

Schools and the Theory of Personal Intelligence

An interview with
Scott Barry Kaufman

BY STEPHEN J. VALENTINE



Something happens to one's mind after speaking about creativity and human potential with psychologist and writer Scott Barry Kaufman. What's the metaphor? Velcro? Maybe. Reading Kaufman's new book, *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*, and talking with him afterward about its implication for education somehow makes your own mind more alert and engaged. For instance, you read the recent retirement letter from eight-time NBA All-Star Steve Nash in which he writes about the gift of his enduring love for the game of basketball – and it sticks. You remember certain phrases, and the letter itself becomes a model of what Kaufman calls “harmonious passion.” Dropping the letter, you chase down a colleague, the best classicist you know, and ask him if he has any scholarly articles about Simonides of Ceos and his “method of loci” memory system. You read about this in Kaufman's book and it, too, stuck – and now you think it might help a student with an upcoming vocabulary quiz.

The next day, while sharing the method of loci with the student – encouraging her to picture a house in her mind in which each vocabulary word resides in a drawer in a room – you realize, again, that you're channeling Kaufman. What is it about the guy? Talking with Kaufman feels like having someone walk through the rooms in your mind and turn on the lights, or open some windows or rearrange the furniture in a way that makes the space come alive. It's kind of the reverse of the method of loci, actually. Kaufman doesn't want to put things into your mind; he wants to rearrange and reveal what is already there.

I know I'm twisting up analogies here – Velcro and desk drawers and some Kaufmanesque avatar wandering through your brain. But being playful, allowing the mind to wander, exploring assumptions about intelligence, these are all practices Kaufman approves, and instigates. Kaufman is the scientific director of the Imagination Institute in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and he practices what he preaches. He has a verbal habit – “Yeah,” “OK,” “That's interesting,” “That's a very keen observation” – of making you feel supported as you grapple with the tough stuff. But it's not puffery. He pushes back against your assertions, disagrees with distinctions you draw, so you exit the conversation feeling as if you just met someone who had your best interest at heart, who really listened to you, and who cared about helping you understand something. Having spent time with him, you are not so much empowered as enlarged. Which, according to Kaufman, is the opposite of the way many young people feel after leaving school.

I interviewed Kaufman in April 2015.

Valentine: As I was reading your book, *Ungifted: Intelligence Redefined*, I noticed that you use the word “labels” often. Honestly, I stopped counting when I reached 25 – and that was pretty early in the book. Can you talk about your feeling about labels and the labeling of children as they move through the educational system?

Kaufman: Some people suggested that I actually title my book *Unlabeled* instead of *Ungifted*. They think that would have been a more accurate description of its essence. I just called it *Ungifted* because it's how I personally felt. No disrespect to the gifted community at all. I think the aspect of labeling that concerns me is when it sets up expectations about someone's future potential. And so, at the heart of my book, is the notion of potential, reconceptualizing what that means and questioning some of the markers, such as IQ, that we have traditionally used in predicting future success.

Labeling can be detrimental to a child's optimal development because it limits opportunities too soon. And it limits opportunities based on our own preconceptions, not based on what we really know about a person and all that he or she is capable of doing. Labeling limits opportunities unnecessarily.

Valentine: I also notice that you don't seem to like comparisons, or rather, generating comparisons between young people. As a classroom teacher, I find the idea that we could eliminate comparisons to be both inspiring and challenging.

Kaufman: The theory of personal intelligence that I put

forth is all about looking at intelligence on the personal, individual level, focusing on individual growth and differences, looking at an individual's own goals and dreams and aspirations, and taking the individual into account. There is very much a call for a paradigm shift in how we understand intelligence – moving from obsessively evaluating people in comparison to others to really taking into account a student's personal goals and values and what he or she wants out of life.

Valentine: Along that line, you have a phrase I have seen you use a few times in speeches, and you use it in the last chapter of your book, about falling in love with a dream. Why is that so important?

Kaufman: That's actually creativity expert Paul Torrance's notion. I absolutely love it. He wrote a great paper in the 1980s on the importance of falling in love... with something. It doesn't just have to be a future image of yourself. It really is a matter of falling in love with the learning process, falling in love with a particular kind of work, a specific thing, such as Jell-O or math or whatever it may be. The key is the identity aspect – falling in love with something and making it your own and integrating it in a healthy way into your own identity and making it a part of your personal development.

Valentine: Do you think it's possible, given the way schools are traditionally set up, for students to fall in love with a dream? How would you best recommend that a high school student fall in love with a dream while trying to juggle five or six subjects a day, extracurricular activities – all the things that students feel pressured to do?

Kaufman: I wouldn't count after-school activities out of the equation of things that you're allowed to fall in love with. They are important. Sports, for example, can be incredibly valuable. It doesn't really matter what students fall in love with or that they stay in love with a particular interest the rest of their lives. In your life, there are core themes around which all your engagements and activities somehow revolve. We don't really spend enough time in the educational context giving students the opportunity to find out what their theme is. A lot of this work involves exposing young people to plenty of different things, to allow them to figure out where their interests are strongest. It involves allowing them to pursue personally meaningful projects, especially if they already have a passion or particular area of interest. Also, in general, it involves creating discovery-based learning environments in which students are not terrified that they

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are going to be evaluated, but, instead, are actually encouraged to explore deeply an environment or a subject matter. The theory of personal intelligence is all about bringing out what is already within people.

