5 Alternative Teaching Methods
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Traditional schools ""with their lectures, homework, and report cards ""aren't for everyone. Here are five alternative approaches to education.

1. MONTESSORI

Dr. Maria Montessori, the first woman in Italy to earn her physician's degree, developed the educational model that bears her name while teaching a class of 50 poor students on the outskirts of Rome in 1907. Dr. Montessori, who previously worked with special needs students, rejected the notion that children were born as "blank slates." Rather, she believed that children were born with absorbent minds and were fully capable of self-directed learning. Montessori developed the framework for a prepared educational environment in which children, empowered with the freedom to choose how they would spend their time in school, would seek out opportunities to learn on their own. Her pioneering work formed the basis for the Montessori classroom, which endures primarily in preschool and elementary school settings today.

Montessori believed that children enjoyed and needed periods of long concentration and that the traditional education model, with its structured lessons and teacher-driven curriculum, inhibited a child's natural development. Montessori students are free to spend
large blocks of the day however they choose, while the teacher, or director, observes. Dr. Montessori was a major proponent of tactile learning. Classic materials, such as the Pink Tower, Brown Stairs, and the Alphabet Box "a set of wooden letters that children are encouraged to hold and feel before learning to write" remain staples of Montessori classrooms.

Montessori classes typically span three-year age groups.

The lack of grades, tests, and other forms of formal assessment helps ensure that classes remain non-competitive. The first Montessori school in the United States was opened in Tarrytown, New York, in 1911. The New York Times described the school as follows: "Yet this is by no means a school for defective children or tubercular children or children who are anemic. The little pupils in the big sunny classroom at Tarrytown are normal, happy, healthy American children, little sons and daughters of well-to-do suburban residents." Today, the Montessori method is employed in roughly 5,000 schools in the U.S., including several hundred public schools. A 2006 study comparing outcomes of children at a public inner-city Montessori school with children who attended traditional schools provided evidence that Montessori education leads to children with better social and academic skills. Among the many celebrities who can attest to the value of a Montessori education are Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page.

2. STEINER/WALDORF

In addition to creating the field of anthroposophy, which is based on the belief that humans have the inherent wisdom to uncover the mysteries of the spiritual world, Austrian philosopher and scientist Rudolf Steiner developed an educational model that focused on the development of the "whole child" - body, soul, and spirit. Influenced by the likes of Goethe and Jean Piaget, Steiner believed there were three 7-year periods of child development, and his educational approach reflected what he thought should and should not be taught during each of these stages.
Steiner founded his first Waldorf school (the term Waldorf is now used interchangeably with Steiner to describe schools with curriculums based on Steiner's teachings) in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany, for children of workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory. The original curriculum spanned 12 years and aimed to prepare students "for living," with an emphasis on creative expression and social and spiritual values. Within 10 years, Steiner's school in Stuttgart was the largest private school in Germany. When the Nazis closed German schools during World War II, Waldorf teachers fled to other countries, contributing to the methodology's increased post-war popularity.

The curriculum that defines the Waldorf method has remained relatively unchanged in the last 90 years. Steiner believed the first 7 years of a child's life, a period marked by imitative and sensory-based learning, should be devoted to developing a child's noncognitive abilities. To that end, kindergartners in Waldorf schools are encouraged to play and interact with their environment instead of being taught academic content in a traditional setting. Steiner also believed that children should learn to write before they learned to read, and that no child should learn to read before the age of 7. From age 7-14, creativity and imagination are emphasized. During this stage, Waldorf school students may learn foreign languages, as well as eurythmy, an expressive dance developed by Steiner, and other performing arts. By age 14, students are ready for a more structured environment that stresses social responsibility.

Some critics of the Waldorf method argue that it borders on religion. According to the curriculum, students learn about Christian saints in second grade and Old Testament figures in third grade. Despite those concerns and the restricting demands of standardized testing, there are more than 800 schools that employ some variation of Steiner's teaching method throughout the world. Rudolf Steiner College, which was founded in 1974 in Fair Oaks, California, serves as the center for anthroposophical studies and the training ground for future generations of Waldorf teachers.

