

A New Story for Learning and Schooling: A “New Mind” for the New Millennium

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I have not tried to forecast, predict or extrapolate (from current conditions) where I believe public education might be in 25 years. Rather, I have simply invented a conceptual framework for a new ‘story’ of education by offering some alternative beliefs, assumptions and principles for creating sustainable learning communities that nurture the intelligence, imagination and creativity of the human mind and spirit. I leave to those more operationally adroit, the challenge to create the structures and processes that might bring the ideas I offer to life.

I cannot view public education as an enterprise isolated from the needs of the human condition. To me, the kind of educational system we create is the direct result of our beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of human learning and the kind of mind we want to nurture for the future. Public education cannot serve the needs of future generations, unless the kind of mind we nurture develops our capacity to become more fully human and sees, as its work, the creation of a compassionate and sustainable world that works for everyone.

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

It is our work, as ‘prophets and pioneers’ to create a generative paradigm of learning that invites not only the fullness of our intellect but the fullness of our imagination and the fullness of our spirit. This vision is premised on several beliefs:

- human beings inherently possess goodness and genius
- liberating the goodness and genius of children is essential to our sustainability; and,
- the fundamental purpose of education is not to credential vocational knowledge and skills, but to build the capacity of each learner to advance the human condition.

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

¹ The following excerpt from Stephanie Pace Marshall, Ph.D., “A possible new story for learning and schooling – Enabling a “new mind” for the new millennium,” is reprinted with permission from the December 1999 issue of The School Administrator magazine, American Association of School Administrators.

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

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

1. Grounded in an epistemology that honors the objectively verifiable, the analytical and the experimental; that views empirical observation as the most important skill; that believes that the acquisition of factual knowledge requires the disengagement of the learners emotions in pursuit of objective truth; that believes that subjectivity endangers the pursuit of objective truth and that holds to the premise that there is no relationship between the knower and the known	1. Grounded in an epistemology that affirms integrative ways of knowing; that believes meaning and connections are constructed by the learner; that affirms the power of relationships and community in learning; that believes the learner's passion and love are essential for deep learning; that understands that relatedness and engagement are at the heart of learning and that there is a profound connection between the knower and the known.
2. Learning is an incremental process of acquiring information.	2. Learning is a dynamic process of constructing meaning through pattern formulation.
3. Intelligence is a defined and fixed capacity.	3. Intelligence is learnable and the potential and capacity for learning are inexhaustible and expanding.
4. Learning should be credentialed by the amount of time spent acquiring information.	4. Learning is credentialed by demonstrations of understanding, anytime.
5. The purpose of schooling is to rapidly acquire information, cover content and reproduce facts; cleverness is the appropriate aim of learning.	5. The purpose of education is to acquire wisdom through the reflective and often slow exploration of essential questions.
6. Prior knowledge is unimportant and a detractor to future learning.	6. Prior learning is essential to future learning.
7. Content segmentation is the more efficient and effective way to learn a discipline.	7. Concept integration is the most meaningful way to understand the unity of knowledge.
8. Rigorous evaluation of learning can only be objective and external; only that which can be quantitatively and easily measured is true knowledge.	8. Rigorous and meaningful evaluation of learning must include qualitative evidence of understanding, be self-correcting and be demonstrated in settings that are real-world.
9. Competition and external rewards are the most powerful motivators to learning.	9. Collaboration, interdependence, and internal rewards are more powerful motivators for learning.
10. Schooling represents a necessary 'rite of passage'; what happens in school prepares one for life.	10. Learning is continuous lifelong engagement; what happens in a school is life.
11. Personal inquiry and the exploration of questions that matter take too much time from the prescribed curriculum.	11. Personal inquiry and the exploration of deeply human questions are the means through which children acquire the knowledge and skills they need to construct meaning.
12. Emotions, passion and the spirit-ful dimensions of who we are 'permitted' if they do not significantly de-rail the objective.	12. The total engagement of the learner enables the construction of meaning.
13. Effective learning requires chronological age peers to be placed together.	13. Engaged learning requires an intergenerational community learning together.

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

This ‘success’ has been at an enormous human and environmental cost, however, and the result has been the emergence of a ‘global mind’ focused on capitalism, consumption, competition, acquisition and winning. The deep systemic problems, that are now casting a malignant shadow over the global community, and our own society and institutions, will not be resolved until we recognize and re-connect to what we have lost:

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

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

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

(1) How to solve the deeply human problems facing us as a global civilization? — problems for which our current system of education does not provide congruent contexts, vibrancy, practices or affirmations;

(2) How to create learning conditions that liberate the goodness and genius of all children? The promise of this time in human evolution, is that by unleashing the unprecedented capacity and power of the human mind and spirit for the world, we set in motion the possibility of inventing a world that works for everyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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