In Other Words…

How High Schools Will Grow with Online Social Networks

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Even while perched on the downward slope after *Race To The Top*, the reform intended to replace the failing *No Child Left Behind*, education policy analysts still seem ready to *move beyond the failure of school reform* (Lavigne & Good, 2014). In hindsight it is easy to see the rise and fall in every cycle of school reform. For better or worse, the next waves will be disrupted by unprecedented technological change.

Hopefully the American High School will *reform itself* from the bottom up. When education policy leaders design reform packages and then attempt to implement a top-down incentive structure, it fails. As with nature, though, optimal systems can emerge from evolutionary forces operating at the level of local interactions. For all of us interested in the growth of young people, our best strategy may be to cultivate personal interactions and relationships. Online social networks now provide vast potential for promoting positive experiences and growth. Students are able to share work in ways that were inconceivable even ten years ago. The most promising components of current reform builds on project-based learning done collaboratively and in real-world contexts (Boss & Krauss, 2014).

The conceit of previous and failed reform efforts is that success happens when all students *learn*. Learning, however, is a fraught concept that, like intelligence, is really defined by how we measure it. We have therefore conceptualized *learning* as the thing that has happened when, afterwards, students can correctly answer written test questions. There is no natural justification for this definition of success, so young people cannot be intrinsically motivated toward it. Reform efforts are doomed to fail by their own measures.

Young people will grow when they are challenged to *do things worth sharing*. Given the current environment, the best options are sports, or music, or other performance-oriented pursuits. The worthiness of these endeavors emerges naturally from the appreciation of the audience, framed by the rules of performance.

The school activities designed to improve test scores are not compelling for young people because they don't produce anything worth sharing. Nothing worth sharing is produced by the standard sequence of classroom activities that moves from the teacher's lecture, to questions from the text, to a rehearsal of correct responses, to a practice quiz, and finally to the culminating test.

When higher level work is assigned, the product seldom gets out of the room, much less shared with a meaningful audience. To the extent students do commit time and energy to academic work, the purpose is extrinsic. They want to make progress toward graduation, for example. The least connected, least absorbing, and least natural part of a young person's day is the part spent in academic classes.

High school can be compared to a tree. The trunk is the experiences young people have, the canopy is the community, and the branches are the connections between student experience and the community. The ground is the real world. Trees have been an essential element of human evolution, providing food and shelter for countless generations of primates. People are naturally attracted to trees and to forested environments. A tree that is comparable to a high school, however, would not be an inviting place for a picnic—at least not the part that is analogous to the academic program.

Above the trunk and below the canopy are a very small number of tenuous branches bent and overburdened by the weight above them. That's because a small number of teachers are the only live connections between student academic experience and the community. Worse, the branches are contorted like bent fingers as they try to navigate obstacles around them. The odd tree that stands tall does so where a few strong branches have managed to grow into some light. But on the academic side, that's the exception. It is primarily the connections provided by extracurricular activities that hold up the canopy.

The trunk is more troubling, though. The perforated bark reveals a compromised interior with bugs teeming through rotten wood. The only thing holding the tree upright is a brittle lattice of fossilized wood, and a few strong veins provided, again, by the extra-curricular activities. The academic experiences available to students are too impoverished to sustain weight. The classroom activities that have been passed down, like copying definitions, filling in worksheets, reading through textbooks, and taking quizzes can barely stand upright. Students are therefore vulnerable to alternative experience, or else they are just bored.

The tree may look pitiful from the trunk upward, but a survey of the roots is horrifying. Beneath a veneer of topsoil the ground has been completely excavated. In its place is a haphazardly constructed scaffold of sorts through which the tangled roots meander. Clamoring around the contrivance are the technocrats of schooling—government officials, school board members, administrators, and others who think they have the potion to cure the decaying tree above them. They may delicately spray, or they may open a firehose, but in either case their work is too artificial and too fragile. A tree is not a good candidate for hydroponics. Schools are not factories. Schools need to grow while thoroughly rooted in the community.