3. HARKNESS

The Harkness method isn't based on a specific curriculum or a particular ideology, but rather one important piece of furniture.
Developed by oil magnate and philanthropist Edward Harkness, a large, oval table is the centerpiece of any classroom that employs the Harkness method of teaching. Students sit with their classmates and teacher around the table and discuss any and all subjects, from calculus to history, often in great detail. The Harkness method represents a significant departure from the traditional classroom setup of a teacher at a chalkboard lecturing to students seated in rows of desks. Individual opinions are formed, raised, rejected, and revised at the Harkness table, where the teacher’s main responsibilities are to ensure that no one student dominates the discussion and to keep the students on point. No conversation is ever the same, which can help teachers avoid the burnout that might result from teaching the same lesson from year to year.

In 1930, Harkness gave a multi-million dollar donation to Phillips Exeter Academy, a private secondary school in New Hampshire, under the condition that the money be used to implement a new educational method that would involve all students in the learning process. Part of Harkness’ endowment paid for the hiring of 26 new teachers, which enabled Exeter to shrink its average class size. This was imperative, as the Harkness method is most effective in classes of 15 students or less. “The classes are now small enough so that the shy or slow individual will not be submerged,” Exeter principal Dr. Lewis Perry told the New York Times in the early years of the program. “The average boy, similarly, finds his needs cared for. In short, the Harkness plan is best defined as an attitude. It is a new approach to the problem of getting at the individual boy.” The method was effective from the start; Exeter reported a decrease in failing grades of 6 percent during the first three years of the Harkness approach.

The intimate setting of the Harkness table forces students to take responsibility for their own learning and encourages them to share their opinions. In addition to learning about topics being discussed, students also learn valuable public speaking skills and to be respectful of their fellow students’ ideas. Studies have supported the method’s effectiveness in increasing students’ retention and recall of material. It takes time to delve into subjects using the Harkness method, which is one reason, in addition to class size limitations, that it hasn't become more popular in public schools.
4. REGGIO EMILIA

Reggio Emilia is an educational approach used primarily for teaching children aged 3 to 6. The method is named after the city in northern Italy where teacher Loris Malaguzzi founded a new approach to early childhood education after World War II. Malaguzzi's philosophy was based on the belief that children are competent, curious and confident individuals who can thrive in a self-guided learning environment where mutual respect between teacher and student is paramount. While the first Reggio Emilia preschool opened in 1945, the approach attracted a serious following in the United States in 1991 after *Newsweek* named the Diana preschool in Reggio Emilia among the best early childhood institutions in the world.

Reggio Emilia schools emphasize the importance of parents taking an active role in their child's early education. Classrooms are designed to look and feel like home and the curriculum is flexible, as there are no set lesson plans. Reggio Emilia stresses growth on the students' terms. Art supplies are an important component of any Reggio Emilia classroom and traditional schools have an atelierista, or art teacher, who works closely with the children on a variety of creative projects. Reggio Emilia teachers often keep extensive documentation of a child's development, including folders of artwork and notes about the stories behind each piece of art.

"It's about exploring the world together and supporting children's thinking rather than just giving them ready-made answers," said Louise Boyd Cadwell, who was an intern at two Reggio Emilia schools in Italy in the early '90s and then wrote a book about the teaching method. "Reggio Emilia is about full-blown human potential and how you support that in both intellectual and creative terms."
5. SUDBURY

Sudbury schools take their name from the Sudbury Valley School, which was founded in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts. Sudbury schools operate under the basic tenets of individuality and democracy and take both principles to extremes that are unrivaled in the education arena. In Sudbury schools, students have complete control over what and how they learn, as well as how they are evaluated, if at all. At the weekly School Meeting, students vote on everything from school rules and how to spend the budget to whether staff members should be rehired. Every student and staff member has a vote and all votes count equally.

The Sudbury philosophy is that students are capable of assuming a certain level of responsibility and of making sound decisions; in the event that they make poor decisions, learning comes in the form of dealing with the consequences. While many public and private schools are constantly looking for new ways to motivate students to learn, Sudbury schools don't bother. According to the Sudbury approach, students are inherently motivated to learn. One Sudbury educator uses the example of an infant who learns to walk despite the fact that lying in a crib is a viable "and easier" alternative as support of this belief.

Sudbury schools, which have some similarities with the "free schools" that gained popularity in the U.S. during the 1970s, do not divide students into different classes by age. Students regularly engage in collaborative learning, with the older students often mentoring the younger students. Annual tuition for the Sudbury Valley School, which welcomes students as young as 4 years old, is $6,450 for the first child in a family to attend the school.

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