PART I

TEACHERS AS MASTER LEARNERS

On My Mind: Teachers as Master Learners

If we're to really understand the new learning opportunities for our students today, we ourselves have to be learners first. We have to build networks and communities online around the things we love so we can use them to teach and model for our kids how to do so on their own. Yet that's a difficult shift for many teachers to make. We think of these tools for instruction first, learning second. How can you become more selfish about learning? Can you give yourself the time to follow your own passions first? Is it hard to see yourself as a master learner? If so, why?

The roles and expectations of teachers are changing, but I wonder if we'll still be calling the adults in the room "teachers" in 20 years. The most important thing we can impart to our kids is a love of learning and the skills to learn well. Our expertise needs to be in connecting to other people, creating our own learning opportunities, and consulting with our students as to how they can achieve the same things autonomously. Maybe one day we'll be called "Master Learners" or something similar, because that's where our real value lies.

24 Feb 2010 08:45 am

As we continue to have conversations around change with the 800 or so practitioners we're **working with in PLP** (tinyurl.com/c48f92), I continue to be struck by the frustration I'm feeling at the seeming separation between teaching and learning. I know that this isn't new; **I've been writing about teachers' difficulties with being learners first here for a long time** (tinyurl.com/3vdmplj). When presented with the concept of building learning networks for themselves through the use of social learning tools, of making connections with other learners around the world who share their passions, many just cannot seem to break through the teacher lens and be "selfish" about it, to make it a personal shift before making a professional shift in the classroom. We want to teach with these tools first, many times at the expense, it seems, of making any real change in the way we see that learning interaction for our students because we don't experience that change for ourselves.

More and more, though, as I look at my own kids and try to make sense what's going to make them successful, I care less and less about a particular teacher's content expertise and more about whether that person is a master learner, one from whom Tess or Tucker can get the skills and literacies to make sense of learning in every context, new and old. What I want are master learners, not master teachers, learners who see my kids as *their apprentices* **for learning**. Before public schooling, apprenticeship learning was the way kids were educated. They learned a trade or a skill from masters. When we moved to compulsory schooling, kids began to learn not from master doers so much as from master knowers, because we decided there were certain things that every child needed to know in order to be "educated." And we looked for adults who could impart that knowledge, who could teach it in ways that every child could learn it.

My sense is that we need to rethink the role of those adults once again, and that we're coming full circle. **George Siemens had a great post** (tinyurl .com/yknuclq) last week about "Teaching in Social and Technological Networks" and he asked the same question **that we had asked at Educon** (tinyurl .com/3ebcsr7): What is the role of the teacher? It changes:

> Simply: social and technological networks subvert the classroom-based role of the teacher. Networks thin classroom walls. Experts are no longer "out there" or "over there." Skype brings anyone, from anywhere, into a classroom. Students are not confined to interacting with only the ideas of a researcher or theorist. Instead, a student can interact directly with researchers through Twitter, blogs, Facebook, and listservs. The largely unitary voice of the traditional teacher is fragmented by the limitless conversation opportunities available in networks. When learners have control of the tools of conversation, they also control the conversations in which they choose to engage.

George goes on to suggest a totally different way of thinking about "teaching," one where "instead of controlling a classroom, a teacher now influences or shapes a network." And he discusses seven different roles that teachers will play, all of which are worth the read. The one that sticks out for me at least is the role of **modeling**, (bit.ly/mOyvfi) where he writes:

> Modeling has its roots in apprenticeship. Learning is a multi-faceted process, involving cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. Knowledge is similarly multi-faceted, involving declarative, procedural, and academic dimensions. It is unreasonable to expect a class environment to capture the richness of these dimensions. Apprenticeship learning models are among the most effective in attending to the full breadth of learning. Apprenticeship is concerned with more than cognition and knowledge (to know about)—it also addresses the process of becoming a carpenter, plumber, or physician.

But I would argue it goes further than that, that apprenticeship for every student in our classrooms these days is not so much grounded in a trade or a profession as much as it is grounded in the process of becoming a learner. **Chris Lehmann** (tinyurl.com/yrz6yu) likes to say that we don't teach subjects, we teach kids. And I'll add to that: we teach kids to learn. We can't teach kids to learn unless we are learners ourselves, and our understanding of learning has to encompass the rich, passion-based interactions that take place in these social learning spaces online. Sure, I expect my daughter's science teacher to have some content expertise around science, no doubt. But more, I expect him to

be able to show her how to learn more about science on her own, without him, to give her the mindset and the skills to create new science, not just know old science.

How we change that mindset in teachers is another story, however, and I know it has a lot to do with expectations, traditional definitions, outcomes, culture and a whole lot more. But we need to change it to more of what **Zac Chase** (tinyurl.com/3lnme6d) from **SLA** (tinyurl.com/3m56jfw) talks about in this snip I **Jinged** (tinyurl.com/ppnb3p) from the **"What is Educon?" video** (tinyurl .com/3kyce2z) posted by **Joseph Conroy** (tinyurl.com/3nqpe74). (Apologies for the audio and the stupid pop up ads.)

We still need to be teachers, but kids need to see us learning at every turn, using traditional methods of experimentation as well as social technologies that more and more are going to be their personal classrooms. How do we make more of that happen?

