What’s Your Passion?

I find it unnatural to have a career. Just as I believe that monogamy in a relationship is an outdated concept, the notion of selecting one career for your whole life is not all that different. It’s professional monogamy and I want to cheat on my profession.

I’m so tired of education in general. While I absolutely adore certain aspects – interacting with students, having an excuse to leave the house and do something worthwhile every day, making an honest living, and constantly learning, I abhor many things about the job. I hate the bullshit politics, the never-ending government quest to develop the “perfect” curriculum, and the utter lack of respect from administrators, parents and students. In general, I’ve become bitter and discontent with teaching. It’s time to start making a change. If I’m not passionate about teaching, how can I expect kids to be passionate about learning?

I’ve come to the conclusion that my place is not in the classroom. I’m meant for something bigger. Something different. I know without a doubt that I can walk into any classroom and teach, but it no longer excites me. I want constant change. I want to travel, to talk, to learn. I want to teach, but not in the same way. Not in a robotic, completely standards-based way. I mean, who really cares about Newton’s Laws of Motion? If something is at rest, it’s going to stay at rest. End of story. Who cares about the physics behind it? I can’t be passionate about this kind of useless knowledge.

What I am passionate about is people. I want to learn what I want to learn, so I ask myself, “Isn’t that the same things kids want? The freedom to learn about their interests?” I’d love to build a curriculum, and I use that term in the loosest possible sense, that allows kids to teach themselves about what they want to know. I want to rebel! I want out! I am on my way to a new life, just not sure what path to take.

Life throws curve balls and I’ve struck out my fair share of times. It’s becoming time for me to take control, for me to be the pitcher, for me to stop striking out.

What’s your passion? If you don’t answer quickly and honestly with your current career, you’re probably in the wrong one. I remember lining up my stuffed animals as a child. The bedroom of my parents’ double wide trailer became a classroom in which I was a teacher. Back then, there was no KERA, no NCLB, no Race to the Top, no Common Core. I was learning for learning’s sake. I probably did a better job teaching my Care Bears and Pound Puppies than I do teaching my current students. Why? Because I was passionate about learning. When did kids lose that? Our education system today robs students and teachers of the joy and excitement that comes with learning something new. The focus is on perfection, not on learning.

Students today don’t become passionate about school and learning. They become passionate about things outside of school. Why not build on those interests? I’m in favor of throwing out ALL the standards and going back to teaching the child – not the content. The idea behind out country is centered on independence, but in schools, every child is supposed to be taught an identical curriculum. This is a disservice, especially to those students who fall behind in grade level and the so-called gap only continues to widen until there is never an opportunity for them to catch up in all areas. Let’s move away from teaching content and to teaching skills and strategies. By doing this, we open the whole world to kids instead of narrowing their education to reading, writing, math, science and social studies. Even that list sounds boring! What about promoting critical thinking and creativity above all else? I really can’t see how multiple choice and extended response questions can function as an effective assessment of these skills. In the real world, I have never been instructed by a boss to sit down and write a 3.5 essay. Never have I been asked to compute a calculus problem. I most definitely have never been quizzed over geographical landforms, electricity, or “The Grapes of Wrath”. I’m sure we can all agree that in some very specific careers, these pieces of knowledge are important. But what about those who dream of being a mechanic, a construction worker, a plumber, or an office secretary? These careers require a specific set of skills and knowledge. Beyond basic reading, writing and arithmetic, the skills needed are not those in the required Common Core State Standards. Why is it important to have kids read novels if they want to work in a factory? Why is Algebra such a necessity for a librarian? Why does a chef need to know World Civilization facts? Let’s base learning on a passion. Let’s give kids options and choice in their own education.

What about the standardized testing we force on our students? In Kentucky, all juniors are required to take the ACT, if they are on the high school diploma track. Our students with mild mental disabilities who struggle to read at an elementary level and have difficulties with basic math skills are not excluded. We put an insane amount of pressure on these kids to score well, and while many of them want to please and try their best, all we do is set them up to fail miserably. These scores are used only for data for the “powers that be”. This year I had a gifted student who had been placed in my Response to Intervention “class”. First of all, it was ridiculous that I had this group of students in an intervention class to begin with. They all belonged in a class where they could extend their learning. This particular student, however, was frustrated and slightly upset because he missed a test question, on yet another assessment, that asked what a gerund was. Now, I don’t know about you, but I, a reading and writing specialist with three college degrees, had to look at him and say, “I have no idea”. But I did know how to find the answer and having that skill was way more important and beneficial than having that useless piece of knowledge that is so unimportant in life.

For all of society’s advances, education seems to be taking a step backward. It’s not keeping up with society. Actually, in my opinion, it’s not keeping up with common sense. Kids are so constrained by the standards-based boundaries that we are actually restricting their growth instead of allowing them to flourish. If we want individuals who become functioning members of society, we need to focus on their strengths and talents and stop training them in such a conformist manner.