

Suggested Interview Questions and Angles

You argue that self-directed learning can help reverse national academic decline. What first convinced you that this approach is powerful enough to make a difference at such a scale?

It was primarily my own experiences through self-directed learning that allowed me to see its immense potential. I was completing, quite literally, a year of material per month when I first started. Obviously, I don't expect everyone to be racing through a year of material a month—that speed isn't really normal and was more due to the enormous amount of time on my hands and my extreme passion for learning. But I knew even then that SDL really does have an impact. I was realizing how I was being restricted in school in ways that I had never thought of before, when compared to SDL—I could move at my own pace, solidifying any knowledge gaps before they became an obstacle later on. I could skip topics that I already knew about or move quickly through ones that I found easy.

Because I wasn't getting a grade for anything, I felt like I had the time to zoom in on a concept as deeply as I wanted, as deeply as my passion for knowledge dictated. It was truly an exceptional experience, one unlike anything that I had ever experienced. And the best thing? I struggled. Where I was mostly unchallenged in school, I finally hit obstacles. Yet it was precisely these obstacles that enabled me to grow the most. Overall, self-study was life-changing; I wanted more people my age to be able to experience something like that, too. And when there are impacts on the individual level, there are nearly always impacts at the large-scale level, too. Those three years of exploration were precisely what convinced me that SDL was what our nation needed—it was a light forward, a compass that could lead the journeys of millions.

You're writing a book about national academic decline and an innovative self-directed learning framework at just 14. How does that feel? Do you feel accomplished... proud... anxious at readers' reactions?

I felt all of these feelings and more—but even though it did indeed feel a titch strange to be writing about the topic when I hadn't even gotten to high school, I maintained my personal philosophical beliefs: really, what difference does a few years make when compared to the vast fabric of the universe, billions of years when most

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of us haven't even lived a century? All of our lifetimes are just... tiny blips, a small fragment of light that appears... then it's gone. There's not much of a disparity between a fourteen-year-old and a thirty-year-old when you look at it from that perspective. Yes, there certainly is lived experience that's involved, but I simply like to think that I'm starting my mission... early. Our world needs people like that—not just me, of course, but any child who decides that their impact can be felt *now*.

Why the sea of knowledge metaphor? What benefits does it have in illustrating how students can engage in self-directed learning?

I chose the sea of knowledge metaphor due to two primary reasons: one, I had used it in other projects in the past, and two, it displayed the precise core values that I wanted to highlight with self-directed learning. So, in seventh grade, when I was applying to the National Junior Honor Society, or NJHS, there were five or six pillars that we needed to write an essay about, demonstrating how we show that value in our lives. Of course, I chose scholarship. This was where the metaphor originated—back then, I had already been doing self-study, doing precalculus at the time, I believe, and wanted a... *metaphorical* way to describe my pursuits of knowledge. The best I could think of was... well, water. The explorer, diving into the waters of knowledge—I tended to use rivers and lakes and such—to illustrate the profundity of wisdom, the fact that you can always go further.

Even though our education system might restrict students to a certain domain, in self-directed learning, one can go as far as one wishes to go. The most conspicuous parts of the metaphor today—the compass, the boat, the storms—those hadn't been developed at that time. Yet the most important part, the fact that humanity's knowledge is boundless, and it is only in self-directed learning that one can truly explore it, remained.

What is one statistic you found that captures the urgency of our current academic crisis?

My most troubling statistic originates from my first research, the research that really prompted me to write *The Sea of Knowledge*. It's the fact that a *fifth*—twenty *percent*—of all twelfth graders in the United States of America are at proficient or advanced levels in math. A *fifth*, the lowest value in the history of the Nation's Report Card exam. That is deeply troubling not only for me, but for educators, parents, and students alike. How can we continue to run our nation when a fifth of graduating students have basic math skills? How will we control rapidly developing technologies, ensure equitable conditions, and keep the economy from failing?

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But, of course, it's not just twelfth-grade math—it's far from it. Nearly every subject and grade level test has reached historical declines. The future has always depended on knowledge, but it looks like perhaps this future does not look very bright. And that's where SDL comes in.

What has been the most challenging part about writing *The Sea of Knowledge* so far?

I would say that the most difficult part about writing the book was adapting it, after the first draft, to be in a form that didn't intimidate readers. I mean, really, my first draft was over 400—I just had so much to write, and, after all, passion for the subject always makes the book longer. I managed to shrink it down to 300 pages around the fourth draft, but ended up adding another 70 pages after beta reader revision with chapter summaries and a new first chapter, and all of that. It really was quite the journey, I tell you. Nevertheless, I am quite thankful that I removed *some* parts; for instance, for some reason I thought I needed to explain the entirety of the origins of America's education system in chapter 3, starting from ancient civilizations to the modern day in several thousand words! Certainly interesting, but not very useful when you're trying to explain our system's flaws *today*. But that one was an easy one to take out; I had to sift through the entire book over my next three full-book revisions, deleting paragraphs that didn't have much impact, taking out unnecessary chapters and sections, and simply making sure that everything contributed to the bigger picture.

