CHAPTER 7

CHALLENGES

Never again is someone going to pay you to give them answers they can look up online. They’ll only pay you to solve problems that don’t yet have answers.

—Seth Godin

What TV show does education most resemble?”

Now that’s a challenge, I thought, as I stood at the podium facing a group of around three hundred teachers, one of whom had asked the question from the darkness of the crowd.

“That’s a good question,” I said, buying myself a moment to think. “Which kids are we talking about? For some I think it would
be America’s Got Talent or Shark Tank, but for others it would probably be more like Survivor.”

Later that night I thought about that teacher’s question again, only this time in terms of what genre education resembles. Comedy? Horror? Again, I thought, the answer depends on which kids we were talking about. But then I realized a major flaw in the answer I had given earlier. The shows I named were reality shows. By contrast, over the years education has become more and more scripted.

Scripted shows are simpler for their participants, because they are given the destination and shown a detailed roadmap (the script) for getting there. They need only memorize the names of the streets, so to speak, and follow a set of directions. Their action and dialogue is predictable and their biggest challenge is memorizing the information given up front. Reality shows are more challenging for participants, because while they’re given the destination, they are only told the general direction they need to go, rather than being handed a roadmap. They must then work with others along the way to figure out how to get there. Their actions and dialogue are unpredictable and their biggest challenge is learning from information gotten along the way. In education, students are being prepared as actors for scripted shows, only to be cast into the world of reality. In other words, what our kids are missing in their academic studies is a healthy sense of challenge.

**GOING OFF SCRIPT**

Prior to the screenwriters’ strike of 1988, television was mostly dominated by scripted shows. But as the strike continued, networks began looking for alternative programming they could air that
wouldn’t have to rely on a set script. Some reality shows, such as *Real People* and *The Gong Show*, had succeeded, so the networks decided to take a chance and add more. Less than a decade later, the format had taken off and reality programming ruled the airwaves.

While much of reality programming is admittedly pretty bad, what many people find most interesting about it is the unpredictability inherent in the format. In scripted shows, the story takes a very clear path. Dialogue is memorized, delivered by actors, and overseen by directors and producers. There is no leeway for the actors to improvise or experiment.

Education is just like scripted television. Students play the role of the actors (and like real actors, often they are also struggling and getting burned out). The teachers are the directors, assigned to lead these actors through very strict, set-in-stone scripts (textbooks) crafted by writers (education policy makers) and approved by producers (politicians and administrators).

What’s needed in education is a little reality. In reality TV there are no “actors,” just real people—*individuals*, with their own real-world backgrounds, motivations, and talents. They have a general idea of what’s going to happen in the show, but along the way surprises occur, learning takes place, and relationships are built. Just as in real life, they must learn to adapt to the realities of the situation at hand. The directors (teachers) are guides instead of bosses, and the job of the producers (policymakers) is to make sure that the overall goal is achieved—which, in education, would mean *learning*. The writer’s job moves from writing a *standard* script to creating interesting *challenges* that are not meant to be followed step by step or word for word, but instead are meant to create interesting situations for the actors to respond to (and, in education, to *learn* from).