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A New Story of Learning and Schooling

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A New Story of Learning and Schooling

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Several years ago, Dee Hock, former chief executive officer and creator of VISA, challenged me with this question: "If anything in the world was possible, if there were no constraints whatever, what would it take to design the world's premier system for learning and what might it look like?"

I have thought about this essential question a great deal over the years, and my response now is a conceptual one: I propose a new story of learning and schooling. I leave to those more operationally adroit the challenge of creating the structures and processes that might bring the ideas I offer to life.

So rather than forecast or extrapolate from current conditions where public education might be in 25 years, I simply have "invented" a conceptual framework for a new story of education by offering some alternative beliefs, assumptions and principles for creating sustainable learning communities that nurture the intelligence, imagination and creativity of the human mind and spirit.

I cannot view public education as an enterprise isolated from the needs of the human condition. To me, the kind of educational system we create is the direct result of our beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of human learning and the kind of mind we want to nurture for the future.

A Human Context

Public education cannot serve the needs of future generations unless the kind of mind we nurture develops our capacity to become more fully human and sees as its work the creation of a compassionate and sustainable world that works for everyone.

Devoid of a compassionate and sustaining human context, public education cannot serve the public good. As a consequence, I believe we must transform the current paradigm of schooling that created structures that stifle the needs children have for meaning and sense-making, for reflection and complex cognition, for exploration and discovery, for risk, adventure and surprise and for integration and connection with the natural world into a vision of education that creates whole, healthy and vibrant learning communities that liberate the goodness and genius of all children for the world.

It is our work, as prophets and pioneers to create a generative paradigm of learning that invites not only the fullness of our intellect but the fullness of our imagination and the fullness of our spirit.

Global Understanding

This vision is premised on several beliefs:

- Human beings inherently possess goodness and genius;
- Liberating the goodness and genius of children is essential to our sustainability; and

- The fundamental purpose of education is not to credential vocational knowledge and skills, but to build the capacity of each learner to advance the human condition.

It is my belief that the current structures of schooling, grounded in false and disabling assumptions of human learning, are not capable of re-igniting the power, courage and imagination of children for the world. They are not big enough to enable children to respond to their real questions about life and they are not "spirit-ful" enough to enable children to see how they "belong" to the world and one another.

In order to create a compassionate and sustainable world, a new global consciousness must become manifest, and this can only come from a paradigm of generative, not prescriptive learning. It is this paradigm that grounds the design of a new story of teaching and learning.

What is the new learning paradigm and how does it differ from the paradigm we live now?

Sights and Sounds

What might happen if the beliefs, assumptions and principles of this new story were made manifest in a learning community? What would it look like if this new covenant for learning were enacted? Let's visit a new learning community.

As we enter the building, we see open learning space. No bells are sounding. Clusters of students, teachers and community members are working together, and intergenerational learning is prevalent. The curriculum is integrative, inquiry-based and problem-centered, so we see groups of students (of multiple ages) engrossed in highly sophisticated and complex problems that actually affect the community in which they live because that is where the problems came from or surfaced.

Using multiple resources, both human and technological, they have been analyzing current research and sharing it in an electronic dialogue with teams of students at other learning centers within and outside the community, as well as teams of experts at national and international research centers. All are working on the same problem. Their integrative and interdisciplinary approach to problem-sensing and problem-finding reminds us more of expert learners who are drawn to principles and patterns than novice learners who are drawn to linearity and algorithmic causality.

The final resolution of each student team's work will be compared with the expert's recommendation and will be presented to the local city council, which will vote on whether to accept the recommendation for implementation.

The council's assessment of the student's work will become a part of each student's portfolio and learning log. Students are intensely engaged in what they are doing. They serve as mentors and tutors for each other both on and off campus. Personalized learning and inquiry plans with specific outcomes enable each to learn at his or her own rate and in his or her own way. Learners have been taught not to seek the one right answer; rather

they seek the best and most effective resolution to the problem at the time because they know they will revisit this question again and again as new information is gained.

The learning environment has been designed to engage the student fully. The flow and dynamic of engaged learning is pervasive and contagious. Lines of hierarchy have been replaced by circles of relationships. Students can access the depth of a subject without permission and can do so with others.

We pass teams of teachers who are designing integrative curriculum frameworks for the group of students for which they share responsibility. Teaching teams have been given authority and accountability for all decisions affecting teaching and learning.

This is a place where significant learning standards are collaboratively established by faculty, students, administrative support teams, parents and the community, but the means to achieve them are not prescribed. Potential, creativity and self-renewal are clearly prized. Choice has replaced control. Order comes from a core identity, a clear and shared vision, explicit values and an abiding belief held by all its members that each member of the community must and will contribute to its growth and sustainability.

We could live into this story, if we choose, not tomorrow, but by 2025.

A Malignant Shadow

The attributes of the current culture of schooling--rapid information acquisition, disintegration of knowledge, independence and competition--reflect our societal ambitions and predispositions. Schools, in fact, have executed the current cultural norms, values, priorities and reward structures (of most developed nations) quite well.

This "success" has been at an enormous human and environmental cost, however, and the result has been the emergence of a global mind focused on capitalism, consumption, competition, acquisition and winning.

The deep systemic problems that are now casting a malignant shadow over the global community, and our own society and institutions, will not be resolved until we recognize and reconnect to what we have lost:

- The acquisition of wisdom and the power of discernment;
- Compassionate use of knowledge;
- Integrative ways of knowing and sensing;
- Concern for human and community prosperity and moral action in the world;
- Commitment to ecological sustainability and the acceptance of nature as a sacred dimension of our lives;
- Willingness to engage slowly, around issues of long-term consequence;
- Deep awareness of and appreciation for our connection to the web of life; and
- The understanding that real learning comes slowly, through the construction of meaning, the recognition of patterns and the creation of relationships.

These attributes of a generative learning paradigm create a framework for a new epistemology, a new pedagogy and a new learning community--all of which offer the possibility to invite the creation of a new global mind, one capable of creating a compassionate and sustainable world that works for everyone.

Twin Challenges

Poised at the juncture of the new millennium, we confront two life-defining challenges:

- How to solve the deeply human problems facing us as a global civilization--problems for which our current system of education does not provide congruent context, vibrancy, practice or affirmation; and
- How to create learning conditions that liberate the goodness and genius of all children for the world.

The promise of this time in human evolution is that by unleashing the unprecedented capacity and power of the human mind and spirit for the world, we set in motion the possibility of inventing a world that works for everyone.