



Where Are We? The State of Education

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ABSTRACT

Today the questions that should be asked about schools and schooling are those that take into account the social context in which we live. We need to attend to the world outside of the closed context of the “system” and recognize the ways in which the world is interrelated. We need to understand that each and every student comes to the classroom with a biography and a way of being in the world. For today’s young learners that world is a wired one in which social interaction can be conducted anywhere, any place, or anytime. A key challenge for educators is to adapt the institutions in which they work to meet the emerging reality of the connected environment. If we do not manage to make this adaptation, then the future of public education is bleak.

For months I have been trying to tie together thoughts about the role of education in creating a better world. In a paper with John McLaughlin from the University of New Brunswick last year, I wrote about education as a social imperative and concluded that what we need today is the development of wisdom (Rich & McLaughlin, 2009). I still believe that even more so after watching a documentary about the state of education and children in the world. The reality for the majority of the world’s population is violence and poverty. Tragically, for the most part we in the West deny our individual responsibility in creating this reality. Things both in the world and in our education system really aren’t going all that well; what we are doing, how we are educating our children—it’s not working because in part we remain tied to the past.

What is the good of learning if in the process of living we are destroying ourselves? As we are having a series of devastating wars, one right after

another, there is obviously something radically wrong with the way we bring up our children. I think most of us are aware of this, but we do not know how to deal with it. (Krishnamurti, 1996, p. 92)

There have been many reactions, to what people see as the “problem” with education. We hear that schools need more funding, new curriculum, higher salaries, lower pupil-teacher ratios, increased opportunities for extracurricular activities, more technology, higher test scores, and so forth. But there is a danger in trying to focus, to take a specific area and make an argument for how it can solve problems within our education system. Perhaps the largest problem is that it is a system, a system that has too many masters and mistresses and that has forgotten what should be at the centre.

Despite education and research poverty, disease and violence define our world. Jared Diamond (2005) in *Collapse* outlines the potential tragedy that our world is facing. As Diamond notes, the usual response to these crises has been to look outside ourselves for someone or something to blame for the situations in which we find ourselves. We seem to have forgotten the power of individual action and we need to understand our biographies so that we recognize that what we do affects the world for better or for worse. Change in education, as in any realm, must start at the individual level—we have to acknowledge that what we think and do has an impact on the world. The system is made up of individuals who need to recognize that they are implicated in the ways in which the system works. Education needs to come to terms with the notion that living a good life means developing self-knowledge and understanding that the relationship of the self to people, to nature, and to things is the core of becoming an educated person.

How did we get here?

In the past, understanding of educational curricula have ranged from Foshay (1980) who suggested that the curriculum is all the experiences that a child has in school through to Tanner and Tanner (1975) who considered curriculum as systematically constructed and planned learning experiences. These notions combined with Tyler’s (1957) advocacy of a planned and measured curriculum led to a conception of the curriculum and education as something that could be measured. This technical rational understanding of education suggests that if the curriculum were just ordered in the correct sequence then students would learn. When such explanations still did not produce universal learning, others, such as Michael Apple (2000), indicated that the so-called hidden curriculum was just as significant as the curriculum

itself and indeed could be the reason that not all students learned the material. Apple and others suggested that as the curriculum was taught, other aspects of societal imbalance were also systematically introduced and schools reproduced societal problems. As Madeleine Grumet (1988) succinctly noted: "Curriculum is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generations" (p. 43). This idea of schools as defining what is worth knowing continues to inform the ways in which provinces decide what students are to learn. There is little room for learners in these world-views. There is little room for accepting individual responsibility.

More recently, perhaps because of the realization that education needs to change, some curriculum theorists have begun to reflect more broadly on education and its meaning. Researchers like Connelly and Clandinin (1988) note that:

Curriculum is often taken to mean a course of study. When we set our imaginations free from the narrow notion that a course of study is a series of textbooks or specific outline of topics to be covered and objectives to be attained, broader more meaningful notions emerge. A curriculum can become one's life course of action. It can mean the paths we have followed and the paths we intend to follow. In this broad sense, curriculum can be viewed as a person's life experience. (p. 34)

Connelly and Clandinin in essence call for the individual learner to come forward to explore who and what they are and ultimately how they might be in relation to the world.

Today the questions that should be asked about schools and schooling are those that take into account the social context in which we live. We need to attend to the world outside of the closed context of the "system" and recognize the ways in which the world is interrelated. We need to understand that each and every student comes to the classroom with a biography and a way of being in the world. For today's young learners that world is a wired one in which social interaction can be conducted anywhere, any place, or anytime. A key challenge for educators is to adapt the institutions in which they work to meet the emerging reality of the connected environment. If we do not manage to make this adaptation, then the future of public education is bleak.

What do we need to know?

