

**Wounded By School\***

**Point of This Assignment:** To identify what, if any “school woundings” have negatively affected how “smart” or “capable of learning” you think you are.

In her book, “Wounded By School: Recapturing The Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture” (*Teacher’s College Press*, ©2009), author Kirsten Olson explains millions of students mentally and emotionally disengage from learning and that today’s schooling damages the single most essential component to education – the joy of learning.

**What are the effects of school wounds?** (p. 26)

- Students believe they aren’t “smart”
- Students believe they don’t have what it takes to succeed in school (and by implication, life)
- Students believe their ideas lack value or validity
- Students believe all their efforts, no matter how hard they try, are below standard
- Students believe they are “flawed people”
- Students feel ashamed of themselves and their efforts; they develop “learned helplessness”
- Students show less pleasure, less courage in learning
- Students have lowered ambition, less self-discipline, and diminished persistence in the face of obstacles

The author gives the following examples of how students can become wounded by our current school system:

**1. Wounds of Creativity:** (p. 39)

- *Belief that our unusual or novel ideas or capacities lack value, or are too weird, too strange*
- *Sense that everything we do has to “add up to something” useful or explicable*
- *Judgmental internal voices that tell us: Who do you think you are to try that? You’re no good at that – you can’t be successful at that.*
- *Blaming internal voices that say: You haven’t worked hard enough at that for it to be of value or to make sense*
- *Denial of what we are passionate about, or for what we have affinity, in favor of what is conventionally expected*
- *Denying our inner compass about what is valuable, what our vocation is, what have to add to the world*

**2. Wounds of Compliance** (p. 41)

- *Feeling that obeying the rules, especially in school, is extremely important to receive approval and acceptance*
- *Feeling that we will be rewarded only if we obey the rules, even if the rules seem unfair, unjust, or diminishing*
- *Fear of being punished for sticking out: “The nail that rises above will be hammered down.”*
- *Feeling of dislocation from ourselves due to institutional expectations: “I learned that the rules of school were wrong, but I still had to go by them.”*
- *Overreliance on external rewards for motivation: “I took this course only because it would look good on my transcript.”*

### 3. Wounds of Rebellion (p. 43)

- *Sense that the only way to protect oneself is to rebel, to object*
- *In response to being unsuccessful, or being told we are not worthy in school, fighting, acting out, becoming hostile*
- *Inflexibility in taking another's point of view; being flooded by one's own sense of anger and injustice*
- *Fighting or acting out learned as an adaptive response, that becomes fixed and maladaptive and self-destructive*

### 4. Wounds That Numb (p. 45)

- *Loss of feeling around learning: numbness, being zoned out, diminishment of vitality around learning*
- *Feeling detached from learning events; just going through the motions*
- *Losing interest in learning experience you once enjoyed*
- *Loss of learning ambition, not much courage or bravery in the face of learning difficulty*

### 5. Wounds of Underestimation (p. 50)

- *Sense that we are not fully "seen" or valued in school due to our social-class standing, race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender*
- *Sense that assumptions are being made about us based on identity issues*
- *Learning outcomes constructed to "confirm" rightness of these assumptions*
- *Outright denial of access to learning due to assumptions made about the learner*
- *Difficulty in naming of underestimation wounds, sense that underestimation is "normal," the way it is and no other way is possible*

### 6. Wounds of Perfectionism (p. 53)

- *A sense that what we have done in school is never enough*
- *Being activated by whatever the next goal is, always wanted to achieve "the best," or "the most"*
- *Fragility around failure; sense that failure or making a mistake will lead to catastrophe; feeling that any failure is a permanent blot on our record*
- *Alienation from our own learning lives due to excessive attention to goals of others*
- *Unwillingness to take risks in learning due to fear of mistakes*
- *Lack of pleasure in learning due to fear of failure*

### 7. Wounds of the Average (p. 55)

- *Belief that we can "only do so much," based on inappropriate testing or tracking in school*
- *Idea that our abilities are fixed and can't be improved through exceptional effort or focus*
- *Suppressed ambition and self-discipline due to our own low expectations of ourselves and those mirrored in our school environment*
- *Denial of our capabilities, both internally and externally*
- *Feeling "unseen," unknown, undersold in school*
- *Not being very interested in ourselves*

### What these wounds have in common (p. 57)

- *Are produced in school environments that don't tolerate differences in mental, emotional and identity differences*
- *Provoke feelings of disapproval and shame associated with being different*
- *Start with feeling pressured to comply, with unsuccessful (or too successful) adaptations to the educational environment*
- *Encourage individuals to separate themselves from what they are learning*
- *Reduce pleasure in learning*

## **Causes of School Woundings**

The author also says there are several reasons why schools wound students. These reasons include:

### **1. Outmoded Institutions: The Legacy of Rip Van Winkle (p.58)**

These are old-fashioned institutions that were originally designed for a different era, but whose ways of doing things are still in effect today. These institutions' were designed with attempts at controlling, educating and influencing people and preparing them for the world around them. The problem is that today's world is very different from yesterday's world.

### **2. Old-Fashioned Ideas About Knowledge (p. 60)**

An emphasis is placed on teacher-centered (teacher as the expert) instead of student-centered (how much the student is actually learning) education. An emphasis is placed on lower-order thinking (memorizing facts) instead of higher-order critical thinking (analysis, evaluation, creation). These old-fashioned ideas were based on an old-fashioned world's limited access to information, not on today's world of information overload.

### **3. New Skills and Attributes Demanded (p. 63)**

Old-fashioned ideas of learning emphasize life skills that were needed in a different era (obedience to authority, ability to tolerate boredom, capacity to thrive in a complex bureaucracy, the tendency to focus on a small area of responsibility, and loyalty). But today's world requires a different set of "life skills" in order to survive (self-confidence, persistence, creativity, critical thinking and adaptability). The old-fashioned institutions are trying to adapt to these new ideas about what people need.

