

Why Every School Needs an 'Innovation Day'

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Google's policy of 20 percent time—giving employees plenty of free time work on whatever they want—is world famous for being the birthplace of innovative products— most famously, Gmail. But what would happen if schools gave students a similar amount of unstructured free time and allowed them to take control of their own learning? This spring Matthew Bebbington, a high school physical education teacher in the U.K., decided to find out. He organized a school-wide "Innovation Day" that let 80 students between the ages of 11-15 choose what and how to learn.

Bebbington writes on [The Guardian's Teacher Network blog](#) that far from taking an extended recess the students "worked solidly for six hours, cross-pollinating across different projects, ages and abilities." Although the teens knew nothing they did throughout the day would receive a grade or appear on a test, Bebbington says requiring them to publicly present their projects at the end of the day, fostered accountability and a "we must make this brilliant" attitude.

As a result, they made everything from art related projects like album covers and Manga to more tech-oriented projects like a remote control car and rockets. Not every project turned out perfectly, but by trying to figure out how to, for example, make a rocket fly instead of crashing, students learned one of the basics of creativity: you [can't be afraid of failure](#).

An end-of-day survey asked students whether the experience had changed their "opinion of how your learning should happen?" One student responded that he had discovered a preference for "longer time periods of project-based learning because it means you can spend longer planning it, thinking about it and concentrating on it so you can produce a better piece of work at the end of it all." That's the kind of self discovery and learning that rarely happens when school is rigidly structured and driven by 50-minute-long siloed lessons.

Although the pressure of having to cover loads of content so that students do well on standardized tests is real, given the success of the Innovation Day, Bebbington believes every school should allocate one day per week for students to learn freely through projects. Doing so would certainly help students see how what

they're learning can be applied to problems in the real world. After all, that's the kind of thing that makes students fall in love with learning, not moment-in-time test scores.