

People like me don't do that kind of stuff

UNLESS YOUR CHILD IS MOTIVATED TO DEFINE HIS SELF-IMAGE, HE WILL CONTINUE TO STAGNATE IN HIS PEER GROUP



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We all know that peer pressure is a considerable factor in the lives of young people today. However, I would suggest that few youngsters are really thinking through the full implications for their own lives when they bend to the pressures.

When I was in my mid-20s, I attended a training programme on mind mapping. In it, not only did I learn about a set of useful tools, but also the brain science behind why it works.

I remember at the time being so excited about the implications of this wonderful new learning. However, I also remember that this was mixed with frustration and some degree of anger. "If this knowledge and information and these tools were all known and in the public domain, why hadn't my educators in school and college shared them with me? What might have been my academic potential if I had been using those tools?"

I'm not going to go into all the details here of what mind mapping is or why how it works. In the simplest terms, it reflects the fact that our minds are not linear in their working. In the process of trying to do creative work, our brains will always work far faster and more randomly than conventional note-taking.

Also, we store our memories and ideas in non-linear ways in our minds. Mind mapping taps into that by following a set of easily learnable principles to map out one's thought processes on paper in a way that more sensitively reflects the way our minds are working.

In recent years, I don't deliver a speech or presentation, write a project plan or anything else (including this article) without it starting life as a mind map.

For me, this lead to more research and a fascinating journey of discovery about how the human mind works, what we know about the science of memory and the learning process.

Understandably, one of my strongest desires was to share this knowledge and to do all

that I could to get this information into the hands of students so they could use the skills to achieve more than I had.

Tools and techniques

I organised and ran workshops for students myself. I collaborated with other people with specific skills areas to bring their knowledge to students. I worked with school heads and teachers to explore ways in which these skills could be integrated into daily habits and practice in schools.

As is customary when conducting workshops, we took feedback from the participants at the end of the programmes. The responses were superb. Students were thrilled by the new tools and were very clear about how they wanted to use their new skills to reduce the burden of their academic studies whilst enhancing their results.

A few months went by and it came around to examination time for the students who had taken the workshop. On a couple of days, I saw students standing outside the examination hall, doing the same things that we've seen students do since examinations were invented – some engaged in nervous mind games with each other, whilst others sat with the open textbook in their hands. I was shocked. If they had taken on board everything covered in the course, the textbook would have been nowhere near.

So I had a dialogue with them after the exams. (See right).

And there was the reality – the fact that their thoughts tools such as mind mapping were not for them.

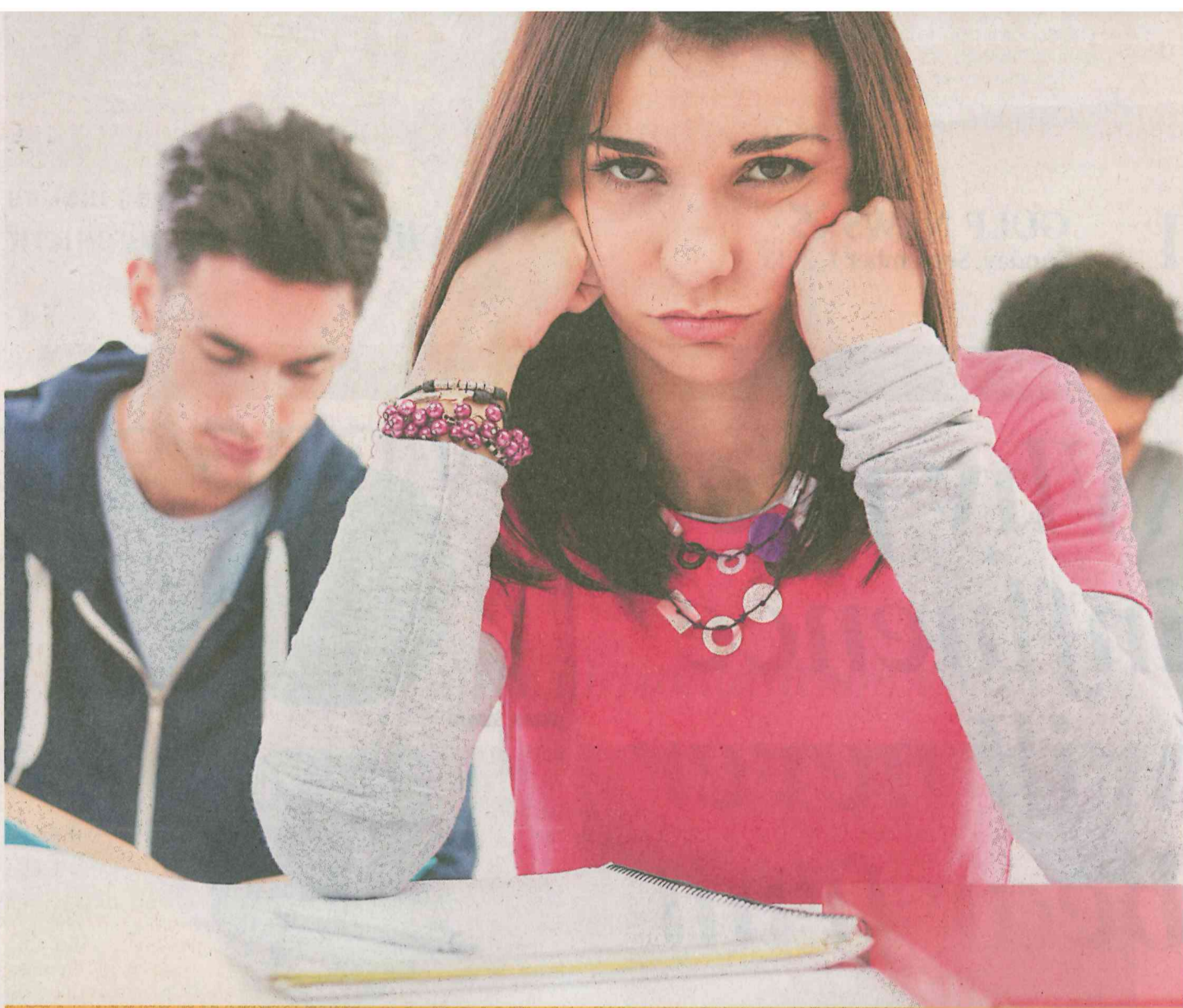
Rational, intelligent young people had turned their backs on a set of tools and techniques that could have revolutionised the way they learned, the potential outcomes they achieved from their learning and even the amount of effort it took to achieve those results... and all because it didn't fit with their self image, their belief in the 'type of person I am' and how that is reflected in behaviours.

