

Talking with Jason Kreutner About Education

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Jason Kreutner is founder and head of the University School of the Lowcountry (USL) which is a third-through-twelfth grade independent school in Mount Pleasant. In addition to a standard curriculum where math, science, humanities, writing, and language are given strong emphasis, USL features small classes, flexible course work based on skill and progress, and a program of “learning outside the classroom” where students spend one day per week (on over 30 field trips per year) experiencing direct interaction with, and service to, the community—all with the goal of

balancing each student’s intellectual, physical, emotional, ethical, and social development. Peter Ingle sat down with Jason recently to talk about education, technology, and change.

Jason, how do you see education changing these days?

My first thought is that there is a difference between how education “is changing” and how it “should be changing.” Technology is permeating education for good and for ill. On the one hand, schools have jumped in with both feet to buy laptops and tablets and create one-to-one initiatives. Yet teaching at its core is about relationships, and technology should be only a part of that.

Has technology also helped the student-teacher relationship?

Yes and no. For example, being able to correspond electronically with teachers, share documents online, and learn from a distance are all positive benefits of technology. At the same time, focusing too much on technology can be an impediment. USL is also a laptop school, but we feel strongly that cellphones don’t have a place at school. Research indicates that cellphones essentially “call to” students in ways that keep them from focusing and take them away from being in

the moment with their teacher, or wrestling with a topic together, or participating in the classroom.

What do you think about standardized testing?

There have to be forms of accountability, and standardized tests have their value. At the same time, we take students off campus every week and the public evaluates us—they *tell us* what they think of our students—which is as important if not more valuable than a standardized test. So even though standardized tests can provide an element of “what is the same for everybody,” they’re an imperfect tool. You need to have other tools, too.

What would you say is the greatest challenge for students today?

I think there’s a lot of pressure to take everything to the next level, be it academics or sports or an instrument. There’s more tension between being gifted and being pressured into boring into that area too hard. I’m not sure a middle schooler needs to be deciding which college to go to. Meanwhile, college has become so expensive that kids aren’t allowed to fail and blunder their way into finding out what they’re passionate about while getting a nice broad education.

What about teachers? What is the greatest challenge for them today?

I know teachers in public, private, and home school settings. They all want to be valued and respected and they want the ability to operate with latitude. Yet the position of teachers has been knocked down by society. Teachers are also more concerned about corporate influences on education, about teaching being turned into the following of a script, and about letting outside demands get in the way of teaching. It should not be a profession that feels it is under siege. After all, one of the noblest things we can do is help prepare the next generation. These are all things we’re struggling with in America.

Do you think education will look dramatically different in 10 or 20 years?

I don’t know. Will there be a move to have schools within schools? Will there be a return to great neighborhood schools? Or a stronger trend toward more charter schools? There are risks on both sides: on the side of providing more choice and making schools more narrow, and on trying to make sure everyone gets exactly the same thing. It used to be that we all read the same newspaper and watched the same four networks. But it’s hard to know now where we get common information. These are concerns.

During your summers away from USL, you've had extraordinary success as a swim coach at Snee Farm. What do you think has made your teams so consistently successful?

Culture. Older kids helping younger kids and showing them how we do things, and talking about things we *don't* do. It's an environment where older swimmers and alumni are held up as examples for younger swimmers to see, be supported by, and be encouraged by.

Culture is nice, but does it breed faster, stronger, more competitive swimmers?

Continuity plays a big role in the success of any entity in business or sports. If you have everyone on board and you share a common language about what's expected, and you have more people paying attention to it with more eyes, it helps a lot. We also tell younger kids stories about when the older swimmers were their age and went through the same learning process they're going through—and those older kids are there talking about that, helping the younger kids, playing water polo with them, and being part of the team.

It sounds like the same culture you promote at USL, except you don't have sports at USL.

The American model of making sports part of school is not the international model. In other countries, kids go to sport clubs after school. The two are kept separate. But we do have P.E. every morning at USL and our kids are as fit as students anywhere.

Why have you chosen not to include sports?

We thought long and hard about it. I decided that I wanted to focus on our students' intellectual and emotional and social development and not have to worry about things like, is the basketball coach yelling at them, or is the soccer coach not playing my child for some reason. Those things take up an inordinate amount of time in school administrative and athletic director meetings. In our case, a lot of kids do sports and music and art in after-school programs at other places.

Back to smartphones for a moment, do you see phones in particular affecting students' academic abilities, their personalities, their behavior?

Yes, which is why this is something we look at every year. For example, we used to let older students keep their phones at school, but phone use has become so ubiquitous in our society that we think phones don't have a place at school. Even though students take phones on our longer field trips, we—teachers *and* students—

don't have our phones out while we eat meals together. My students know that when I go to bed at night my phone stays downstairs. We're trying to prioritize the student-teacher relationship without letting phones get in the way of that.

So how do you monitor phone use at school?

