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# ENCOUNTER

*Education for Meaning and Social Justice*



# ENCOUNTER

EDUCATION FOR MEANING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

VOLUME 22, NUMBER 3 AUTUMN 2009

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## Table of Contents

<i>Editorial.</i> Albert Schweitzer. William Crain . . . . .	2
Video Games: A Critical Analysis. Lowell Monke . . . . .	7
Reawakening a Sense of Play Through Theater. Diane Caracciolo and Laraine Wallowitz . . . . .	21
Night Swim. Peggy Ellsberg . . . . .	26
Listening to the Locals, Listening to the Land. Rebecca M. Sánchez and Quincey Spurlin . . . . .	27
A Student's Guide to Taking Back the Classroom. Tom Stokes, Breton Sheridan, and Dylan Baird . . . . .	31
Book Reviews	
<i>The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement</i> by Ron Miller (Reviewed by John M. Watkins) . . . . .	37
<i>Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War.</i> Edited by Elizabeth Goodenough and Andrea Immel (Reviewed by Esther Willison) . . . . .	41
<i>Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns</i> by Clay Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson (Reviewed by Sandra J. Balaban) . . . . .	44

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## Editorial

# Albert Schweitzer

In an earlier issue of *Encounter* Suzanne Hudd (2005) described how Albert Schweitzer foresaw the negative effects of today's consumer society. Her essay sparked my interest in Schweitzer, about whom I knew little. I discovered that Schweitzer was accomplished in many areas. He was a highly-regarded pastor, historian, theologian, philosopher, organist, and music scholar. At the age of 31 he began seven years of medical studies so he could treat people's illnesses in west central Africa. In 1953, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this work. Schweitzer also formulated a simple philosophy of life, which he called a "Reverence for Life." In this editorial I will not say much about his work as a doctor in Africa, as important as it was, but will focus on what has most impressed me in Schweitzer's writings — his reflections on his childhood and his philosophy of life.

### Early Years

#### Church

Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) grew up in the village of Gunsbach, which was then part of the German empire and is now part of France. His father and maternal grandfather were Protestant ministers, and Schweitzer maintained his Christian faith throughout his life. Even as a child, however, he was skeptical about some biblical texts. At the age of 8 years, for example, he wondered what Jesus' parents did with all the gold treasures that the Wise Men gave them, and "How could have they been poor after that?" (Schweitzer 1931, 14)

Nevertheless, Schweitzer liked attending church and later concluded that church gave him something very important: "A feeling for what is solemn" (1931, 45). He said that although children might not understand everything that is said during church services, it is good for them to see the grown-ups full of devotion, and children come to appreciate the need for quiet reflection. Schweitzer added that as an adult, moments of peaceful introspection enabled him to find the meaning of his life (1931, 45).

#### Music

Schweitzer's father began giving him piano lessons at the age of 5, and the young Schweitzer was deeply moved by music. One day, when he was 7 or 8 years old, he overheard some older boys in a music class singing a vocal duet and recalled that "I had to hold the wall to prevent myself from falling. The charm of the two-part harmony thrilled me to my very marrow" (1931, 15). At the age of 8 Schweitzer began playing the organ, and at 9 he sometimes played it at services in the Gunsbach Church (Schweitzer 1949, 2).

When he was in secondary school, he began taking piano lessons from a great young organist, Eugen Munch. Initially, Munch found Schweitzer to be a frustrating pupil because Schweitzer played with so little feeling. Schweitzer said, "I could not bring myself to display to him all that I felt while playing a beautiful piece of music, and I am sure that many music-students feel the same" (1931, 40).

One day Munch lost his temper and told Schweitzer, "If a boy has no feeling, I certainly can't give him any!" In response, Schweitzer spent the following week carefully practicing his assigned Mendelsson piece, and at the next lesson he braced himself and "played it just as my soul bade me" (1931, 41). Munch was so moved that he then sat at the piano and played a new piece just for his pupil.

Although this episode apparently had a liberating effect on Schweitzer's musicianship, the young Schweitzer didn't let his emotions pour out in other areas of life. He often had difficulty letting others know his true thoughts and feelings, and as an adult he often reminded himself that "much more goes on in a child's heart than others are allowed to suspect" (1931, 44) Moreover, he believed the child's privacy — as well as the adult's — should be respected. Like the body, "the soul has its clothing," and others shouldn't try to remove it (1931, 68).

When Schweitzer was 15, Munch began giving him lessons on the organ, and when Schweitzer was 16, he

was allowed to substitute for Munch at the Reformed Church of St. Stephen's. Soon after, Schweitzer played his first concert with the church choir and an orchestra and felt great joy as the organ sent its sounds to mingle with the music of the others (1931, 42). Tragically, Munch died of typhoid fever when he was still a young man. Schweitzer wrote a short memorial piece on Munch. It was, at the age of 23, Schweitzer's first publication (Schweitzer 1949, 2-3).

### School

Schweitzer was not a top student. In his elementary school years his performances were hindered by his tendency to daydream, and in secondary school he found many subjects to be difficult and distasteful. He particularly disliked science books that presumed to explain Nature without recognizing Nature's fundamental mystery. Nature, he felt, is too full of riddles to ever be fully understood. He also hated lessons on poetry. Poetry, he believed, shouldn't be explained. It should be felt and experienced (1931, 52-53).

Schweitzer's early tendency to daydream upset his parents, and Schweitzer felt fortunate to largely overcome the habit in secondary school. The critical event was the appearance of a new teacher, Dr. Wehmann. "I saw clearly through the mist of my dreaminess ... that Dr. Wehmann came with every lesson carefully prepared" (1931, 39). The teacher's behavior inspired Schweitzer to become more self-disciplined — a change which Schweitzer described as much greater than any punishment or exhortation could have produced. Schweitzer kept in touch with Dr. Wehmann long after his school years, but when he tried to find Dr. Wehmann after World War I, he learned that his former teacher had suffered from severe hunger and had taken his own life (1931, 39).

Despite Dr. Wehmann's influence, Schweitzer never completely lost the habit of daydreaming, and he wrote positively about young people's tendency to dream big dreams. He noted that as a child he frequently heard stories about missionaries in far-off lands like Africa and that these stories stirred his imagination and influenced his future life (1931, 45-46, 53). Schweitzer especially valued the idealism of adolescence. Grown-ups wrongly tell young people to abandon their ideals and become more realis-

tic. Young people should hold fast to their ideals and maintain them as adults. Ideals inspire us to become more humane, truthful, and peace-loving. Schweitzer said, "If all of us could become what we were at

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*The teacher's behavior inspired Schweitzer to become more self-disciplined — a change which Schweitzer described as much greater than any punishment or exhortation could have produced.*

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fourteen, what a different place the world would be!" (1931, 77)

### Love of Animals

The young Schweitzer was deeply concerned about animals. The sight of a horse being beaten, for example, haunted him for weeks. As a boy,

It was quite incomprehensible to me — this was before I began going to school — why in my evening prayers I should pray for human beings only. So when my mother had prayed with me and had kissed me good night, I used to add silently a prayer that I had composed myself for all living creatures. (1931, 27-28)

When he was 7 or 8, he and a friend made sling shots, with which they could catapult small stones. One day his friend said, "Come along, let's go shoot some birds" (1931, 28). Schweitzer didn't want to go, but he was afraid his friend would laugh at him if he refused. When they got near some birds, his friend squatted down, ready to shoot. In obedience to his friend's order, Schweitzer did the same. Despite "terrible twinges of conscience," Schweitzer was prepared to kill a bird when some nearby church bells rang. Schweitzer took this as a message from Heaven. He thought of the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," and shooed the birds away (Schweitzer 1931, 28-29).

From that day onward, Schweitzer resolved to overcome his fear of being laughed at. He put more weight on his own convictions and less on the opinions of others. For example, peer pressure initially persuaded him to go fishing with other boys, but he soon thought about the pain of the fish and gave up the practice. He even found the courage to try to persuade others to stop (1931, 29-31).

Schweitzer maintained his love of animals throughout his life. When he became a physician in Africa, he rescued so many that there was always a menagerie by his side. Like St. Francis, he sang to animals, spoke to them, and took care that no harm came even to the flies and bees that came into his building (Joy 1951, 19; Anderson 1965, 48).

### A Philosophy of Life

As Schweitzer grew up, then, he came to value many personal qualities — including idealism, independent thinking, a sense of life's mystery, and a love of animals. But as he moved into adulthood, at the beginning of the 20th century, he saw Western society debasing these qualities (Schweitzer 1949, 146).

The West was, to be sure, making remarkable technological progress, but it was lacking in ethical ideals. Most people were interested in material things, not creating a just, loving, and peaceful world. What's more, people weren't thinking deeply or independently. Under the pressures of advertising and consumerism, people simply followed the latest trends. And because they didn't think deeply, they were failing to develop spiritually, to appreciate the oneness and mystery of existence (1949, 220-224).

Schweitzer spent many years trying to develop a philosophy of life that could steer people in a better direction. To learn more about spirituality, he studied Eastern thought (and wrote a brilliant history of Indian philosophy [1936]). He concluded, however, that Eastern philosophy wasn't the answer he was looking for. It provided mystical insight of our oneness with all beings, but it was too inward-directed. It didn't sufficiently concern itself with ethical action in the external world.

Western philosophy, in contrast, did discuss ethical action — but only to a limited degree. It typically focused on humans alone. It ignored moral attitudes toward animals, and therefore lacked the universal-

ity to which it aspired. Schweitzer likened Western ethics to a person who has just scrubbed a floor and makes sure the dog doesn't walk on it and mark it up with his footprints. Similarly, "European thinkers watch carefully that no animals run about in the fields of their ethics" (Schweitzer 1987, 297).

Schweitzer's search for an ethical vision lasted more than 20 years. Even during his first stay in Africa, when one would assume that his medical work would have been all-consuming, he struggled to develop a new philosophy of life. In 1915 he was on a small steamer, slowly making its way up the Ogowe River to treat an ailing patient. On the third day of the trip, he was lost in thought,

struggling to find an elementary and universal conception of the ethical which I had not discovered in any philosophy. Sheet after sheet I had covered with disconnected sentences, merely to keep myself concentrated on the task. Late on the third day, at the very moment when, at sunset, we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase, "Reverence for Life." The iron door had yielded: the path in the thicket had become visible. (1949, 156)

As he developed his philosophy, he wrote that the most elemental fact is that each of us is an individual who wills to live and is united to all other life that also wills to live (1949, 157). "As the wave in the ocean surges forward together will all waves, so must we feel in our life the life that is around us" (Schweitzer 1965, 40). Our ethical task is to give every will-to-live the same reverence that we give to our own. In this way, we deepen our spiritual relationship to something vast and mysterious, "for life continues to be a mystery too great to understand" (Schweitzer 1956, 255).

Thus, Reverence for Life upholds the Eastern view of the unity and mystery of existence. At the same time, the philosophy is Western in its call for ethical action. It asks us to act on behalf of all that lives. We must try to demonstrate the essential worth of life by doing all we can to prevent death and suffering (Schweitzer 1949, 234; 1971, 24).

Schweitzer believed that it is not sufficient to respect various life forms' urge to survive. When life is capable of development, we must honor this, too. Thus, the ethical individual

accepts as being good: to preserve life, to promote life, to raise to its highest value life which is capable of development; and as being evil: to destroy life, to injure life, to repress life which is capable of development. (1949, 158)

To one who follows this philosophy, every life form, no matter how small, is of absolute value.

He tears no leaf from a tree, plucks no flower, and takes care to crush no insect.... If he walks on the road after a shower and sees an earthworm which has strayed on it, he lifts it up from the deadly stone surface, and puts in on the grass. (1987, 310)

An individual who reveres life, must always be "on the look-out for opportunities of bringing some sort of help to animals, to make up for the great misery which men inflict on them" (1987, 319).

Schweitzer said some people will ridicule such attitudes as overly sentimental (just as he feared people would laugh at him as a boy). But he came to believe that deep down, all people recognize their ethical obligation to end suffering, and the time will eventually come when this obligation is broadly recognized (1987, 310-311, 319; 1931, 31).

A Reverence for Life is not a principle that solves all our moral dilemmas. For we are "subject to the puzzling and horrible law of being obliged to live at the cost of other life, and to incur again and again the guilt to destroying and injuring life" (1949, 159). The ethical individual simply does the best he or she can to prevent unnecessary death and suffering (1949, 234).

### Evaluation

I believe Schweitzer provided sensitive insights into childhood and a profound philosophy of life. But I do have criticisms of his philosophy. On two topics, he wrote too dogmatically, as if his statements were the final word.

The first topic is the unity of life. Schweitzer described it as a spiritual reality that is inevitably shrouded in mystery (1987, 283; 1949, 158; Anderson

1965, 40). But is this so? Some people, as he implied, do develop a sense of the oneness of life through mystical experiences (James 1982, 394-395). However, others have reached the same conclusion through scientific research. Since the early 1960s, molecular biologists have found that all living things, despite the visible variations among them, use the same genetic code, build proteins with the same 20 amino acids, and share many other molecular properties (Campbell and Reece 2005, 78, 314). The unity of life does not seem to be an unfathomable mystery.

There is, to be sure, a sense in which Schweitzer may eventually prove to be correct. Despite all the advances in modern genetics, there is still something deeply puzzling about the way life thrives and grows. Geneticists understand the structure of genes and amino acids, but they are far from understanding why specific genes become active at specific times. Growth often seems driven by some inner force, what Schweitzer called a "forward-urging Will" (1987, 283), whose nature is largely unknown. Nevertheless, it is much too early to claim, as Schweitzer did, that this force is inherently mysterious.

Schweitzer also wrote too dogmatically with respect to the choices we often face when we try to save lives. For example, if we contemplate a diet that reduces the killing of animals, we still must eat plants, which are living things. Schweitzer made sweeping statements that if we revere all life, all such choices are arbitrary and subjective (1949, 233; 1987, 317). But in his later years, Schweitzer became a vegetarian (Anderson 1965, 37), presumably deciding that, if given the choice between saving a seed, plant, or animal, it's best to save the animal. Was this decision completely arbitrary? Animals, as far as we know, are capable of greater pain and suffering than plants (Singer 2002, 11-13, 235-236), and Schweitzer's writings suggest his decision was implicitly based on his wish to prevent the greatest suffering (1949, 159, 234; 187, 319). This motive doesn't seem arbitrary.

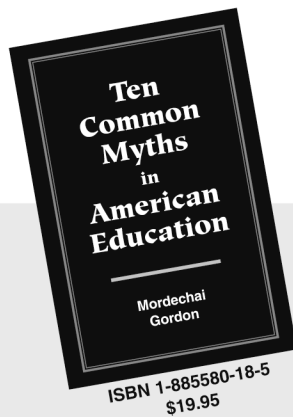
Despite my reservations, I like Schweitzer's philosophy very much. It gives eloquent and inspirational expression to a viewpoint I share. It's as if Schweitzer said, "Follow this star; it will give your

life direction and meaning." I am eager to learn the responses his philosophy elicits among young people, especially those who are actively searching for a philosophy of life. I intend to introduce Schweitzer's philosophy to my undergraduates, and I suspect it is an appropriate topic for discussion among students at many levels, from middle school through graduate school. If you would like to present a selection to your students, I recommend either Schweitzer's Epilogue in his book *Out of My Life and Thought* (1949) or the chapters titled "The Will-to-Live" and "Reverence for Life" in *Albert Schweitzer: An Anthology* (Schweitzer 1956).

—William Crain, Editor

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#### Table of Contents

Foreword by Joe L. Kincheloe	
Introduction	Technology is the Cure for All Problems in Education
Good Teaching Means Following a Recipe	Good Techniques Are Those that Seem to "Work"
Theories Can Be Applied Directly to Practice	More Testing Results in Higher Standards
Students Need to Know "The Basics"	Multicultural Education: It's All About Heroes and Holidays
Keeping Students Busy Enhances Learning	Easy Solutions Work in Education
Confusion and Uncertainty Hinder Learning	

# Ten Common Myths in American Education

Mordechai Gordon

"Mordechai Gordon has emerged in just the last few years as one of the top educational foundations scholars in North America. His ability to get to the heart of an issue, to make educational and moral meaning in ambiguous situations, and to express his ideas in a clear, concise, and compelling manner is treasured by those of us interested in the social, cultural, and philosophical contexts in which education takes place.... *Ten Common Myths in American Education* presents Mordechai Gordon at the top of his game. Educational leaders, education students, and teachers need to read this book — especially at this ominous juncture in the history of education."

