

PLEASE DON'T MAKE THESE MISTAKES THAT I DID TRYING TO BE THE "INNOVATIVE TEACHER" (continued)

AJ Juliani

#1: Too much time spent thinking, reading, and watching what might change your teaching, your school, education — and not enough time spent doing the work.

I read a lot of blogs, a lot of books, and watch a lot of videos on how to innovate in education and transform learning. So much so, that a few years ago I felt overwhelmed just by the amount of reading I had to do, and completely stopped, cold turkey. I was spending so much time consuming information, that it left almost no time to create, make, and design something different. I also was envious of what others were doing. It didn't help me personally, or my students, when I spent this much time consuming.

After taking a break from all reading, I realized that there was a reason I consumed. I wanted to make that difference. Yet, unless I started taking action, there was not going to be any change that was made. I started reading, watching, and listening with purpose again. This time, I choose wisely and purposefully what I fed my brain. And it served as inspiration and motivation in the creation process. Don't get drowned out by the massive amount of information (which is really good) and not make time for creating. Let it be the inspiration for innovative work instead.

#2: Focusing on the shiny new programs, apps, products, technology instead of what works.

Yes, I am still recovering from years of worrying about the newest, latest, greatest thing. Whenever a new product, or new release, or new phone would come out, I would jump on the bandwagon immediately. For some reason it felt good to be the first, even if being the first had no impact on my life, my work, or what I wanted to do in my role. The problem is that I was using technology, and pretending to be innovative, for the sake of technology. I had the "new" part of innovation, but not the "new ideas that work better" piece. It is a trap that I still find myself struggling with, and the only way I've been able to focus on the work instead of the new is through a community of great teachers and leaders that hold me accountable.

#3: Trying to do everything by yourself. You aren't a lone wolf, you are human, and humans need community to thrive and innovate.

Which brings us to our third mistake. One that I've spent a lot of time thinking about. It seems the majority of people I talk to who are doing innovative work in their schools or districts share one of two stories. The first story goes something like this. They consistently try to improve and iterate and innovate. Each project and year go by as their students are exposed to new ideas and it takes a lot of time to get buy in from their colleagues and school leaders to allow this sort of work to happen inside of school. They tend to be worn out and overwhelmed by the sheer amount of time it takes to be innovative and creative, hoping that somewhere along the way someone will join their cause, and be innovative as well. After years of trying to do things the right way, they either leave for another place, or become bitter at trying to make a difference.

The second story is much different and goes a bit like this: They are part of a tribe of innovators. Their colleagues share, support, and praise learning that looks different. They fail often but have a team around them to help spring them back up and keep moving forward. There is a sense of purpose in their day-to-day work, and the students and school culture is a reflection of this type of innovative learning. They aren't tired, but instead inspired to continue pushing the boundaries of what works best for students.

The big difference between story #1 and story #2 is that the person in story #2 has a community around them that supports, praises, and picks them up throughout the creative process. We must have a group of people we can lean on, bounce ideas off of, and talk to in order to keep doing the work that matters. As Margaret Mead said: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.