

In my rural French school, toward the end of *seconde*, we were made to participate in something called “career orientation.” For one grim hour, we sat in a dim computer lab scrolling through an outdated government database of professions: banker, farmer, hairdresser. We were fourteen, maybe fifteen. Most of us had barely glimpsed adulthood, yet we were expected to declare our place in it. One friend had set her heart on the medical profession, wishing to follow in her parents’ footsteps. Another chose accountancy—a mystery I’ve never solved. I envied their certainty, an attribute I distinctly lacked. My fourteen-year-old appetite for adventure didn’t seem to fit within any of the prescribed career paths. With each profession I read and promptly rejected, a slow dread began to accumulate: *what on earth was I going to do with my life?*

The teacher had already passed by once, asking if I had any ideas. “I don’t know,” I told her. She came round again. Same answer. By the third time, I was dreading the question. So I decided to offer her the most admirable path I could think of... at least on my own terms.

“Cult leader,” I said.

As I have grown in age and perhaps wisdom (although some people may disagree), I’ve come to reject the question at the heart of that exercise: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* It offers children the wrong model for life: a career that stretches neatly from graduation to retirement. The reality is far different. In the U.S., individuals born in the latter part of the 1960s had an average of 12.7 jobs throughout their working lives (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). The trend is echoed in McKinsey & Company’s report *Human Capital at Work*, which found that the average employee switched roles every two to four years in the UK, EU, US, and India (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Factor in the rise of jobs that don’t yet exist, won’t for another decade and the idea of prepping children for a lifelong career starts to feel not only outdated but borderline dangerous. Charles Handy’s *Second Curve* offers a far different perspective: the idea that we should actively reinvent ourselves before decline sets in. It’s an invitation to embrace personal change in our careers, over and over again. However, for many, embracing the second curve feels incredibly difficult. The reasons are deeply human: fear of uncertainty, fear of losing identity, fear of failure, or the daunting prospect of walking away from years of hard-earned progress. Layer onto that the pressures of finances, societal expectations, and the inability to clearly see a viable alternative, and it becomes easy to understand why so many remain stuck.

Beneath all this, though, lies a more fundamental issue: we were never taught to expect change. We are told a story: get a degree, climb the ladder, stay the course, and “you’re sorted.” Most education systems prepare us for one linear path, not for the 12.7 career shifts that an average life may hold. No wonder the second curve feels so unfamiliar, almost unnatural to so many.

This essay will argue that both education and the world of work need a radical rethink: not to funnel students into one-size-fits-all professional identities, but to cultivate in them the courage to face uncertainty, the flexibility to adapt, and the resilience to begin again. Education should teach them the art of adaptation, failure, and reinvention. The true goal should be to empower them with the ability to grow from every misstep so that, when success does arrive, they won’t be shackled by it but emboldened to take the next bold step forward and undergo their own second curve.

To build this case, the essay will first explore the historical roots of modern education -how the industrial-age philosophy that shaped contemporary schooling continues to dominate our approach to learning, work, and success. It will examine how this outdated model fails to equip students with the tools they need to navigate a future defined by unpredictability. Finally, it will propose a new vision for education: one that prepares the young for a lifetime of change.

