Truth #6 – Pedagogies prove “personal” is better than “school” for learning

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So the Digital Revolution forces changes in old pedagogical practices - what are teachers to do!? Fortunately decades of research in three distinct, but related, areas of psychology provide deep evidence-bases to draw on. In an another work I detail how the research can serve as the foundation for actual classroom practices in schools, but for now, it’s enough to digest the research findings and suggest their application to stimulating self-initiative, critical thinking and lifelong learning. The main bodies of research are in the fields of Intrinsic Motivation, Authentic Happiness and Flow Theory.

Intrinsic Motivation

Based on the larger body of research into “Self Determination Theory,” Edward Deci, Richard Ryan and their global colleagues establish a solid case around the nature and contributions of intrinsic motivation. In the interest of space and honoring the source, I recommend reading either one of two engaging books that convincingly present the work better than I can in these pages: Deci’s *Why We Do What We Do* and Daniel Pink’s *Drive*. It would not be too strong to state that either of these should be required reading for any school hoping to re-invent itself for the digital era. In essence, intrinsic motivation is fostered when people perceive that they have *autonomy*, possess *competence* and feel *connected* to those working with them. Try a simple reflection to confirm the theory with personal experience. If you have no choice in a task how do you feel about performing it as opposed to when you chose to do it yourself? How motivated are you when you feel incompetent at the task? Finally, what about when you feel alienated or bullied from those engaged in the task with you? Decrease either your perceived autonomy, competence or relatedness and don’t you feel your motivation seeping away? Conversely, given choice, an increased sense of your capability and positive connections with those around you, don’t you feel an increased enthusiasm for the endeavor?

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The great news for educators is that not only does it feel good to be intrinsically motivated, it also produces profound results. What if we were told that a new educational strategy guaranteed improvements in these five things:

1. Retention of information
2. Outright achievement
3. Conceptual thinking
4. Ongoing interest
5. Mental well-being

I don't believe a teacher exists who wouldn't sign up for this workshop. Except that it means re-thinking almost everything schools use to manage student performance and behavior.

Essentially we have two problems. First, the act of learning isn't equivalent to assembling standardized parts. Never was, never will be. The reason we have adopted the industrial model was that it was the best way to scale up from the one-room school to the needs of a growing nation. With scale comes logistical problems of management. What I suggest is that many of the routines in our schools are remnants of the factory model, not attributes of learning. And now that we enjoy the options of another era, it makes sense to revisit our purpose and our challenges. The second problem is that we now know from research into motivation that extrinsic motivators only really work in very specific situations. Daniel Pink makes this case very effectively in his work on *Drive*. In fact, the only time external incentives result in the desired outcome is when the pay is high enough for comfort and the work itself is mundane – think "well-paid blue-collar worker in the heyday of Detroit." Here a generation of high school graduates were able to buy homes and secure a university education for their offspring. These people knew their sacrifices "working the line" were a fair trade-off for a secure lifestyle for themselves and a brighter future for their children. Such a trade-off might have worked for an earlier generation of students as well: drudgery in the classroom was reasonable "dues" to pay for easy transition into college or a career. These days the pay-off for students is far from certain. Oh, and one other thing: remember that extrinsic motivators only worked when the task was dull and required little creativity, problem-solving or critical thinking. Since the 1980s the corporate world has been calling for just these characteristics from our schools. In fact a whole movement has grown up around just such "21st Century" skills. Oops… looks like we might be preparing students for a different reality.

Authentic Happiness

Martin Seligman is the leader of the Positive Psychology movement whose extensive research provides insights into aspects of our shared humanity that can inform a new framework for education. Although connecting such significant areas as optimism, signal strengths and "grit," research into "authentic happiness" seems particularly useful when reconsidering the goals and challenges for education in our post-industrial world. Putting aside the infinite differences in how we go about it, as humans we prefer our existence to be a happy one. Seligman and his colleagues found that all the unique ways we go about achieving happiness can be grouped into four main approaches. As humans we:

1. pursue pleasure
2. engage in challenges that stretch us
3. put care or effort into what we do
4. serve something larger than ourselves