— Joe L. Kincheloe

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# Video Games

## A Critical Analysis

Lowell Monke

**In a new wave of publicity, the video game industry, backed by many university professors, argues that the games are highly educational. Actually, video games promote overly rational modes of thought and remove young people from the experiences they need in the real world.**

A recent development in the controversy over children's use of technology is the attempt to rehabilitate the image of video games. Long criticized for their violent content and for monopolizing children's free time, video games are now being defended not just as harmless entertainment but as positive educational experiences for youth. And the defense is coming not just from the video game industry and its enthusiasts but from university professors as well. As a result, newspaper and magazine articles reassure worried moms and dads that video games are among the things that once were thought to be bad for kids but really are good. Books with titles such as *How Computer Games Help Children Learn* and *Don't Bother Me, Mom – I'm Learning* go farther, portraying video games as essential models of learning that are particularly relevant for 21st century youth. Typically missing from these promotional tomes is any critical analysis of the claims. This essay is an effort to provide such an analysis.

### Video Game Use and Abuse

According to a 2005 Kaiser Foundation survey, young people from the ages of 8 to 18 in the U.S. consume electronic screen media, on average, 6.5 hours per day. The only activity that takes up more of their time is sleeping. Of that 6.5 hours, the researchers found that a little over 1 hour is spent playing video games. Other estimates for video games are somewhat higher. It is likely that today the average amount of time young people play video games is approaching 2 hours per day (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005).

Even younger children spend considerable time playing games on screens. In a typical day, 83% of U.S. children up to the age of 6 use some form of screen media. Children ages 4 to 6 spend just over an hour a



Lowell Monke, a founding Board member of the Alliance for Childhood, is Associate Professor of Education at Wittenberg University in Ohio. He has written numerous articles on the role of technology in education and is coauthor (with R. W. Burniske) of *Breaking Down the Digital Walls* (SUNY Press, 2001).



day playing video games, nearly the same amount of time as older youth (Rideout and Hamel 2006).

Though the amount of time children spend playing video games is considerably less than watching TV, the amount of time that children spend watching television has remained fairly constant during the years that video gaming has grown (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). Thus, the question of what activities children are giving up in order to play video games is an important one. For example, the Kaiser study found that youth now average only about  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour reading print media each day (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). Also, the amount of time children spend outside has diminished dramatically in the last two decades (Juster, Ono, and Stafford 2004). Of course, it is an over-simplification to pin these losses solely on the rise in video game usage. But it is important to keep in mind that children have only so many minutes in a day. Every choice to do one activity means less time for others. So it's difficult to dispute writers like Richard Louv (2005) who see the rise in video games and other electronic media as an important contributor to the reduction in outdoor play (and what Louv calls "nature deficit disorder").

Even video game supporters acknowledge that video games are notorious time sinks. Children and adults alike admit losing track of time while playing video games. Video game addiction, once considered a mislabeling of minor game-playing obsession, is becoming recognized as a serious pathology, not just in the U.S. but all over the world. It has created enough of a ripple in the medical community that in June 2007 the American Medical Association considered establishing video game addiction as a formal diagnosis. It eventually backed off, punting the issue to the American Psychiatric Association, asking them for advice. The APA punted as well, claiming that because the 1998 Manual of Mental Disorders does not have video games listed, it could not be diagnosed as one, though it might be considered for the 2012 edition.

Other countries are not so reluctant to designate video game addiction a real mental health problem. In South Korea, where 10 people died from the effects of compulsive video gaming in 2005 (most from disruption in blood circulation caused by sitting in a single, cramped position for too long) the government

has set up a gaming addiction hotline (Faiola 2006). Hundreds of private units have also been set up by hospitals and psychiatric clinics to deal with the problem in that country. China, Japan, the Netherlands, Canada and Great Britain are among the nations that have recognized video game addiction as a real health problem. In the U.S. doctors have been formally treating video game addiction at least since 1996, when Dr. Maressa Hecht Orzack opened a computer addiction clinic associated with McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts (Marriott 1998).

Most researchers believe that video game addiction follows the same character as impulse control disorders like gambling and pornography addiction. But a recent report by researchers at the University of Bolton in Great Britain suggests that the traits of gaming addicts are more like Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism ("Video Game Addiction 'Like Being on Drugs' " 2008). This is a particularly disturbing finding, given the explosion of children identified with autism in this country. Asperger's Syndrome has received special attention as the "Geek Syndrome," a mild form of autism that has reached epidemic status in Silicon Valley (Siberman 2001). No one is saying that video games, or extensive computer use, causes Asperger's Syndrome, but the British findings could mean that video game playing might amplify an otherwise mild tendency toward the condition.

There is much to be learned about video game addiction. What is clear is that thousands, if not millions of people's lives are being adversely affected by their inability to control their video game playing. Of course, that is not grounds for banning these activities; after all, we don't ban alcohol, gambling or pornography even though each has proven to have addictive qualities. But we do ban access to them by children. The odds of becoming addicted typically increase dramatically with early exposure. Any activity that is implicated in addictive behavior thus poses a particularly serious health risk for children.

### Basic Arguments for Video Games

As mentioned, arguments are now being advanced that cast video games not as a destructive consumer of young people's time but a potentially valuable educational tool. Can video games really

help children learn? And are the benefits strong enough to offset the possible addictive qualities just described?

Two academicians who think so are James Paul Gee and David Williamson Shaffer, both professors at the University of Wisconsin. Gee has written several books describing the benefits of video game playing (Gee 2003; 2005; 2007). He argues that market forces compel designers of complex role-playing and adventure video games to figure out ways for players to learn how to navigate and negotiate their way through these games by solving series of increasingly difficult problems. In the process, the player learns how to think and act like an engineer, pilot, city manager, or soldier by actually taking on their roles. In the better games, solving the problems that arise may require research, collaboration with other players, trial and error, and a good deal of reasoning. All of these are characteristics that apply to good learning. Gee specifies 36 of these traits that are found in many of the better video games and claims that educators should look to video designs as models for 21st century learning.

Schaffer (2006) supports and extends Gee's educational claims by drawing heavily on the progressive ideas of philosopher John Dewey. Schaffer claims that Dewey's argument for experiential learning is valid but until now has been too difficult to put fully into practice. Computer and video games enable children to learn by doing without the expense or the dangers that often accompany real world experience. Indeed, video game simulations overcome one of the biggest hurdles schools have had in implementing Dewey's ideas: they allow children to undertake far more complex and remote learning experiences than was available through the educational media of Dewey's day.

These arguments recognize the inadequacies of the "traditional" practices found in many schools throughout the country. Most thoughtful educators — and parents — will sympathize with the preference for experiential learning over passive consumption of information; dialogue over one-way lecturing; interactive activities that spark enthusiasm over worksheets that generate boredom; customization over standardization.

There is, in fact, a strong strain of progressive philosophy at the heart of most of these arguments. Educational technologists have long been among the strongest critics of the standardized curriculum and testing that deadens so much of learning. A few video game advocates go even farther than taking the progressive side of the educational debate. They claim that good video games promise to overcome the longstanding dispute between progressives and traditionalists because they have built into them the best of both approaches to learning.

The arguments behind these and the other claims are many and complex. I cannot review them all here, nor is this essay intended to offer a point-by-point rebuttal of all of the claims. Rather, I want to raise questions and concerns and some fundamental disputes with these claims to help the reader think through the controversy more carefully.

Because video games are built on computer technology and engage the user in much the same way (through video screens and some hand-held input device) many of the criticisms leveled at computer-use by children also apply to video games. I refer you to the Alliance for Childhood's *Fool's Gold* (2001) for those criticisms. However, there are some issues related to both computer use and video games that warrant more detailed and focused comment.

### Reduction to Abstractions

What takes place in any video game is not only mechanical but always at some level an abstraction — a symbolic representation, either through text or images. Many of the attributes that promoters cite as benefits of video games grow out of the ability to represent aspects of the world symbolically. A relatively simple game such as *Lemonade Stand* is able to create a virtual business environment through the creation of a number of symbolic representations that follow complex mathematical rules assigned to physical properties such as the weather, the cost of ingredients, and the price charged for the lemonade. In the far more complex simulation game, *Civilization*, everything from the characters to the terrain is represented visually on the screen. Stocks of weapons and food and levels of production, commerce and, pollution are represented graphically or numerically. As Professor

Schaffer (2006, 11) says, the great value of video games is their ability to offer children “parts of the real world that are too expensive, complicated, or dangerous for them except through computer simulations.” In other words, the educational value of video games is achieved by reducing the costs, complexity, and danger of direct investigation.

But in many cases it is precisely the costs, complexity, and danger that are crucial elements in understanding how the real world works. For example, *The Oregon Trail*, perhaps the first, and certainly the most well known, educational video game, purports to teach students about the western migration across the U.S. by simulating the trip. But simulating that migration on a computer seriously distorts history. Essentially, children learn that success in crossing the Great Plains depended most heavily on managing one’s resources, spiced by a dose of random good fortune. Success in the game depends on making rational, calculated decisions about behavior based on precise measurements of one’s assets; in other words, one must be a good accountant to be a good pioneer.

There is a germ of truth to this. But the program amplifies this aspect of the journey to the point that the real meaning of the great American migration completely disappears. One simply cannot comprehend the significance of this journey without coming to grips with the unrelenting heat, the deadly cold, the hunger, the fear, the heartache, the elation that accompanied this movement. The meaning of this historical event lies not in the calculating capabilities of the pioneers but in their heart, their faith and their will. In fact, it is only because of the extraordinary determination, ingenuity, desperation, hope, and capacity for both suffering and cruelty the settlers used to overcome their almost constant *miscalculations*. Because the computer governing *Oregon Trail* (or any computer-based simulation) can neither recreate nor inspire such deeply human qualities, they are severed from the simulation. What the students are left with is an image of pioneers as hyper-rational problem solvers, whose success depended on their management of cold, external data — an impression that completely misrepresents what is most significant about one of the great human dramas of all time.

### Mechanistic Thinking

Long before students started playing *Oregon Trail*, or video game advocates linked game-playing with educational problem-solving, computer science pioneer Joseph Weizenbaum warned about the dangers of substituting mechanical calculation for human judgment. Alarmed that his colleagues were seriously using a program he had playfully designed to simulate conversation with a psychotherapist, he pointed out that “instrumental reason converts each dilemma, however genuine, into a mere paradox that can be unraveled by the application of logic, calculation” (Weizenbaum 1976, 13). The full, rich complexity of human decision-making gives way to a reductionistic, totally mechanical calculus, leaving much that is most precious to our stories behind.

“The introduction of computers into our already highly technological society,” writes Weizenbaum,

merely reinforced and amplified those antecedent pressures that have driven man to an ever more highly rationalistic view of his society and an ever more mechanistic image of himself (Weizenbaum 1976, 11).

The contribution of video games to this development of a mechanistic view of human thought is something that advocates have not been able to sort out in their own minds. Gee, for example, seems to think that the way computers function is, in fact, the way people think, and therefore provides a good model for children to emulate. “In part because they externalize the way in which the human mind thinks,” he writes, “good video games often organize learning in deep and effective ways” (Gee 2007, 25). Later he adds, “Since fruitful thinking involves building simulations in our heads that prepare us for action, thinking itself is somewhat like a video game, given that video games are external simulations” (Gee 2007, 80).

In contrast, Shaffer echoes Weizenbaum’s observation about the character of computer “thinking.” “By definition,” he writes,

the things that a computer can do are things that can be represented by a well-formed algorithm. That is, they can do things that can be standardized. So learning to do what a computer can do

by definition means learning some standardized skill.

But Shaffer isn't dissuaded by the limits of standardization. Instead, he believes that the computer's mechanized processes can supplement distinctly human thinking, making learning even more powerful.

Shaffer's claim may be true when the computer's remarkable capacity to crunch numbers or edit symbols is used to supplement work outside the artificial environment. But *video games* are essentially self-contained microworlds. One must think within the constraints of those logic-built "worlds" if one is to have any success at all. Any thinking beyond what can be expressed in mechanical, standardized, algorithmic form simply doesn't work in such an environment and is therefore framed out of the experience.

This is precisely what we see happening through the Oregon Trail simulation (or Civilization or the popular Sim series). As such, the traditional moral of the actual Oregon Trail story, which relies on the full scope of human experience, is also framed out of the game. It is replaced with a new and wholly technical lesson that the proper way to engage the world is through rational, calculated decision-making designed to increase our power and control over our environment. But it is not just any environment, but an environment that is itself created in the image of a machine.

Thirty years after Weizenbaum warned that computers could take us down a path where human judgment is usurped by mechanical calculation, we find video game advocates touting their ability to not only improve one's thinking skills but even one's ethical character. A popular press report quotes Justin Hall, a gaming consultant, who "credits games for teaching him morality." Hall, according to the article, found that

Richard Garriot's 'Ultima IV' game helped him grasp that good behavior sometimes means choosing between competing virtues.... In a Garriot-designed universe, a person might lose the game by seemingly making all the right moves, but failing to give money to a pauper met along the way. (Rubin 2004)

Hall twists moral-ethical conduct into purely instrumental reasoning. The conception of compassion

offered here is not an act of generosity based on some heart-felt connection with a fellow living being. Instead, the player feeds the hungry because it furthers his own interests. The pauper is just another object used, another investment made to gain success. Given the cold logic guiding this doctrine, it is not difficult to predict what will happen when Mr. Hall's real-life experience convinces him that giving to the poor doesn't help him become more successful in his real-world endeavors.

All decisions made by the computerized innards of video game technology are pure mathematical calculations. Any efforts to build human ethical conduct into the programming of these games requires redefining terms such as compassion, commitment, integrity, and dignity in ways that are divorced from any emotional, spiritual or other non-rational aspects of life. This is an instance of what social critic Theodore Roszak (1986, 78) has called the grand reductionary principle of computers: "If the computer cannot rise to the level of the subject, then lower the subject to the level of the computer."

Thus, one of the fundamental, and most dangerous, errors of the video game-as-educator argument is that what takes place on the screen is a fair and adequate model of what takes place in real life. By passing on to our children the illusion that video games simulate real-life experience, we teach them that what makes them most profoundly human doesn't really matter.

### Collapse of Space and Time

One of the allures of video games-as-educators is their capacity to compress time and essentially obliterate the constraints of physical space. Collaboration between students living on opposite sides of the planet can take place almost instantaneously. The benefits from this hyper-compression of time and space are a strong part of the argument made for the educational use of video games.

Unfortunately, there is no consideration given to the possible problems related to this compression. As Piaget showed (and parents know from experience), children's perceptions of time and space are often confused, and getting accurate senses of time and space are developmental tasks that last into adolescence (Piaget 1969). Does early use of video games

and other time/space compression technologies interfere with that development? We don't know. There is little research into how this compression might affect young people's general concept of time and space. But there is enough anecdotal evidence of young people being unable to attend for any length of time to real-world activities, to raise suspicions (Brod 1984).

In my discussions with teachers and parents about the importance of nature in children's lives, one of the most often expressed frustrations is that young people today typically show little patience when they are taken out to a pond or forest. Having been raised on Discovery Channel-type nature programs that compress hundreds of hours of footage into a half hour of exciting video, they expect to see the deer drinking, the fish jumping, the otters playing, and the bears growling all at once and with no effort on their part. Real space is too big, real time is too slow to match the excitement the child experiences watching a video or playing a video game. When the simulation becomes preferable to the real, there arises a real question of the simulations' true educational value.

Moreover, video games devalue place entirely. Where one actually is in space has no impact on the game. Thus, the context of where one lives, including home life, neighborhood, school location, and natural setting, has no significance within a video game environment. Yet one of the most important things a child needs is a sense of belonging to a physical place. As philosopher Simone Weil put it, "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (Weil, Eliot, & Wills 1978, 41). Unfortunately, being rooted in a place (other than in front of a screen) is a need that video games do not recognize, much less promote, at all.