Sources: tinyurl.com/3ddbz7; tinyurl.com/ybejmzw

Personalizing Education for Teachers, Too

There's no question that the personalization or customization of education has begun. It's just not happening in schools yet. At a time when we have access to so much information and so many potential teachers or experts, we have to begin to think about how to give our students more of a voice in what they learn and how they learn it. In doing so, we can get to the goals and objectives that we set out for them in the curriculum. But the more accustomed our kids get to doing personalized learning outside of school, the more they'll demand it in the classroom. Can you model that for them?

28 Feb 2009 06:50 am

I finally got around to finishing up Sir Ken Robinson's new book **"The Element"** (tinyurl.com/3zhmwfr) which, for the most part, was a great read. He lays out a pretty compelling case for the power of passion in learning, and the absolute need for schools to help students identify their own passions through which they can learn just about anything they need. I've said in the past that the one thing I want from my own kids' teachers is for them to help them find what they love to do more than anything else and then support them in their learning endeavors around that topic. Unfortunately, that is not something the current public school system was built for.

Toward the end of the book, Sir Ken lays out the case for personalizing our kids' educations in the context of transforming (not reforming) schools:

> The key to this transformation is not to standardize education but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions (238). The curriculum should be personalized. Learning happens in the minds and souls of individuals–not in the databases of multiple-choice tests (248).

He argues that we should do away with the hierarchy of subjects and that we should work as hard as we can to customize, not standardize, each student's experience of schooling. Oh, to dream.

As I thought about those points, I started thinking about how we treat teachers and their learning as well. So much of professional development is throwing everyone in a room and having them learn the same stuff. Maybe there is some choice in the offerings, but by and large there is very little attempt at creating a customized professional development curriculum for teachers. Yes, we have our PIPs, but those usually address deficiencies or weaknesses, not passions.

The other day, I was having a conversation along these lines with a good friend who serves as the Director of Technology at a local school. We were talking about change, about how hard it is, and how long it takes. While he's done a great deal to move his school forward in terms of open source and social tools and technology in general, from a pedagogy standpoint, he had been racking his brain trying to figure out how to support individual teachers in these shifts. Finally, he came to the conclusion that the only way to do it was to create an individualized learning experience for each teacher, to take them where they are and mentor them, individually, to a different place. He's in the process of surveying each teacher to determine what technologies they currently use, what their comfort levels are, and what they are most passionate about. Then, using those results, he and one other tech educator at the school are going to start going one by one, talking about change, looking at tools, making connections, and shifting the pedagogy.

Whoa.

It echoes Sir Ken:

> Too many reform movements in education are designed to make education teacher-proof. The most successful systems in the world take the opposite view. They invest in teachers. The reason is that people succeed best when they have others who understand their talents, challenges, and abilities. This is why mentoring is such a helpful force in so many people's lives. Great teachers have always understood that their real role is not to teach subjects but to teach students (249).

Teachers are learners. If they're not, they shouldn't be teachers. In a world where we can engage in our passions through the affordances of connective technologies online, we need to be thinking about how to personalize the learning of the adults in the room as well as the kids. This is not the easy route, by any stretch, but it's the best route if we're serious about moving the education of our kids to a different place.

Source: tinyurl.com/d94mwc

Urgent: 21st Century Skills
for Educators (and Others) First

These days, there is a lot of talk about students becoming fluent at "21st Century Skills" which, in all honesty, are skills that have been around for a long, long time. But at what point do we start demanding them of ourselves as teachers as well? Do we need to practice these skills regularly in order to better make sense of them for our students? I don't think there is any doubt. Publishing, participating, sharing . . . these are all fundamental practices in the 21st-century world of learning. More and more, if you want your students (and others) to take you seriously, you're going to need to share your voice with the world.

Is there a better way to teach "21st Century Skills" than to practice them in your own learning? I can't think of one. Yet we're at an interesting moment where we're calling for all sorts of literacies for our students that very few of our 20th-century-trained and-educated teachers possess. What do we do about that? The first step is participation, because as you begin to share your ideas with the global community, you begin to understand what it means to create, think critically, collaborate, and more. Don't wait for the workshop. Dive in; the learning is fine.

09 Mar 2008 04:45 pm

Don't get me wrong, the **Thirteen Celebration conference** (tinyurl.com/ d3yysk) was a great event. Just getting the chance to hear Jane Goodall and Jean-Michel Cousteau speak about the amazing natural world and their sustained hope that we can undo much of the damage we've done to it was in and of itself worth it. That and being able to listen to the passion of Diane Ravitch and Deb Meier as they discussed the ills of education gave me more than enough to think about.

But here's the thing that's giving me the most angst. (Hey, I haven't been too angsty in a while, have I?) For all of the experts and scholars and pundits who were staking out a part of the conversation about educational reform, I couldn't help leaving there wondering how many of them really have a sense of the changes that are afoot here. I looked up a whole bunch of the names of the presenters and I could only find a handful that have any real Read/Write Web footprint that would allow me to consider them to be a part of my network. And worse, it was painfully obvious by their death by PowerPoint presentation styles that their own adoption of technology as a communication tool not to mention a networked learning tool left a great deal to be desired. The governors, the state superintendents, the consultants . . . from none of them did I get the sense that they could give a great response to a request to model their uses of technology to teach and learn effectively, especially in the context of networks.