Of these four, three "work" in that people who use these approaches rate their lives as "authentically happy." You may have guessed that the ongoing pursuit of pleasure is a never-ending cycle of disappointment as each new satisfaction becomes commonplace and a new gratification is required to maintain "happiness." No wonder the New WWW threatens many youth: its immediate media gratification fuels an anhedonic downward spiral. The remaining three approaches – call them Mastery, Care and Service – each offer different paths to an authentically happy life, but something they all share in contrast to pleasure-seeking is that they require people to extend, invest and give rather than take. They all involve a "putting in" rather than a "taking out," sharing an outward, rather than an inward, focus. Religions and philosophies have made this point for millennia but in our modern media and marketing-amplified societies the incessant messages proclaim that having this and doing that *will* make us happy so that any advice that doesn't begin and end with the self comes across as moralistic or quaintly "old school." But what makes Seligman's research so compelling and powerful for education is that we can act smart, side-step the pleasure obsessions and get on with what actually works – to tap into the human appetite for real happiness. Before moving on, it should be noted that everyone pursues pleasure to some extent. This is natural. Trouble arises when this is the only approach. Seligman refers to pleasure as the "cherry on top," the nice little extra on top of the rewarding experiences derived from the other three orientations. Finally, people seem to have a penchant for which

of the three they prefer or in what combination. The important thing is the attitude toward cultivating a life that looks beyond the self for meaning.

So how can education "get on with what actually works": nurturing an inclination to master, care and serve? Experience raises two red flags when this message is introduced to the typical school environment. First, because of the engrained didactic and instructional orientation, we tend to "teach" how to be happy, that to do it right – to "get the right answer" – students should challenge themselves, pay attention and think of others. This sounds an awful lot like "school rules," not "happiness." Besides, "teaching and preaching" has little to do with the great feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment. The point is not to "say" to do these things, but to orchestrate experiences where students participate in activities that *do* stretch them, require attention and end in a sense of appreciation for the more significant things in life. If you reflect on the classroom activities and projects that really engage students and end in meaningful learning, you will have witnessed your students' authentic happiness.

But challenges exist. Fostering authentically uplifting experiences in the school environment is something of a mismatch because the segmented and teacher-directed aspects of our "industrial" schools work against the self-managed engagement and investment of time and energy that enables the personally-driven pursuit of authentic happiness. The good news is that when we shift away from the Factory approach and take advantage of what the Digital Era affords, learning and authentic happiness align much more readily. Strategies for leveraging a digitally-enhanced learning environment comprise a large part of my book on Next Era Education. The key concept to understand at this point is that the power of digital learning will come from, not the ever-emerging and intriguing glitz of technology, but from the singular focus on using the infinitely personalizable nature of the digital world to inspire and challenge students to pursue mastery, invest care and serve a larger purpose. In conjunction with an approach that fosters intrinsic motivation, the Digital Era educator can move beyond a focus on classroom management, to foster student self-initiated learning achievements. Authentic happiness becomes a fulcrum, the single point at which greater work can be accomplished.

Flow Theory

The third area of research that should inform a new pedagogy for the Digital Era is known as Flow Theory. It comes from the work of Seligman's colleague Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (roughly pronounced "Chix sent me high ee"). Flow Theory focuses on the first of the three

approaches to happiness that “work.” I’ve referred to Flow in terms such as “challenge,” “mastery” and “stretching.” Essentially, “Flow” describes the experience of optimal performance where we lose ourselves in an activity. Time and place seem to dissolves as we “become one” with the experience. Everyone has, not doubt, enjoyed a personal version of Flow whether it has come as the result of such activities as strenuous sport, an engaging intellectual challenge or deep appreciation of an artistic achievement. What each of these optimal experiences have in common is that they occur when “the conditions of Flow” are met. Csikszentmihalyi has conducted many research studies to determine these conditions, such as his famous “Beeper Study” where participants were randomly prompted by a pager numerous times throughout the day to survey what they are doing and how they feel about the experience. In its simplest rendering, the conditions are:

1. a clear set of goals
2. a balance between perceived challenges and perceived skills
3. and clear immediate feedback

If we pause to reflect on these conditions, we can appreciate that Csikszentmihalyi’s decades of research confirm what we already seem to know. When the challenge is clear, we feel confident that our abilities are up to the task and we get immediate feedback on each of our acts, we become fully engaged and enjoy the experience. Conversely, when the goals aren’t clear, by definition, we can’t hope to succeed. Similarly, if we don’t feel our skills are matched to the challenge, we become overwhelmed or bored. Finally, if we never receive feedback, how can we respond to the challenge or appreciate our progress? Thus these conditions seem to make common sense and apply in a range of human activities from the physical, intellectual and even inter-personal or emotional. But do they apply to education? Let’s play our “Tale of Two Classrooms” to see both negative and positive versions in light of what we know about Flow. In one classroom, the conditions of Flow are ignored. Students don’t really know what’s expected of them and in terms of learning, assignments and homework are given, but the goals for these tasks are vague. Students may even have given up asking the very valid question, “Why do we have to learn this?” When the range of