Educators at all levels must come to understand the reality that confronts the world and realize that it has changed as the West faces the rising economies of India and China. Globalization is real, important and has an impact on the everyday lives of citizens. Employers require fewer but more skilled workers as we move into a demanding cognitive age in which people must become better at absorbing, processing and combining information. The cognitive skills fostered by education should be those of problem solving that enables individuals to process information effectively and work within complex, ever-changing environments. Learners have to be prepared for difficult and uncertain situations and be able to adapt and develop personal autonomy and responsibility.

However, all too often today's students do not view school as the place in which one becomes educated. Many recognize that all too often schools are more about credentialing and making sure that test scores are high rather than real learning. Real lives are lived outside of the classroom in a world that is networked, wired and engaged in ways that schools have not acknowledged. Real lives and an authentic education involve hands and hearts as well as heads. Real lives need an authentic education that acknowledges the reality of the learner.

Today's learners are a part of multiple social networks and use these networks to negotiate much of their everyday lives, yet schools have been slow to come to the recognition that these different forms of technology are a significant factor and can be used to extend the limited borders of the classroom. Through capitalizing on these emerging technologies, schools can enable students to enter into an inclusive social dialogue in which individuals come to respect and understand the nature of the other. Rather than being education for democracy, this is education as democracy in which students from many disparate locations participate in a pluralistic community, talk, and make decisions together. Such an education will prepare people to change jobs at least two or three times during a lifetime rather than just training learners to become better students. Schools should be working to produce learners who will be knowledge-workers with the capacity to take initiative, organize work with others, solve novel problems and use technology. Schools that encourage students to merely recount facts do not prepare students for a changing future. Such schools prepare students for a society and a world that has long since passed.

Is there hope?

There are signs of hope. Recently some schools have begun to take up the

issue of learning communities or communities of practice. These communities provide an opportunity for situated cognition in which practical knowledge, knowledge that is valued in the world, is gained through participation in communities of practice. Such communities involve heart and hands as well as head because within the community, learners develop trust and work together towards a common goal. Further in such communities, the members often have to determine who they are as individuals with lives that have an impact on the community and its development. Such communities take learning beyond what schools do best—teaching learners how to be students—and direct them to become actively involved in the world as participants whose knowledge and skills are valued. In short, these schools are recognizing that if one wishes to learn how to be in the world, one should participate in it.

In these contexts where learning communities are created, situated knowledge becomes important and valued. Such learning communities reject psychological theories that reduce knowledge and learning to atomized bits of information and attend to the complexities of the world in which learners live their lives. Such communities create a learner who can fully participate in a changing global world. Learners in these learning communities view learning as a social, participatory practice for which they each have a responsibility. Engagement with a community or communities is something that most young people are familiar with as they participate in social networks. What schools (and teachers) need to learn is how to harness that engagement to bring students into acts of means creation, problem solving, reasoning, decision making, and evaluation. It means bringing together collaborative teams of learners from across the country to work on ambitious projects that are meaningful to those outside of the classroom.

Knowledge developed through engaged practice might arise in an online environment where constructed communities wrestle with problems set and solved in a context created by the interests of a specific community. Such situated learning reverses the privileging of one form of knowledge over another and emphasizes knowledge as constructed, practical, interdisciplinary and informal rather than knowledge that has the official imprimatur of knowledge created within the academy and distributed to learners. Located engagement in learning communities means that problems and questions can be addressed quickly and can circumvent more cumbersome problem-solving processes. This type of engaged, work-based practice offers learners a space in which they can make a difference, not only in relation to their own practice but also to that of others. The recognition that learners are connected with each other and with the larger world is perhaps the first step in making a real change in education.

Adoption of a learning communities approach that involve learners working together to solve real world problems engages learners and ultimately leads to transformation of education. Such communities better prepare learners for the modern workplace that demands skills in communication, planning, management and social skills in general. These communities represent a break from traditional schooling and schools that have focused on individual, independent learning and rely on standard accountability measures that do not measure soft skills. Particularly for those students who are at risk, collaboration in learning communities can increase motivation and facilitate working with others of diverse backgrounds. Learning communities that develop around real world problems intrinsically motivate learners to learn because the learning environment and activities are meaningful.

Creating a new story

Learning communities seem to offer one way of beginning to make a difference in education and in the world. At the heart of any change in education will be the re-drafting, re-creation of a new story for education—a story that recognizes the ways in which people are interrelated and responsible for each other. This new story needs to have a plot line that seeks to include rather than exclude, that seeks to accept interrelationships rather than reject them, and that values collaboration and real problem solving. In order to create this new story, we need to reflect on our core cultural values so that our story recognizes that human beings need to nurture mind, body and spirit. The key for education to succeed is for it to attend to the whole person.

If education can capitalize on the wisdom gathered by separate learning communities, we may be able to re-write who we are and help our children and grandchildren understand that what matters most is living a good life that respects each person as a member of a sustainable, global environment.

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