My French high school is no different from most; in fact, it is surprisingly similar to schools across the developed world. At the ring of the bell, we shuffled from one class to the next, perfecting the fine art of looking engaged while cramming facts we'd forget by Friday. This kind of schooling is so deeply baked into our culture that imagining an alternative feels almost heretical. But if we trace its roots, the logic behind it starts to make sense. Modern schooling, as we know it, began to take shape in the 19th century, alongside the rise of industrial capitalism. As factories multiplied, there was an urgent demand for a workforce that was punctual, obedient, and able to perform repetitive tasks efficiently. Historian David Tyack (1974) points out that early American public schools were quite literally modelled on factories. The goal wasn't enlightenment, it was efficiency. No surprise, then, that the qualities most rewarded in students mirrored those prized on the factory floor: patience, compliance, and a healthy respect for hierarchy. This 'factory' school model was not unique. Prussian education reforms influenced many Western countries by introducing standardized curricula and age-graded classrooms designed to produce "docile and efficient citizens" (Kaestle, 1983; Foucault, 1977). And while the factories have mostly modernized or vanished, the school model remains, churning out graduates better trained to follow instructions than to question them. We've clung to this model long after the world it was built for disappeared. Today's economy doesn't need factory workers, it needs problem-solvers, creators, and agile thinkers. Yet our education systems reward the wrong qualities. Teachers praise the rule followers and play the role of managers, tightly controlling students' time and behaviour much like factory supervisors (Foucault, 1977). Subjects are chopped into isolated blocks, mimicking the division of labour in factories (Illich, 1971). Most damagingly, obedience and punctuality are prized far above creativity or critical thinking; because smooth operations always come before bold ideas (Cuban, 1984). This factory-era logic made sense once, but it's 2025 now and the world has changed beyond recognition. Schools, however, have barely budged. Institutional inertia keeps them stuck. As sociologist Meyer (1977) notes, education is deeply embedded in society and difficult to change. Additionally, parents and policymakers often trust a system that worked for them. Charles Handy (1994) echoes this challenge, noting that organizations including schools often resist change because they cling to familiar "control" structures to manage complexity, even when change is long overdue. The urgent question, then, becomes not *why* education must change but *what* it should change toward.

You'll be relieved to hear I didn't end up leading a cult. Instead, I became a design engineer (for now who knows, maybe Plan A will be my second curve). What drew me to design engineering was the mindset: the freedom to build, test, fail, and start over. In a world where change is the only constant, the most valuable skill isn't a fixed set of knowledge, but the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn. That means shifting from education as training to education as design. Design thinking aligns with Charles Handy's *second curve* philosophy and offers a powerful alternative to the outdated factory model. As Tim Brown explains in *Change by Design*, it's nonlinear, iterative, and experimental. It begins with curiosity and a readiness to prototype, fail, and refine. The real game-changer? Failure isn't punished, it's celebrated. The goal isn't a flawless prototype, but constant progress.

There's something profoundly liberating about spending hours on a project, watching it flop, then stepping back with fresh eyes and thinking, "*Okay, here's how to do it differently next time.*" James Dyson's 5,126 failed prototypes before inventing the bagless vacuum cleaner remain a classic example to us all (Dyson, n.d.). Now imagine if education embraced that mindset. Instead of forcing eighteen-year-olds to declare their life's work, what if we encouraged them to prototype their careers? Try an internship, learn what works and what doesn't: too much people contact? Not enough creativity? What else could you test? Shadow someone, chat with a mentor, tweak, and reinvent. Yet today, someone who's had four jobs, three internships, and ten coffee chats might be seen as flaky or lost. We all know that one relative who's tried every career under the sun, only to be told, "*What are you doing? You're wasting your life.*" Maybe it's time to flip the script. Rather than scolding the restless explorer, we should be asking the burnt-out finance worker stuck in a dead-end groove, "*What are you doing? You're wasting your life.*" In the design world, experimentation signals resilience and growth -- not failure. Companies like Google dedicate entire weeks to testing wild ideas that might make a manager faint (Franck, 2021). What if schools did the same? What if students had the freedom to ask, "*What is something new I want to learn? Am I still evolving?*" The more a prototype is tested, broken, and rebuilt, the more valuable the process becomes. Our classes were full of stories about products who failed on the market because they didn't test enough. Seen this way, education's mission changes completely. As Tony Wagner argues in *The Global Achievement Gap*, schools shouldn't just cram facts, they should nurture creativity, critical thinking, and resilience. According to the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2023*, half of all workers will need to update their core skills every five years. The top five most in-demand skills? Creative thinking, analytical thinking, technical literacy, curiosity and lifelong learning—followed closely by resilience and agility (World Economic Forum, 2023). In this light, education must prioritise exactly these traits. It must teach us to embrace the glorious messiness of becoming. *How, exactly, should education rise to that challenge?* That's the question we'll explore next.

So how exactly should education meet this challenge?