### Motivation

We now come to the central premise of using video games for learning: Many young people seem wildly motivated to learn how to play them well. Given how poorly motivated many children are to learn in school, it is an attractive idea to use the same principles that are employed to design successful commercial games for developing educational games. We might see young people spending hours gladly im-

mersed in learning history, science and math. So goes the argument. Unfortunately, it is a remarkably flimsy one, for a number of reasons.

First, there is no evidence that video games can be designed with the kind of deep and accurate content that young people need to learn while maintaining the level of excitement and challenge that draws them to high selling video games. When it comes to matching the seductive power of video games with serious academic content, proponents admit that they are selling *potential*, not actual existing programs that work. Given the sorry history of other highly touted technological saviors of education — from the motion picture to the Internet — all sold on speculative potential rather than existing evidence, there is good reason to be highly skeptical of the utopian picture painted of the future by enthusiasts.

Second, proponents claim that the motivating feature of video games has nothing to do with content matter at all. That's why university professors can point to games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* as examples of video games that are powerful learning environments (Gee 2007). These games may portray extremely violent activities, but their creators understand what it takes to get young people to keep playing them. According to Gee, Shaffer, and other advocates speculate that the appeal has nothing to do with an attraction to violence, but an ever-enlarging sense of control. As Gee (2007, 49-50) puts it,

When people are playing a computer or video game they are manipulating a character ... at a distance in a very fine-grained way — in this case a virtual distance. They feel that their minds and bodies have been extended into this virtual world. This process appears to allow players to identify powerfully with the virtual character or characters they are playing in a game and to become strongly motivated to commit themselves to the virtual world the game is creating with their help.

Perhaps if young people could actually live in a virtual world, it would be fine for them to become committed to it. But this is, in fact, what strikes many critics as worrisome — that video game players seem more devoted to a simulated world than the

real one. If the power that comes from being drawn into a virtual reality is one of the major motivations for playing video games, it is difficult to imagine how that motivation could be helpful in directing young people's interest toward real-world learning.

Take, for example, the difficulties already discussed that are created when children who are used to playing fast paced simulation games dealing with the environment confront the much slower moving real thing. Science philosopher Stephen Talbott examines this problem in an essay titled "Impressing the Science Out of Children." He writes (1995, 146) that trying to motivate science students with awe-inspiring multimedia programs (the "wow" factor) is counterproductive because "special effects wonder" does not lead to the same reverent scientific curiosity generated by the wonder that accompanies prolonged contact with nature.

The latter ... grows from an awareness of one's immediate connection to the phenomenon — from a sense that the inner essence of what one is looking at is somehow connected to the inner essence of oneself.

Talbott goes on to argue that substituting the dazzle of special effects generated by a computer for a child's deep connection with the actual phenomenon will likely result in the child only being attracted to the special effects, not the phenomenon itself, nor science at all. In contrast to the fast moving, entertainment-saturated simulation, the much slower moving, more subtle, less controllable real world strikes the child as mundane, boring, incapable of inspiring awe and excitement. Teachers often find that the things themselves hold little interest for the students, and motivating their students to learn in unmediated situations becomes even more challenging. In many classrooms, the occasional use of glitzy computer activities that once seemed to be a teacher's surefire occasional means of motivation has already turned into the jaded child's means of extortion, with the unspoken threat echoing from kindergarten to college: "I won't learn from you unless you entertain me."

Moreover, Gee's idea of exploiting children's manipulative instincts as a way to motivate them may be a boon for commercial video game designers, but it should raise serious concerns among parents and

educators who recognize that part of growing up is learning to *constrain* the urge to manipulate "at a distance." In fact, here we encounter an example of one of the most troubling aspects of video game design: a willingness to exploit the most immature qualities in children in order to sell the games. Marc Prensky (2006, 85) writes,

Computer games are so engaging because the primary objective of the game designer is to keep the user engaged. They need to keep that player coming back, day after day, for 30, 60, or even 100+ hours, so that the person feels like he or she has gotten value for their money (and, in the case of online games, keeps paying). That is the measure of success.

It does not occur to Prensky that this description could also fit the strategy of a drug pusher, that the best means of keeping the user "engaged" is to get them hooked by appealing to users' baser, more immature instincts rather than their higher values. If the free market, rather than a concern for the health of the child, determines what motivational tools are built into video games, then anything goes.

An example of this can be found in *Virtual Laguna Beach*, the first of three on-line role-playing environments designed by MTV, in which participants create their own 3-D characters. When asked why young people would play the game, chief executive of MTV Networks, Judy McGrath, confidently remarked that it appealed to the same qualities that attracts them to her network. "MTV," she said, "speaks uniquely to a group of people who are endlessly fascinated with watching themselves" (Siklos 2006).

Advocates should consider that many of the key motivational characteristics unique to video games — the sense of overwhelming control, the ability to manipulate the one's personal "avatars," the customizability of the virtual environment to suit one's whims, the commitment to a world with oneself as a central character — may grow out of an unhealthy, adolescent self-regard that education should seek to diminish rather than exploit.

Finally, the newest motivational arguments claim that learning itself is the primary reason young people are flocking to these games. Video game promoters provide no research to support this contention.

Moreover, the argument strains credulity. *Grand Theft Auto 4*, one of the most violent video games, sold 3.6 million copies the first day it was out, breaking the record set by another violent video game, *Halo 3* ("Grand Theft Auto Reaps Record Sales" 2008). Are we to believe it sold in such record numbers because of a thirst for learning? It is equally difficult to square the educational argument with the fact that 7 million more copies of the bloody version of *Mortal Kombat* were sold than the non-bloody version (Goldstein 1999). It is far more likely that the appeal of these games comes from stimulating the adrenal glands rather than the cerebral cortex.

What little research there is on the impact of playing video games on learning doesn't seem to bear out Gee's claim either. A study undertaken by Vivek Anand found that "the amount of time a student spends playing video games has a negative correlation with students' GPA and SAT scores. As video game usage increases, GPA and SAT scores decrease" (Anand 2007, 552). GPA and SAT scores may not be the best indicators of learning, but they might provide some indication of an increased motivation to learn. At least in this study, there is no evidence of that.

Given all of this, it is not at all clear that the kinds of motivation drawing young people to video games are helpful to educators, or healthy for kids. Motivation is a complex issue. It rarely transfers cleanly from one context to another. Moving video games from entertainment to education is a much larger transfer than most advocates are willing to admit. To date, there is little evidence that the right kinds of motivation survive the move.

### Play

One of the most appealing aspects of video game advocacy is the recognition of the importance of games as learning experiences for children.

Children *play* games. As advocacy groups like the Alliance for Childhood (Miller & Almon 2009) have shown, play is an essential element of child development as well as something children should be involved in for its own sake. It is good to see video game advocates cite child development experts like Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner on play's value for emotional, social, and cognitive development. But

there are many types of play. Today's children need some types more than others. Most middle class American children play far too many highly structured, adult supervised games that rob them of their creative freedom. Too little time or space is allocated for self-directed, loosely or unsupervised play. Too much Little League Baseball and junior league soccer, too little tag and hide-and-seek.

A big mistake that many video game advocates make is insisting that video games belong in the latter category of self-directed, unstructured play. It's an easy mistake to make; after all, the child directs the action on the screen and adult supervision not only is not needed, it is typically scorned. But a closer look reveals that video game play is not so independent after all. It just isn't the adult in the room who is in control. Indeed, in one sense, there is no human in control at all. But the computer, X box, or Playstation establish relatively tight and extremely rigid parameters (not to mention physical space) within which the play must take place.

All games are rule-bound. That's what makes them games. But the rules in child devised games tend to be remarkably fluid. They are often revised on the fly. Not so with video games. Not only are the fundamental video game rules laid out by the designers, with whom there can be no negotiating, the computer running the game has to abide by a deeper and extremely narrow set of operating rules that even the designer can't ignore. The traditional supervisor (parent, teacher) may have been disposed of, but a hidden pedagogue has assumed the throne, and a new set of strict laws has been encased in silicon.

When Theodore Roszak examined educational software pioneer Seymour Papert's (1980) prophecies about the takeover of education by "microworlds," he found himself "haunted by the image of the prisoner who has been granted complete freedom to roam the "microworld" called jail: 'Stay inside the walls, follow the rules, and you can do whatever you want'" (Roszak 1986, 75). At the most fundamental level, video games do not liberate children from overly structured play, they simply shift the responsibility for structuring the play from humans to machines.

Even the claim that players get to direct the action within the game is overstated. It is more accurate to say that players manipulate objects and text on the screen, to which the program responds, in turn manipulating the action according to the programming code set by the designer. The nature of this feedback loop is not so troubling. It is similar to what happens in the real world — poke your playmate and he may poke you back. The possible responses allowed are far fewer in the video game, but the process is at least similar.

What isn't at all similar is the role of the player in the activity. In real-world play, children themselves engage in a wide variety of actions. In video game play, it is the child's avatar, an image that the child partly controls from a distance, that makes the moves. For some video game advocates, this is seen as an attractive collaborative relationship based on shared knowledge. Gee, for example, extols the virtues of his relationship with his avatar in a first-person shooting game: "He knows how to move and fight in the game world, while I know how and when to order him to do (Gee 2007, 72). Less favorably put, video game players are like virtual puppeteers who have no knowledge of how the strings they pull actually move their two dimensional puppets. This enforced role of directing and manipulating action from both a physical and cognitive distance is a very different way of engaging the world from hitting the ball, building the fort, setting the table, climbing the tree, sorting the coins, speaking and listening to another person, physically acting out roles in fantasy play. In an important sense, when a child plays a video game she gains control over a vast array of activities by giving up the capacity to actually do them herself.

Video game advocates are right that children need play. But what is missing from children's lives is not the kind of highly structured game playing that is programmed by video game developers. It is free play — the type of play that is truly open-ended and child-directed — that is missing from children's lives. This is the type of play that is also now widely recognized as an essential requirement for healthy child development (Miller and Almon 2009; Crain 2007). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, free play is disappearing, in part, because to-

day "in many communities, children cannot play safely outside of the home unless they are under close adult supervision and protection" (Ginsburg 2007, 185). But the decrease is also caused by "children being passively entertained through television or computer/video games" (Ginsburg 2007, 185). And the more that children are allowed, even encouraged, to stay inside and play video games, the more likely it is that the demand for safe outdoor spaces for free play will shrink.

### Video Games for Physical Development

Though there has long been broad agreement that video games contribute to physical passivity, there have also long been arguments that video games provide some benefits to physical development. The early arguments were modest and often rather silly. Perhaps the most common, and unintentionally revealing, was the still often made claim that "shooter" games improve hand-eye coordination — as if children can't easily find activities, like throwing and catching balls, playing Jacks, coloring with crayons, stringing beads, building with wood blocks, that are far more effective at developing that skill. It is, in fact, a gross distortion to apply the traditional developmental use of the term "hand-eye coordination" to such slight movements of a single digit. That the claim persists and does not evoke hoots of derision from parents is sad evidence that those once ordinary childhood activities are not so common any more, that children's lives have become so sedentary and passive that twitching one's thumb now qualifies as skillful physical activity.

As the games and the equipment have become more sophisticated, however, video activities have grown more robust, to the point that children can now work up a good sweat playing games like Dance Dance Revolution. Devices can be attached to video game consoles to provide instant feedback to swinging a golf club, pounding on drums, even paddling a kayak. There are even "games" that monitor and supervise yoga exercises and running on treadmills. With such activities available, some video game supporters suggest that they could actually be an important component in counteracting the epidemic of child obesity.



Certainly, these kinds of games are an improvement over those that involve merely staring into a screen and moving a joystick. Still, video game exercise should not be mistaken for the kind of activity a child gets through free play, which typically entails much directional change, a wide assortment and often random movement of limbs and activity that takes place at a tempo and locations determined by the child, not a machine. Video games aren't video games unless the player is tethered to a screen in some way. Furthermore, recognizing and analyzing movement is a complex function for the computers at the heart of video games and, thus, only a very narrow range of human motion counts in any active video game. This is fine for a golfer practicing her basic swing or a contestant stepping on various "dance" pads in a certain order, but it should not be mistaken for the unrestricted, self-directed, wildly diversified movements that children, especially younger ones, need for healthy physical development (or real dancing, for that matter, which involves the development of *graceful* movement of all parts of the body, not just sequential foot stomps on sensors).

Consider video-enhanced treadmills. Video games are attached to a treadmill so that running on it becomes more fun and attractive to kids (the game automatically changes the speed and incline of the treadmill in concert with what is shown on screen — a sort of virtual reality jogging). Still, health professionals do not recommend that children exercise by running on a treadmill. Anyone who has ever watched children play tag can see why. Running on a treadmill simply cannot include the sudden changes in direction and bursts of speed, the ducking, twisting, turning, jumping, reaching, etc., that get every muscle in the body involved in the game. Whether it is virtual running, bowling, golfing or even dancing, those same limitations apply. They always reduce what counts as physical action to a small set of sensor-activating movements.

This reduction of physical activity to mere "exercise" allows promoters to ignore the qualities of childhood activity that lead to an appreciation of the outdoors: feeling the texture of grass under bare feet, breathing the fresh air, orienting oneself in panoramic three dimensional space, moving in ways

that are restricted only by the strength of muscles and the pull of gravity. These are the kinds of qualities that children take such delight in *for their own sake* that we sometimes describe it as "frolicking." A child certainly may exercise in tandem with playing a video game, but she doesn't frolic.

### Violence

No issue related to video games has created more parental concern, press attention, and scholarly research than the violence depicted in many of them. Much of the debate about the influence of this violent content flows along the same lines as the decades-long debate over violence in other media like TV and movies. However, because video game players do not just observe violence but actually participate in generating images depicting it, there is also a unique concern that this intimate involvement may cause even larger effects than other media. Real events, like the Columbine High School shootings where the two boys who went on the rampage seemed to emulate the violent video games they had spent hours playing, have added emotional fuel to the debate.

Video game defenders have countered that the number of incidents of violent video game players turning into mass murderers is infinitesimally small; that there is no strong scientific research indicating that playing video games cause young people to be more aggressive, much less commit violent crimes; and that there are far more critical factors that govern young people's decisions to act violently.

Sorting out all of the competing claims is difficult. Until recently, there had not been a sizeable enough body of scientific research to gain a very clear picture of the impact of violent video games on youth. But there has long been more than enough research on other forms of media violence to show that images of violent behavior do, indeed, affect young people. Craig Anderson, a long-time researcher into the effects of violent media, minces no words in claiming the conclusiveness of the evidence: "The scientific debate about whether exposure to media violence causes increases in aggressive behavior is over ... and should have been over 30 years ago" (Anderson and Gentile 2008, 4) He cites, among other evidence, the work of a panel of media violence researchers orga-

nized at the request of the U.S. Surgeon General that found "unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts" (Anderson and Gentile 2008, 282) These conclusions are echoed by many other (though not all) researchers, including Stephen Kirsh, whose summary of his exhaustive review of the literature in his book *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence* (2006) found, among other evidence, that "violent television consumption is associated with increased levels of self-reported aggressive behavior" (p. 225); that "violent television can increase aggression behavior" (p. 225); and that repeated exposure to television violence can cause youth to be desensitized behaviorally, cognitively, emotionally, and physiologically.

Of course, the relevant question here is whether those same conclusions can be made about violent video games. Much less research has been accumulated in this specific area so there remains some controversy about just how strong an association can be drawn between playing the games and its effects on behavior and attitudes. Jeffrey Goldstein (2003) argues that much of the growing body of research showing a link between playing violent video games and subsequent aggressive behavior is badly flawed; that laboratory experiments cannot adequately simulate social activities; and that the number of studies showing no relationship between playing these games and violence have been underreported. He even makes the novel argument that playing violent video games may lead to less violent behavior than watching violence on TV because game players have control over some of what happens on a screen and therefore rather than passively consuming the violence learn to manage it in a positive, disciplined way.