A healthy tree, just like flourishing youth, may be the most glorious creation

on earth. A full canopy of leaves soaks up freely available light and converts it into energy that makes growth possible. The tree is firmly anchored by a vast network of underground roots, equivalent to the branching network above the ground. The mighty trunk stands ready for all that nature can throw at it. That's a thing worth growing.

A natural school will connect the community, student experience, and the world. Student experiences are rooted in real-world activities, they don't just try to replicate it. Nourishment flows through those experiences. The experiences themselves have to be robust and kept at the center of school life. The branches are stout connections designed and maintained to facilitate sharing of student experiences with the community, and vice-versa, to facilitate sharing of community expectations and feedback back to students. The community is composed of all the entities that can help bring energy to student experience and to the school. It certainly includes families, but also groups and organizations in ever-expanding spheres.

Growing and maintaining such a school requires cultivation, not top-down mandates. Online social networks will put the nexus back at the level of local interaction. Young people want to do things worth sharing. Social networks provide a platform for sharing. There is a natural convergence between learning management systems, which are growing "branches" to include peer groups, mentors, and project management teams, and social networks *for things* people find valuable beyond socializing. An example is Strava, which bills itself as the *social network for athletes*. There will be a *social network for students* that will help to grow the natural connections for a flourishing high school. This hypothetical platform may be called *SchoolBook*.

Cultivating a school requires some selectivity. One low-hanging fruit is the format of student work. As teachers increasingly assign work that can be completed digitally, it will lend itself to sharing work online. As students share more work online, there will be incentive to enrich content with images, slides, audio, and video.

Another selection process will incorporate members of the community into SchoolBook. Parents are the most natural members. Just as some learning management systems have begun to add parent portals, additional means of involving interested community members need to be cultivated. Groups of community members need to cluster around the young people with common interests. SchoolBook groups should mirror, and be reinforced by, groups that cohere in person.

Another process will result in selected status updates for academic experiences. Young people engaged in worthy endeavors will want to post about their experiences online. SchoolBook could include means to automatically update the status for young people as they submit significant assignments for review, for

example. To the extent young people are engaged in long-term projects at school, status updates will begin to serve as benchmarks for progress, and also opportunities for feedback and support.

The energy that drives continued student investment will come from the feedback SchoolBook facilitates in the form of kudos and comments. Completion of major projects and mastery of key skills will be celebrated with badges awarded not just by teachers, but by the clusters of the community who have a stake in the showcased skills and knowledge.

The idea of badging to promote student motivation, and ultimately to reform education, has recently garnered considerable attention in both the private and the public sectors. Then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2011) remarked that "by promoting badges and the open education infrastructure that supports them, the federal government can contribute to the climate of change that the education, business and foundation sectors are generating."

Further, our current National Education Plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) outlines ways "[teachers] can connect with community organizations specializing in real-world concerns to design learning experiences that allow students to explore local needs and priorities… technology can help organize learning around real-world challenges and project-based learning using a wide variety of digital learning devices and resources to show competency with complex concepts and content ...a student might publish her findings online where she receives feedback from researchers and other members of communities of practice around the country."

SchoolBook can and should continue to grow beyond a simple platform for sharing work and providing authentic feedback to students. It should also provide mechanisms for selecting and defining projects. Those projects that are most valuable will get the most attention because individuals will be attracted to them. Community-level values will emerge from the patterns of attentiveness in a way analogous to the selection of hive sites by honeybees. A model of group-sourced project-based work already exists in Wikipedia. Individuals interested in contributing can go to the community portal. It provides tools that direct users to projects for improving Wikipedia entries. The portal facilitates the grouping of people working collaboratively and defines specific tasks that will yield growth and progress.

It may be that forward-minded educators connect students to Wikipedia directly, and that academic work comes to be defined as contributing to communal knowledge as represented on a global encyclopedia. It may be that geographically local problems and projects are more compelling, and academic work takes students into the field. In either case, the contrivance schools have become will take its rightful place in the scrapheap of history.

References

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