### **4. Outmoded Ideas About Human Ability (p. 63)**

The idea that individuals are either "born smart" or they are not. Research over the last 30 years shows that "ability" to succeed in life goes far beyond natural cognitive (thinking) and verbal (speaking) abilities. It also includes environmental supports/constraints, multiple forms of natural abilities (visual, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist), and life skills (persistence, self-discipline, etc.). The outmoded education ideas then "sort and track" based on perceived "natural abilities" in individuals from the very beginning.

### **5. A Shift in Emphasis on Teaching to a Emphasis on Learning (p. 66)**

Old-fashioned schools placed an emphasis on the teacher being the expert and "pouring knowledge into empty vessels". When students didn't learn, it was assumed that there was something wrong with the student or that the student was unwilling or too lazy to learn. Today's teachers are often trained in understanding that there are multiple ways of learning, but not nearly as often are they effective at tailoring learning assignments to meet individual student's needs. Consequently, students often get mislabeled due to insufficient information about their performance in school.

## 6. Schools are Deliberately Designed to Sort and Track (p.68)

Students are placed on “tracks” (regular, honors, AP, “slow”/underachievers” “bound to be laborers, etc.) based on perceived abilities throughout their schooling. These tracks are designed to shape and prepare people for specific roles (college-bound future professionals vs. skilled labor jobs such as plumbers and mechanics) in the workplace. This sorting and tracking reinforces social-class standings. (*The wealthy go to college, and the poor become plumbers and mechanics.*)

## 7. Hidden Curriculum (p.68)

The school system teaches a “hidden curriculum” of values and ideas, and then convinces us to not question them. The problem is that those values are based on an out-dated culture and are no longer useful in this new era.

## Healing From School Wounds: (p. 104)

According to the author, there are four stages to the healing process:

**Stage One - Self-Blame and Private Shame:** In this stage, wounded individuals blame themselves for not living up to school demands, instead of recognizing that their potential was limited by their woundings. Feeling that we are a terrible person because of what we have done.

**Stage Two - Points of Light/Moments of Insight:** Individual’s perspective begins to change when s/he experiences unexpected success such as getting one’s first “A”. For some people, healing comes from learning that the source of the problem is not them, but rather a broken system. Moving away from the source of wounding can start this process as well.

**Stage Three - Anger and Sadness:** Once we can accept that we have school wounds, we need to give ourselves time to work through our feelings. During any grieving process, it is normal to bounce back and forth between differing feelings such as sadness and anger. Yet there is also a time to move on and forgive. This prepares us to move onto the next phase.

**Reconciliation - Activism/Engagement in Change:** At this point, many people commit to getting involved in the education reform process at some level such as teacher, administrator, political activist, or reformer. These people aspire to make the world of schooling better.

## What Encourages Healing? (p. 112)

- Adult supporters (even one) who tell the individual he or she is worthy and has value, in the face of the many negative messages of school.
- School environments that tend not to label and categorize children.
- School environments that provide challenges to unconventional learners; that honor and engage their unique learning gifts.
- Constant reevaluating our understanding of experience in the most powerful positive light.
- Thoughtful awareness about the institution of schooling.

## Commonalities of Healing Stories (p. 87)

In doing her research for this book, the author discovered some common themes in the stories of individuals who were able to heal from their school woundings.

- Adopting the philosophy, “Good things come out of bad things.”
- My deficits (weaknesses) are the shadow side of my great gifts.
- I am good at learning from my mistakes; my mistakes tell me things I need to know about myself.
- I can do better; I have high expectations for myself.
- Mistakes aren’t the end of the world!
- Challenges are wonderful – being labeled and told you cannot do it isn’t.
- I define myself – I am not defined by other people, nor the institution where I go to school.
- I am kind toward myself.
- I know how my own mind works; I work with my strengths, and wisely and strategically make up for my weaknesses.

**Application**

Close your eyes and think back on your prior educational experiences. Then go back to the first page, and review each of the woundings. Do you relate to any of the woundings listed? As you read the descriptions, take the time to highlight any of the examples given that you feel describe you.

- 1. Based on the information provided and your highlights, how do you see yourself? Do you believe any of these wounds fit you? Name the wound as found on Pages 1 and 2. (You may list more than one wounding if appropriate). Give the example(s) that describe you.**

**If you don’t feel you were wounded by school, explain why.** (Then, skip to Question 3.)

*Wound*                      *Example*

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- 2. Identify any of the causes of these wounds listed under “Causes of School Woundings” (Pages 3& 4) section that may have contributed to your wounding.**

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- 3. How have these wounds (or lack of wounds) shaped your attitude towards school and learning in general?**

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**4. How are these attitudes affecting your attitude about being here in college right now?**

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**5. Review the lists of “What Encourages Healing” and “Commonalities of Healing Stories” (Pages 4 & 5). What ideas can you use to help you heal from any wounds you may have?**

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**6. What kind of attitude about your own potential as a student/learner do you want to have? (Example: I want to believe that I can graduate from college.)**

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**7. What goals should you set for yourself to encourage you will have an attitude that believes you can succeed in school?**

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*\*Adapted from: Olson, K. (2009). Wounded by School. New York: Teacher's College Press.*

**Test your understanding:**

**What is the main point of this assignment?**

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**Why were you expected to do this exercise?**

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**What type of person would need to do this exercise?**

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**How well do you fit the profile of the person for whom this assignment was created?**

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**Reflection: (Write down your response after completing this assignment.)**

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