

A Need for a New Education: Starting Over

Paul Tatter, Albuquerque, July 2010

Please consider this an invitation to join me in reinventing education with a new dream. Schools aren't working, and we haven't been able to fix them for decades. There is hope for the future of education but only if we let go of our wish for the old system to improve, because it can't. This isn't because motivated and talented educators haven't tried. In fact, it's because they have, and reasonable people must agree that repair is no longer possible.

Eventually we'll have to find a non-threatening way to help us move toward imagining a new institution for learning that is not a school, because the institution of schooling is limited to incremental reforms that cannot transform its basic structure. In fact, school reform is essentially a conservative activity destined to preserve the basic structure and tenets of an institution while adjusting to some failure by improving its operation, making it more acceptable in the short run. But institutional structures are like proto-skeletons with limits to change, and when they ossify or decay they cease to support the currently evolving human needs, and they have to be replaced.

Schools are bound by their institutional structures to remain schools. Their ability to evolve into something new is limited by their unavoidable structural rigidity, habituated practices and entrenched assumptions with regard to management and organization, architecture, student groupings, curriculum and textbook content and organization, economically biased pedagogical models, evaluation, demands of employers, daycare functions, corporate influence, government funding rules and policies, state regulations, compulsory attendance and curriculum laws, the inverted pyramid of promotion and matriculation requirements, and even an archaic and anachronistic concept of what it means to learn. These are only some of the things preventing imaginative reinvention of education. Because schools are stuck with these and many other demands, requirements and structural permanencies, they really can't help themselves.

The only practical solution is to start over without these constraints, to reinvent education with a new dream.

Everyone has a need for comprehensive, lifelong education: personally meaningful, liberating, humane, joyful, experiential, self-regulated, evolving, incrementally life-changing, and practical education. There is a need for comprehensive, lifelong education for all people, regardless of distinctions or differences among them, in all areas of their evolving purposes, abilities and interests.

There is a need for a new education that respects everyone with no prejudice in design, meaning or function toward anyone's personal history, economic condition, amount of formal schooling, primary language, cultural background, gender, age and other circumstances of birth, residence or living environment.

There is a need for a new education that suspends urgency and cultivates comfort with not knowing how something will turn out before it happens, and that expects learning anything for anyone may take an indeterminate amount of time, perhaps a lifetime, with the expectation every day of something unexpected.

There is a need for a new education that acts, and organizes itself, according to the precept that knowledge evolves and is continually evolving, and that the source of knowledge is active corporeal experience through which people learn by making and doing in thoughtful and creative action.

There is a need for a new education that adapts every day to nuances in personal development and to shifting or evolving interests, and that accepts that the outcomes of learning for anyone cannot be determined ahead of time.

There is a need for a new education that embraces freedom to err and to adjust without emotional, physical or psychological punishment, and that secures freedom to learn with a guaranteed choice of privacy in learning.

There is a need for a new education that accepts and accommodates different learners as ordinary variations in human diversity, rather than classifying many of them as learning disabled or as gifted. Many American children are diagnosed as learning disabled. This is mostly evidence that schooling is incompatible with many children, and that these are disabilities of schools rather than of learners.

There is a need for a new education that trusts learners to be responsible for, and to desire, their own learning, and to develop their own thinking about what they experience.

There is a need for a new education that encourages free and timely association of learners of all ages with each other, free access to materials and tools, and freedom of movement, without confinement to rooms that, unlike a home or workshop, have minimal tools and materials and no evidence of previous learning or activity, no “archeology” or embodied history of use.

There is a need for a new education that provides a variety of spaces that are transformed and retransformed by use, and spaces to develop, make and store materials, exhibits and equipment for use as imagined and when needed.

There is a need for a new education that creates as much interest and effort in the education of parents and grandparents as it does in children and grandchildren.

There is a need for a new education that as a matter of scrupulously applied policy does not damage learners, children and adults, through fear, humiliation, guilt or foreboding.

There is a need for a new education that advocates basic, on-site research in learning by its local education practitioners for the immediate purposes of being themselves more effective learners and more helpful educators with all the other learners they represent, encourage and support.

There is a need for a new education that is infused throughout its entirety with physically embodied, experiential pedagogy and that is fundamentally transactive, with the expectation that learning will change the learners and the educators, and will change the objects involved in their learning, and will change their environments, through give and take transactions among all things involved.

There is a need for a new education that does not discriminate against fifty percent of the people as above or below average, and that does not segregate people by habituated assumptions like ages, grades and classes, or categories like rank and disability and standards or standardized tests, but rather associates them according to their shared purposes and passions.

There is a need for a new education that provides the challenge of taking intellectual risk with the comfort of knowing you won't be punished for it, or tested, evaluated, judged, ranked, separated, sorted, classified, and placed.

There is a need for a new education that invites planned or spontaneous, face-to-face collaboration of educators from the same or different places of learning in their efforts to create meaningful education, consistent with a pedagogy of experience and empowerment for learners guiding their own learning through personally empowered experience over extended periods of time.

