



# GENIUS HOUR

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**PASSION PROJECTS THAT IGNITE  
INNOVATION AND STUDENT INQUIRY**

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*"I'm so excited about this!"*

*"I wish I could've done something like this when I was in primary school."*

*"I want to innovate and be challenged ... my mind is constantly spinning with ideas."*

These are just a few of the comments I heard when I shared our Genius Hour projects with students who visited my classroom last year. They were gifted high-school students who came to the primary school once a week to work with my gifted students, and they were so impressed with what and how my students were learning. They could not believe that I was allowing my students to work freely on whatever they wanted. They were astonished and began to ask questions, wanting to know more about how and why this worked in my classroom.

Four years ago, I found my passion teaching gifted education in a small, rural school. About 3 years ago, I began to realise that my students needed something more. They needed a way to tap into their passions and do something that would make a difference to their learning and beyond. Coincidentally, I came across Don Wettrick, author of *Pure Genius: Building a Culture of Innovation and Taking 20% Time to the Next Level*. He was sharing about his innovations class on "The Two Guys Show", an educational webcast (Minock, 2013). As I listened to him share about the experiences that he was offering his high-school students, I couldn't help but realise that it was exactly what my students and I were missing. I remember a specific moment in the webcast when Don said, "There's never been a better time to be a student."

As I listened and learned, I was so excited because I began to understand that while that was so very true, there has also never been a better time to be a teacher. I needed to make learning more

personal, more real and more engaging for my students. I had the technology and the tools to do so. So, I did. We jumped in with both feet. Passion projects became a priority in our classroom, and Genius Hour gave my students the opportunity to pursue things that matter to them. In doing so, they became creative thinkers, collaborative classmates, ambitious dreamers and confident learners.

## What Is Genius Hour?

So, what is a passion project? What is Genius Hour? And why do I believe that this type of learning has the power to change education as we know it?

It's really quite simple. Students choose a topic, a passion or an interest. My students designed projects to learn more about animation, website design, animals, homelessness, sewing and the list goes on. Whatever a student chooses to learn about becomes his or her project. Students then spend their time researching information, learning by doing, collaborating with experts and designing a product that can be shared with an authentic audience. Although Genius Hour is what we called this time in my classroom, many classrooms prefer *passion projects* or *20% time*. Regardless of what it is labelled, it is a time for students to explore their passions through the creation of a product to share with the world.

Genius Hour has given my students the opportunity to pursue things that matter to them.

Let's be honest. Our students are tired. They are tired of learning by completing worksheets that involve nothing more than putting pencil to paper and regurgitating what they have just heard. They are tired of sitting in classrooms quietly while the rest of the world collaborates and communicates in order to find success. They are ready to be seen as the learners that they are. It's time to realise that in our classrooms sit the world changers, inventors and innovators of tomorrow. Our students are the future. If they are indeed our future, then why are we still trying to force them to learn in the same ways that we have in the past? It doesn't make sense.

## Why Genius Hour?

Passion projects give students an opportunity to learn by doing. Application of relevant standards is the best way for students to gain understanding. By applying your standards, they begin to see real-world connections and understand that their learning can go beyond the walls of the classroom. None of us want to spend any of our time doing meaningless work. Instead, we want our work to be relevant. We want to make a difference, ignite change and be engaged in meaningful learning. As teachers, we should want nothing less for our students. If what we are doing in our classrooms is not meaningful, it is a waste of our time and theirs.

Genius Hour provides students with opportunities to discover what it means to think for themselves, to really pursue something that is meaningful to them. It changes the role of the teacher and gives the learning back to the learners. It opens doors for students to have experiences that help them realise learning doesn't have to be done by choosing A, B, C or D. Instead, students will design projects that are personally significant and engaging.

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Genius Hour doesn't mean that students are working and we, as teachers, sit back and hope that they are learning something. Our role has simply changed. Instead of designing a one-size-fits-all lesson for our students, we teach by questioning and finding creative ways to weave your standards into each one of our students' projects. We engage in conversations that help our students make connections and see the learning that might have been missed without our insight.

We tend to make a lot of assumptions in education. We assume that our students will not be motivated enough to learn independently. We assume that teachers will see things like Genius Hour as "one more thing". We assume that administrators will not allow us to implement something like this in our own classrooms. It's time to stop making assumptions and start doing what is best for our students.

*Forbes* magazine published an article on the "10 Skills Employers Most Want in 2015 Graduates". In the article, Susan Adams (2014) explained that working well on a team, solving problems, communicating with others and making decisions are some of the most important skills when looking for employment. The other skills include:

- ① the ability to plan, organise and prioritise work;
- ① the ability to obtain and process information;

- ① the ability to analyse quantitative data;
- ① technical knowledge;
- ① proficiency with computer programs;
- ① the ability to create and/or edit written reports; and
- ① the ability to sell and influence others (para. 3).

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As educators, are we preparing our students appropriately? Are we giving them opportunities in the classroom to solve problems in creative ways or are we expecting them to come in every day and “play school”? How many of our classrooms give opportunities for students to work as a team instead of the dreaded group work that results in one or two students carrying the load while knowing they will all receive the same mark? How often do we engage our students in real conversation apart from calling on them to answer a question or giving them permission to use the toilet? Do we really value their decisions or do we make decisions for them and expect them to react accordingly? The real world is telling us what it needs from our students. In order for us to prepare our students for the roles that they will fulfil in the future, classrooms have to change. We must begin to see our classrooms as a launchpad for our students and realistically prepare them for a future that is constantly changing.

## How to Use This Book

In this book, I hope to explain passion projects in a way that will make the process easy to implement in any classroom. In an effort to help my students stay on track, I came up with a simple strategy that guides students through each step of a passion project. Throughout the book, I will explain each of the 6 P's of Genius Hour – passion, plan, pitch, project, product and presentation – to be used as a map for students to follow as they create, design and carry out a project.

As we take a look at each of the steps, I will share the technology, tips and tricks that I found to make this process meaningful for my students and manageable for myself. I will share the importance of outside experts, authentic audiences and meaningful reflection with suggestions of how to best create these experiences for your students. Each chapter includes a “big idea” or a major takeaway from that section and reflection questions to spark ideas and conversation. Throughout, you will also find strategies for quick implementation of each of the 6 P's, example student handouts and strategies for using Genius Hour with gifted students. Finally, the end of the book includes a list of additional resources about Genius Hour and a compiled list of the technology tools discussed throughout the book.

I'm so excited that you have decided to join me in pursuing passion in the classroom. My hope is that when you put this book down, you will realise the importance of giving the learning back to our students. Genius Hour is an opportunity that every student deserves. Whether it's a student in your classroom who struggles with traditional learning, a student who has great ideas and just needs an opportunity to make those ideas a reality, or a student who sits in your classroom waiting for his or her chance to do something great, giving students the freedom to learn by doing changes everything. Finally, I hope that Genius Hour ignites your own pas-



sion for teaching. Whether you are frustrated, bored, or even if you love your job and just long for more for your students, I hope that this book and the simple strategies that I share will meet you where you are and change your classroom to be more than you could have ever imagined.



## Reflection Questions

1. Do you believe that it is an exciting time to be an educator? Why or why not?
2. How could Genius Hour change the atmosphere of your classroom?
3. Are you comfortable with your role as an educator changing? What makes you the most uncomfortable?