

The Purple Potty Theory of Passion



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“Grit” is required for success today in the United States. “Grit” is passion plus persistence. Jobs that require basic or even higher, but standard, skills will often be low paying, done overseas, or automated. Success will more and more require high-level mastery and the ability to innovate. And that, in turn, requires grit. There are no short cuts.

There is no persistence without passion. How do people grow passion? We really don’t know near enough about passion, but let me tell you a story that shows one route to passion and then to grit. Tabby Lou is a woman who retired in her 60’s in ill health and became homebound. In the old days that could have been the end of the story: a retired shut in. However, Tabby Lou’s daughter and granddaughters played *the Sims* (a life and community simulation), the bestselling video game of all time, and she got hooked on playing the game.

One day, one of her granddaughters told Tabby Lou she wanted a purple potty to put into her Sim houses. The game doesn’t come with purple potties. But what grandmother would disappoint her grandchild? So Tabby Lou decided she just HAD to build one for her. But that meant she had to learn to make digital content for *The Sims*; she had to become a designer and not just a player. How could she do this? She needed help and some good, but complicated, digital tools to work with. This, too, in the old days could have been the end of the story: no help, no tools or the tools are too hard to learn on one’s own.

However, communities of people exist on the Internet passionately devoted to designing clothes, houses, furniture, landscapes, and stories for *the Sims*. These communities offer sophisticated digital 3D design tools and lucid mentoring. They are organized, when they are at their best, in interesting ways: Everyone is accepted in (newbies and experts are there together); no age grading (old and young are both there); everyone is helped to achieve mastery if they want it; everyone is allowed to get mentored and to mentor others, to learn and teach; everyone is expected to take a proactive individually dedicated stance towards learning that does not, however, exclude asking for help, but help that never undermines one's proactive stance towards learning.

Tabby Lou used the community's resources and made a purple potty. She had a very happy granddaughter. But her granddaughters today are not just happy, they are proud. Tabby Lou got hooked on the community and developed a passion for their passion: for design, not just designing purple potties. Today, over 13 million people have downloaded her designs. People have thanked her for her work over one million times in her guest book on the *The Sims Resource* site. She is internationally known.

Tabby Lou's story gives a theory of passion, what I will call "the purple potty of passion": The passion starts local and small: Tabby Lou is passionate about making a purple potty for her granddaughter. She found a community she came to love and its tools to realize that passion. The community is organized in such a way that she becomes passionate about the other people in the community and their shared passion (designing for *the Sims*). Energized by the community, wanting to rise in the community and to serve others in it, she persists through thousands of hours of practice with complex digital tools. She gets grit. She becomes a rock star.

Tabby Lou is a shut in, but she is not shut out of the global world. But many of our school children are. They are not getting grit for 21st century design and digital skills. One way we can solve that problem is to apply the purple potty theory of passion. Get them passionately hooked on something local and personal, something THEY really want to do; lead them to a well organized learning community that has the tools and help they need; get them passionate about the community and its passion; within the community, their local and personal passion becomes more global. Their desire to rise in and serve the community leads to persistence in mastering the skills behind the community's passion. Now they have grit in the service of 21st century skills. They will become rock stars.

But school as we know them would be utterly changed if we applied the purple potty theory of passion. Different people have different passions. So everyone cannot have the same curriculum, though people with different passions can teach and collaborate with others to pool skills for larger endeavors. Communities that are very different from school are required. No age grading, no one single time scale for success for all. Members both learn and teach. Learners are proactive, but collaboration and help is not cheating.

So school reform—really learning reform for society, since learning today is 24/7 in and out of school—would be about helping people find their purple potty, the thing that, with the right tools and communities, will make them rock stars.