pipeline of creative talent, then read this book, take note of the ideas and play your part in creating the change we must make happen.”—**Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO**

“In my life I have met and worked with individuals who help create the world they live in—innovators. Their lives are so much more fulfilling than people who live in a world of someone else’s creation. This book, in a clear, tangible way, explores how to help young people access skills of innovation and lead richer lives.”—**Brad Anderson, former CEO, Best Buy Corporation**

“In just the click of a mouse, we left the Industrial Age for the Information Age. Now just as quickly, we find ourselves in a new age of our society and economy; the Innovation Age. Tony Wagner and Bob Compton have provided a powerful tool for parents, educators and students seeking success in this new society and economy.”—**Dr. Tony Bennett, Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction**

“Many have written about the paucity of innovation in America. Others have chronicled our schools’ struggles to improve on dimensions of skills that matter. In this book, Wagner has positioned himself astride these critical challenges in a way that clarifies what we must do to address these problems, and how we can do it—making this a must read for anyone interested in the education of our nation.”—**Clayton Christensen, Professor, Harvard Business School, and author of *Disrupting Class***

“A seminal analysis promising hope for the future through small wonders in the classroom.”—**Kirkus**

About the Author

Tony Wagner currently serves as an Expert In Residence at Harvard University's Innovation Lab. Previously he has worked as a high school teacher, K-8 principal, university professor, and founding executive director of Educators for Social Responsibility. Tony is a frequent speaker at national and international conferences and the author of *Creating Innovators* and *The Global Achievement Gap*.

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Creating Innovators

Introduction

Recent events and new questions and insights have compelled me to write this book.

My last book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, published in 2008, described the new skills students need for careers, college, and citizenship in the twenty-first century and the growing gap between these skills versus what is taught and tested in our schools. Judging by the outpouring of positive responses to the book from diverse audiences and the many subsequent speaking requests I received from all corners of the world, it would appear that I got a number of things right in that book. But I now see that the new skills I described—which I call the Seven Survival Skills—while necessary, are not sufficient.

The world has changed profoundly since 2008. The economies of the West are in shambles. In the United States, the combined rate of unemployment and underemployment is more than 15 percent, and in some European countries it is far worse. Many economists say the solution is for consumers to start spending again, thus creating new jobs. But most consumers can no longer borrow money as easily as they once did. And because many fear for their jobs, they are now saving at a far greater rate than just a few years ago. It is not clear when—or even if—our consumer-driven economy and accompanying low unemployment rates will ever return. Meanwhile, both economists and policy makers are caught up in fierce debates about whether to reduce debt or provide more economic stimulus, which would in the short term increase government debt.

Most leaders agree on one thing, however. The long-term health of our economy and a full economic recovery are dependent upon creating far more innovation. New or improved ideas, products, and services create wealth and new jobs. Business leaders, in particular, say that we need many more young people who can create innovations in the areas of science, technology, and engineering. Many argue that so-called STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is increasingly important to the future of our country. Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike say that for our young people to be better prepared for high-wage, high-skilled jobs, they must all graduate from high school “college ready” and earn a two-year or four-year postsecondary degree—preferably in a STEM-related field. Thomas Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum take the argument even further in their recent book, *That Used to Be Us*, asserting that only the jobs of innovators and entrepreneurs will be immune to outsourcing or automation in the new global knowledge economy.

At the same time as these arguments have gained traction, there has also been a growing concern about the cost of a college education and whether college students are learning very much in their classes. In 2010, college debt—estimated at \$1 trillion—exceeded credit card debt for the first time.¹ And in early 2011, a new study revealed that, after two years of college, nearly half of all students were no more skillful than when they began their studies, and fully one-third showed no gains after four years.² Statistics show college graduates earn far more than high school graduates. But is that because they are actually more skilled or because the credential has become a simple way to weed through the forest of résumés?

Given the near consensus on the vital importance of innovation in today's economy, I decided to explore the question of how you educate young people to become innovators. What are the capacities that matter most for innovation, and how are they best taught? I became especially interested in what truly constitutes a meaningful STEM education.

The question of how teachers can develop those students skills that matter most for our country's future has become even more urgent for me as I have followed the recent education-reform debates in the United States and elsewhere. I am frankly appalled at the idea, now widely held, that the best measure of teachers' effectiveness is students' performance on standardized, multiple-choice tests. I am not a fan of teacher tenure, and I believe strongly in accountability for improved student learning. However, most policy makers—and many school administrators—have absolutely no idea what kind of instruction is required to produce students who can think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, and collaborate versus merely score well on a test. They are also clueless about what kind of teaching best motivates this generation to learn. And the tests that policy makers continue to use as an indication of educational progress do not measure any of the skills that matter most today. We need more profiles of quality instruction—and better sources of evidence of results—to inform the education debate.

Since the publication of *The Global Achievement Gap*, I have been inundated with e-mails from concerned parents. They know their children's schools are not teaching the skills that they will need, and the parents want to know what they can do. I have my own experience as the father of three wonderful children, now grown with children of their own, but that hardly seems like a sufficient basis for giving advice to other parents. How do parents nurture some of the important skills and attributes of their children? I began to wonder.

