School 2.0

IT’S TIME WE SAW THE SCHOOL AS A PHYSICAL BUILDING AS ONLY ONE OF THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SCHOOLING IN THE FUTURE ALONGSIDE NEW VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

‘UBIQUITOUS ACCESS TO INFORMATION is changing the economics of knowledge,’ while ‘technological connectivity is fundamentally transforming the way we live and interact,’ according to What Matters, a 2007 report by McKinsey and Company. Is it possible that ubiquitous access to information in combination with technological connectivity might be changing the way our children are educated? Might we see the school as a physical building being only one of the possibilities for schooling in the future alongside new virtual learning communities?

Some families cannot operate without safe places to send children while parents go out to work, but members of those same families may well ask why our existing educational institutions, schools, are open for so few hours and why their working year is so short. Other families, who can provide ongoing supervision, are asking why they have to send their children to school when they know that their children would find much more interesting and flexible ways to learn together with Web 2.0 technologies.

Here’s what one parent wrote to me: ‘I love the idea of my children being a part of a number of different online communities with which they could connect to explore Science, Maths, English, Languages other than English, History, whatever they were interested in. They could connect via skype, wikis, forums, blogging and so on. I imagine age would not be an issue, nor would the time of day, nor would your location in the world, only your interest and imagination. It would be learning for the joy of it.’

This parent was writing to ask me if such communities already exist. Sadly, I don’t know of the existence of any such communities. So in my reply I challenged the writer to think about setting one up. Our children, and indeed all children, need some fresh new leadership here. I hope some readers may see the creation of a learning community as an opportunity for them to contribute. Maybe we could bring together some like-minded people who individually and collectively could begin a new School 2.0.

We all, to some degree, store our knowledge in our friends. Individually, we cannot achieve our goals, but with the help of others we can. This is particularly so when it comes to setting up a learning community. We need others with different specialist knowledge to our own, but who share our values, to build and support a learning community. We will need ‘teachers,’ discipline specialists in major subject areas who can run ‘classes,’ real or virtual, and who will contribute to online forums to provoke, support and share their knowledge.

Technology already exists to bring such communities into existence. The ‘teachers’ referred to here don’t have to be trained teachers; they could be adults with specialist experience or they could be student peers, like many of the contributors to Wikipedia who are young people whom schools would describe as students but who in knowledge and skills are effective teachers. The ‘classes’ I’ve referred to here are a generic term for purposeful meetings that have learning as their goals. There’s no reason why classes have to be the age-related, artificially-gathered groups that we find in schools.

The challenge in setting up a learning community is to ensure that it is focused on knowledge acquisition and creation and is also emotionally nurturing and safe, but there’s an additional challenge: to change the mindset of those who could be wonderful contributors, but who may be anxious about committing to something so much more amorphous than a school. Perhaps our governments’ treasurers may find such learning communities easier to support, if for no other reason than that they will be more cost effective than existing schools, with no building to build or maintain and fewer overheads. But could government centralists ever let go of the power that comes from having a physical system under their authority?

I think What Matters is reading the trends correctly. We do have ubiquitous access to information and it is changing who owns and how we manage knowledge. We also have technological connectivity which is dramatically changing the way we live and interact. So far, however, neither trend has had a direct impact on our primary learning institutions, such as schools and universities.

It’s time that we accelerated the development of new educational approaches which are better suited to the new knowledge, economic and social conditions of the 21st Century.

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REFERENCES