But as studies have accumulated, and the methods of investigation have improved, there seems to be stronger evidence linking violent video games and violent behaviors and attitudes among young people. The strongest indication of this change comes from Anderson's 2001 and 2004 reviews of the research. Anderson and Bushman's 2001 meta-analysis (a statistical technique that combines individual studies) indicated that violent video games were associated with increases in aggressive behavior, ag-

gressive thoughts, aggressive emotions and physical arousal, while diminishing helping behavior. This study was criticized by some for including too many poorly designed studies. When Anderson went back in 2004 and updated the meta-analysis there were many more studies available and he was able to separate them into strong and weak studies. He found that when the studies with the most flawed methods were removed, the negative effects from violent video games were actually stronger. In other words, the more poorly designed studies actually underestimated the effects of violent video games on young people rather than overestimated them.

Not only did Anderson's work indicate that the impact of violent video games was larger than previously thought, the link between playing violent video games and aggressive behavior was, according to Anderson, "alarming." The statistical connection is "larger than the effect of condom use on decreased HIV risk, the effect of exposure to passive smoke at work and lung cancer, and the effect of calcium intake on bone mass" (Anderson 2004, 120).

Of course, this has not settled the issue. Dmitri Williams (2005), who accepts the growing evidence of linkage between violent video games and aggressive behavior, cautions that statistical correlations do not automatically infer that playing the games *cause* people to be violent. It could be, for example, that violent people are drawn to violent video games.

It should be noted that even those like Anderson, who claim that these games cause aggression, are not suggesting that children play violent video games and then immediately go out and shoot people. As Anderson points out, "Extreme acts of violence typically involve the convergence of multiple risk factors, and even then are fairly rare. No single risk factor by itself predicts extreme violence very well." (Anderson and Gentile 2008, 295). This is one way to make sense of the noise created by all of the claims and counterclaims: that violent video games should be considered as one contributing factor, along with other factors, to an increased risk of aggressive, even violent activities.

As the scholarly debate continues, new research directions also support the connections between violent video games and aggression. For example, a study conducted in 2006 by a team headed by Rene

Weber from Michigan State University used MRI technology to measure brain states while participants played violent video games. Their results "indicate that virtual violence in video game playing results in those neural patterns that are considered characteristic for aggressive cognition and behavior" (Weber, Ritterfeld, and Mathiak 2006, 51)

Other recent studies have shown that apart from the question of whether children become more aggressive after playing violent video games, they tend to become desensitized to violence (Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman 2007). This may be an even more important finding than the direct link to aggression for it means that even if children do not become more violent themselves, they are more likely to accept violent behavior in others as normal. This view of the world is likely to result in children being more fearful, less trusting, and more willing to accept aggressive behavior on their behalf, even if they personally do not act aggressively.

In fact, this is the conclusion reached by Christine Ward Gailey (1993), based on her analysis of many of the most popular Nintendo video games in the mid-90's, before the explosion of ultra violent video games took place. She found that, even in these less brutal games, "the prevailing worldview ... is one of extreme caution, even paranoia. The world is fraught with danger ... a place where anything new is potentially dangerous; the new must be avoided or killed in order to survive or benefit from the world's hidden treasures" (p. 89). Even some of the supposed positive elements add to the fearful view. "The world, then, is certainly shown as a diverse place, but the diversity is threatening in most cases" (p. 91). Gailey summarizes her study by stating that, in general, these games present "a grim, even Hobbesian, picture of life, replete with sexism, racism, class hierarchy, competitive exclusion and other Social Darwinist notions. The room allowed for altruism and cooperation is limited" (p. 91).

Regardless of how conclusive the evidence is about the connection between violent video games and aggression, parents must ask themselves whether they want their children engaging in activities that vividly promote this sort of ugly, even sociopathic, view of the world. Even such an avid promoter of video games as Marc Prensky (2006) ac-

knowledges that if children were constantly exposed to violent video games, "one could reasonably expect their behavior to be violent" (p. 21). But Prensky expects society to find ways to offset this problem. "And that," he writes, "is precisely our job as parents, teachers and society: to provide those counterbalancing influences" (p. 21). Thus, it would appear that the message to parents and teachers is this: Your role is not to shelter children from harmful influences; your role is confined to repairing the damage.

All of this points to the rather strange assumption characteristic of many video game proponents that playing video games is some sort of inalienable right, even for children; that regardless of the harm it may cause, there is nothing we can, or even should, do to control it; and, therefore, the best we can do is try to use it for the most positive, educational, purposes. This amounts to a form of technological fatalism that may have some purchase in society as a whole, but not when it comes to children. Parents have every right to choose and fight for the kind of environment they want their children to encounter. To argue that violent video games are another destructive influence in kids' lives that parents and teachers have to somehow compensate for rather than protect against is to make the jobs of parenting and teaching even more difficult than it already is.

### Putting Video Games in Their Place

Gee (2003, 11) states that video games "reflect the culture we live in...." There is some truth to this statement. We are a society in which our children are engulfed by electronic technology; where they are bombarded by images and isolated from real things; where they constantly engage machines and rarely engage nature. They live in a world that glorifies violence and promotes greed. It is difficult to see how activities that draw children deeply into abstract, symbolic environments at the price of real-world interaction, that keep them indoors, that rely heavily on violent imagery and a mechanistic view of the world, will somehow provide the optimum educational environment for children. Especially in a world in which our relationship with the environment desperately needs to be repaired, children's growing alienation from nature is hardly something

that ought to be reflected in either their learning or play environments.

It is doubtful that the beneficial claims being made for video games would attract much support except for two factors: an educational system that remains rooted in a stale, dehumanizing, industrial standardization that is an easy and deserving target of criticism; and television, a technology that sets the bar so low for interactivity, both with the medium and other people, that just about anything looks healthy in comparison. Video games may offer a step up from either of those dismal environments. But there is no reason to settle for an environment that carries so much of the same destructive baggage.

Good schools, and even many good teachers in lousy schools, long ago moved far away from factory model "traditional" methods of instruction, trading in worksheets for collaborative activities, compensating for standardized testing with experiential learning, and working hard to develop the kinds of relationships with students and subjects that inspire a real love of learning. Many schools have recognized the foolishness of sacrificing art and music for expensive computer labs and are bringing the arts back into the curriculum. Recess is also making a comeback, as the issues of obesity and nature deficit disorder finally penetrate school consciousness. Computer technology has played no essential role in any of this. In fact, video game proponents are oddly behind the times in this regard. They do not seem to recognize that computer technology is not the only alternative to "traditional" methods of learning.

Nor are video games the only, or anywhere near the best, alternative to passive TV watching. And just because children are drawn to video games does not mean that the only response available to parents is to direct them to good ones. Parents would do better to encourage children to play outside, where they can learn about the real world through *doing*, rather than just directing symbols on a screen.

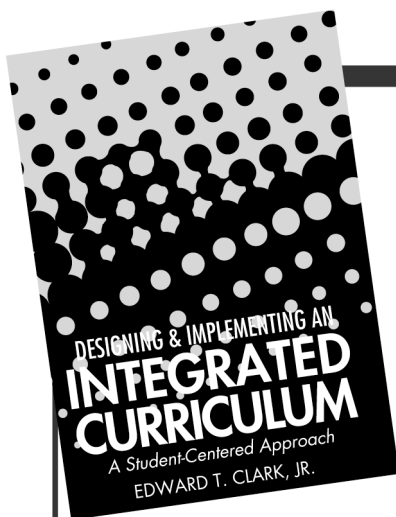
Parents need not be concerned that playing *Halo* once or twice will turn their children into psychotic killers. Nor should this critique be taken as a blanket condemnation of all video games in all circumstances. There are many situations where adults and older youth can make good use of video game simulations for learning and certainly for entertainment.

What has to be foremost in our consideration, however, is that unless those uses are preceded by years of contact with the real world and face-to-face relationships with real people, what may be beneficial on one level is likely to be detrimental at a deeper level. In a society saturated with second-hand symbols, all children, but younger ones especially, need as much time as we can give them experiencing the world directly, engaging people directly, playing their games physically. Indeed, in the high tech world of the 21st century, more than ever before, children need a high-touch childhood.

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#### Table of Contents

- Educational Reform: A Design Problem
- The Design Solution: Systems Thinking
- Creating a New Educational Vision
- Creating a Context for Teaching and Learning
- Questions Worth Arguing About
- Concepts as Organizing Frameworks
- Implementing an Integrated Curriculum
- Designing Schools as Learning Communities

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# Reawakening a Sense of Play Through Theater

Diane Caracciolo and Laraine Wallowitz

**Children's opportunities for free play seem to be on the decline, threatening the development of imaginative capacities. Classroom theater techniques provide one way of restoring young people's playful imaginations.**

**H**ow often do we allow ourselves and our students to play? The exhilarating sense of freedom, wonder, and discovery is too often exiled to summer, while the serious business of education marches on like a joyless assembly line. According to the Alliance for Childhood (Miller & Almon 2009a, 2009b) free play is even disappearing from our kindergartens. This is an alarming trend, in our view, because play is so central to the development of the imagination.

The Alliance for Childhood (2009a, 6) believes part of the problem is the background of new teachers.

A challenge in educating teachers for playful kindergartens is that many younger teachers did not grow up with a strong experience of child-initiated play. Their free time was filled with electronic media and organized activities. They will need to experience play themselves to understand its role in effective education. The same can be said of younger parents. A major task — but a rewarding one — is to help parents and educators recapture the spirit of play.

Educators too easily forget that some of the greatest scientific minds attribute their successes to the spirit of play. In a recent interview, acclaimed neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran, explaining his unusual hands-on approach, said that “the lack of technology actually *forces* you to be ingenious” (Colapinto 2009, 76). Ramachandran came to appre-



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ciate the creative and playful nature of scientific investigation as a boy.

In his early teens, Ramachandran began conducting experiments in chemistry and biology in a makeshift laboratory under the staircase of his family's house in Bangkok, where his father was stationed. He also read books on the history of science and was struck by the role of intuition and play in many important discoveries: Galileo adapting a child's spyglass and discovering the moons of Jupiter, which led him to challenge the geocentric model of the universe; Faraday tinkering with a magnet and coil and discovering electromagnetism. Ramachandran often recounts these anecdotes to his students. "These stories are inspirational and fun.... But they're also telling you how to do science." (Colapinto 2009, 78-79)

Unfortunately, we adults often disassociate play from the act of learning, even though deep down we know that exploration, discovery, and wonder generate our deepest insights.

So how can we reawaken a sense of play in classrooms? How can we carry the warmth of our summer enthusiasms with us throughout the other three seasons of the year? We can take inspiration from young children's make-believe play. Much of it has the quality of theater. Children create dramas. They say things such as, "Now I will be the store person and you be the customer. Okay? What are looking for, Ma'am?" Because it seems that make-believe play is on the decline in childhood, it's particularly important to restore it where we can. In this article, we suggest some *theatric techniques* to introduce playful imagination into the classroom.

### Take an Imaginary Journey with Us

Imagine you are walking down a pleasant, sunlit path through the woods. The weather is just right. You can feel the sun's warmth on your face, shoulders, and back as you move further down the path. Perhaps a gentle breeze touches your cheek. Listen for the sounds below your feet and in the branches above you as you move on. What do you hear? Try to imagine the varied sounds and scents carried by the breezes around you. Are you near the ocean, or in the

mountains? In a pine woods? What do the scents tell you about your environment? How does the path feel under your feet? Is it soft, pebbly? Damp or dry? Bend down and touch the surface with your hand. How does it feel?

As you move further you will see a clearing in the canopy of trees before you. Looking through the opening you see in the near distance a house. Try to see in your mind's eye all of the details of this house. How large is it? How many floors does it have? Is it modern or old-fashioned? What do the grounds surrounding the house look like? Are they well-kept or overgrown? Try to see all of the details of the house and its grounds. Now walk further down the clearing and approach the house until you are standing right before the front door. Push open the door and go inside. What do you see? Take note in your mind's eye of the furnishings and decorations, colors and objects. There is one door across the way, which, in a moment, will open for you. As this door opens a person is going to walk across the room and exit through another door. Focus all of your attention on this person as she or he moves across the floor. Now the door opens. What do you see? How old is this person? What is she or he wearing? How does this character move across the floor? Does this person see you, say anything to you? Take some time and focus on this action, trying to see in as much detail as possible the movement of this character across the room.

Now stand up and move your body about the space in imitation of the character that you have just seen. Experiment. Try to move, walk and talk like this character. Does he or she step lightly or feel burdened by the weight of gravity? Is there grace in the movement? Is it purposeful, rushed, unfocused or uncertain? How does your character speak? Is the tempo of the words fast or slow, thoughtful or impulsive, angry, sad, amiable? What emotions stand behind the words?

The above narrative is adapted from several theater exercises inspired by the work of Michael Chekhov (1991, 2006). Like his uncle, the famous playwright, Anton Chekhov, Michael Chekhov was a seminal figure in 20th Century theater. Chekhov's lively views of the actor's art translate well into the classroom because of his detailed emphasis on how to strengthen the powers of concentration, sensory

memory, inner visualization, and the creative imagination. His playful work with movement, speech, and improvisation also show us how to lead our students from the inner representation of their creative processes to lively outer representations that can range from informal to formal performances and written products. Anyone who has ever witnessed shy adolescents unfolding in the warmth of a supportive, creative atmosphere can attest to the power and joy of such an approach, which is simultaneously free and disciplined, playful and focused, and a vibrant seedbed for individual growth and group collaborations.

When teaching Dante's *Inferno* to a class of tenth graders, Diane (the first author of this article) introduces a version of the imaginary journey before ever asking the students to open the book. Of course, in this version, the pleasant walk through the woods gradually grows darker, colder, and more ominous, until the students are lost. For example,

Imagine the woods around you growing darker. It's becoming much colder now, and the sun has disappeared from the sky. How does this make you feel? What do you see in the shadows around you? Can you hear any sounds?

During this journey, students encounter their own frightening beasts, and then, at the most despairing point, are met by that one person in their lives, living or dead, who can be trusted to guide them out of this horror — in other words, the basic plot of the first canto. At this point, the students have an archetypal experience of one of the major themes of this work — the journey from fear to hope. Before ever reading the difficult text or learning the word *allegory*, they are creating their own powerful allegories, with senses and emotions fully engaged, about their personal "journey to hell." Later, when reading the actual text, there is a sense of recognition, rather than alienation.

Using the technique of creative visualization can help language arts teachers introduce a wide range of settings, characters, and themes before their students open a book. For teachers who wish to extend these techniques into a classroom practice that integrates their students' creative thinking with their bodies, emotions, and voices, we offer two additional techniques: Story Dramatization and Readers Theater.

### Story Dramatization

Story Dramatization is the use of improvised role-playing inspired by stories, such as fables, myths, legends, picture books, and children's own invented stories (McCaslin 2006). As David Booth (2005, 13) states, "Drama is the act of crossing into the world of story." You can take as a starting point the variety of characters and settings created by your students' imaginary journeying. Ask them to sug-

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***Educators too easily forget that some of the greatest scientific minds attribute their successes to the spirit of play. However, we adults often disassociate play from the act of learning, even though deep down we know that exploration, discovery, and wonder generate our deepest insights.***

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gest some possible reasons that some of their characters might meet. Have your students create some scenarios for the meetings. Then ask them to improvise these meetings in a short scene which must have a beginning, middle, and end. This can take the form of a game, where the scenarios are written on cards that are chosen from a basket.

Alternatively, students can simply work in pairs to create their own scenarios. At first these scenes may be no more than 1-2 minutes in length, with only one action occurring. For instance:

Character #1 enters a room and finds Character #2 sitting on a chair with an envelope in hand looking downcast. How does character one respond? What is in the envelope? How does the scene end?

Along the way students will learn basic stagecraft as they note the need for strong voices and actions in order to communicate to the audience, as well as the importance of a dramatic climax and clear emotional intent.



You should not expect polished performances. Make it clear that this is an exploratory stage, and they are being asked to experiment and discover by watching and commenting on each others' work. With each pair they will learn something new that can be built on by the next pair. Emphasize group discovery, support, and cooperation — not competition. If movements and gestures are stiff or unexpressive, you can spend a session having students

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**U**sing the technique of creative visualization can help language arts teachers introduce a wide range of settings, characters, and themes before their students open a book.