In the last few years, I have had opportunities to work with highly innovative companies such as Apple, Cisco Systems, and Scholastic, as well as with senior leaders in the US Army. I have been fascinated by how these leaders see the world and deal with the accelerating pace of change. I became interested in what the best employers do to develop the capacities of young people to be innovators. I also recently met with education leaders and visited schools in Finland, whose education system is considered the best in the world. It is also credited with helping to produce one of the most innovative economies in the world. I wanted to explore what lessons we might learn from Finland's success.

Finally, I have continued to be intrigued by this so-called net generation—the first to grow up as what Marc Prensky calls “digital natives.” I interviewed a number of twentysomethings for the last book, but felt I had only scratched the surface of understanding this generation. Since then, the debate about this generation's work ethic—or lack of one—has continued to rage. So I wanted to better understand how they might be differently motivated, and what kinds of teaching and leadership they respond to most positively.

Out of all these disparate influences and questions an idea for a new book began to emerge. I resolved, first, to take a leap and become a student of innovation—something about which I knew little until a few years ago. I have tried to understand what the skills of successful innovators are and why are they so important to our future. I interviewed highly innovative twentysomethings and then studied their “ecosystems”—the parental, teaching, and mentoring influences that they told me had been most important in their development. I wanted to see if I could discern patterns of parenting that contribute to the nurturing of young innovators. And what about the teachers whom these innovators identified as having been most important in their development—were there any similarities in their methods? Are there colleges or graduate programs that do an excellent job of teaching the skills of innovation, and if so, how might they be different? I also sought to learn what the mentors and employers of young innovators had to say about how these capacities are best fostered.

I've interviewed scores of diverse young innovators—budding engineers, scientists, artists, musicians, and other individuals who have started companies or worked for some of the most innovative companies in the world, as well social innovators and entrepreneurs who are seeking better ways to solve societal problems. I then interviewed their parents, teachers, and mentors. I observed classes and conducted interviews at several colleges and graduate programs that have an international reputation for graduating innovators. Finally, I interviewed business and military leaders who are dealing with the challenges of developing organizational capacities to innovate. In all, I conducted more than 150 interviews for this book.

It has been an utterly fascinating project, but also challenging because of its scope and complexity. For this reason, I decided to limit the innovators whom I profile in this book to young people between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-two who fall into one of two categories: individuals who are doing highly innovative work in so-called STEM fields, and individuals engaged in social innovation and entrepreneurship. The former are critical to our economic future, the latter to our social and civic well-being. I have also chosen to combine the categories of innovators and entrepreneurs. I am well aware that not every young innovator is an entrepreneur or vice versa. However, I discovered that the majority of the young people whom I interviewed aspire to be both, and that young innovators and entrepreneurs—regardless of their areas of interest—share some common roots.

Describing how I found the people I interviewed would take another book. Research for this project has been much like the process of following hyperlinks on the Internet. Several of my student researchers suggested names of young people whom they had met or read about, while angel investors and venture capitalists introduced me to others. Some individuals—such as General Martin Dempsey—found me. One source would take me to another and that one to the next. I make no claims to a “scientific” sampling. However, based on all that I have learned in the last three years, I have a high degree of confidence that the innovators whom I profile in depth are a representative sample.

I am enormously grateful to the innovators I write about here, as well as the ones whom I had to leave out for space reasons, and to all of their parents, teachers, and mentors. Everyone gave me hours of their time—often over several interviews and in follow-up e-mails—and allowed me complete access to their life and family history.

Thanks to the persistence and hard work of Bob Compton, you will not only meet many of these people between the pages of this book, you will also be able to see and hear them on camera. Bob—who himself has had a remarkable career as a high-tech innovator, entrepreneur, and angel investor—has recently focused his energies on producing an outstanding set of videos about education. His first, *2 Million Minutes*, was screened by all of the presidential candidates in 2008 and has sold more than twenty thousand copies. We met at an Investment in America Forum at West Point several years ago, and we recently collaborated on a film about Finland's education system, *The Finland Phenomenon: Inside the World's Most Surprising School System*.³ When I told Bob about plans for this new book, he urged me to make it a truly innovative book in its format—and not just a book about innovation. So throughout these pages, you will find a series of QR tags, which, if you scan them with your cell or smartphone's camera and the appropriate software, will take you to web pages where you can watch videos related to the innovators' lives and the schools I describe.

Whether you are a parent, teacher (preschool through college), mentor, employer, or policy maker, I think you will find that the print and video profiles of these young innovators, as well as the ecosystems that have helped them to develop their capacities, have a great deal to teach us all. I know that I was—and continue to be—inspired by the people whom I interviewed for this project. So I invite you to read, watch, listen, learn—and then to reflect, share, and discuss with your friends and colleagues. For if we are to create a strong economic future and a sustainable way of life for our children and grandchildren, we all have much

that we can and must do together.

Wagner on Why I Wrote This Book



<http://creatinginnovators.com/chapter00Tag01-5>

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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