All of which raise a number of questions:

First, am I a snob? Out to lunch? I mean it. I feel like it sometimes when I go to an education conference with 6,000 attendees and virtually no Internet access where almost no one who is presenting is modeling anything close to great pedagogy with technology. (That doesn't mean, btw, that they are not great teachers or thinkers.) Where just about the only technologies represented on the vendor floor deal with assessment or classroom displays. I mean, I know I'm a one-trick pony in terms of what my frame of reference is (so no need to remind me again), but shouldn't I be at least getting some sense that the people who are making the decisions understand on some level what we here are jammering about every day, the transformation that's occurring, the amazing potentials of this? I feel like I have to be missing something here, that it must be me.

Which leads to the second question which is how in god's name can we talk seriously about 21st Century skills for kids if we're not talking 21st Century skills for educators first? The more I listened, the less I heard in terms of how we make the teaching profession as a whole even capable of teaching these "skills" to kids. Sure, there were mentions of upgrading teacher preparation programs and giving teachers additional time in the school day to collaborate, etc. But the URGENCY was all around the kids. Shouldn't the URGENCY be all about the teachers right now?

Finally, I was struck by how difficult it felt to accept much of what I was hearing because, and this is something that is really concerning me (seriously), few if any of these folks had the network creds to be "trusted." Now I know this is an admission that is going to get me in trouble, and it likely should. But it is also a consequence of being rooted so deeply in this network. It's not that I distrust their "traditional" creds out of hand, but it's almost like for me, these days, if you're not doing at least a little bit of social, networked learning and publishing that I can tap into and track and engage with, I'm just not as inclined to buy in when you're talking about reforming education with or without technology.

Which leads to the following conclusions. First, (and this really has little to do with the larger point of this post but is stuck in my head) if you want to do one thing to save the world, become a vegetarian, today. Right now. As Cousteau said, any time you eat a steak or a chicken, you are cutting down a tree in the Amazon. Beef cattle graze, use up the land, then they plant soybeans to feed the chickens being farmed all over the world. Rainforests gone. Our carnivorousness is killing the planet. That means no pot roast nachos either. End of sermon.

And, second, if you want your ideas to resonate with me and to be taken seriously, don't just talk. Engage. Publish. Converse. Add your voice to the network of people who are living these ideas every day. I'll use **Mr. Stager** (bit.ly/oDuGhV) as an example here, since I know he'll most likely have something to say on the topic. I'd heard of Gary before he started blogging, but the fact that he's now willing to put his ideas out here and invest in the network, whether I agree with him or not, garners my respect and makes me more open to his ideas. I can think of a number of folks in this arena who I can't say that about.

Rant over. Be gentle . . .

Source: tinyurl.com/3xbk8d

Why Is It So Hard for Educators to Focus on Their Own Learning?

How do you learn? How has your learning changed? What new ways of learning can we take advantage of? In these times of high-speed change, it's doubly important for educators to be reflective about the way they learn, not just the way they teach. When you're introduced to a new tool, get in the habit of asking, "How can I use this in my own learning practice?" not "How can I use this in the classroom?"

17 Jul 2007 03:10 pm

That's a question that I'm really trying to get my brain around of late. In the past few weeks, I have really ramped up my rhetoric to teachers in terms of trying to get them to examine how these technologies challenge their own personal learning. How can the connections we make with these tools affect their own learning practice? How can they begin to understand what the implications for learning are for their students until they at some level understand them for themselves? And so on. And for the most part, heads nod politely in agreement.

But, here's the thing. By and large, most of the questions that come up during the workshop or the presentation run along the lines of "how do we keep our kids safe with this stuff?" or "if I want to put up my homework for my kids is it better to use a blog or a wiki?" or "so parents could subscribe to these RSS feeds, right?" All good, useful, legitimate questions. But very far removed from the personal learning focus I've been trying to articulate. In fact, when I stand by these teachers and hear their questions, when I look at them directly and say "well, that's a great question, but I really want you to focus on your own practice here, your own learning," more often than not what I get is a scrunched up face, a biting of the lower lip, a feeling that their brains are saying "AAARRRGGGHHH."

And even as I sit in this session with Tim Tyson at Building Learning Communities, one principal says "I want to learn more about these tools so I can help my teachers use them in the classroom." I want to jump up and say "No! You are missing a step! You want to learn more about these tools for yourself so you can help your teachers learn from them too."

So what's that all about? Is it just habit? Is it just such a focus on curriculum delivery that "learning" is all about how to do that job better? Is changing the way we do our own business just too darn hard? Or is this such a huge shift, this idea that we can actually learn through the use of technology that most people just don't think they have to go there, that they can just keep using it as a way to communicate without the surrounding connective tissue where the real learning takes place?

Or, maybe it's just me . . .

Source: tinyurl.com/2cycbk

Teaching Ourselves Right Out of a Job

This post from six years prior to this writing still resonates deeply with me. I'm more convinced than ever that our most successful students will be those who can teach themselves, those who can create their own classrooms and communities and curricula around the things they want or need to learn. To that extent, we need to rethink much of our role—as the traditional teacher, the content expert, the classroom manager—in favor of model learner and connector of students to other teachers outside the classroom walls. In what ways can you begin doing this with your students?