How has SDL changed your thinking about achievement? What do you define as success?

Yes, self-directed learning has *profoundly* changed my idea of what success looks like in so many ways. Sometimes I think about what my life would be like had I never discovered self-directed learning—and, boy, do I get scared thinking about that. I remember little, naive Elijah three years ago, his focus constantly set on earning that top grade, whatever it took. He would spend literally hours on assignments even after doing them in five minutes, just to make sure that he got all the answers right. He would always be the last person to submit any test, just so that he could be absolutely certain that he would see that 100% turned back in to him. He *worshipped* that grade. He lost track of his deep love for learning just so that he could have the right number entered in a gradebook. His dives into the sea of knowledge were not primarily out of his own interest, but rather that of the grade that would follow. *That* was success to him. But as that naive Elijah began engaging in self-directed learning more and began actually appreciating the vast well of knowledge that was available to him, his definition of success... evolved. It was a slow process, moving beyond getting a near heart attack at the sight of a 99%, but... I did it. (Thank goodness.)

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Eventually, I was fine with just an A; I was fine with missing a point—in fact, I didn’t really care much about my grades as long as I was learning. That didn’t really happen much at school, sadly, so there was even more focus on my SDL then so that I could continue growing. And, quite ironically, when I didn’t put in all that unnecessary effort... I ended up with even more classes with a perfect 100% in eighth grade. Back then, success was a grade. Now, success is a process—a process that wasn’t a single moment, nor a number, but an entire journey of lifelong learning.

You dedicated an entire chapter to the digital world and AI. What’s your stance on AI and how it will impact self-directed learning?

I try to keep a mostly positive view of AI—I like to think of it as having the potential to either ruin society or benefit it profoundly. It all depends on how we use it. The same thing is, I believe, true with using it for SDL. You can use it to solve all the questions for you and make rapid “progress” through the course... but... then what’s the point of dedicating the time to SDL in the first place? So you can brag to your friends about how “you” have “completed” a calculus course? I don’t think so. No, AI should be used to *assist* you, to be your *coach*. If you treat it like a tutor, *guiding* you through questions and letting you experience content from new perspectives, then that’s when you achieve the maximum levels of growth.

But AI doesn’t just have impacts on the individual level; on the contrary, I think it’s an excellent idea to introduce AI in self-directed learning to students across the country. After all, *we* are going to be the ones running these systems in the future, and to ensure more equitable conditions with this rapidly transforming technology, we need to know how to use it responsibly. Self-directed learning is the perfect place for this.

What do you want kids your age to know about self-directed learning?

Many things, in fact. For example, SDL doesn’t have to start big. Often, it’s the smallest beginnings that result in the largest growth. Don’t compare yourself to others—even stories of self-studiers like me shouldn’t guide your focus. No, every journey is unique; every journey allows you to reach your full, very unique potential.

People also tend to focus more on the accomplishments rather than the struggles with SDL, where the opposite should happen. Being a process, SDL is all about the challenges you face. It’s all about *when* you fall down and *when* you get back up again. It’s also not about speed—your pace is dictated by how much time you have and

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how much you want to spend on each concept. Take your time. Really appreciate the vastness of knowledge we have available.

What are your next steps forward in your author career?

I take my mission extremely seriously, a mission that doesn't end with my book—no, the book is simply the beginning. A book has the potential to spark cultural change, but it's only with actual leadership that changes as massive as mitigating national academic decline can be implemented. This is precisely why I plan to found a non-profit in the future, dedicated to expanding the application of SDL to students across the world—not for money, but to ensure the continuity of humanity's knowledge. The organization will also ensure more equitable conditions for self-study; though it requires little more than an electronic device and a stable internet connection, many sadly do not have these in this troubled world, and I aim to do as much as I can to fix that by creating self-directed learning centers and creating deals with other non-profits.

But before this point is reached, before this organization is created, I aim to found a community-focused effort at my own high school. Called the Independent Learner Project, the premise revolves around showing other students the immense power of self-directed learning and how it can help them reach their unique potential. This club is governed by a 10-page constitution, a continuously evolving club handbook, and a six-member Executive Council to ensure that it lasts not only during my time, but for years to come.

The non-profit I'm planning to found will be the same—very clear yet adaptable leadership programs to secure continued progression, yet adaptable standards to maintain relevance. This stress about not only the present, but the future, is crucial for both. An individual can only do so much in one life; the best efforts are those that are spread across decades, generations inspired by the same vision. A vision of knowledge. A vision of a world where learning is appreciated more than ever. A vision where we, humanity, can reach our largest goals. In the infinite fabric of the universe, a single person is nearly nothing; a sustained vision is everything.