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act out scenarios with gesture and movement alone. This is a powerful way to explore the richness of non-verbal communication. When voices are again added, they will experience the increased power of their expression.

Although Story Dramatization works easily within the informal classroom setting, you and your class can also select some stories to perform for an audience. These selections may come from particularly promising original stories produced by your students, or from adaptations of stories they have read. But don't have the students read lines. Remember: Story Dramatization is about on-the-spot improvisation. One of its benefits is the inventiveness that can take place without the need to slavishly memorize lines. Requiring your students to memorize lines will shut down those students who have difficulty remembering words verbatim, and block the playfulness and spontaneity that are the actual gifts of this kind of work. It can also bring creativity to a standstill. Of course, there is a time and place for line memorization, most often for afterschool theater productions which tend to focus more on product than process.

Teachers do not have to follow all the details we have mentioned. Feel free to select what works best for your classes.

One of the most enjoyable experiences is watching a group of high school students perform for children. Children are the best audiences. They respond to your students' words and gestures, summoning a more engaging and playful performance than you, as director, might have hoped to accomplish. All of the work and preparation leading up to a story dramatization is paid in full by their lively exclamations and waves of laughter.

### Readers Theater

Story Dramatization is about improvisation; the technique of Readers Theater, in contrast, is a drama that works from *written lines*, adapted from a single literary source or a creative compilation of sources. For example, your students might create a play by editing a chapter or chapters from a young adult novel for performance by the entire class or groups within a class. Since the performance is read, with scripts in hand, Readers Theater, like Story Dramatization, avoids the need to memorize lines. There are no fixed rules — except one. You will need to help students practice glancing down at the page *before* speaking. This is because students should never speak while looking at the paper in their hand; they should always speak their lines to the audience or another cast member.

You do not have to limit the students' performance to one kind of text, such as a novel. You can include letters, poetry, speeches, newspaper headlines and articles, autobiographies, biographies, transcripts from trials, blogs, diaries, historical documents, personal essays, letters to the editor, interviews, picture books, fairy tales, fables, songs, and original writing (Ratliff 1999). Materials are selected in order to tell a story in an interesting way. Simple stage directions and indications for music, sound effects, and visuals can also enhance the final script.

Readers Theater does not belong exclusively to the language arts classroom. Almost any school subject can be enriched through the use of this technique. The "story" may be focused on a particular historic struggle (the ending of apartheid in South Africa, U.S. women getting the vote); a scientific discovery (penicillin, atomic bomb); a significant figure or thinker (Galileo, Rosa Parks, Rachel Carson); or a

theme, such as "Voices of Freedom" or "Women of Courage." Stories can also celebrate the work of an individual writer or groups of writers, a particular place, epoch, or historic event. We encourage teachers to give students choices in determining their materials, further exercising their imaginations.

Once a range of interesting materials has been selected around a particular event, figure, or theme, it is vital to *edit* materials and then *arrange* the pieces in an order that builds from a compelling opening (hook) through a dramatic climax and ends with a satisfying conclusion. After the first read-through, the script will usually need to be pruned of unnecessary material, and *narrative links* will need to be added to hold the story together. Such links can be several whole sentences and/or one- or two-word subtitles, such as news headlines or dates. The links should provide any necessary exposition, bring coherence to the narrative, and keep the story moving forward. For a powerful example of a Readers Theater performance script, we recommend Jan Maher's (2006) *Most Dangerous Women*.

We have found Readers Theater to be particularly useful for concept-based teaching. Concept-based curriculum (Erickson 2002) is defined as the use of concepts (especially timeless, universal, and generative ideas) that serve as the organizing centers around which teachers focus units of study. Concept-based learning moves beyond simple memorization of facts to abstract thinking, which is measured by students' ability to transfer, or apply, what they learned to their own lives, other texts and disciplines, or any new situation. For instance, rather than concentrating exclusively on the facts of a particular social studies topic, such as the Civil War, students can also ponder the notion of *human rights*. The unit of study grows beyond an isolated chronological march toward a final exam, and becomes an opportunity for student-based inquiries that create connections to their own world, bringing history into the present. Riveting Readers Theater performances can be produced by students around such explorations, leading to more enduring learn-

ing. For example, students can dramatize a human rights conflict, such as a trial over an individual's act of civil disobedience. Thus, the free play of childhood is transformed into the *free play of ideas* for the older student.

### Conclusion

Educational theater summons some of the fundamental habits of mind necessary for engaged learning, such as mental imaging, inventiveness, and the consideration of big ideas. Classroom opportunities that strengthen these habits of mind are ideally suited for all teachers searching for ways to breathe life and joy back into their classrooms. Most importantly, educational theater offers teachers a means to journey with our students back into the kingdom of the imagination, a kingdom growing ever more tenuous due to wrongheaded educational thinking which fails to recognize the human imperative of play.

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# Night Swim

By Peggy Ellsberg

Summer-camping with the girl scouts, age fourteen,  
we move through all the green rooms of the forest  
and then we pitch our tents,  
in a field near a lake.

One week after the solstice  
the sky still high with light,  
but the hour grows toward night.  
At ease, we move to the water,  
and pull off our clothes,  
and toss everything, as though in a game,  
sneakers, shorts, someone's watch,  
voices singing out over the water's one note.  
So, naked we splash in, swimming, reaching  
for water. We wake the sleeping fish  
and we are not afraid.  
Bullfrogs, newts, and turtles move about us  
and we are happy.

My hair fans like a net on the surface,  
my body untouched except by this cold  
silken element, this velvet and silk of black  
water, and I look up and up until thin clouds  
appear blowing past the full misty moon.  
Then I pull back up into the air  
Suddenly cold  
And I swear I hear  
Angels, praying in Hebrew.  
This is rapture, I suppose.  
I am not afraid.

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# Listening to the Locals, Listening to the Land

Rebecca M. Sánchez and Quincy Spurlin

**By taking oral histories and collecting audio postcards, children connect to their cultural traditions and the land.**

Using sound to gather data and make sense about the world around us is old, very old. Imagine during the Pleistocene when the sound of a snapping branch was full of critical meaning. Imagine before the printing press when knowledge was passed through oral histories and rich stories. Imagine before television when families gathered around the radio to listen to Franklin D. Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, or to hear the latest adventures of a radio hero, or to hear a baseball game.

The richness and beauty of sound is hardly present in modern educational activities. It certainly isn't present in the teacher's lectures or instructions. We can restore part of this severed dimension through storytelling, one of the most essential and ubiquitous of all human activities, to the intellectual lives of children. In this essay, we will describe how children can obtain stories from people in their families and communities.

Currently, schools separate children from their communities, home contexts, and other places of importance. As a result, children lead divided lives. They need their native languages and stories integrated into the school setting. Children also need school experiences connected to their land and natural world. Returning to oral traditions, and the traditions of storytelling, restores the wholeness of a child.

We have asked 4th grade students to interview people in their families and communities. The fol-



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lowing oral history excerpt, in which a child interviewed her uncle exemplifies a family tradition of working the land:

From about the age of 5 years old until the present that is all we have been doing is working on the ranch. I would want people to know that the

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***We can restore the beauty and richness of sound to the classroom through storytelling, one of the most essential and ubiquitous of all human activities, to the intellectual lives of children.***

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ranch belonged to my grandfather and when he died the family sold the ranch. When those people (who bought the ranch) were getting a separation they went to my dad and asked if he wanted to buy it. That land has been in my dad's family for a long time. It is located in Alcalde, New Mexico by the Rio Grande River.

The land emerges as a major theme in the oral histories obtained by our students, perhaps because they live in the Southwest. One child's interview with her grandmother tells a bit about life in times gone by.

A special place that I would go to when I was a girl was Cuervo, New Mexico. My great-grandmother Marta Benevidez Holguin lived in this little house up against a mountain. Right next to the door was a bucket and this bucket was wrapped in a gunnysack and that is where she kept her drinking water. Well, most of the people in Cuervo are gone. I remember knowing people there. It was a life that was very hard. There was no water and electricity, it was hard.

Children can document the stories of places and the sounds of the environment that are becoming extinct. Furthermore, oral histories encourage children

to explore themes related to place. One girl's grandfather gave an evocative account of how the land was related in his mind to his future bride.

You could sit on the front porch or go to the front yard and look at the seasons changing on the lake. Well, when I first met your grandmother one of my fondest memories was of walking with her around the Park Lake. A young beautiful woman with long hair, just walking and holding hands. It was always so wonderful; and the way the sunlight hit the lake, it glistened like diamonds. I would tell her, "look we are rich. I'm going to give you all of these diamonds."

#### Oral History Enriches the Curriculum

Cultures worldwide continue to rely on the oral tradition to preserve history, to pass on spiritual worldviews, to instruct children on cultural norms and expectations, to entertain one another, and to preserve language.

As a curricular and pedagogical strategy oral history changes the very nature of the social studies curriculum; and it changes the very nature of the whole curriculum. Children, their families, and their communities become appreciated informants and incorporate their own stories into the greater historical record. Oral history democratizes the curriculum by including the perspectives and experiences of those most closely connected to the children and the community. Children become empowered to explore the self through the stories of their elders. The works of Dickson, Heyler, Reilly, & Romano (2006), Ritchie (2003) and Perks & Thompson (1998) suggest that oral histories offer the following benefits.

- Oral histories offer counter-narratives to the "studied" and traditional content of history, which often overlooks the contributions and experiences of diverse individuals, groups, and communities.
- Preserving the stories, memories, and histories of individuals, groups, and communities is a critical avenue for cultural and linguistic maintenance.

- The process of collecting and analyzing oral histories encourages children to engage in the rigorous and meaningful work of historians.
- The process of sharing a history encourages interviewees to envision themselves as historical contributors of significance.
- When children (or community members) identify individuals to interview, listen deeply to the interviewee, record the interview, and reflect on the histories presented, the children can affirm their own background and cultural knowledge as well as that of the interviewee.

A significant contribution of oral histories is that they present alternative perspectives to historical phenomena. The audio recording documents events, perceptions, and interpretations for posterity. The recorded (and transcribed) text can be revisited by children and community members for many years. Oral histories contribute to literacy development by emphasizing listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### Getting Students Started

Teachers often recommend that students:

- Reflect and write notes on why you want to interview the person.
- Ask the person to talk about memories of parents, siblings, grandparents, and other individuals of personal significance.
- Try to get the full names of all of the people listed.
- Inquire about favorite stories that involve the individual.
- Encourage the interviewee to express what the individuals meant to them personally, spiritually, emotionally.
- Ask the interviewee to collect several cultural, personal, or historical artifacts and important photos which represent an aspect of their life.
- Ask the interviewee to describe the artifacts and photos.

- Once the story is recorded, listen to it again and think of what how it provides a sense of history.

Incorporating oral history into the classroom is a way to honor traditions, languages, and cultural practices. When children collect and revisit oral histories, meaningful intergenerational connections are created. Such connections contribute to the development of the whole person. Collecting oral interviews also establishes new relationships based on trust, sharing, and knowledge situated within the community.

### Audio Postcards

The sound — the audio signature — of a place are associated with the roots, the struggles, and the progress of communities and their cultures in relationship to the natural environment. From rural sound to urban sound, children can learn to “read” the audio messages and weave their own environmental stories to explain, propose solutions, establish baseline data, as well as to heal. Children can explore their sense of hearing, learning to distinguish sound from noise. They can create curricula in the form of what we call “audio postcards.”

For example, in some traditional rural communities in New Mexico, the sound of water rushing through the flood gates of the acequias (irrigation waterways) helps identify the place. Children can add to this type of audio signature the oral explanations of elders, verbal descriptions of what is seen, and sometimes facts from research. Children create their own place-based, storied curriculum. As part of defining self and community situated in place, the audio postcards can be shared with listening learners near and far.

Children can send their postcards to family, friends, and community and business leaders. They can reach out and send their unique postcards to children who are from other areas of the country and ask their ear-pals for return postcards. The curriculum can reach from the near to the far.

### Technical and Procedural Considerations

There are numerous technical and procedural considerations once you have decided to embark on the exciting endeavor of collecting oral histories and au-

dio postcards with children. In terms of recording equipment, a cassette-tape recorder with an exterior microphone is not only suitable but still the most common way to record both oral histories and audio postcards. Try out different kinds of equipment to find out what works best with your kids. Have the children make sure the equipment and batteries are working before every recording.

If children are recording other people they should secure consent, and arrange date, time, and place of the audition in advance. During the recording it is important to note the date and time of the interview and ask the interviewee to state their name and some introductory biographical information (for example: time and place of birth, information about parents and family members). Conducting background research on the historical periods and places, asking open-ended questions, and eliciting descriptive environmental information will enhance the content of the interviews and the postcards. Have the children thank the interviewee and participants by providing them with a copy of the tape, transcript, photos, and other final products.

### Conclusion

Oral histories and audio postcards are powerful ways to reawaken children's relationships with sound, story, other, and self. Children can become the

keepers of knowledge by listening to their elders recount memories of special places, of sacred places. In the excerpt below a fourth grade student captures the connection her grandmother, Rose, has to a miraculous church in northern New Mexico.

The Santuario de Chimayo is a very holy place. It is about 8 miles from my home. I have memories of going there when I needed to spend time alone, and coming home feeling very much at peace. When I was 15 we moved from Colorado and I saw the church. I don't think I realized what a special place it was until later in life.

Through the stories they capture, and their audio postcards, children connect to family, community, place, and tradition. Children listen to the thoughts of their elders as well as the nourishing sounds of the natural world and the land around them. When the curriculum is situated within the familiar and the significant, children are made whole.

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- Perks, R., and A. Thompson. 1998. *The oral history reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Ritchie, D. 2003. *Doing oral history: Using interviews to uncover the past and preserve it for the future*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Resources for Oral History And Audio Postcards

Audio Editing Software, Reviews and Features <[www.emusician.com/editing](http://www.emusician.com/editing)>

Cornell, J. 1987. *Listening to nature: How to deepen awareness of nature*. Nevada City, CA: Dawn Publications.

Digital Audio Recording and Editing <[www.synthzone.com/digaudio.htm](http://www.synthzone.com/digaudio.htm)>

Guidelines for Oral History Interviews: The History Channel <[www.history.com/classroom/oralhistguidelines.pdf](http://www.history.com/classroom/oralhistguidelines.pdf)>

Krause, B. 2004. *Wild soundscapes: Discovering the voice of the natural world*. Berkeley: Wilderness Press.

Making Sense of Oral History <[www.historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral](http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral)>

Oral History Association <<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha>>

Step-by-step Guide to Oral History <[www.dohistory.org/on\\_your\\_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html](http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html)>

# A Student's Guide to Taking Back the Classroom

Tom Stokes, Breton Sheridan, and Dylan Baird

**Three public high school students describe their project to increase student autonomy.**

Autonomy, or the ability to control one's own actions, was considered by our founding fathers to be an inalienable right. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution refer to autonomy, or liberty, as something that is God-given and something that could not be taken away by a government or society. The decision to add autonomy into the framework of our country was not an arbitrary one, but was done so that eventually every person could share the right to self-determination, for without that right people become apathetic and lose their individuality and motivation to change the world around them. However, despite the hope of our forefathers, our social system has not been able to guarantee autonomy to every person, and the dilemma is most strongly represented within our school system. This problem of lack of autonomy in our schools is hurting students and decreasing their personal motivation to learn. When we asked a class of 9th grade U.S. history students if they felt like they were part of a school community, not one person said yes. We then went a step further and asked them if they felt like leaders in school, again no one said yes. One student even sarcastically added, "It's hard to feel like a leader when you don't even feel like a person."

Currently our school system is set up as an economic and expedient way to move students into the business world, with little regard for their personal development. As our 12th and final year of compulsory education comes to a close, it becomes increasingly evident to us that not only is the average student apathetic about school, but the lack of autonomy and power in school has had the effect of driving much of the individuality, motivation, and hope from its pupils.

Currently, when we walk into school as students we are immediately stripped of all power. Not only

*Note:* This article is adapted with permission from the zine, *A Student's Guide to Taking Back the Classroom*. To receive a full copy of the zine, with all the original text and artwork, please contact the authors at <structureproject@gmail.com>.