14 Sep 2005 05:00 am

We had an interesting conversation at dinner last night revolving around the changes that are occurring in classrooms these days. Since we're in the middle of our Tablet PC pilot at our school right now, I know this is especially acute as I've seen some pretty remarkable things this first week with teachers and students. But last night we were talking about the access to information that many (but not all) students and teachers have via the web. And we were talking about how few educators had made the Internet a significant part of their practice. If we're entering a world where much of what we do in business, communication, politics, etc. will be done online, we have to prepare our students for that reality. And the most effective way to teach these skills is to master them ourselves.

Case in point: I was talking with a math teacher who is a part of our pilot, and he told me that in the course of his lesson on Monday he used a term that was unfamiliar to his students. Rather than simply give them a definition, he modeled his own practice by having his students watch as he went from the OneNote page he was projecting via his tablet, opened up a browser, surfed over to **Wikipedia** (tinyurl.com/268zt), looked up the definition, and started a discussion about not only the math but about the workings of the site. Now I would bet that only a handful of teachers would model that same process.

And why is that? I'm back to that again, I know. The web and these technologies have transformed the way I learn, provided me with many teachers who push my thinking, given me the potential to direct my own education as it is. Why don't more educators make it a part of their own practice?

What I realized more clearly last night is that for many teachers, the idea of teaching kids to be able to access information and find mentors and communities of practice basically means teaching themselves out of their jobs, at least as they know it. I mean, at some point, we're going to have to let go of the idea that we are the most knowledgable content experts available to our students. We used to be, when really all our students had access to was the textbook and the teacher's brain. But today, we're not. Not by a long stretch. And we don't need to be. What we need to be is connectors who can teach our kids how to connect to information and to sources, how to use that information effectively, and how to manage

and build upon the learning that comes with it. That's a much different role than "science teacher" or "math teacher." Now I'm not saying that subject matter expertise is irrelevant and that there aren't core concepts that discipline specific teachers shouldn't teach. But they should be taught it a much wider context, not in the fishbowl that is our traditional classroom.

This is a scary idea, I think. But it takes me back to something I wrote a couple of days ago that was almost a throw away line at the time but one that got me thinking much more deeply about all of this stuff:

The best teachers are the ones we find, not the ones we're given.

There's much more to write about that . . .

Source: tinyurl.com/5j87vx

The Next Generation of Teachers

One of the biggest challenges for teachers right now is reframing the way they think about access and technology in the classroom. For instance, how can we begin to think of the devices we give to kids as connections, not just computers? How can we aspire to create connections outside of our classrooms instead of keeping everything within the four walls? It's easy to talk about "why not." How instead do we keep the conversation focused on the potentials rather than the problems?

21 Mar 2007 11:24 am

Last night I got the chance to spend a couple of hours with about 20 graduate students in education at a pretty large school here in New Jersey during a class they are taking in educational technologies. We ended up talking about a lot of the shifts that are occurring right now, the tools, and the challenges that face them as they enter the profession. Now, I was really impressed with the level of the conversation and the sincere questions that they shared. But I was also struck by how much of a reality check it was for me, at least.

The general sense from the group was "yeah, but" once again. Yeah, but we have these kids who are going to abuse these technologies if we open them up. Yeah, but we're going to be out there on our own if we decide to use these technologies. Yeah, but I don't have enough time to make this a part of my own practice. Yeah, but, etc. (And please, if any of those in attendance are reading this, feel free to chime in.) At one point I said something along the lines of "you know, there's a lot of pressure on you in my circles because many people think nothing is going to change until the old guard retires out and you guys take over." Well, that didn't float very well. I got the sense that most didn't want to accept that challenge or felt it was just too daunting. And at another point, after going through a list of reasons why using these ideas were going to be difficult, I said "yes, but you know there is nothing stopping you from changing the way you learn." Not sure how well that went over, either.

I don't mean to come across as disparaging to any of these students. You could tell they were by and large smart and sincerely interested in the discussion. But I guess I was hoping for more, though I'm also not entirely surprised I didn't get it.

One other thing. A couple of them noted that this one class (which was an elective, by the way) was the only (stress . . . ONLY) time in their grad program that they had talked about technology in a pedagogical sense.

As much as I want it to be otherwise, the reality here is that we're just not getting it done on so many levels.

Source: tinyurl.com/35ujzp

Teachers as Learners Part 27

The problem with teachers when they become teachers is that their definition of what it means to be a teacher is based on the teachers they had growing up. (Say that three times fast.) Why is this a problem? Because it leaves few other lenses through which to surmise what a teacher is. I wonder how many would go into teaching if the definition were changed to "one who learns with her students."

30 Aug 2006 07:29 pm

The whole integrating technology discussion that many have been chronicling of late has been sticking in my craw for a couple of reasons. First, a couple of weeks ago I had a bad teacher day while I was doing some training, the kind that really gets me pessimistic about how difficult a road this is going to be.