No surprise

As frustrating as this was for me, it wasn't going to do any good to make these students feel bad. After all, what they had done was very human. Countless psychological studies have found that people have a propensity to act and behave in ways that reinforce their self-perception.

Thus, a student who thinks he or she is a 'B' student, will invariably find ways to ensure that their performance varies little from a 'B' grade, regardless of the new techniques and methods taught to them.

In addition, there are countless studies that suggest that, if you want to get a pretty good idea of what a student is going to achieve in academics, look at who he or she spends their time with. With minor variation, the vast majority of students achieve around a median level achieved by their four or five closest



The dialogue

After the exams finished, I brought the course participants together for a review. Their results, incidentally, had been little different from the students the year before and matched what had been predicted for them.

My first question was, "What benefits did using mind mapping bring for you in the preparation for these exams?"

For a few moments, the students shuffled in their seats. A few glanced furtively at each other, but none would make eye contact with me.

"Let me change the question. Who used mind mapping, either in the period running up to the exams, or during the exams for planning essay answers?"

After a moment's pause, three or four started to mutter about how they thought they would use it 'next time'. "But after the course, you were all so enthusiastic. Some of you reckoned use of these tools and techniques could be life changing for you. What happened?"

There was another pause, broken only when a boy who was often spokesman amongst the students cleared his throat, before replying: "Well, it's like... it's like, not very cool. People like me don't do that kind of stuff. It was good, but not really for us."

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In addition, there are countless studies that suggest that, if you want to get a pretty good idea of what a student is going to achieve in academics, look at who he or she spends their time with. With minor variation, the vast majority of students achieve around a median level achieved by their four or five closest friends.

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Ultimately, the only way that your child is going to break out of that level of performance is if he or she becomes so fired and inspired by a goal or a vision they want that they become motivated to change their perception of themselves, the kind of person they are, who they associate with – in short, what they mean by "people like me".

In my next article, I'll be exploring the ways in which goals can help us to shape the kind of life and prospects we want for ourselves.

For parents

So, what does all this mean for parents and students?

1) First off, we need some straight honesty with ourselves. If you are a parent of a child who sees themselves as a 'C' grade student, whose friends are also 'C' grade students, then there is very little that you or your child are going to do to change that. You could use any amount of positive or negative motivation and reinforcement, but little is really going to change (unless your child himself wants it).

2) If your child claims to have big aspirations; to attend an Ivy League college, to blaze a trail in a cutting-edge field or to 'set the world alight' in some other way, you and your child need to look very carefully at these two factors:

A) What are the academic scores, life aspirations and trajectories of his or her closest friends?

B) What evidence do you have for how they perceive themselves as an achiever?