

Graduation speech SOTE – Ali Black

“Skills needed for the 21st century”

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today, to share this day of celebration and to share some thoughts with you and your families. It is a real honour.

Now, I have known about this since August, and so in the meantime I have taken a peek at the graduation speeches of a few other people (J.K. Rowling; Lisa Kudrow; Jim Carey, Meryl Streep and Tim Minchin to name a few). So, my fall-back position is, if my speech turns out to be a bit shoddy, you can always watch these YouTube videos and be inspired!!

And the thing is, everyone has their own life lessons, and generate their own insights, and have their own views about what matters, and so listening to lots of ideas can be helpful. And it is very likely that you already have gathered some life lessons of your own.

Shane asked me on Friday to provide a bit of a bio. And he sent me your bios, which I have to say are so impressive - dancers, pianists and florists; cyclists, soccer players and squash champions, builders, and gardeners, film-makers and photographers and technology experts. So much talent in this room. But your bios also tell me about who you are, that you have shown others that you are a good friend, you have integrity, you are level headed (unflappable – Steven, I want some of your unflappableness please), you are funny, you have a work ethic, you are problem solvers, resilient, respected, thoughtful and caring, enthusiastic and good natured. These qualities and character traits are the things that will ensure your success.

Bios are interesting to read and write. Some say they should include your major achievements. Others say they provide an overview of what makes the person significant. This is in itself food for thought, what makes me significant? What makes you significant? What do you want to be reflected in *your* bio?

I have developed a standard bio, that I tend to use across my work:

Dr Ali Black is an arts-based and narrative researcher in the School of Education, University of the Sunshine Coast. Her discipline area is early childhood education. Ali's research and scholarly work seeks to foster connectedness, community, well-being, and meaning making through the building of reflective and creative lives and identities. She is interested in storied and visual approaches for knowledge construction, representation, and meaning making and the power and impact of collaborative and relational knowledge construction.

What this bio actually means is that I love art and I love story. Creativity and stories have been part of my life from the very beginning. I love the arts, and right back when I was 3 years old and animatedly told my next-door neighbour that my puppy had gotten hit by a car and his head fell off and rolled all the way down the road, (he actually got bitten by a snake), I have gotten excited by a good story.

So today, what I can share with you is bits of my story, bits of my life, and hopefully this might connect you with bits of your story, and some ideas that resonate.

What my bio also says about me is that I am a visual person, a visual thinker. In my research work I am really interested in people's lived experiences, what it is like to be them, what they feel and know and understand. Sharing our stories, enables perspective taking, deeper awareness of other people's views and lives. I am interested in how sharing our stories supports understanding, empathy, belonging, community, and wellbeing. And I think reflection is very important.

For those of us working in education, reflection is critical to being an effective teacher, but really I think reflection is essential for being a good human being. I am also a creative person and I think the arts and creativity are really important for today's world. They help us to make meaning, and to represent our ideas, to access and represent what we know and think and feel. I also value working with other people. I think caring matters, community matters. Collaboration matters.

What this bio *doesn't* tell you is that I am a mother of two amazing children, Bella 14, Brodie 16, nearly 17. And I have been in the shoes of your parents here, when this time last year I attended Brodie's Year 12 graduation. So, I know how they are feeling, Proud. Full of hope for you. Proud. Perhaps a bit emotional. Proud.

My brief today is to talk to you about the skills needed for the 21st century. What do you need to be successful in life? In this changing world?

Like all good researchers, I looked to Google, to see what others are focusing on in terms of 21st century skills.

I found '*the Four Cs*' of 21st century learning: Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity.

And I know from my own reading, working, living and parenting that these 4c's are very important. There are many great authors out there who are highlighting that these are what matter. Ken Robinson – such a great advocate for creativity and creative thinking, and his fabulous book '*The element*' which talks about using our natural talents and personal passions to find ourselves in '*our element*'. Dan Pink – *A whole new mind, why right-brainers will rule the future*, says that the future belongs to a different kind of person with a different kind of mind. Artists, inventors, storytellers, creatives, and holistic thinkers. Adam Grant – *Originals, how non-conformist will rule the world*, talks about bringing creative ideas to life, the value of people who stand out and speak up, people who are curious and who are kind. In another of his book's, *Give and Take*, Adam talks about how success is increasingly dependent on how we interact with others. One of the messages that I really love that arises out of his work, is that givers (not takers), givers, are the ones who are receiving extraordinary results and success across a wide range of industries and professions. Caring for one another, collaborating with each other, building a sense of community, breeds success.