With this particular group, it was made clear that the only reason they were in attendance was that they were getting paid for the day, that any teacher who came in during the summer and wasn't getting paid was ruining it for everyone else, that the technology wouldn't work in their classrooms anyway, that they didn't have time to practice what they were learning, that, well, fill in the blank. It was one of those days, and they don't occur very often, but it was one of those days when I walked out of the room thinking "Thank god my kids don't go to this school."

Depressing, to say the least.

The second reason is that it's becoming exceedingly clear that we have an outdated perception of what teachers need to be. Like David, more and more I think there is a "T" word that we should stop using, only mine isn't technology. It's teaching. And let me say up front that this is one of those "I'm blogging this so people will help me figure out what it is I think" posts as my thoughts are still somewhat murky. But here goes.

When we say "teacher," what we are really saying is "the person in the classroom to whom students look for knowledge" or something like that. In the traditional classroom that almost all of us grew up in, the teacher was the focal point, the decision maker, the director, the assessor. Teachers, well, teach, or try to. We hire teachers based on how well they know their subject matter and how well we think they can deliver it to students. Teaching, the way most of us see it, is all about imparting knowledge in a planned, controlled way.

In a world where knowledge is scarce (and I know I'm using that phrase an awful lot these days), I can see why we needed teachers to be, well, teachers. But here's what I'm wondering: in a world where knowledge is abundant, is that still the case? In a world where, if we have access, we can find what we need to know, doesn't a teacher's role fundamentally change? Isn't it more important that the adults we put into the rooms with our kids be *learners* first? Real, *continual learners*? Real models for the practice of learning? People who make learning transparent and really become a part of the community?

I hesitate to make blanket statements about teachers because a) they are seldom appropriate (the statements, that is) and b) they get me in trouble. But when I ask myself what percentage of the thousands of teachers I've worked with over the past two years are practicing *learners*, I have a hard time convincing myself that it's more than half. Maybe even one-third.

I'm not saying this is necessarily their fault. We teach teachers to teach, we don't teach teachers to learn. Even in professional development, we teach them stuff they need to be better teachers, but do we give them the skills they need to be better learners? Do we evaluate them on what they've been reading? On what they've been writing? On their reflectiveness?

There is a section in **Henry Jenkins' book** (tinyurl.com/3p9wxv2) that somewhat goes to this titled "Collective Intelligence and the Expert Paradigm." I'm going to blog about it in this context when I next get a chance (which might not be for a few days).

But for now, I'll keep trying to think it through. What if we hired learners first?

Source: tinyurl.com/69xkx6t

Unlearning Teaching

So let's push this reenvisioning of teaching even further. What if teachers and students were co-learners, co-creators in the process? What if we saw our classrooms as laboratories and our own roles as participants in the work instead of leaders of the work? What if we entered our classrooms with a sense of "not knowing" and shared that lens with our students? For some, this is a terrifying thought. But at a moment when knowledge is simultaneously ubiquitous and evolving, I'm not sure we have much choice.

18 Aug 2010 07:04 am

> Rather than teachers delivering an information product to be "consumed" and fed back by the student, co-creating value would see the teacher and student mutually involved in assembling and dissembling cultural products. As co-creators, both would add value to the capacity building work being done through the invitation to "meddle" and to make errors. The teacher is in there experimenting and learning from the instructive complications of her errors alongside her students, rather than moving from desk to desk or chat room to chat room, watching over her flock.

I love this vision of teaching from Erica McWilliam, articulated in her 2007 piece "**Unlearning How to Teach**" (tinyurl.com/27w8h4w) (via my **Diigo** [tinyurl.com/g5uja] network). I know the idea isn't new in these parts, but the way she frames it really resonates. And it speaks to some important aspects of network literacy and the teacher's role in the formation of and the participation in those student networks. At the end of the day, as she suggests in the quote above, we have to add value to the process, not simply facilitate it. Here's another snip that gets to that:

> A further point here—if we consider the student's learning network as a type of value network, then, we must also accept that such a network allows quick disconnection from nodes where value is not added, and quick connections with new nodes that promise added value—networks allow individuals to "go round" or elude a point of exchange where supply chains do not. In blunt terms, this means that the teacher who does not add value to a learning network can—and will—be by-passed.

I think that's one of the hardest shifts in thinking for teachers to make, the idea that they are no longer central to student learning simply because they are

in the room. When learning value can be found in a billion different places, the teacher has to see herself as one of many nodes of learning, and she has to be willing to help students find, vet, and interact with those other nodes in ways that place value at the center of the interaction, meaning both ways. It's not just enough to add those who bring value; we must create value in our networks as well.

Another interesting point in the essay suggests that because of our emphasis on knowledge in the schooling process, we are actually creating a more ignorant society. I greatly admire **Charles Leadbeater's** (tinyurl.com/6frh6p) work (If you haven't read **"Learning from the Extremes"** [tinyurl.com/3xlcnfr] (pdf) you need to), and this somewhat extended quote really got me thinking:

In a script-less and fluid social world, "being knowledgeable" in some discipline or area of enterprise is much less useful than it was in times gone by. In *The Weightless Society* (2000), Charles Leadbeater explains the reason for this by exploding the myth that we are becoming a more and more knowledgeable society with each new generation. Leadbeater's view is that we have never been more ignorant. He reminds us that we have a much less intimate knowledge of the technologies that we use every day than our forebears had, and will continue to experience a growing gap between what we know and what knowledge is embedded in our manufactured environment. In simple terms, we are much more ignorant in relative terms than our predecessors.