The kids can bring their phones to school, but they check them in at the office. Last year we let them keep phones in their book bags during the day, but that didn't work so now they leave them in a designated place in the office where they can check them if necessary. Will our policy look different next year? I'm sure it will. But I think that until cell phones evolve in some way, they're plaguing us more than helping us.

You said earlier that USL is a laptop school. What do you mean?

Each student is allotted a laptop. But at the same time, we don't allow note taking on laptops because research has shown that taking notes by hand is more effective, that more information gets absorbed and retained when you write it down. In our case, limiting the use of technology is also a matter of learning to be alone with your thoughts and to be comfortable with that, as opposed to always having to be on a phone—or watch a movie in the car—because you feel bored. The ability to self-regulate is something we have to work on, especially in moments of anxiety. I worry what the country might look like in the future if we're torn moment to moment between being alone with our thoughts and reaching for technology.

Do you think children are under more stress now due to technology?

Yes. There's more anxiety about the state of the economy and the cost of school, especially college. And social media makes you call into question how you are doing in relation to other people. Even though it can help you connect with others in amazing ways, it also makes it easy for people to be incredibly cruel to each other. It can be hard to take a break from social media, and your Facebook feed can end up haunting you into adulthood.

What's at the core of your vision for the University School of the Lowcountry?

Nice kids treating each other and their teachers well, and exploring the world firsthand. Those are the things that stood out for me when my first child was born. I thought, if we were independently wealthy, how would we raise our children? And the answer was that we would take them across the world and learn about the Romans by taking them to Rome. Or go see Niagara Falls and talk about it right

there: learn about things by experiencing them. I started thinking how to incorporate that approach into a school where kids really like to learn and want to learn together, with each other and with teachers. It's the people and those relationships that make good education.

And academics?

I remember in a previous school where I worked, it came time to present achievement awards to students. One teacher went to bat for a particular student, talking about how much that student excelled in a certain subject. Another teacher said, but wait, that student is disrespectful, unbearable to teach in other classes, has no organizational skills, and doesn't get along with other students or even socialize with them. What are we rewarding here? It was clearly not enough just to get good grades or figure out how to get all As. That's why we introduced the idea of a "skill wheel."

Can you explain how that works?

Students from third through fifth grade are not given numerical grades. Instead, they're evaluated quarterly on a broad range of disciplines that include things like empathy for others, the ability to listen, preparation for class, expressing ideas in writing, comfort with public speaking, comfort around authority, dealing with ambiguity, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and so on. In sixth grade, we introduce numerical grading but we keep the skill wheel and incorporate more categories. Each quarter, students examine their skill wheel evaluations and write to me personally about why they think they're being evaluated a certain way and where they think they can improve or want to improve.

Is it well received?

Sometimes we'll ask older students if we can pull out their skill wheels from several years ago and show them to the younger kids who can see how the older students went through exactly what they're going through. It takes the edge off. It makes them feel not so alone and isolated in "their" grade. As importantly, it shows them that scholastic performance is not the only measure of success; that they need strong skills in areas like public speaking, creativity, organization, and problem solving—which are just as valid as getting an A on a test. It also shows the more academically oriented students that there are important skills which are representative of the greater world at large.

Did you design the skill wheel?

When we started USL, we looked at different ways that schools and other institutions evaluate people and one of the things we found was a pie chart which we adapted as a skill wheel. But our skill wheel isn't in the form of a circle. It's more the idea of measuring a variety of human skills. We also include different criteria in intermediate school, middle school, and upper school.

Can you give an example of the different criteria?

For instance, in the upper school we stress the importance of mentoring and being willing to mentor younger students. And just the other day I had a discussion with the upper school about the difference between self-compassion and self-confidence. What does this distinction really mean? We had a great talk about how some people who seem confident can be overconfident and not really have a clear assessment of themselves, while other people who at first underestimate themselves can learn to know that about themselves, not panic, and find their way through it to success.

You also teach something called "leadership and life skills." Can you talk about that?

Creativity and critical thinking come from the filter you create to understand the world. If your filter comes from 180 days inside the classroom and learning about things from books and pictures, and not really venturing into the world, then your filter is limited. On the other hand, spending time on our field trips year after year helps students develop very sophisticated filters about life. My job is to connect everything together in support of all disciplines both in the classroom and on our field trips, and helping students knit it all together is an aspect of developing their critical thinking. We call it linking—where you connect things that may not seem related. That's creativity, and it's a twenty-first-century skill. There will always be a place for creative, innovative people who can communicate and collaborate with all sorts of people due to real-world exposure through a wide range of experiences. I think this is what will enable these kids to flourish.

What continues to surprise you about students?

Seeing them know far more than I knew at their age. Watching them bring their talents to bear, write a thank you note, reach out to someone who is ill, and do thoughtful things for our teachers. It's very humanizing for all of us.

What's your greatest reward as an educator?

Being here. Coming here every day. I think the students would tell you that I'm happy 96 percent of the time. And I feel like I have tons of sons and daughters. I can't think of a better forum than being able to spend so much time with these kids and getting to know them as they change. ■