The authors wrote this article while attending the Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, MD. TOM STOKES now attends Yale University and BRETON SHERIDAN is enrolled at Temple University. DYLAN BAIRD is taking a year away from formal education to stimulate student empowerment projects across the country.



does the average student not have adequate say in school climate and school rules, but we are also legally denied each of the civil liberties afforded to us in the Constitution: We are forced to enter and exit classrooms based on teacher's permission. We can be searched, told to be quiet, told when to sit, told when to stand, told when to eat, told when to speak, and



even told when to go to the bathroom. Our grades dictate our futures, and while we may have certain power over our grades, ultimately teachers can hold them over us whenever they want our cooperation. Some have managed to escape the control of grades, but there is always the threat of suspension to make sure we do as they say.

We argue that under these circumstances, in which we are not trusted with autonomy with respect to our education or our personal well being, it is very hard for students to feel respected and appreciated by teachers and administrators. When students do not feel respected and valued as individuals, they become indifferent to their education as well as their school. We as students must begin to take back the power in the classroom and begin to take control of our education.

How often have you wanted to take a class project into your own hands, but have been denied that right? When we asked students about how they felt when they were actually given autonomy in an assignment, one girl described that she spent longer on a 20-point Peace Studies project than any other assignment all year. She stated that she actually cared about what she was doing and felt passionate about her subject and so was driven to spend such large amounts of time perfecting her final product.

How often has a teacher said it would be too hard to grade everyone's individual assignment if each

one was different? Yet, isn't that the purpose of individuality? Sacrificing originality for ease of grading is a huge consequence in our education system that has been caused by our adherence to strict curricula and national standards/ standardized testing. It is also true that students without power lack motivation, and without responsibility in their education often act out in frustration. These are the major problems we look to remedy with an increase of student autonomy.

Every year we receive a packet detailing student rights and responsibilities; what we are saying is that we now understand our rights as individuals, we are simply taking responsibility and getting them back.

### The Benefits of Student Autonomy

A wise man once wrote that "the self is not something that is ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." That man was John Dewey, one of the most influential education reformers in American history and someone who understood that education should teach students *how to think* instead of *what to think*. Unfortunately, Dewey's vision of education as the realization of self is often thwarted by the extremely limited autonomy students experience in the classroom. By not allowing students to have some say in the direction of their studies, along with some choice of activity within the course work, they become apathetic about school and their personal growth is stunted. Some private schools give student's "full" autonomy, in an attempt to combat these realities; these are often dismissed as too radical or unruly, and perhaps rightfully so. So where is the solution? What is clear is that by giving students more autonomy, we will create confident, independent thinkers who will be motivated leaders in this ever-changing global society — benefits that astronomically outweigh the potential problems of changing the outdated status quo.

### Perception of Self

One of the benefits of giving students more autonomy is the positive effect it will have on their perception of self as well as how they view their peers. Social theorist Carl Simpson's observations suggest that by allowing students to have some choice and control, they will be less likely to label each other and be more

likely to appreciate themselves and their peers as individuals, each with strengths and weaknesses.

### **Autonomy and Motivation**

Motivation and enthusiasm are crucial to the success of any student. There seems to be a strong correlation between autonomy and motivation; as multiple experiments have shown that when people are given control of their lives they are happier and more motivated. One such experiment, dubbed the "Nursing Home Experiment," observed two wards in a nursing home. The people in the first ward were given very little autonomy, having their meals, activities, and bedtimes chosen for them. Those in the second ward were given more autonomy, being able to choose what they ate, what they did, and when they woke up. The more autonomous group reported being a lot happier, independent, and on average lived for a year to a year and a half longer than their more restricted peers.

Another benefit of having control in your life is emotional stability. "Few things," Alfie Kohn observes, "lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness." The idea of happier, more enthusiastic students must be an enticing one to any teacher who has ever looked up from his or her lecture notes only to see kids sleeping or uninterested. Most students are excited by some aspects of school, but unfortunately when they aren't given sufficient control they may not be able to follow these intellectual impulses, and they consequently lose interest. Students given choice and autonomy will become more interested in learning and then be more enthusiastic towards broadening their horizons.

### **Independent Thought**

Perhaps the biggest advantage of giving students more autonomy in the classroom is that students will become more assertive and independent thinkers. The explanation for this comes from simple logic: If students are always being told what to do and how to do it, they will become experts at following directions and not thinking for themselves. If, however, the students are allowed to make choices and exert control throughout their young lives, they will become independent thinkers and decision-makers who are assertive and confident in their own judg-

ment. School must teach you to think for yourself, and often this entails the teacher not wielding all the power.

Alfie Kohn wrote, "The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions." Kohn advocates for greater student input in the education system and a more even distribution of power between student and teacher. Unfortunately, Kohn says, "schooling is typically about doing things to children, not working with them." By building a curriculum around both student and teacher input, both parties will learn mutual respect, teamwork, and motivation. It is important that both students and teachers be stakeholders in these areas. According to Kohn, "If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it," a sentiment that seems to agree with the results of the aforementioned studies. Not only is greater student autonomy the key to molding independent thinkers, it is also the antithesis to the blind obedience that is being programmed into many students today.

### **Creating Leaders**

Obviously if you suddenly gave students full autonomy in a classroom, you'd create something of a chaotic scene. But intellectuals like John Dewey and Alfie Kohn aren't suggesting we just let kids run loose. Rather, they seek a better balance of power within the schools, and want schools to teach our youth how to think instead of what to think.

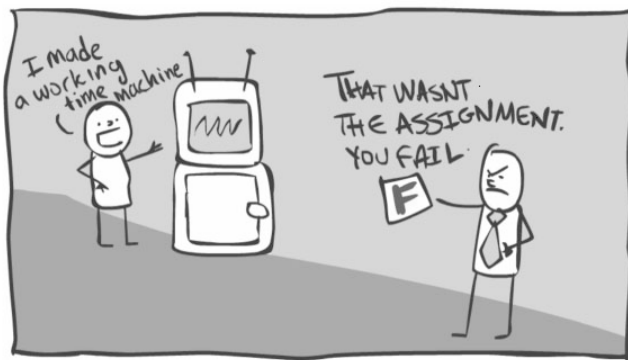
Right now, students are submissive to the authority of the teacher and administrator, and are only motivated by rewards or punishments instead of a true yearning for knowledge. The time has come to modernize our education system if we are to stay competitive in this innovative twenty-first century. By deciding curricula, rules, and activities through teacher *and* student input, teachers will retain their role as the students' leader and guiding force, but now students will feel self-motivated. And, as students make more decisions for themselves, they will develop lifetime habits of independent and innovative thought. Students will also become more inquisitive and confident.

All of these benefits of greater student autonomy will combine to create leaders. Leaders need to be

confident, independent thinkers who are extremely driven and motivated for their cause. By giving students more autonomy these qualities can be brought out in today's youth.

Teachers should consider some of the ways in which they can lead a more autonomous student body, like having multiple assignments for the students to choose from, or through less emphasis on grades and more on thought.

Whenever debating educational philosophies, one must ask what the ultimate goal of education



is. We asked ourselves and realized that it shouldn't be to get the highest GPA or SAT scores; it should be the same as the ultimate goal of adolescence: to figure yourself out. The goal should be to gain a clear, confident understanding of who you are and what you believe. Of course you should fill your brain with knowledge, but more importantly you should arm yourself with the ability to think for yourself and gather new knowledge that doesn't come from a textbook. School should teach us to be leaders, team players, and individuals, not how to bubble in the answer we frantically memorized the night before. The means of realizing this dream is cooperation, a newly forged alliance between teacher and student — in short, greater student autonomy.

### Our Experiment

The more we learned about the philosophy of greater student autonomy, the more convinced we became that it was the answer to student apathy, but we wanted to talk to other students and see what our peers thought. So we arranged to visit several classes and conduct an activity simulating a more autono-

mous learning environment, after which we had informal discussions with the kids about their own experiences with school and power.

After introducing ourselves, we divided each class up into four or five groups (depending on the class size), generally with five or six kids per group. We wrote down three well-known social issues on the board, and the groups were instructed to choose one and come up with three actions they could take and three actions the government could take to solve the problem. The point of the activity was not to evaluate what they came up with, but to observe how they arrived at their conclusions. Two of the groups were given a "group leader," while two were not. We dubbed the groups "leader groups" and "leaderless groups." One student from each of the "leader groups" was pulled out into the hallway and told that he or she had complete power to dictate the group discussion, power to decide who spoke when, what question would be answered and the power to reject anyone's input. (Essentially, this leader had the power of a teacher.) The "leaderless groups" were given no such instructions and left to figure things out on their own. We walked around as they discussed and observed some very interesting results:

### Observations from the Activity

Often we noticed that one or two of the students in the "leader groups" were not participating, while, in general, the "leaderless groups" seemed to all be engaged.

The answers of the "leader groups" were always complete but seemed to lack the creativity and diversity of the "leaderless groups."

Sometimes the "leader groups" seemed to run more efficiently and finish faster.

Often groups would go beyond the requirements of six answers; more often these groups were those without leaders.

In virtually every class experiment, the "leaderless groups" finished last. While this proves groups with leaders can be more efficient, there was enormously more discussion and thought that went into the leaderless group's answers.

### Informal Discussions

When deciding which classes to talk to, a major consideration was diversity. We wanted to talk to AP

kids, ESOL kids, regular kids, honors kids, black kids, white kids, kids who loved school, kids who hated school, kids cherished by the school system and kids who have fallen through the cracks. We found that while different kids have different priorities, a lot of us are frustrated by the same problems. Kids from all backgrounds told us that they had little power in school and often lost motivation. They explained that when a teacher didn't respect them or treat them as equals they felt resentment and lost confidence. They excitedly described the few instances they remembered in which teachers had shared their power and respected them, but these hopeful anecdotes were too often drowned out by the endless horror stories we heard about teachers not respecting kids and abusing their authority. Many kids seemed desperate for change but doubted their ability to make anything happen. Many kids were so overtaken by the pressure to succeed by the school's standards instead of their own, that they feared change, doubted us, and seemed unable think outside of the box. One girl noted, "We're only in school a few hours a day and we really don't care that much anymore. They're not gonna listen to us, so why even bother." Sad words which articulated perfectly the backlash of our education system and the frustration of a disenfranchised generation of students.

### **Obstacles**

When one examines the argument for student autonomy, its benefits are obvious. But, as many know, implementing it in our classrooms can be a challenge. Current public school teaching philosophy is geared towards teacher authority. In an average classroom, the teacher holds almost all the power; whether it is to decide class rules, the content of an assignment, or rubric for grades in the classroom. For autonomy to be effective in schools, teachers would have to give up some of this power, which is contrary to what many teachers have been trained to do. At the same time, students will need to overcome their conditioning as powerless.

### **Taking Action**

The difficult part is actually getting more autonomy. Many kids are afraid to take action towards changing their education due to the enormous pres-

ures of standardized tests and grades. Likewise, many teachers are afraid to take action to change the status quo for fear of losing their jobs or not meeting county testing requirements. But this fear must be balanced. There are countless ways in which students and teachers can better share the power in the classroom, and still be hugely successful.

The most powerful of these are communication, proactivity, protest, boycotting assignments, and flyers.

### **Communicate**

The best way to get anything done is through good communication. Most teachers are not irrational, and if students disagree with something, they will listen, but only if you voice your disagreement in a constructive way. Say a teacher wants to assign seats, instead of moaning and groaning, the students need to object peacefully and offer another suggestion. Ask, "Why don't we sit in a big circle, that way you can see everyone and we can still sit with who we want to sit with and if that doesn't work, you can assign seats." Communication leads to mutual respect, which will lead to more trust and then more power. If you're frustrated with the power structure in school, odds are other kids are too; talk to them and then together talk to your teacher, assertively and without fear.

### **Be Proactive**

We need to take an interest in our education. You'd be surprised how receptive some teachers will be to your suggestions regarding future assignments and class conduct. Think how much more apt you would be to do an assignment if it was one that you suggested, rather than another boring book report. For most of us, work isn't the worst thing in the world; it's work that seems redundant or unnecessary that makes us apathetic. An important way to have your voice heard is to present your ideas with other students, to show the class is behind you. Student solidarity is crucial for regaining power from the teacher.

### **Protest**

If a school rule or policy seems unjust, a teacher's behavior unwarranted, an administrator's actions unfair, then by all means protest. You can work with student advocacy groups within your school as well

as the Student Government to organize students, and let the powers-that-be know that the students will not be stepped on. From petitioning to organizing walkouts, the power in numbers of the student body at any school is major.

### Boycott Assignments

One of the most frustrating things about school is the assignments that students find worthless. One way students get through to the teacher that they need to change an assignment or their teaching style

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***The current state of public education has bred extreme apathy and distaste for school; therefore, while we agree that students cannot hold all the power in a classroom, things must begin to change, immediately.***

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is by boycotting the assignment. If so many students express displeasure, a teacher has no choice but to change the assignment, otherwise it will bring unwanted attention to them from administrators and will appear as if they do not have control over their class.

### Use Flyers

Flyers can be used in many ways. One way is to make a statement about unjust principles of school, whether it be lack of respect from teachers or the lack of power students have in their own schools. Another way is to simply make jokes and get fellow students to laugh, maybe a funny picture of an administrator or a funny slogan. Either way it is important to show that students have a right to choose what goes on the walls.

### Conclusion

Our demand for increased student autonomy is not simply a cry for students to have complete control over their classes, but rather a cogent argument for cooperation between students and teachers. The current

state of public education has bred extreme apathy and distaste for school; therefore, while we agree that students cannot hold all the power in a classroom, things must begin to change, immediately.

The biggest obstacle seems to be the unwillingness of people to take responsibility for the change they want to see. When we talked to students, they blamed teachers for not respecting them. They argued that because they didn't get respect they didn't feel motivated. Teachers argued that most students don't work hard, but rather just cared about grades. Finally, both groups blamed administrators, for not treating them like equals, and not giving either group any power. In truth, everyone plays his or her role in the apathy and distrust that exists in school. It's easy to point the finger at someone else. Much harder, but vastly more rewarding, is to take the first step towards change and assume responsibility.

Almost every person we talked to agreed that increased student autonomy is a good thing, yet almost every person we talked to was also skeptical it would ever happen in public schools. How can it be that something so many people fundamentally support is seen as so impossible to achieve? The truth is, it isn't. If students begin taking control of their education and teachers loosen the reins a bit, we will see drastic change. It is time we stopped blaming each other; it is time we stopped hiding behind the authority of a higher power. Students want to learn, teachers want to help us learn, so enough: Embrace your individualism, your creativity, your curiosity, and regain your motivation in school!

### For Further Reading

*The Case Against Homework* by Sarah Bennett and Nancy Kalish  
*Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong* by James Loewen  
*The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn  
*Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner  
*Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich  
*Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* by Grace Llewellyn  
*Deschooling our Lives* by Matt Hern

### On the Web

<http://dothisallday.org>

# Book Reviews

## **The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement**

By Ron Miller

Published by Holistic Education Press (Brandon, VT, 2008).

Reviewed by John M. Watkins

Ideas such as self-organizing systems, complexity theory, pattern emergence theory, open systems theory, to name a few, are all the rage these days in everything from how we understand particle physics, to how we explain global warming, to how we understand change in organizations, and even to how the brain functions. Ideas from cybernetics have combined with ideas from thermodynamics and evolutionary biology to explain human systems behavior. At the same time people interested in new ways of managing the “commons” for a more participatory, socially just, and sustainable world community have entered the fray (examples include Open Space Technology, The World Café, The Art of Hosting, the Small Planet Institute, the Sustainability Institute, the Institute of Integral Studies, and the Berkana Institute).

In parallel development, ideas from Eastern thought, Buddhism, Non-Dualist Tantric Hinduism, Zen, and others from Western mystical traditions are challenging the legacy of the Enlightenment’s mechanistic view of the universe, hyper-rationalism, and the cult of the individual. It is no wonder these ideas would eventually permeate even the most resistant of all systems, the U.S. education system. And it is appropriate that that permeation would come through the lens of people involved in education al-

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ternatives, the fringe “disruptive innovators.” It is these people who challenge Enlightenment notions of measurement, prediction, and control as they are expressed in an education system that is a perfect example of Weber’s iron cage of modernity.