But Leadbeater makes a further point about our increasing relative ignorance that is highly significant for teaching and learning. It is that we can and must put this ignorance to work—to make it useful—to provide opportunities for ourselves and others to live innovative and creative lives. "What holds people back from taking risks," he asserts, "is often as not . . . their knowledge, not their ignorance" (p. 4). Useful ignorance, then, becomes a space of pedagogical possibility rather than a base that needs to be covered. "Not knowing" needs to be put to work without shame or bluster . . . Our highest educational achievers may well be aligned with their teachers in knowing what to do if and when they have the script. But as indicated earlier, this sort of certain and tidy knowing is out of alignment with a script-less and fluid social world. Out best learners will be those who can make "not knowing" useful, who do not need the blueprint, the template, the map, to make a new kind of sense. This is one new disposition that academics as teachers need to acquire fast—the disposition to be usefully ignorant.

As a parent, and I know I keep coming back to this lens more and more these days, I want my kids and their teachers to be "usefully ignorant." It's the basis of inquiry, and that type of learning can't happen unless we give up this notion that we can "know" the answer and that it can be tested in a neat little short answer package. The world truly is "script-less," and the more my kids are

able to flourish with "not knowing" the more successful they will be. Just that concept will require a lot of "unlearning" when it comes to teaching and schools in general.

So how are you unlearning teaching?

Source: tinyurl.com/22rwjso

"What Did You Create Today?"

It's hard for me to separate my role as a parent from my role as an educator, and this post captures much of my current frustration. Our conversations about schools rarely center on anything more than grades and homework. Still, I know this is mostly due to the expectations of the system, but I still believe that we can create meaningful, relevant opportunities for students to contribute to the world while developing passion for and adhering to all of those traditional expectations. How we make that engagement happen in our classrooms is, I think, the most important inquiry for an educator.

22 Aug 2009 08:55 am

In a couple of weeks, both Tess and Tucker will be starting their first day at brand new schools. They'll know no one, have all new teachers, new surroundings, and, hopefully, new opportunities. I'm not sure they're totally at peace with these changes, but as I keep telling them, it's the kind of stuff that builds character. (I keep regaling them with school switching stories of my own, the most challenging being when my mom moved us out to New Jersey from Chicago when I was beginning 6th grade and three days before school started I was wading barefoot in a creek, stepped on a broken bottle, and ended up with 10 stitches in the bottom of my foot and a pair of crutches for the first week of classes. Talk about character building.) Wendy and I have been trying to prepare them for this shift as best we can, and while I know it's a bit scary for them, I'm really hopeful the change will be good for them on a lot of different levels.

What I'm most hopeful for, however, is that their stories about school will change. Last year, far too much of the reporting about their days started with "I got a ___ on my ___ test!" or "Yes, I've got homework" (said in the same voice as one might say "Yes, I've got ringworm"). School was something that rarely sparked a conversation about learning. Usually, it was a topic to be avoided or ignored. I hope to hear more excitement this year, more passion about learning, more thinking and doing. To that end, I've been coming up with a mental list of the types of questions I'm hoping they might answer:

- What did you make today that was meaningful?
- What did you learn about the world?
- Who are you working with?
- What surprised you?
- What did your teachers make with you?
- What did you teach others?
- What unanswered questions are you struggling with?
- How did you change the world in some small (or big) way?
- What's something your teachers learned today?
- What did you share with the world?

- What do you want to know more about?
- What did you love about today?
- What made you laugh?

I think their answers to those questions (and others that I'm hoping you might add below) would tell me more about what they learned than any test or quiz or worksheet that they brought home for me to sign. And here's the deal; I expect them to be talking answers to these types of questions every day. As a parent, I think I have every right to expect that my kids are immersed in spaces where learning is loved and enjoyed and shared every single day. Classrooms where they are engaged in meaningful work that makes them think, a majority of time doing stuff that can't be measured by some impersonal state test. (I can give them software to do much of that.) Where the adults that surround them are models for that learning work themselves. Is that too much to ask?

New schools, new opportunities, renewed expectations. We'll see how it goes . . .

Source: tinyurl.com/medywy

Get. Off. Paper.

Becoming fully functional in these online spaces will require a letting go of some of our old learning practices and habits. And probably the most difficult for many is to give up paper and pen. Here's the reality as of February 2011: 98% of all knowledge is digitized, Amazon is selling more e-books than paperbacks, and being able to navigate in digital multimedia spaces is now a literacy according to most. For those of you still wedded to paper, I know this is hard. But do you really think the kids in your classrooms will ever take notes with paper and pen in their lives? Digital is a different, I think better, beast. It has to be a seamless part of our learning lives.

13 Nov 2008 05:35 pm

The other day I was talking to a school administrator about an upcoming hands-on workshop and she asked if I could e-mail her the schedule to hand out the morning of the event. For some strange reason I just said "Nope. No paper."

After a short silence, she said, "Oh . . . ok."

