INTRODUCTION

I thought if there was just one computer in every school, some of the kids would find it.
It would change their life.
—STEVE JOBS

When I was growing up in the 1950s, the school curriculum focused entirely on memorization. The work we did was not relevant, creative, collaborative, or challenging, but rather the simple consumption of information requiring little more than short-term recall. Things were either black or white; we either memorized the material or we didn’t. And it was understood that the seemingly never-ending series of standardized tests we were given would show how “smart” we were, in the process judging us, labeling us, sorting us, and attempting to forecast our future.
Today, when I speak, I often reference the inspiring Army slogan that once prompted us to “be all you can be!” The slogan of a great educational system should be the same—an education should make us feel that we can do anything we set our minds to and nothing can stop us. But for many of us sitting there at our desks, staring down at those omnipotent tests, that just wasn’t the case. We were warned that these tests meant everything and would define us in the eyes of our teachers, families, friends, and future employers. Even then, watching many of my fellow students struggle with those tests, I knew there was something inherently wrong with the way things were. Scores on a test had led many of us to believe that perhaps we already were all that we could be.

I had always considered myself a good student. My parents read to me nightly, instilling a love of learning and discovery. I started reading young and was well prepared by the time I entered school. I absolutely loved those early grades, as they were more about discovering new things and just trying to learn how the world worked. Of course, we still had to learn the basics like arithmetic and spelling, but even those seemed interesting because my teachers made them fun and memorable. If this was what school was like, I thought, then I was going to love it! Then I entered middle school and everything changed.

Suddenly school felt a lot less like fun and a lot more like work. It was as if our natural creativity, which comes from simply being a child, was no longer valued or wanted. Whereas in elementary school we were these young, energetic “crazy ones,” by the time we hit middle school it was expected that we would be over our craziness—that we would grow up and become better at fitting in. Explorations had been replaced by expectations, collaborating by competing, discovering by memorizing. And the praise we had
always gotten for how unique we were now came only when we received good grades and test scores.

If we did things differently in elementary school, it was considered creative, but when we did the same things in middle school it was considered coloring outside the lines. Learning felt no longer rewarding, but boring, and it began to show in my work. I knew that I needed to adapt, so I quickly learned to play what I refer to as the education game, one complete with points (GPA), scores (grades), levels (grade levels), winning (graduating), and losing (dropping out).

The character I became to play this education game was a Memorizer. Even though it was not my strength, it didn’t require too much work, and it seemed to be the way to win the game. The more I memorized, the better my grades got, and the more I was respected and appreciated by adults. Unfortunately, I also noticed that some of my friends just weren’t very good at playing this game. To me this made no sense, because I knew these were smart, creative kids that had thrived right along with me in elementary school. “What was happening?” I would wonder. The books and worksheets in middle school seemed pretty straightforward to me. “How can such smart kids be losing?” It seemed as if the education game was rigged against them.

**THE WRONG GAME**

When I graduated from high school, a classmate wrote in my yearbook, “Aristotle and Couch are now synonymous. Keep memorizing those problems!” It was meant as a compliment, but looking back, it really captures the main weakness of our current