Valentine: *In your book, you give teachers and students a nice research-based road map for creativity, for how to be creative. You encourage openness — openness to experience, to flow states and mind wandering, to positive constructive daydreaming and spontaneous cognition. Are there ways to encourage students, within the school context, to constructively daydream, to let their minds wander, to be open to experience?*

Kaufman: It's probably best to get away from single "snapshot" assessments. I would much rather move toward an educational environment in which everything is continually revisable and open to feedback from an expert. We actually have teachers who are experts in what they are teaching. We actually have good teachers who have a passion for what they are doing and who can be mentors to students. I'd like to see educators serving as mentors, as opposed to passive teachers. This vision that I have is very different from our current model of education. In a situation in which everything is revisable, assessment is ongoing. It's a growth model, so it's just completely ongoing. You would only compare the person to the person — how much growth that person has had. And in this model, when you look at things like imagination and creativity, you can include that as part of assessment — a judgment of the extent to which the student has shown imagination.

Recognizing these additional features of the curriculum is important, and the teachers would have to be open to giving proper feedback on those aspects and helping each child to develop them. I am a much bigger fan of — I say it over and over again — shifting from this obsessive need to evaluate students to actually bringing out the potential that is already in students.

Valentine: *Does a teacher have to be creative himself or herself in order to promote creativity?*

Kaufman: I think there's a deep truth here — that the more imaginative teachers are going to be the ones who figure out more ingenious ways to inspire their students and for their students to be valued for their creativity.

Valentine: *So if that's the case, if teachers who are more imaginative are more likely to teach students to be creative and imaginative, are there ways to help adults...?*

Kaufman: Well, that is very important. I think the teacher training level is truly where it's at. That's why I am teaming up with the University of Pennsylvania's Duckworth Lab [focused on the study of grit and self-discipline] this summer to institute a summer internship program. Young people will be part of the internship, but the goal is to create curriculum that teachers can use.

Valentine: *So you are working on helping teachers to either bring more of themselves to the classroom or be more creative, or...*

Kaufman: Just to be grounded, to be more aware of the conditions that are most conducive for optimal human flourishing. To have that knowledge. Imagine if every teacher took an intro to positive psychology class. They would be more "on the lookout" and more aware of what they are doing that works and what they are doing that doesn't work, and why. So much of psychology is not public knowledge.

Valentine: *What are some of those principles? If you could wave a magic wand and give every teacher in America three or four different approaches that would make a difference for student learning, what would those things be?*

Kaufman: Design classrooms and atmospheres that take into account as many of the fundamental human needs as possible. The need for *flow* is key — which means doing a really good job making sure your material is at an appropriate level for the student. If the student is under-challenged, that is just as important as a struggling student being over-challenged. Matching up the skill level and what the student is ready for in the curriculum could really increase the

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possibility of helping students get into the flow state. Also, making classrooms more active environments, as opposed to passive environments. Making them places where students are encouraged to question their assumptions and do discoveries on their own and have time to play around with the material and ideas, in fun ways, through fun activities. This is absolutely essential. And the need for autonomy... I think the need for autonomy comes along with what I was saying about giving students free time for discovery.

The need for relatedness, or belonging, is important — making the students feel as if they belong — *here* — in the classroom. So if you're teaching a female in a math or science class with a room full of guys, you should make it clear that she belongs in that classroom.

And the need for competence is another one, which is related to flow as far as I'm concerned. Having the students feel that they can master material through revisions. I am all about revisions and feedback, as opposed to judgment days of testing — because you can get students to have a sense that they are moving toward competence or mastery, as opposed to shutting them down with evaluation. The possibility of getting a low grade in a single snapshot in time is not encouraging and doesn't bring out the best in students.

I could go on and on and on, but this is a sampling of some of the basic fundamental human needs that teachers should be mindful of. Taking care to fulfill these basic fundamental human needs is so important.

Valentine: *Let's talk about tuition-driven schools. Independent schools are very expensive, and some parents have to make practical choices about when to enroll their children in them. Can you talk about the different benefits of your approach to learning in the first half of pre-K through 12 schooling as opposed to in the second half?*

Kaufman: From a neuroscience perspective, the answer is nuanced — the adolescent years are absolutely crucial, as well as the preschool years, but in different ways. As early as possible in education, what is really important is to make sure you don't take the play and the love of learning

completely out of the students before they even start to formally learn. Preschool is a very important time in a child's development. It's a time when we should be encouraging curiosity and play and not worrying so much about teaching formal things yet. We need to pave the way for the student to love the learning process itself.

But in the adolescent years, if you don't exercise students' imaginations, if you don't actually continually allow them to exercise a lot of cognitive functions that come from the imagination brain network — such as imagining the perspective of others and having compassion — you find that they can lose those features. It really is a use-it-or-lose-

it situation. So once you get to those higher grades, the adolescent environment is very important to making sure you don't just offer higher levels of work, such as abstract math or more complicated literature, but that you concomitantly activate the students' imagination or the imagination-related functions.

Valentine: *Near the end of your book, you write, "Intelligence is the dynamic interplay of engagement and abilities in pursuit of personal goals." Any last thoughts on that?*

Kaufman: That is what personal intelligence is. I think that, ultimately, personal intelligence should be our focus. We focus too much on general intelligence. General intelligence is well measured by IQ tests. It measures your general ability, across context situations, regardless of your own personal dreams. It measures how

fast you can learn information. We need to stop primarily valuing fast learning and also truly value deep, personal learning. That's the level of analysis at which you can see immense brilliance in all students.

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