"No, I mean it," I said. "We're going to be spending the whole day online; there is no reason to bring paper."

"Really?"

"Really."

"No paper," she said, thinking, finally adding "How exciting!"

Now I don't know that I've ever thought of no paper as exciting, necessarily, but I continue to find myself more and more eschewing paper of just about any kind in my life. My newspaper/magazine intake is down to nearly zero, every note I take is stored somewhere in the cloud via my computer or iPhone, I rarely write checks, pay paper bills or even carry cash money any longer, and I swear I could live without a printer except for the times when someone demands a signed copy of something or other. (Admittedly, I still read lots of paper books, but I'm working on that.) Yet just about everywhere I go where groups of educators are in the room, paper abounds. Notebooks, legal pads, sticky notes, index cards . . . it's everywhere. We are, as Alan November so often says, "paper trained," and the worst part is it shows no signs of abating.

At one planning session I was in a few weeks ago, twenty people were all furiously scribbling down notes on their pads, filling page after page after page. The same notes, 20 times. (I'd love to know where those notes are now.) At the end of the session, I gave everyone a TinyUrl to a wiki page where I had stowed my observations and asked them to come in and add anything I missed. Two people have.

At the end of a presentation a few days ago with a couple of hundred pen and paper note taking attendees (and the odd laptop user sprinkled here and there) I answered a question about "What do we do now?" by saying "Well, first off, it's a shame that the collective experience of the people in this room is about to walk off in two hundred different directions without any way to share and reflect on the thinking they've been doing all day. Next year, no paper."

I don't think most were excited. It all reminds me of the time last year when I got to an event and the person in charge had copied, collated, stapled and distributed six paper pages that she had printed of my link-filled wiki online to 50 or so participants.

"It's a wiki," I said. "You can't click the links on paper!"

"I know," she replied. "I just need to have paper."

Um, no. You don't.

Does anyone think most of the kids in our classes are going to be printing a bunch of paper in their grown up worlds? If you do, fine; keep servicing the Xerox machine. But if you don't, which I hope is most of you, are you doing as much as you can to get off paper?

Source: tinyurl.com/66jbmj

Opportunity, Not Threat

Parents are an important piece in this puzzle we're trying to put together around change. It's difficult for most parents to envision their children experiencing school differently from the way they did themselves. Yet we need to help them see just that. At the same time, can we as educators really wait for parental approval to create a different learning path for our students? As the "experts" in education in our local communities, do we have a responsibility not only to change what we do in the classroom but also to bring parents into the process?

07 Apr 2010 10:40 am

Let's just start with this money quote from Michael Feldstein in a comment on the must read post by Jim Groom titled "Networked Study":

It's hard to change the culture of education without getting the kids before their thinking processes begin to ossify, but in order to do that, you have to contend with their parents who, however well-intended, didn't have the benefit of the kind of education you're trying to provide their kids and often see it as more of a threat than an opportunity.

To me, that's the most interesting piece of this conversation right now, how to move the parents' perspective of the nascent, non-traditional models of education to one that really embraces the opportunities that online communities and networks are creating for meaningful learning. I know that when I talk about my aspirations for my own kids, and I start going down the road that the traditional college degree is only one of many options for them, that they may be able to cobble together a more meaningful education (depending on what they want to do) through travel and apprenticeships and self-directed experiences and not end up in mountains of debt, most respond with all sorts of reasons why not going to college is a risk, "especially in this job market." (As if college grads are stepping into great jobs these days anyway.)

Here's another quote that speaks to this idea, this time from Anya Kamenetz's new book DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education:

I've had a number of parents tell me that as much as they truly believe the educational landscape is changing, it's hard for them to sanction their own kids being a part of that change. "To some degree I lack the courage of my convictions . . . I'm developing very strong convictions that the existing system is fundamentally and probably irreparably broken, but I would not yet take my kids out of their school," Albert Wenger at Union Square Ventures said. "It's one thing to experiment by investing money in start-ups or reading books, and it's another to experiment with your own children."

There are so many levels to this from a parenting perspective that it's hard to know where to begin. Most parents think their kids' schools are doing just fine based on the assessment systems we currently have in place. Most parents see

the traditional track from high school to college as success. Most parents are ok with "online courses" and can use them to check the technology box since they don't radically disrupt the status quo. Most parents have no clue as to what that change they might be sensing really looks like. They don't, as Jim Groom writes, see education as "the biggest sham going."

Whoa.

The roll your own education "movement" is obviously not just a disruption to parents; it's a threat to educators as well. The question of how to help them find opportunity here is one we'll be struggling with for decades, no doubt.

But isn't the bottom line here helping our kids take advantage of the opportunities? This comment by Michael Feldstein about how kids don't have the ability to direct their own learning echoes the ridiculous expectations floated by Mark Bauerline in the Dumbest Generation, that somehow, these kids today are supposed to learn this all on their own:

> It's not like student-centered education was created by the edupunks. And yet, students fail to learn in these classes all the time. The high drop-out rate in community colleges reflects a lot of different factors, but one major one is surely that many students who go there do not have the skills to take charge of their own education, no matter how much you try to empower them. I have not been given reason to believe that the digital version of this approach will be wildly more successful than the analog version.