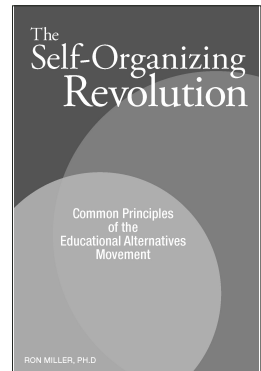
I have found this great synthesis of emerging thinking fascinating to observe and study, and I have been an enthusiastic practitioner in trying to apply its emerging ontology, epistemology, and methodology to my own work in educational and organizational change. That is, I have found its sense of who we are, how we know, and what action we take a compelling way forward in my own life and work. So it was with great delight that I undertook to read and review Ron Miller’s new book, *The Self-Organizing Revolution: Common Principles of the Educational Alternatives Movement*.

But I have to say, I was disappointed in what I found. I will summarize Miller’s major points and then offer my critique.

### **A Shift in Consciousness**

Miller starts with the assertion that we are in the midst of a profound cultural revolution, the emergence of a new worldview, an evolution of consciousness:

At certain points along our historical journey, the expansion of consciousness has burst out of established cultural forms and worldviews that could no longer contain the newly perceived possibilities.... The old forms are increasingly creaky and obsolete, rigid and destructive, but the new forms are not yet securely rooted.... [H]istory is ... the outer expression of an ongoing evolution of consciousness.... [T]his evolu-



tion [is] approaching a critical threshold in our time, when old forms [will] prove to be inadequate and begin to dissolve.... (pp. 14-15)

He refers to this process as a "major cultural shift, from a Newtonian, materialist worldview to a more holistic, organic understanding of the universe" (p. 15) that will allow for a more organic system of human growth and social interaction, and a more sustainable relation between social order and the environment. "A key distinguishing feature of these new ways of thinking is their emphasis on dynamic, open, self-regulating systems" (p. 16).

In Miller's view, the accountability movement, starting with *A Nation at Risk* and culminating in NCLB, is the manifestation of an antiquated technocratic empire, the corporate world, and centralized government, whose interests are threatened by the arrival of the new era. He explains that efforts at standardization and control are essentially an act of desperation. Since, according to Miller and those he cites, we are already in the midst of a transformative moment in consciousness and culture, Miller cautions us about these acts of desperation: "... cultural evolution is an organic process that can only be resisted at the cost of intolerable repression" (p. 19).

### A Shift in Our View of Learning

Miller next explores a variety of ways of thinking about learning and the purposes it serves. He argues for focusing on helping young people to develop "a higher, more sophisticated level of integration..." (p. 22), and calls on adults to "meet our young people in genuine, caring dialogue ... to nourish the seeds of growth ... to support, encourage, and lovingly guide their exploration and self-expression" (pp. 22-23). He is a strong critic of every form of standardized curriculum and efforts to define "what all students should know and be able to do" (though that phrase originated as a way to help parents, students, teachers, and communities decide collectively what is important). Miller believes the purpose of education in our emerging new age is to help learners "to discern the meaning and value" in the information they are bombarded with, and "to cultivate habits of reflection, critical inquiry, and compassionate discrimination" (p. 25).

Miller's view of learning is a curious mixture of Emersonian mystical transcendentalism, itself a romanticized version of Enlightenment views of the individual, and contemporary cognitive and social constructivism. In that regard it is both modernist (not postmodernist), in that it imagines an individual, heroic path to progress; anti-modernist, in that it proposes that what inhibits that progress is society itself; and mystical, in that it believes that it is evolving Consciousness itself that ultimately will cause change. Miller later expands on this idea to talk about "our evolutionary potential ... [not] stifled by centuries of political, economic, and educational oppression" (p. 51).

### Mapping the Educational Alternatives

Miller believes that the educational alternatives offer the most fertile ground for situating an educational enterprise that can respond to this shifting view of the learner and the purposes of learning. Miller develops for us a "mental map" of the educational alternatives so that we can see how these various approaches might come together to create a movement to transform education, to align better with the emerging holistic and integral worldview.

While I found his map compelling, he cautions against being overly concerned about the conceptual categories, and asks us to embrace a diversity of approaches to teaching and learning. Yet his categories are intriguing.

As best as I can make him out, he sets out three axes, a three dimensional mental space, within which he arrays diverse and "coherent patterns of educational theory and practice" (p. 31). The first continuum seems to be the control to freedom continuum: from authoritarian transmission to freedom-based approaches. The second is the individual to social continuum: from child-centered and constructivist to critical pedagogies and social change-based approaches. The third is the fixed to open-ended spiritual continuum, which might be called the religious to spiritual continuum. It moves from the spiritual developmentalist (a spiritual developmental process that the educator directs the student through) to a holistic or authentic education approach (which posits an authentic but emergent relation between the knower and a fluid, complex,

living world, that adults guide learners to explore). Much of this section explores the philosophies and histories of these differing approaches, and is fascinating reading.

Miller believes that each of these continua and their advocates have something to offer the emerging revolution in education, though he equivocates about the authoritarian/transmission end of the spectrum. The rest of his thesis hinges on how to bring these folks together into a movement.

#### **A Word on Critical Pedagogy**

I have to say a word about the critical pedagogists that Miller describes as one example in his typology. Among the educational alternatives, it is this group (more than most others) who have taken seriously the plight of urban (and rural) poor, and addressed issues of racism and classism in our existing educational system. It has not been the strength of the alternatives movement to take on these issues. Any reformulation of approaches and strategies that comes from this collection of educational alternatives will remain suspect if it cannot directly confront the issues of intractable poverty and cycles of Kozol's "savage inequalities" in education. That is one reason that many respectable organizations that have been paying attention to poverty and racism in education have embraced the sanctions of NCLB, even if its effects have been less than stellar in addressing poverty and racism.

#### **Principles to Guide a New Movement**

To create an effective movement, Miller argues that we need to adopt five guiding principles, "ideals toward which the entire culture would be striving" (p. 46). They are respect for the person; balance; decentralization of authority; noninterference between political, economic, and social spheres; and a holistic or integrative perspective. Miller claims that these come from a variety of traditions, but make more sense taken as "a more harmonious whole" (p. 48).

#### **Critique of Miller's View**

The problem with Miller's view of educational change is three-fold. First, he himself points out that this diaspora of educational alternatives is itself balkanized, and each is mistrustful of the others.

Second, he argues that it is only in embracing his set of principles that this diversity of approaches can become an effective movement. Yet the very nature of self-organizing and emergent social phenomena is that they self-organize; they do not accept someone else's utopian ideals as the "strange attractors" around which their actions coalesce.

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*Miller believes that the educational alternatives offer the most fertile ground for situating an educational enterprise that can respond to this shifting view of the learner and the purposes of learning.*

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The third problem with his argument is the notion that this self-organizing revolution will cause a cultural change. Miller himself says in the end that it is more likely that inevitable cultural change will enable this revolution to overcome the resistance of the existing educational system, not the other way around. In which case it is not an educational revolution, but a response to cultural evolution.

Underlying all revolutionary change, in Miller's view, is an evolution in Consciousness. We hear from an array of spiritual movements as well as from the social change movement that we are in the midst of an evolution of Consciousness away from some past version adapted to conditions of life that no longer exist, toward some future version that will be better for humanity and for the Earth. It is this evolution that will create the new culture within which a new educational system will emerge spontaneously.

I admit I am, on my spiritual side, attracted to this idea; yet, the scientist in me remains skeptical. The human brain has not changed much in the past half million years, and evolutionary change is not something we can see very easily. The notion that it is changing now is more mystical than scientific. And the notion that it is changing in a way aligned with progress is a view deeply embedded in Enlightenment philosophy, but it is a notion that confuses evo-



lution (a naturally occurring phenomenon) with progress (the social product of human effort). Finally, the notion that it is a *collective* change in Consciousness, not just a change in individual consciousnesses, raises many questions for the scientists among us.

### Open Systems

We also need to explore further Miller's ideas about open systems. The idea of an open systems view of an emergent self-organizing revolution in education is intriguing, captivating, and compelling. That is all the more reason for us to be very careful about how we use these terms.

"Open systems" has two definitions, neither of which is quite how Miller uses the term. One definition of open systems comes from thermodynamics and is also used in cellular biology. An open system is "open" because it is a system with permeable boundaries that can take energy in from outside itself, use it to achieve a higher level of order, and excrete the non-useful energy out into the environment. In thermodynamics, the non-useful energy is heat from friction; in cells it is parts of food that cannot be used in metabolism or waste. These systems are also called "dissipative" systems because they dissipate excess energy back into the larger system. That is not the same as being open in the sense of being flexible and able to change. In fact, the term self-organizing comes from the idea of *autopoiesis*, a process whereby a system produces its own organization and maintains and continually reconstitutes itself in a space. Most of these uses of the term "open system" thus actually refer to highly stable, if dynamic homeostatic, orders.

The second definition of open systems is used to describe what happens in "far from equilibrium states," where new orders emerge spontaneously. This term derives, again, from thermodynamics, and from complexity theory and chaos theory, and is about what happens in spaces where the existing system collapses so totally that no residue remains of the existing structure or order. Energy moves about in chaotic turbulence, reforming itself spontaneously around new ordering principles, or strange attrac-

tors. Our theories about the way matter formed after the Big Bang is one example. Some of the more radical evolutionary biologists also believe that life itself has maintained a "far from equilibrium state" on Earth since just after early life emerged, so that new life could continue to emerge and evolve.

I imagine that social change strategists use the second meaning of open systems more often, though the first is equally important to understand. People using a process like Open Space Technology understand the emergent nature of new orders in far from equilibrium states as a metaphor for what happens when people use its very specific process. But the principles in Open Space Technology are design principles for the *process*, not design principles for the *outcome*, an essential distinction.

Many people have written about applications of systems theory to organization and education; I don't believe this is the place to review all of that literature. However, several ideas may help us understand additional possible applications. We can imagine that systems have hierarchies, not the kind Miller decries in educational bureaucracies, but hierarchies of scale and scope. A phenomenon of scaled systems is that they often allow subsystem fluctuations or perturbations to happen in order to create enough flexibility in the overall system to make it resilient, hence less susceptible to change. We might argue that the educational alternatives Miller describes are in fact one sort of subsystem fluctuation that allows the overall system to remain unchanging. That would be a sad implication of all of this good work. Subsystem fluctuations can result in overall system change only if the larger system is in a state of extreme disequilibrium (which may be what Miller is arguing about the current education system), or when the larger system faces what systems theorists call a "bifurcation point," in effect a choice point to move in two different possible directions. Subsystem fluctuations then can push the larger system in one of those alternate directions. Miller might want to explore the implications of this theory for the transformation he proposes.

Because Miller's position (and title for the book) relies on the notion of a movement that is self-organizing, pattern emergence is another application of open systems theory that we should consider, al-

though it is one that has been studied more in mathematical modeling than in lived reality. Pattern emergence has many applications (e.g., the Navy's use of networks of distributed intelligences in sensor array processing of emerging images), but in social change theory it is applied to model how the strategic placement of a catalytic number of "nodes" that behave in certain ways within networks can cause the whole network to shift toward the behavior of the nodes. Mathematicians have used this to model how a small number of "good neighbors" or "bad neighbors" situated within a certain distance of one another in a neighborhood can shift the behavior of the whole neighborhood. Guerilla gardening is a great example of this idea used as a community transformational strategy. In Miller's case, we might ask how the alternatives movement places instances of its alternatives in networks in proximity to more traditional educational settings, and see if that network of nodes of change can then influence the larger system. Would, for instance, Steve Barr's disruptive innovation of Green Dot at Locke High School in Los Angeles be one of those kinds of nodes? How would he interact with other alternatives in the LA area to cause the emergence of a pattern of alternatives that could shift the whole system? Where do Miller's alternatives situate in relation to that sort of phenomenon?

In the last analysis when we examine how Miller has used the notions of self-organizing, revolution, and movement to explore change in education, we are not left with a revolutionary educational movement at all, but a set of ideas about an emerging evolutionary cultural and consciousness change and how we might work to take advantage of that cultural shift to change how education works. In that case, we might really be talking about another cultural transmission model of education, paradoxically, because we are talking about the new education transmitting this new holistic and integral worldview. Maybe this is OK; actually, I think even Miller might agree it is fine. But it's not a self-organizing revolution or a movement.

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## Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War

Edited by Elizabeth Goodenough  
and Andrea Immel

Published by Wayne State University Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Esther Willison

Goodenough and Immel have brought together a collection of ideas and scholarly studies worthy of our best philosophers. The concern of the editors — the effects of war stories on children — should have been extended to a concern for their readers. Although this volume cannot be read in one sitting, I couldn't really put it down either; I couldn't stop thinking about it. The book needs to be read when there is a space in your life and your mind, not when other things require your attention. It is totally absorbing, distinctly upsetting, and rich in ideas and moral issues, some of which may be new to you.

In the first section of *Under Fire*, the editors write that their

contributors problematize the ethics of mobilizing children for war efforts. To muster support by exploiting childish vulnerability using any available means ... may be seen as the flip side of adopting the child's innocent eye to expose the horrors of war.

In her chapter, "Storying War," Mitzi Myers discusses definitions of children's literature and how it differs from adult works. She also raises questions about how, why, and in what form representations of war should be presented to children. And in writing for children, how can we be sure to inspire them to behave morally instead of frightening them into a kind of paralysis? Myers, finally, discusses the possibilities of "cross-writing," of writing history and fiction together, as well as works that can be read and understood, perhaps in a different manner, by both children and adults.

M. O. Grenby, in "Surely there is no British boy or girl who has not heard of the Battle of Waterloo!" investigates how British children living at the time of Trafalgar and Waterloo understood the wars and how they learned from them. Grenby writes,

It is extraordinary that even at the height of the Napoleonic War, with Britain threatened by invasion and then economic ... destruction, so much children's fiction was attempting to dampen martial ardor ... and to dissuade boys from enlisting.

Many of the children had direct contact with the war, either themselves or someone in their family, but, surprisingly enough, these experiences were not reflected in the stories they read.

Eric J. Johnson examines ideological works aimed at children. These works, according to the propagandist authors, must know how to reach children where they are vulnerable. The messages must be familiar and easily understood.

One illustration Johnson uses is a picture book by the young Nazi artist Elwira Bauer. Johnson describes Bauer as using

two rhetorical strategies. The first casts Jews in a negative light, characterizing them as a parasitic infestation that must be purged.... The second firmly places Germany's children at the center of the Nazi vision of Aryan resurgence. With the Jewish threat identified, the future reclamation of everything ... the Jews have stolen ... depends on them.

The book's final claim is: "without a solution to the Jewish question there can be no freedom for mankind."

All the books Johnson discusses try to persuade children to believe in a particular doctrine. By making the story sound like other books these children have read, the authors were able to get across their political beliefs. No matter what age group the book was aimed at, the common theme was that the text was geared to speaking to children in their own language.

The section, "Representing Trauma," raises the issue of whether portraying violence in fiction for children is a help or a hindrance. The chapters in this section generally argue for a more realistic portrayal of life, including its pain and brutality. As we read the chapters, we get the sense that these tales, more than "happily ever after" fantasies, allow children to deal with mental anguish and enhance their own recovery skills.

Margaret R. Higonnet considers childhood trauma as a result of WWI. Higonnet observes that some of the wartime picture books for children make the correlation between the sufferings of soldiers and the anguish of children. Often these books tell of specific situations in which both the child and his or her father were trapped. For example, in *Toinette et la Guerre*, the bombing of Paris forces Toinette and her brother Riri to hide in their cellar. The cellar is dark, cold, and full of spiders and hidden dangers. At the same time, their father is hiding in a trench in France, in the freezing cold, attacked by rats and surrounded by dead bodies.

In almost every chapter the writers in this book describe the conflicts and ambiguities in children's literature. They also catch the very essence of war itself and the particular way children are "under fire." The essays raise provocative questions about the discrepancy between fact and fiction, between memory and imagination. They opened my mind to so many possible ways of approaching the topic of war and children that I found myself saying, "yes, yes" to one opinion and then six pages later saying "yes, yes" to another opinion diametrically opposed to the first. Although there are definitive views expressed in these essays, on some level it is a bit like reading a Socratic dialogue; it raises more questions than answers.