As Charles Handy wrote back in the 1990s, organisations and schools should behave more like living systems: flexible, adaptive, and always learning (Handy, 1993). In practice? Start with classrooms that feel more like design studios than exam halls. What if every new topic began with a puzzle to solve, not a lecture to memorise? In a flipped model, students would jump into a challenge they don't yet know how to solve, fail productively, and try again. Programs like Team Repair are already showing the way by handing students broken appliances and asking them to figure it out, no instructions provided (Team Repair, n.d.). Or give them a stack of newspapers and challenge them to reconstruct the day's events; chaotic, yes, but it teaches students how to think, not what to think. This mindset shift should continue into higher education. Of course, we want our civil engineers to understand physics: but lectures alone won't cut it. Instead, students could design a miniature bridge, watch it collapse, and then analyse why it failed. The highest grade doesn't go to the strongest structure, it goes to the most insightful post-mortem. Failure isn't a flaw; it's the point. Education that begins in curiosity never truly ends, and that's the power of prototyping. And beyond graduation? Lifelong learning becomes not a bonus, but a baseline. Handy's "portfolio worker" model predicted this decades ago: people will no longer have single careers but rather a mosaic of evolving roles that demand constant reinvention (Handy, 1994). Unsurprisingly, the edtech sector is booming, valued at over \$123 billion in 2022 and

still growing (Grand View Research, 2023). Tools like ChatGPT are already helping people master new concepts overnight. In Google's famous "20% time" model, employees were encouraged to explore side projects, some of which became Gmail and Google Maps (Franck, 2021). Imagine if schools and workplaces offered everyone that same creative breathing room to explore. Generative AI can tutor, edit, challenge, and support students at scale. What if every learner had a personalised AI mentor, designed to stretch their skills, deepen their curiosity, and provoke critical thinking about their next step? Used wisely, AI can help move us away from a ladder-shaped education system and toward a web: where learning is nonlinear, cross-disciplinary, and curiosity-driven. You want to explore climate policy, literature, and machine learning all at once? Now you can. Institutions like MIT, Khan Academy, and Minerva are already prototyping this future. AI enables personalised learning and, just as Handy envisioned, empowers students to manage their own education: a modern version of what he called "self-management" (Handy, 1993). This vision also echoes Sugata Mitra's call for student agency and autonomy in the learning process (Mitra, 2014). But to truly thrive in this kind of system, students need more than curiosity: they need resilience. As Carol Dweck explains, those with a growth mindset are more likely to take risks, embrace failure, and persist through setbacks (Dweck, 2006). Still, belief in growth isn't enough. Learners need the emotional tools to stay grounded in uncertainty. Brené Brown reminds us that vulnerability is the birthplace of creativity, courage, and learning (Brown, 2012). Real learning starts with the words: "*I don't know... yet.*" Flexible, human-centred, lifelong learning communities must evolve with us. The best learners, the ones who keep growing long after the diplomas, are those comfortable with *not knowing yet*. Because that is the space where all real growth begins.

The idea that we must pick one path, follow it forever, and call that success: it's tidy, it's comfortable, and it's utterly false. Learning isn't about mastering everything; it's about humility, the courage to admit what you don't know and the curiosity to seek it out. That, I believe, is what education should nurture: not a fixed profession, but a person always in motion. What the world needs now isn't more certainty, it's more curiosity. More prototype careers. More students asking weird questions. More professionals willing to tear up the old playbook and draft a new one every few years. As Charles Handy reminds us, we don't have to ride the first curve all the way to its bitter end, we can leap mid-flight, into something new. So let's stop asking kids what they want to be when they grow up, as if growth ever stops. Ask them instead: *What do you want to try next?* Because in the end, life isn't a straight line, it's a series of second curves. And if we can teach students how to swim rather than cling to the shore, we'll have done something far more valuable than preparing them for a job.

We'll have prepared them for a life.

Looking back on that bleak corridor and the endless scrolling through career options, I now know how I'd answer the question:

Growing.

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PS: The cult leader story is true, and yes I did get in trouble for it!