In my “google research”, I found that 21st century skills can be divided into three types: Learning skills, Literacy skills and Life skills,

I found out that these skills can also be called general capabilities, lifelong skills and cross-curricular skills.

And that you are going to need different skills from those that were learned by students in the 20th century. Your world, the 21st century world is a complex, competitive, knowledge-based, information-age, technology-driven economy and society.

Your school, the School of Total Education has given you an awesome foundation for navigating this 21st century world. To cope in a world, and to succeed in a world that is complex, competitive, knowledge-based, information-age, technology-driven, and economy-driven, you need to know who you are, you need to know what you bring, and your own definitions of a happy and productive life. You need to have a sense of values, and recognise your potential.

And you have this. You know this. The values you have experienced at SOTE and with your families have given you a solid foundation to navigate, and flourish in, the 21st century world.

As an early childhood educator, I share many of the same philosophies of your school. Of the importance of observing and responding to children’s interests and strengths, of learning that is meaningful, individualised, and hands on. Too often in education there is a tendency to want to reduce children and young people to categories and developmental areas or competencies (cognitive development, emotional development, physical development). But all these areas of development are interrelated and interconnected. Children are whole people. You are a whole person. Education needs to meet the ‘whole child’.

At SOTE you have been lucky to learn about things like character, and team spirit, and loyalty and integrity. You have had your needs and interests considered and supported. And you know what it is like to feel a sense of achievement, and to be part of a community that supports one another. You have had an opportunity to engage in contemplation and connect to your emotional and spiritual wisdom. These are all wonderful things that will support your success. What you need to be successful is already within you.

I wanted to come up with something brilliant, something like the 4C’s, an acronym perhaps, to inspire and help you remember my talk. But then I remembered I really hate acronyms, and applying simplistic recipes to diverse and complex lives.

So, going back to my strengths, and my capacity for ‘the visual’, I have decided to engage you with a metaphor. Metaphor for me is a tool I use in my research, it is a way of sharing and expressing aspects of our experience, of symbolising what something is like.

As I have been thinking about SOTE and its interest in holistic education, and the WHOLE person, I have been drawn to the idea of a mosaic.

A mosaic is an image made up of many small pieces, which need to be brought together in order to make sense of the whole. For us today, we can think about a mosaic approach as a way of creating a living picture of our lives. It is a listening framework, where we can consider these different pieces and their contribution to the whole, and gain insight into our interests, values and priorities, to the picture and the bio we are creating.

So just as aside, I am so committed to this mosaic metaphor that I am deliberately wearing mosaic-like jewellery to help you connect with this idea. The power of accessorising! 🤪

So, you have come into the world with some of your mosaic pieces pre-determined, you have innate talents and curiosities, and passions that have been supported and which have grown. Many of your mosaic pieces have roots in your childhood experiences, and the opportunities you have had. And you have built on those pieces. The grass has become greener where you have watered it. These are great approaches, following your talents and interests, focusing on what you are good at, and giving time and effort to maximising these, and doing the best that you can.

But your mosaic is going to change, a bit like a kaleidoscope, or that game where you can move the pieces around to make different shapes and patterns. And that is the exciting part, there are an infinite number of designs you can make with your mosaic pieces. There are an infinite number of designs that await you.

And sometimes, you won't be in control, the cosmic universe, or just everyday events, will cause a twist and a turn in the kaleidoscope. And you will find your life changing, and you will be faced with the need to adjust your vision and your direction to the new pattern of life set before you. But what I have come to learn is that "There are no mistakes". Life is greater and bigger than any of us can fathom. Your job is listen to yourself, to connect with the pieces of the mosaic that make up 'you'. To feel them, to hear them, to know them, to engage with them. There are no wrong paths, there are no wrong patterns, there are no wrong designs. Oprah says "there is no such thing as failure really, 'cause failure is just that thing that moves you into another direction, so you get as much from your losses as you do from your victories. The losses are here to wake you up. So when you understand this you don't allow yourself to be completely thrown by a grade or by a circumstance, because your life is bigger than any 'one' experience", (or by any 'one' piece of the mosaic). Oprah tells us, to "Relax, it is going to be ok, it really is going to be ok, even when you are on a detour, or waiting for what you want, when you feel uncertain. Just pay attention to the pattern you are making. The way through the challenge is to get still, and ask what might be 'the next right move', and from that space, make the next right move, and the next right move, and not to be overwhelmed, because your life is bigger than, just one moment." "Detours and failures are not things to resist. Your life is not defined by what someone might say (even yourself) is a failure for you. Failure just points you in a different direction."

