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FOOTNOTES

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What Students Can Learn From Steve Jobs

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<http://www.fpri.org/education/innovation/>

Teachers: The lessons contained in this essay are dangerous. You probably do not want your students to read it, any more than the Chief of Police of Birmingham, Alabama wanted people to read Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s letter. Fight that impulse.

Students: The lessons contained in this essay are difficult to put into practice in your lives. You'll probably want to remain a passive consumer, stay on the paved roads your parents and teachers lay before you, and not make waves. Fight that impulse.

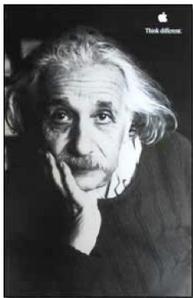
A few days ago, Steve Jobs, the rockstar founder and Chief Executive Officer of Apple, Inc. resigned his job to become Chairman of the Board, instead. For more than ten years, Mr. Jobs has been paid one dollar a year to run what has become the most valuable company in the world.

His story is almost legendary: Co-found a company in your parents' garage before you turn 21...invent the personal computer industry...lose it to grownups wearing blue suits and less talented "me-too" competitors...reinvent personal computers "for the rest of us"...get thrown out of your company by the grownup you chose to help run it...reinvent personal computers again (and animated storytelling, too)...return to the company you founded that has been mismanaged to near bankruptcy by those grownups...reinvent personal computers again (and the music industry...and the mobile telephone...and then make most personal computers obsolete)...and...?

To be fair, Mr. Jobs did not single-handedly do any of those things. From his first partner, Steve Wozniak, to the small team of dedicated and talented engineers who built the Macintosh, to the thousands who work for today's Apple, he attracted skilled and creative people who wanted to change the world by making better tools. Along the way, he managed to make a lot of money, but it is clear to those who have met him that money was never the goal - it was just a byproduct of clear vision, mostly great execution, and a willingness to lead, to fail, and to try again.

Lesson 1: "Education is that which remains when one has forgotten everything learned in school."

- Albert Einstein



Steve Jobs was, by his own admission, never a good student. He dropped out of college after six months, then just hung around, going to whatever classes interested him, and sleeping on friends' floors, for another year and a half. Try telling your parents that you want to do that! (Warning: Stunt performed by an unprepared student on an open course of life. Do not attempt!)

What Steve said about his dropping out is simply, "much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on....you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future." Lesson 1: allow your curiosity and intuition to guide your learning. Steve dropped out of college, but not out of learning! Not everyone has to be good at everything, but each of us should try to be our best at something - and we should try to enjoy it, too.

Lesson 2: “Don’t settle.”
- Steve Jobs



In many ways, we are all encouraged to stop short, to settle for just good enough, or in lots of ways, not good enough. We run out of time, out of energy, out of money, and we settle for a bad product, a boring job, the wrong spouse. Each time we do this, we devalue our own lives. It doesn't matter if you're a painter of houses or murals, a writer of instruction manuals or of poems - if you do not demand the best of yourself and those with whom you work, you have cheated the world.

Jobs has never been afraid to fail, either. The Apple III, the Lisa with its “Twiggy” disk drive, the Mac Cube - all glorious product failures. Each was followed by a Plan B - another attempt informed by what was learned from failure. As Steve told the graduating class at Stanford a while back, “I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You've got to find what you love. And that is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking.”

Lesson 3: Design Matters, and Great Design Matters Most

At Apple, as at NeXT and Pixar, Steve Jobs is the master communicator as well as master innovator. His focus on clear communication is not just that he makes telephones and computers that can videochat, it is that he builds tools for communication between people, and that these are built on the stories that we tell each other as we live our lives. That is why his products have value, and have made Apple rich. If you've ever seen a Steve Jobs keynote speech (watch them on YouTube) then you know that he is famous for the way that he builds a presentation, from the introductory “how we got here” recap, to the “one more thing” presented like an encore song demanded by the audience that knows that it's coming, and that he owes it to them.



There were computers before the Apple II. There were mp3 players before the iPod. There were mobile phones before the iPhone, and there were tablet computers before the iPad. In each, though, Jobs and his colleagues took the time to understand how the function performed by the device fit into the daily narrative of our lives. They carefully built stories, and from those, they built tools of deceptive simplicity. When computers had cursor keys, they gave us a mouse.

When computers had text, they gave us icons. When music was pirated, they gave us iTunes. In each case, others came before, but Jobs and his team learned, refined, and resisted the urge to complicate the stories, and our lives, with bad design. Jobs insists on a clear narrative. He demands that you be able to explain what you're doing in 30 seconds. Try it - it's very difficult to do, but if you succeed, you will find that people will want to help you. Innovation is not merely a cool invention. Innovation finds the value of that invention in people's lives. Good design, like a good story, is infectious.

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Since he announced his resignation, there have been hundreds of articles written about the future of Apple without Steve Jobs. Some conclude that Apple cannot survive, while others presume that like the rest of his creations, Jobs has planned Apple to thrive in a wider world. As Chairman, Steve is not absent from Apple, so the reports of his (and Apple's) death are, as Twain said, greatly exaggerated. As students, we may all owe him a bit of gratitude, for showing us that there is another way. If we are willing to keep learning, especially outside school; if we demand the best from ourselves, and others; and if we are mindful that our lives are the stories we tell and the stories we hear, then we will have learned important lessons from a man who never intended to be a teacher, but who teaches in the best way - by example.

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