Mark Heberle's "The Shadow of War, Tolkien, Trauma, Childhood, Fantasy" is for Tolkien fanciers, and even for others, it is a treat. Heberle first tells us about Tolkien's own experience as a soldier in WWI. "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead." The chapter is also rich as a biography of Tolkien's life and the history of his writings, starting with a story about a dragon he wrote at the age of seven. Heberle concludes:

It is revealing that Tolkien's initial titles for *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* were "The Return of the Shadow" and "The Shadow Lengthens...." Whether as public history or personal memory, psychic trauma, moral evil, or simply the endless cycle of war since 1914, Tolkien's works are haunted by such shadows.

"The phenomenal success of *The Lord of the Rings*," Heberle adds, "validates Tolkien's choice of fantasy

as a means of successfully assimilating and converting his own trauma into a 'shadow of war' that is at least imaginatively redemptive."

In the section, "The Holocaust in Hindsight," the editors acknowledge that

nowhere is the demarcation between books for the child and the adult reader more easily shattered than in fiction about World War II. When writing about the Holocaust for youngsters, the author's burdens become even greater, especially if he ... argued for the revelation rather than the concealment of genocide's most appalling aspects.

The contributors to this section struggle with these conflicts — or as the editors put it, the variety of approaches to these problems in this section "attest to the complex ethical, narrative, pedagogical issues [that arise] by efforts to represent and manage the incommunicable in literature for young people."

In "A is for Auschwitz," Kenneth Kidd tells us that since the early 1990s there has been an abundance of children's books about the trauma of the Holocaust. And, despite the impossibility of doing it justice, there seems to be a consensus now that children should be exposed to the horrors of war rather than protected from them. Kidd asks if this kind of literature is too traumatic for the child to read and if so, is this the only way in which children can understand atrocity. This is a fascinating, disturbing chapter, with analyses of the works of authors such as Jane Yolen and Lois Lowry, and a heady theoretical section on trauma, testimony, and ethics.

The chapter, "The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome," is one of my favorites. U. C. Knoepfelmacher takes Grimm's simple, well-known story and writes twelve fascinating pages about it: abandonment, parental betrayal, cages, sexual awakening, terror, and the oven. Knoepfelmacher questions the "happily ever after" ending of the story. Is it not too much to ask of us to believe that the children forgive their father for his attempt to abandon them? He also compares Hansel and Gretel with other similar stories which have taken a different turn or handled the children's reactions in a more realistic manner: Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*, Maurice Sendak and Tony Kushner's *Brundibar*, the poems of Randall

Jarrell and Anne Sexton, and Louise Murphy's novel, *The True Story of Hansel and Gretel*.

In the following chapter, Naomi Sokoloff discusses Almagor's *The Summer of Aviyah*. The story takes place in the 1940s and 1950s, when Israel was a young state flexing its military muscles. Many Israelis, Sokoloff suggests, were of the opinion that *they* would never allow *themselves* to be victimized like the Diaspora Jews who were ineffectual against their enemies. In Almagor's story, "it is not just the trauma of the mother's past that shapes Aviyah's misery, but the response of her own society to Holocaust survivors that prolongs and complicates the trauma." Aviyah is a child "at long last expressing those painful, formative experiences and critiquing ways in which the society was unwelcoming for her and her mother." Second generation writers like Sokoloff helped to change Israeli thinking about the Holocaust. They opened the door for the Israelis to be more receptive to survivor stories, which were, at last, listened to and confirmed. These books enabled the Israelis to have a better understanding of the history of persecution and victimization.

The book's final section describes the possibilities of children avoiding long-term effects from wartime trauma. The first, by John Gall, reminds us that not every child need be traumatized, that "the newborn baby dances, and if the parents know how to dance with him or her, there is the possibility of great joy from the beginning." The second chapter, by Mark Jonathan Harris, tells us about Kindertransport, an amazing British rescue mission that saved ten thousand (mainly Jewish) children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia before WWII began. Many of these children suffered from parental separation and were permanently affected by their loss. Most of them, as adults, never discussed this experience with their families. Harris writes about the dangers of unexpressed grief and concludes that

Sixty-five years after the Kindertransport we know much more than we did then about the long-lasting impact of childhood ... trauma. By now it is clear how porous the "wall of silence" is, how flimsy a defense against our worst fears.... Though the physical scars of war may be more visible, the psychic scars can last much

longer, passed on from parent to child to grandchild.

The last formal chapter in *Under Fire*, by Maria Tatar, reiterates some of the ideas in the volume, supporting the belief that children's journeys in literature need to include confrontations with "the shadow of death." Tatar concurs that writing about this topic for children is extremely difficult. She asks some of the same questions in this last chapter that are asked earlier.

Should we retreat into the untroubled pleasures of *Curious George* ... or pay attention to the gritty realism of *Shattered: Stories of Children and Wars*? Research tells us that realistic fiction expands children's understanding of the world. It also helps them develop compassion for those who suffer and it enhances their own ability to combat personal challenges. On the other hand, we take the risk, by exposing children to "realistic" literature, of scaring the dickens out of them.

Tatar states: "We err when we give them too strong a dose of reality, but we also make a mistake when we pretend that nothing is or ever will be out of order in the world."

*Under Fire* is a stunning book. It is about the effects of war on children; it is about the effects of literature about war on children; it is about the causes and effects of trauma on children and of hiding trauma, as well as the effects of not addressing any of these issues. It is about the people who write about and draw illustrations of wars, who write children's books with happy endings or partly happy endings, or no endings at all. It is flooded with intriguing references to many volumes, like tributaries from the source, spilling into each other until the reader only wants to take up residence in his or her local library and read or reread every single book mentioned. The authors have done an incredibly thorough job of researching their themes and addressing the implications of those themes. Compared to this achievement my praises are indeed "in the shadow" of *Under Fire*.

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## Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns

By Clay Christensen, Michael Horn,  
and Curtis Johnson

Published by McGraw-Hill (New York, 2008)

Reviewed by Sanda J. Balaban

Almost everybody agrees that education needs to change in order to effectively equip students for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Almost nobody agrees on specifically *how* it needs to change, and what those changes should look like.

I was titillated by the title of Clay Christensen and his co-authors' recent book, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, given the implicit linkage to how education can uproot the class structure that too often perpetuates poverty across generations. But social justice seekers beware: Christensen does not explicitly engage with class disparity, and though the disruptive innovation he recommends could potentially lead to greater access and opportunity for students with the greatest needs, it could also lead to further stratification by sorting "similar students" to be served within more differentiated settings that could exacerbate inequity.

*Disrupting Class* deals more directly with what would be needed to create radical change in our implacably traditional school structure. Few would argue that our schools aren't in need of innovation. In the sweeping majority of schools, a time traveler alighting in a classroom would not be able to discern what year she or he had landed in, except perhaps through close scrutiny of clothes and hairstyles, or listening to whether chatter was about Angelina Jolie, Madonna, Annette Funicello, or Greta Garbo. Why is this, and what could be done to promote break-through models for teaching and learning?

The authors lay out two distinct kinds of innovation: *sustaining innovation*, which builds on and improves existing products or service and caters to a current population of consumers, and *disruptive innovation*, in which a new way of addressing needs can arise and grow without competing with, and being suppressed by, existing ways of doing things. A

disruptive innovation is not a breakthrough improvement that sustains current practice, but rather something that disrupts the traditional trajectory by creating something affordable and simple to use that benefits those not served by a previous product or service. Rather than tackle what exists, to succeed, disruptive technologies must be applied in arenas where the alternative is nothing. Furthermore, the authors contend that unless top-level leadership actively manages the process, organizations will reshape every disruptive innovation into a sustaining innovation because organizations cannot naturally disrupt themselves. Hence without active intervention, the school of tomorrow will look much like the school of today or yesterday.

The book details the spread of innovative practices in other businesses and industries, describing how forces within a well-established field often impede reforms, even those that will lead to necessary improvements. It also cites examples of how innovative practices *can* become established and then spread through an industry: the telephone disrupted the telegraph, mini-computers disrupted mainframes, digital photography disrupted chemically-produced photography, and other examples abound. While the education reform world is peppered with sustaining innovations, the authors posit that these are insufficiently “disruptive” to transform education to meet the needs of the diversity of learners served within schools and to prepare them for different kinds of futures. Examples of opportunities the authors deem ripe for being disruptive within education include the creation and expansion of online Advanced Placement courses, programs serving home-schooled or home-bound students, and online credit recovery programs.

Early on, the authors list, and debunk, common attributions of what ails education in the United States, thereby avoiding the school-bashing that has become almost a professional sport. They note that our schools *have* improved over the years *to the extent they can* within significant constraints. Structural changes have proved hard to achieve in light of interdependencies within schools — between and across grades, between various layers of the system, between those who make policies and those expected to implement them — and this has impeded innovation.

As someone who has worked for structural autonomy within an enormous urban school district for six years, I know how hard it is to support disruptive innovation, given the nonstop demands schools contend with each day. Although charter schools offer a more protected place within which to incubate innovation (and indeed the authors endorse charters as research and development labs for school systems), charters are merely a sustaining innovation; few charters are “doing school” in radically different ways. (The authors do cite charters like KIPP schools and The Met schools, though the former seems to offer more school rather than demonstrably changing how teaching and learning time is used.)

The authors assert that disruptions share a pattern. They do not arise overnight, but rather tend to be an evolution that gives rise to revolution.

So what would it take to truly disrupt school? Technology has long been touted as a transformational tool, but the authors note that the promise of computers has not, in fact, played out in pervasive shifts to student-centered learning and project-based learning, as many reformers would like. At least not yet. The authors believe that the change will occur, noting four contributing factors: technological improvements that will make learning more engaging, research advances that will create student-centered software, a looming teacher shortage, and cost pressures. They predict that by 2018, 50% of classrooms will utilize computer-based, student-centered learning, particularly in courses otherwise prohibitive to teach (due to price or personnel), and will serve as a frequent supplement within teacher-led courses. They describe how it will happen and what it will look like (software platforms for student-and-teacher generated content, education-focused user networks akin to eBay and YouTube). They assert that that this amplification of technology will not “eradicate” teachers but help them; for they’ll be able to flip the ratio of how they spend their time (which now tends towards 80% time on monolithic, full-class activities and 20% helping students individually) and be able to customize and coach individual students. Equally appealing, students and families will be empowered to self-diagnose their learning needs and design educational approaches that work for them.

So perhaps technology will give rise to the possibility of disruptive innovation, but this will in no way be inevitable. After two interesting but tangential chapters about missed opportunities within the arenas of early childhood and educational research, the authors hone in on an important crux in a chapter on “Forging A Consensus for Change.” This chapter elucidates the challenges of getting agreement amongst stakeholders in terms of what they want (creating a common definition of success), and cause-and-effect in achieving it (an agreed-upon pathway or action plan), within any field. Unfortunately, such arguments are particularly thorny, if not outright intractable, in education. The authors depict different kinds of tools and strategies that can be used depending on where different stakeholders fall in their thinking in relation to these issues. Where there is a large degree of alignment, tools like negotiation and democratic deliberation can be utilized. But education is rife with disagreements that the authors feel necessitate power tools of coercion or balkanization if true change is to be achieved.

The authors don’t dwell on this, but they clearly support the coercive tactics that characterize the new breed of urban school district superintendents such as New York City’s Joel Klein and Washington DC’s Michelle Rhee, who could well be called disruptive innovators. Indeed both of them and their brethren have had catalytic impact on big, broken bureaucracies that veer towards inertia. Yet to effect true transformations, and sustainable ones, will require influencing the minds and hearts of the front line foot soldiers — principals, teachers, and students — which I’m not convinced can be achieved through coercion. Though the authors position “disruption” as a positive force, many educators would characterize as disruptions the various administrative mandates and dictates that get in the way of the authentic work they seek to do with students in their classrooms.

Disappointingly, the authors don’t describe the school change process to my satisfaction, nor do they engage with the human dynamics of disruption. While I agree with the need for “disruptive innovation,” and think that the authors make the case effectively and in a way that can appeal to a broad base of stakeholders, I found myself ultimately dissatisfied with the book, which sidesteps some core conun-

drums. For example, an inherent challenge of “innovation” is that it is not interchangeable with “excellence.” Parents are understandably extremely nervous about their children being part of educational experiments, and tend to want their children to experience the same kind of teaching and learning that they themselves did, no matter how satisfying or unsatisfying they deemed their own educations. A school in which their children log too many hours on a computer (as they themselves do at work) is undoubtedly anathema to many.

For the most part, the authors avoid debates about content and curriculum, opting instead to address the structural stagnancy of schools. Yet the curriculum wars that have raged for decades serve as cautionary tales about how polarized educators can become, and it’s not clear how the authors’ espoused innovations will avoid getting stuck in similar quagmires.

Furthermore, although the authors lay out the historical and cultural context of schools, they fail to acknowledge myriad historic and existing alternative education models and movements that could illuminate some of the concrete possibilities of the future. This is the kind of myopic omission which contributes to the mutual skepticism that has caused rifts in the education community between “business people” and educators.

At several points in the book, the authors propose innovative educational practices they believe will be central to twenty-first century education. While appealing, their proposals are not likely to seem innovative to experienced educators, who will likely yawn or roll their eyes in response to practices they have been implementing in varying forms over the past decade.

Most unsettling, the authors overlook the paradox of desiring radically different kinds of schools while subjecting those schools to a uniform (and high stakes!) system of accountability. The authors implicitly encourage more traditional, test-driven practices. New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein blurbs the book as being “just what America’s K–12 education system needs — a well thought-through proposal for using technology to better serve students and bring our schools into the 21st Century” and notes, “We owe it to [our kids] to make sure this book isn’t merely a terrific read; it must become a

blueprint for educational transformation." Such an embrace is exciting, and hopefully the Chancellor of the biggest school system in the country will recognize the need to think differently about assessments and honor a broader range of ways schools and students can represent their thinking and learning. Hopefully the incoming New York State Education Commissioner also will create more flexibility around Regents tests than outgoing Commissioner Mills has seen fit to do. The authors do note that if we indeed want to begin teaching subjects to students in ways that correspond to how their minds are wired to learn, it means that the science of assessment will need to evolve significantly, and I wish they had tackled the implications more directly.

These critiques notwithstanding, much of what the book recommends for schools resonates with me: no one size fits all, codify effective practices, discern the factors that create success, create protected places within which to incubate innovation. The authors rail against the siloing that still characterizes too many central offices and propose alternative organizational architecture if we are to give rise to innovative schools. The book will undoubtedly provoke readers' thinking. It spurred an intriguing array of questions for me, such as:

- How would teachers be supported in shifting their instructional approaches to capitalize on such an increased emphasis on technology? Given that most preservice programs seem as impervious to innovation as schools themselves are, what disruptive innovation would be needed within teacher education and within inservice professional development to capitalize on the authors' vision?
- Will the creation of school models designed to fit certain students' circumstances and learning styles lead to more satisfying, customized options for kids or to more sorting and separation, which is rarely equitable?
- Will disruption such as that portrayed by the authors shift focus to more cost-effective, student-centric educational opportunities or will it shift dollars to the private sector sucking up more public education dollars for its products and services?

We may well be at a crossroads in education, with divergent forks each fraught with danger and opportunity. Progressive educators will undoubtedly agree with the authors' assertion that schools should customize education for each student's learning style: "student-centric learning opens the door for students to learn in ways that match their intelligence types in the places and at the paces they prefer by combining content in customized sequences." And most will agree that it is ultimately a mistake to undertake marginal reforms within a context that defaults back to traditional modes of teaching and learning.

Though *Disrupting Class* makes a compelling case for radically different school models, it does not provide a true roadmap for how to give rise to them. At the end of the day, my sense is that this book will be championed more by business people, and business-minded educators, than by social justice-seeking progressives, many of whom strive to foster the kinds of student-centric learning Christensen espouses in spite of current institutional constraints. How we can expand beyond pockets of innovation to permeate the broader field is the \$500 billion question that the education "industry" must grapple with if we are to truly disrupt class.

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