

Educational Reform - A Learning Revolution

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Education is one of the church's most important endeavours and the key to opportunities for individuals to enhance their existence, bring about spiritual and social transformation and to the economic success of individuals. But, it is also one of society's most fossilized, rigid and change-averse institutions. It appears in most cases to remain largely committed to the education philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and still attempts to impose a single way of knowing on everyone.

If someone who lived 150 years ago were suddenly dropped into a modern-day school, he or she would see little difference. For the most part, they would observe students sitting passively and taking notes while a teacher at the front of the room droned on. This performance oriented learning process applies from elementary to university to millions of members of education's captive audiences. What is important to note here is that if you put that same 150 year old person into any other area of modern life, he or she would be flabbergasted at the changes that have transformed human existence - from the invention of the telephone or television to antibiotics, computers, rockets and cars.

Education is most often still rooted in an archaic model that does not serve all students, church or society as well as it could. But a fundamental shift is easier than most people realize. This shift is not just about sprinkling a bunch of personal computers into classrooms. It's also not about uniforms or standardized tests. What must happen to education is that its method of operation must change. And those educational systems that do will leave the others behind.

In an interview in the early 1990's Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft Corp., said "Why is it that education has only been about performance"? he asked. "Kids don't learn best by listening to someone perform in front of them all day long." In fact, as many of us can attest, poor performance skills by certain teachers can turn students off even subjects that would otherwise be of interest or importance. That is because teachers are chosen mostly for their knowledge of a certain subject area, not for their communication skills. But just because a teacher has mastered a subject, he or she isn't necessarily able to transmit their knowledge clearly and concisely.

Gates envisioned creating a child-centered learning model with the emphasis shifting from a teacher standing in front of kids, lecturing, but instead talks fortified with entertaining and informative graphics, animation or tools. "Why shouldn't kids hear the best lectures ever given about the Roman Empire or algebra?" he asked.

The solution is not about, however, throwing technology into a classroom. It's about changing the paradigm from one-way learning, one-size-fits-all, teacher-focused education to interactive, highly customized, student-focused learning.

Seymore Papert, author of *The Children's Machine*, suggests that the computer, and particularly its future development, will change children's relationship with knowledge producing a revolution comparable to that of the "advent of printing and writing". He imagines a machine he refers to as "The Knowledge Machine" which would allow children a rich exploration of the world. Examples of this would include interactive video, electronic books, and virtual reality.

In Papert's view, moving from the present system and approaches in schools will require megachange. Small schools, involvement of community, encouragement of educational diversity, decentralization, fostering of personal teaching styles, and the involvement of parents, teachers and students are to be the prime ingredients of change to embark on the revolution necessary to move into the "age of learning".

Rethinking our conceptions of learning will require relinquishing some of the control and formalization that we insist on building into education. Unfortunately, our systems today are being driven more by increasing demands for accountability, which leads to more testing, more top-down planning, and to a curriculum driven style of schooling. In the past, reform in education has traditionally focused on changing the curriculum, adopting alternative methods or new tools.

However, it may be well that at this important time of reform, and we are going to have to whether we like it or not, the demand is to fundamentally rethink our role as educators, rethink how we behave, what we believe about knowledge and learning, and what we do. In this sense the revolution calls for a very personal one. It requires not so much that schools change but that we, as educators, teachers and parents, change.