

# The Dangers of Aestheticized Education: A Return to Curiosity in a Curated World

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

*This paper examines the growing tension between authentic curiosity and aesthetic performance in American higher education. Through personal experiences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this work explores how the pressure to maintain appearances and create Instagram-worthy academic personas increasingly overshadows genuine intellectual curiosity. As social media and digital platforms reshape educational practices, students find themselves caught between the desire for deep learning and the perceived need to aestheticize their academic journey. This reflection argues that while visual appeal and presentation have their place, the prioritization of aesthetics over authentic engagement threatens to undermine the fundamental purpose of higher education.*

*Keywords: higher education, authentic learning, digital aesthetics, student experience, academic curiosity, social media influence*

## 1. Introduction

During my first week at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I watched my classmates transform their notebooks into carefully curated Instagram sets. MacBooks adorned with aesthetic stickers sat at perfect angles next to color-coded notes and artfully arranged coffee cups. Everyone seemed obsessed with the perfect study system - Notion for organization, Notability for color-coded notes, Google Calendar scheduled down to the minute. But in this relentless pursuit of the perfect system, where was the space for serendipity? For reading a book unrelated to your major? For following an unexpected thread of curiosity?

We've become prisoners of the very tools we built to liberate our learning. These systems, meant to enhance our education, are increasingly dictating how we think and what we

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<sup>1</sup> **Editorial Note:** This essay is a combination of reflection and reflexivity. The latter is essential in *reflexive practice*, which is a necessary condition in second-order cybernetics for any research, including scientific research. Reflexivity is a metacognitive process that involves awareness of one's own thinking. Reflexive practice in education applies metacognition to one's practice of educating or being educated.

value. Students obsess over taking the "right classes" to appeal to employers, but there are no right classes - there is only curiosity and genuine interest. The modern university has confused the exception of getting a degree with the act of understanding. The scene in our libraries may be Instagram-worthy, but something vital has been lost in translation.

The contemporary educational landscape is increasingly characterized by a paradoxical relationship between learning and appearance. Social media platforms, digital productivity tools, and the culture of constant documentation have transformed academic pursuits into performative experiences. Students now navigate an educational environment where the aesthetics of learning often overshadow the substance of intellectual exploration.

This paper emerges from a critical reflection on personal academic experiences, challenging the prevailing notion that educational success can be measured by the visual appeal of study methods or the perfection of digital note-taking systems. Instead, it advocates for a return to curiosity-driven learning—an approach that values intellectual exploration, interdisciplinary thinking, and the messy, unpredictable nature of genuine discovery.

## **2. The Aestheticization of Education**

Digital technologies have created a unique phenomenon: the aestheticization of education. Students now curate their academic experiences as if designing an Instagram-worthy lifestyle. Perfectly organized digital notebooks, color-coded study schedules, and meticulously arranged study spaces have become more than tools—they have become performances.

During my early academic years, I found myself trapped in this paradigm. My initial approach to learning was defined by:

- Perfectly structured digital notes
- Carefully curated study environments
- Strict adherence to productivity systems
- Prioritizing visual presentation over intellectual depth
- Focusing on efficient course selection and alignment with academic goals.

However, this approach fundamentally misunderstands the nature of learning. True education is not about creating the most visually appealing study setup but about engaging

deeply with ideas, challenging assumptions, and following intellectual curiosities wherever they might lead.

Today's university system operates like a well-oiled machine, processing students at scale with little regard for individual curiosity or passion. I've experienced this firsthand - both as a victim and as someone who eventually broke free. During my early days at UIUC, I too fell into the trap of perfecting my study setup and doing what I was "supposed to" rather than pursuing depth and curiosity.

The college experience bears little resemblance to the romantic notion of pure intellectual pursuit. In lecture halls, students' screens often display split views: course materials on one side, Instagram or TikTok on the other. Notes are taken not just for review but often for social media content. Study guides are created with an eye toward their shareability rather than their educational value.

### **3. Technology: A Double-Edged Sword**

Digital technologies present a fascinating paradox in education. They offer unprecedented access to information while simultaneously creating mechanisms of distraction and performative learning. The same tools designed to enhance learning can become barriers to genuine intellectual exploration.

My academic journey revealed that authentic learning often happens in the margins—in unexpected conversations, in projects that defy traditional disciplinary boundaries, and in moments of serendipitous discovery. Projects like the UIUC Talkshow, where I conducted over 80 interviews across disciplines, or writing books like "The Cheesy Energy of Lithium" emerged not from curriculum requirements but from genuine curiosity.

My transformation began when I realized that my most meaningful learning happened outside the aesthetic-driven mainstream. While others perfected their digital note-taking systems and followed the most efficient course selections, I found myself:

- Attending random lectures in departments far from my major
- Writing books about Venezuela's political crisis ("SIMÓN: The Weight of Guilt") because I couldn't stop thinking about my home country
- Conducting biocomputational physics research on antimicrobial peptides, not because it fit my career plan, but because the questions fascinated me

The key was learning to distinguish between performative education and genuine intellectual pursuit. My notes became messier but my understanding deeper. My calendar had more blank spaces, but those spaces filled with unexpected discoveries.

#### **4. Reclaiming Curiosity**

The solution is not to reject digital tools entirely or to ignore course recommendations but to approach them differently. This means:

- Holding technological tools lightly
- Prioritizing curiosity over aesthetic performance
- Creating spaces for spontaneous, interdisciplinary exploration
- Valuing understanding over perfect documentation.

Based on personal experience, I propose several strategies to counteract the aestheticization of education:

1. Analog Exploration: Regularly designate "analog-only" learning sessions that minimize digital distractions.
2. Messy Creativity: Embrace imperfect, exploratory note-taking methods that prioritize understanding over appearance.
3. Interdisciplinary Engagement: Actively seek learning opportunities outside one's primary field of study.
4. Reflective Practice: Continuously question the purpose and depth of academic activities.

We live in an age of unprecedented access to information, creating a fascinating paradox. For the truly curious, technology offers possibilities previous generations couldn't imagine - every academic paper, every lecture, every book potentially at our fingertips.

However, this same technology can become a cage. Students often let algorithms and trending study methods dictate their learning paths rather than following their intellectual instincts. The result is a generation of learners who know how to make beautiful notes or know the "right papers" to read but haven't developed the habit of asking beautiful questions.

My journey led me to understand that authentic learning requires both structure and space for spontaneity.

I've learned to let curiosity rather than aesthetics guide my learning. This approach led me to unexpected places, like becoming a founding member of the Inter-National Association for Trans-Disciplinary Communication (AFTC) after a wandering path through Buckminster Fuller's work led me to cybernetics and eventually to Stuart Umpleby who then introduced me to Nagib Callaos, who invited me to write the paper you're reading right now.

## **5. Conclusion**

The future of education lies not in perfecting our study systems but in preserving our capacity for wonder. My own journey - from carefully arranged study spaces to messy but meaningful exploration - taught me that real learning is often unglamorous. It's about following curiosity down rabbit holes, engaging with ideas that don't fit neatly into your major, and being willing to let your notes be messy if it means your thinking can be clear.

As we navigate this increasingly aestheticized academic landscape, our challenge is to create spaces where genuine curiosity can flourish. The greatest insights often emerge not from perfectly arranged study spaces or artfully crafted notes, but from moments of pure, unfiltered intellectual adventure. In my experience, true education happens when we dare to step off the well-documented path and into the messy, beautiful unknown of real learning.

## **6. Acknowledgments**

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