Applying some of these ideas to my own life: I knew I had an interest in early childhood education, I loved being with young children, and I had a sense that I was a 'teacher'. But I didn't think to myself, oh I have to get a PhD, oh I want to work in a university and be an academic. Life has unfolded. I have been in education for 29 years. I began as a director of

a child care centre, then a preschool teacher, a primary school teacher, and then found my way into higher education, teaching and researching at a range of universities including QUT, CQU and now USC. I have taken what I have thought was the next right move, and the next right move after that.

And I didn't expect my mosaic pieces to take me where they have. I feel more comfortable on my own, reading a book, a bit of a loner. But the twists and patterns on my kaleidoscope have opened up opportunities where I have been stretched, and given the opportunity to do things like write educational columns, to share ideas with pre-service teachers, and to be here today sharing with you. And the cosmic universe has offered me some interesting and challenging twists along the way. I have lost both my parents, and life hasn't always been easy. I have had to draw on my mosaic pieces connected to character, grit and perseverance.

To give you a recent example, in 2013 my family moved to the Sunshine Coast. I left my Senior Lecturer job in Gladstone and sought employment at my current workplace. They weren't advertising positions at my current level. And so, I had to take a job at the level below. This meant a change in status, and a change in pay, and I felt really bad. I wondered what my colleagues at the other universities would think, would they think I was demoted? Would they wonder what was wrong with me? I felt an acute sense of failure. That year in 2014, in my new job, I felt wounded. And my workload was nuts and so I was forced to overwork and I didn't give time to self-care and to wellbeing. Leaving me exhausted and depressed at the end of that year. But you know what, that year of 'failure' was such a place of learning for me. I realised, like Oprah says, that my life was bigger than that. It was bigger than being a 'senior lecturer' or a 'lecturer'. My family didn't love me any less because I had a different job title. My friends who mattered to me, didn't think any less of me. And so my sense of failure was a place to stop and be still, and really connect again, and listen to what I wanted for my life.

What did I want to write in my bio? What was the difference that I wanted to make?

And so these last years, I have been much more conscious about where I want to give my energy. I have learned the power of recognising, that if nothing else I have 'three feet of influence'. The world that I can most effect is the one immediately around me. If we can imagine the metre space around us as our canvas, we can actually have a really positive impact on the people around us. In our canvas space, we can show a kindness, offer a listening ear, help carry some heavy bags or open a door, or let the pesky car beside us into our lane.

So just like you have experienced a 'total' education here at SOTE, life is a 'total' thing too. It is not just about a successful career, it is about being who you are, using your talents and your passions, and your character. Success in life is about everything. Your wellbeing (so get enough sleep, I am nagging on behalf of your parents), get outdoors and in nature regularly, eat nutritious food, exercise. It is about connection (friendship, kindness, peace-making, community). It is about giving time to creativity, experiencing flow, loving what you do.

(and just as an aside, if you are going to uni, make sure you go to classes, don't just watch them online, meet your lecturer, meet your classmates, seek support if you need it, don't go it alone).

(and as another aside, if you are leaving home as part of your new adventure, keep in touch with your parents, respond to their texts, and their emails, let them be part of your Facebook and Instagram accounts. They have spent decades loving you into existence and you have been their focus for the last 17 years. So they are going to feel it when you go—even though this is exactly what they have parented you to do). Congratulations parents, you have raised wonderful human beings. Congratulations too, to the teachers—the caring and time and knowledge you have brought to your work has been life-changing.

So just to conclude, and return to the skills for the 21st century. **The only skills you need, are the ones you already have. They are within you.** You are going to make a difference. It might be through the gift of beautiful flower arrangements, or the production of a thought provoking film or the building of beautiful homes. It might be through your sporting achievements or your academic achievements. But it is definitely going to be through your interactions with others—And what you do in the one metre canvas of influence that you carry with you.

So today is a celebration of all the wonderful pieces that come together to make you, you. Congratulations to you all. I wish you every joy as you embrace the changing patterns and extraordinary designs, magical colours, and special mosaic pieces of your amazing, kaleidoscope life.