student abilities in a typical classroom can span two grade levels, how can one common task ever match all learners' abilities, being neither too hard nor too easy? And then, the work that students *do* complete may not be returned for weeks or may provide little more than a letter grade as feedback. Little wonder that these classrooms are "No Flow Zones." Consider on the other hand, a classroom were the conditions of Flow are used to advantage. First, all students have a clear sense of purpose. Yes, the goals and instructions are clear, but more than this, they have a deep understanding of why what they are doing is important. Next, the tasks are well-suited to a range of skills and abilities. Some differentiation in the challenge is appropriate as well as a ready supply of scaffolding or extension strategies if students demonstrate a need for them. Finally, the efforts students make immediately generate feedback. In this scenario, learners are part of a dynamic environment that acknowledges and responds to their participation. Certainly the second version requires more preparation and planning on the part of teachers, but the words of Csikszentmihalyi himself capture a positive reality:

> *Fortunately, many teachers intuitively know that the best way to achieve their goals is to enlist students' interest on their side. They do this by being sensitive to students' goals and desires, and they are thus able to articulate the pedagogical goals as meaningful challenges. They empower students to take control of their learning; they provide clear feedback to the students' efforts without threatening their egos and without making them self-conscious. They help students concentrate and get immersed in the symbolic world of the subject matter. As a result, good teachers still turn out children who enjoy learning, and who will continue to face the world with curiosity and interest.*[1]

Pedagogical Conclusions

While everyone loves to learn, *who really loves school?* And yet, instead of focusing on the innate human drive to experience engagement, growth and connectedness, we strive to make the best of an anachronism. Put bluntly, the traditional school doesn't belong in the 21st Century. I can say this with confidence for two main reasons: current psychology and digital technology. Neither of these two fields, dominant as they are in today's culture, were available in the early 1900s when the Industrial Era needed to educate its students.

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1 Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1991). THOUGHTS ABOUT EDUCATION, in CREATING THE FUTURE. Perspectives on Educational Change, Ed. Dee Dickinson, New Horizons for Learning. Retrieved from the Internet on November 13, 2006 at: http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_csikszent.html

So today we *do not* have to begin with the premise that "students have to go to school and it doesn't matter whether they like it." With our common human appetite to be intrinsically motivated, authentically happy and to experience Flow, digital technologies can provide the infinite variations that allow individuals to pursue their own unique, deeply rewarding growth.

Three responses usually follow from educators. One simply exhorts, "Bring it on! Let's get going!" The other two responses raise what seem like reasonable objections. Many point out that they have tried giving students choice and autonomy, to pursue their own interests, and that the experiment ended in failure. Students didn't buy-in, they didn't exert themselves, and, really, the classroom looked like a zoo – run by the monkeys! The problem with this objection is that the students now in our classrooms have been thoroughly indoctrinated to the "factory." The less motivated do just enough to stay out of trouble while the "able and willing" just enough to win at "playing school." When we use extrinsic motivators to manage classroom behavior and grades to fuel academic performance, we turn learning into a job that's only done for payment. And the fact that the payment is pretty paltry in the students' value system, undermines any inherent "pay-off" derived from the experience itself. Altering this won't happen over night, but applying the New Pedagogies can foster students' innate interest in learning.

The other objection is that without common standards or grading, we won't know be sure that students have learned anything. We currently use seat time, standards and tests to measure achievement. Really? Is this the best we can do? Does the fact that a student sat in a classroom bare a causal relationship to what he's learned? Does our mere use of standards itself equate to rising intelligence or does this occur when we use results to personalize strategies to improve student learning? Do we know how performances on high-stakes tests correlate to things we actually value, be they academic, career or character-related? It's time to be honest and base our actions on research, not habit.

Finally, for all those who argue that what they are doing "already works," let's embrace this enthusiasm and certainty and use this "already working" achievement as a benchmark. Because the truth is that education has yet to become a true profession, meaning that it is founded on a body of knowledge and principles that are continuously improved. Where is the control group that supports the finding that what's already done "works?" Exactly *how* does this work? When? In what conditions? With which learners? Compared to what other strategies? These are great questions and lead us to our next truth…