Is it any wonder they can't "take charge of their own education" when that self-directed love of learning on their own was driven out of them by second grade, when no one has ever allowed them or taught them how to do that? And are we at the point where we can begin to give them reasons to believe? Are we? (In fairness, Feldstein accedes to this later in the thread.)

The irony here is obvious: right now, as it's currently structured, traditional schooling is in many ways the threat, not the opportunity that many still see it as. How we make that message digestible to parents is, I think, the most interesting question of all. And how we do it in ways that don't drive people to the edges but instead help them work in the messy middle and make sure we ultimately keep in mind what's best for the care of our kids is the most challenging part of all. To that end, I love this quote from a recent must read Mark Pesce post:

> There is no authority anywhere. Either we do this ourselves, or it will not happen. We have to look to ourselves, build the networks between ourselves, reach out and connect from ourselves, if we expect to be able to resist a culture which wants to turn the entire human world into candy.

This is not going to be easy; if it were, it would have happened by itself. Nor is it instantaneous. Nothing like this happens overnight. Furthermore, it requires great persistence. In the ideal situation, it begins at birth and continues on seamlessly until death. In that sense, this connected educational field mirrors and is a reflection of our human social networks, the ones we form from our first moments of awareness. But unlike that more ad-hoc network, this one has a specific intent: to bring the child into knowledge.

Yep.

Source: tinyurl.com/6bf6k2a

Response to Jay Matthews at the Washington Post

Do we require new skills and literacies to navigate this new world or do we just have to get better at the things we've been doing all along? That's an important question to consider as we think about learning in online networks. I think they encompass new and different requirements that bear little resemblance to what most would currently describe as literacy. How do we help students navigate the world as they are experiencing it instead of the way we experienced it?

05 Jan 2009 09:23 am

Jay Matthews wrote a piece in the Post this morning titled "The Latest Doomed Pedagogical Fad: 21st Century Skills" to which I replied what follows. Would be interested to hear your thoughts, here or there . . .

I don't disagree that the majority of "21st Century Skills" are nothing new, and that we should have been teaching them all along. As computer and online technologies evolve, we have more tools that we can use to teach those skills in perhaps more relevant or compelling ways. But that depends on the teacher's familiarity and comfort level with those technologies, obviously.

What is different here, though, is something that is not being articulated by the Partnership or many others, and that is the learning that can be done (and is being done already) using online social tools and networks. I'd point you to a recent MacArthur Foundation study which concludes that "New media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn" and that this has very important implications for schools and teaching (tinyurl.com/55a878, pdf). While most kids' uses of these technologies are "friendship based," the more compelling shift is when their use is "interest based" or when they connect with other kids or adults around the topics or ideas they are passionate to learn about. With access to the Internet, and with an understanding of how to create and navigate these online, social learning spaces, opportunities for learning widely and deeply reside in the connections that we make with other people who can teach or mentor us and/or collaborate with us in the learning process.

That, I think, is where we find 21st Century skills that are different and important. Sure, those connections require a well developed reading and writing literacy, and critical thinking and creativity and many of the others are skills inherent to the process. But this new potential to learn easily and deeply in environments that are not bounded by physical space or scheduled time constraints requires us as educators to take a hard look at how we are helping our students realize the potentials of those opportunities.

Having blogged now for seven years and having learned in these interest or passion-based online networks and communities for almost as long, it's hard to begin to describe how different it is from the classroom teaching that I did for 18 years in a public high school. My learning is self-directed, and everyone in these virtual classrooms wants to be there because they too are interested in pursuing their interests. They come from all over the world, all different cultures, all different experiences, a diversity that is hard to fashion in most school classrooms. We share our learning openly, admit anyone into the conversation, and constantly seek to make each other smarter. But while that can sound like a pretty positive and powerful space, it is fraught with complexity. We have to learn to read not only texts but to edit them as well, not just for accuracy but for bias, agenda and motive. In the online learning world, we have to be full fledged editors, not just readers, because the traditional editors are gone from the process. And, we have to be creators as well. In order for us to be found by potential teachers and collaborators, we need to have a presence, a footprint. I'm fully convinced that my own kids need to publish, need to establish their reputations early by creating and sharing and engaging in ideas in provocative and appropriate ways. These are not easy skills to master. (I'd refer you to Dan Gillmor's new essay "**Principles for a New Media Literacy**" ([tinyurl. com/4b3pos/] for more on that).

My kids need the help of teachers in their classrooms who understand all of this on some personal, practical level. They need teachers who can help them navigate these complex spaces and relationships online that require, at the very least, a different application of traditional skills and literacies. I think as educators we have a duty to do so. You can call it a "fad" if you like, but the reality is that these skills are sorely lacking in our teachers who are suffocating in paper, policies and processes that prevent them from exploring the potential of online networked learning spaces. It's imperative, I think, that we change that. To quote Kansas State professor Michael Wesch, "We [need to] use social media in the classroom not because our students use it, but because we are afraid that social media might be using them—that they are using social media blindly, without recognition of the new challenges and opportunities they might create" (tinyurl .com/9ywq57). To me, that's what 21st Century Skills are all about, teaching our kids to navigate the world as they are experiencing it, not the world we experienced.

Source: tinyurl.com/7dxrbm