

2012 EDEN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

OPEN LEARNING GENERATIONS

CLOSING THE GAP FROM GENERATION "Y"
TO THE MATURE LIFELONG LEARNERS

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The Unconventional Learner

A conventional interview with [Dale J. Stephens](#), keynote speaker at [EDEN's 2012 Annual Conference](#)

by Eva Suba

The first time my virtual walk led me to the website of Dale's [UnCollege](#) movement I blinked with surprise on the courage and positive approach the Manifesto's words radiate on what education should be. Hundreds of questions popped up in my head on [this young man](#), so absolutely sure in his choice of abandoning institutional education's path and being proud of it. Where institutionalized educational paths guide carriers, he decided for his independent personal learning experience and shares it with everyone interested. After dropping out of college following long hesitation, he now considers himself an educational futurist and offers new visions on education not only to his generation thanks to his [Thiel '20 under 20' Fellowship](#). Dale runs UnCollege with a small and enthusiastic team and is a Thiel Fellow, currently writing his first book *Hacking Your Education*. With ideas painting an entirely different picture of learning system, Dale J Stephens is the voice of the generation in and out of our universities/colleges now.

E.S.: Dale, you are in the age of a college student with the ambition to offer an alternative learning path. In the Manifesto of UnCollege, you depict yourself as an 'educational deviant'. What made you an 'Educational deviant'?

D.J.S.: I call myself an education deviant because I was able to take my education into my own hands. I didn't conform to the expectations of society--that one goes to university, get a degree, and then finds a job--instead I created my own path. I defined my own values. I set my own learning goals.

You can do the same -- what makes you an educational deviant is not quitting university. You can be an educational deviant within university if you're there for the right reasons. What makes you an educational deviant is knowing your end goal. If you want to be a doctor, it's what you've dreamed about since your were five, then by all means go to university. If, on the other hand, you want to be creative, start a company, write, make films, do archeology, or engage in any other non-licensed profession, then you should choose the most direct route to get there.



E.S.: What as the most shocking reaction to your ideas in the last year and what reactions inspired you the most lately?

D.J.S.: The most shocking reaction was from fellow students at Hendrix, the college I left in Arkansas. My fellow students took great offense at my choice to leave university. They didn't understand that my frustrations were with the system, not the university. I received many nasty notes from students who told me I was "shooting myself in the foot" and that I should "bloom where I was planted."

E.S.: *This year's EDEN Conference focuses on the digital divide among generations. What advice would you give university professors, decision-makers how to deal with the new generation of learners (apart from UnCollege)?*

J.S.: The generation of students that are in classes today grew up with technology. We are digital natives. For better or for worse, we see technology as an extension of ourselves. That means that technology must be integrated. You can't expect students to just sharpen pencils. They want to interact on Twitter and Facebook.

This generation has grown up more empowered than ever before. We have the freedom to make choice, to consume, and to create. We have powers that previous generations didn't have. That means we think more highly of ourselves. And that means we must be respected. Teachers and administrators need to take into account the opinions of students -- because this generation is willing to speak out.

E.S.: *New learning paths developed around learning methodologies thanks to the speedy technological development. What do you think is the best way for traditional educational institutions to prepare for the future?*

D.J.S.: I think the best way for institutions to prepare for the future is to dismantle themselves. By that I don't mean that institutions will go away or disappear -- instead what I mean is that if schools want to survive in an era of free knowledge they must become unstructured. Professors should become detached from classes, libraries detached from laboratories. In this way, students can access institutions on a la carte basis. Institutions become more flexible and can support themselves through multiple means.

E.S.: *2012 is the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations which gives to certain extent the context of the conference. What is the echo of that slightly sentimental concept for your avantgarde approach?*

D.J.S.: In a way my provocative approach is cross generational because it reminds adults of the idealism they once had in their youth. In other ways, it is not at all, for I believe the future lies with the young.

E.S.: *Where do you see yourself years from now?*

D.J.S.: Everything I do centers around unlocking human potential. Education is just one means of doing that. I don't know whether I'll work on education for the rest of my life, but I do know that everything I do will help empower people to live their lives to the fullest.

E.S.: *You will be one of the keynote speakers in Porto. What are you looking forward to the most?*

D.J.S.: I'm most looking forward to having the time to share my experiences as an unschooler. Most talks I give are quite short and I don't have much time to truly talk about student-directed learning. In Porto I will have the time to dissect my experiences and produce suggestions for ways schools can become student-directed.

Questions by Carla Carvalho, member of our 2012 Annual Conference Facebook Group:

C.C.: *According to Confucius "Knowledge should be given to those who search for it." How would you comment this phrase?*

D.J.S.: I think the converse of this statement is more important -- knowledge should not be forced upon anyone, yet this is exactly what schools do. I believe that learners should be given the opportunity to learn, but that no one should be forced to learn.

C. C.: *With all the hype and industry interest for e-learning what do you think why isn't there more investment in this area?*

D.J.S.: Investment in this area is heating up! Every week I have investors asking me which education technology startups are hot.

What are your ideas of 'unschooling'? Share your reflections on the EDEN 2012 Annual Conference's [Facebook group](#) and on [Twitter](#).



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