There is a need for a new education that can provide the possibilities for the development of the full range of a person's capacities, talents, skills, and interests, even those yet unanticipated, undeveloped or unknown.

There is a need for a new education that can free education and learning from their nearly complete identification with schooling, and associate them instead with personal growth, collaboration, understanding, worldly facility, passion, and a good life.

There is a need for a new education that practices kindness, empathy and tolerance in all its activity, acknowledging that emotion and sociality are essential to consciousness, rational thought, judgment and intelligence, and that mind, body, emotion and reason all are facets of one and the same thing—their simultaneous engagement in being a person is necessary for any learning. Mind is the social aspect of the body, and emotion is the personal aspect of reason.

There is a need for a new education that values and utilizes conflict and disagreement as sources for understanding and the development of new perspectives, and supports multiple modes and forms of communication, and provides reasons for communicating and for making ideas clear.

There is a need for a new education that can make places of refuge, where we first do no harm; where people can be entirely absorbed in the present without the threat of embarrassment, anxiety, insecurity or shame.

There is a need for a new education that is derived from principles of learning rather than from principles of teaching, or economics, politics, law, religion, tradition or other social habits.

There is a need for a new education that is grounded in educational and humanly liberating values such as personal growth, respect, trust, hope, participation, patience, reason, empathy, joyfulness, inspiration, equity, peace, collaboration, community, caring, independence, interdependence and tolerance.

There is a need for a new education that values people for who and what they are right now, rather than what they ought to be, ought to think, ought to know.

Starting Over

There is a need for a new educational institution that provides a new education for everyone. It is something entirely new that we have not yet fully imagined. No human institution is eternal. Every one of them has a time after which its freshness, its creative contribution to improving life and the well-being of its members, and its effectiveness in engaging and organizing the activities of the people, has expired. School as a social institution has long passed its use-by date. It no longer is able to provide the good it was created to serve. We have reached a point in the life of school as an institution when reform is insufficient, impractical, and ineffective. It has been this way for half a century. The evidence for this is indisputable. It is time to begin anew. We all—children, parents, grandparents and our whole social world—will be far better to engage and commit our considerable creative energy into imagining and inventing something entirely new.

While some of the qualities from the preceding list of needs can be found at this time in various places of learning, which is good, there is a need for a place of learning to have all of them fully engaged simultaneously. I am sure there are more qualities that other people would add. What matters for the future of education is the ensemble, the effect of immersive experience in the whole.

A place of learning with these qualities must occupy a physical space where people would meet, engage, cooperate and share activity face-to-face and side-by-side. The importance of shared, physical presence in a place, and of the qualities and material characteristics of this place, cannot be overemphasized. The experienced environment, the functional and esthetic properties of place, has a very great influence on the quality of learning.

Such a place would comfortably and smoothly accommodate a multigenerational and multicultural community of learners who would be associated by choice in periodic and fluid groups of mixed humanity, for variable terms and of variable composition, based on optimal learning conditions, interests, friendships, purposes, activities or project scope and duration. This would include groupings of people with substantial differences in age, belief and opinion, previous experiences, or backgrounds, so, for example, for some purposes five-year-olds and sixty-five-year-olds might be learning together.

A central feature of a new education would be its transactivity, or the mutual give and take that is essential to learning, especially to mutual, simultaneous learning. People of any age who have had some success doing what they love have a responsibility, even a social obligation, to pass it on, pass it down, pass it up, pass it around. Although it is generally accepted that elders have things of value to pass down, it is inarguable that youngsters have things of value to pass up. Everyone benefits and learns from these transactions.

Such a place would provide relative freedom of movement and association, with on-demand access to tools, materials, instruments, equipment, information, workspace, and help from

facilitators. It would have various, transformable environments for making and doing and growing and repairing things: workshops, laboratories, gardens, ponds, kitchens, playrooms, music, dance, design, theater and art studios, stages, and venues for events, performances, games and physical education. All of these transformable environments would be designed to support learners acting on their ideas and experiencing the consequences of this action or activity.

Such a place would create evolving, contextualized content that adapts to personal changes as people learn. It would provide for learning groups of variable constancy: some drop-in and some dropout, some continuous, some periodic, some multi-pacing with fluid entry and exit into and from similar groups. It would be accessible to its participants at least sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. It would negotiate and coordinate employee participation with employers. It would mediate placement or employment of its participants in businesses and other institutions. It would employ some of its own participants and produce some products for its own use.

Such a place might resemble a blend of parks: a research park developing or improving new ideas and exploring things unknown; an industrial park providing tools and materials for inventing or repurposing and making things; a nature park nurturing natural growth and protecting places of refuge and freedom; a health and wellness park caring for physical, social and emotional well-being; a culture park promoting engagement with arts and sciences; and a city park open to spontaneous meeting, activity and imagination and myriad informal uses.

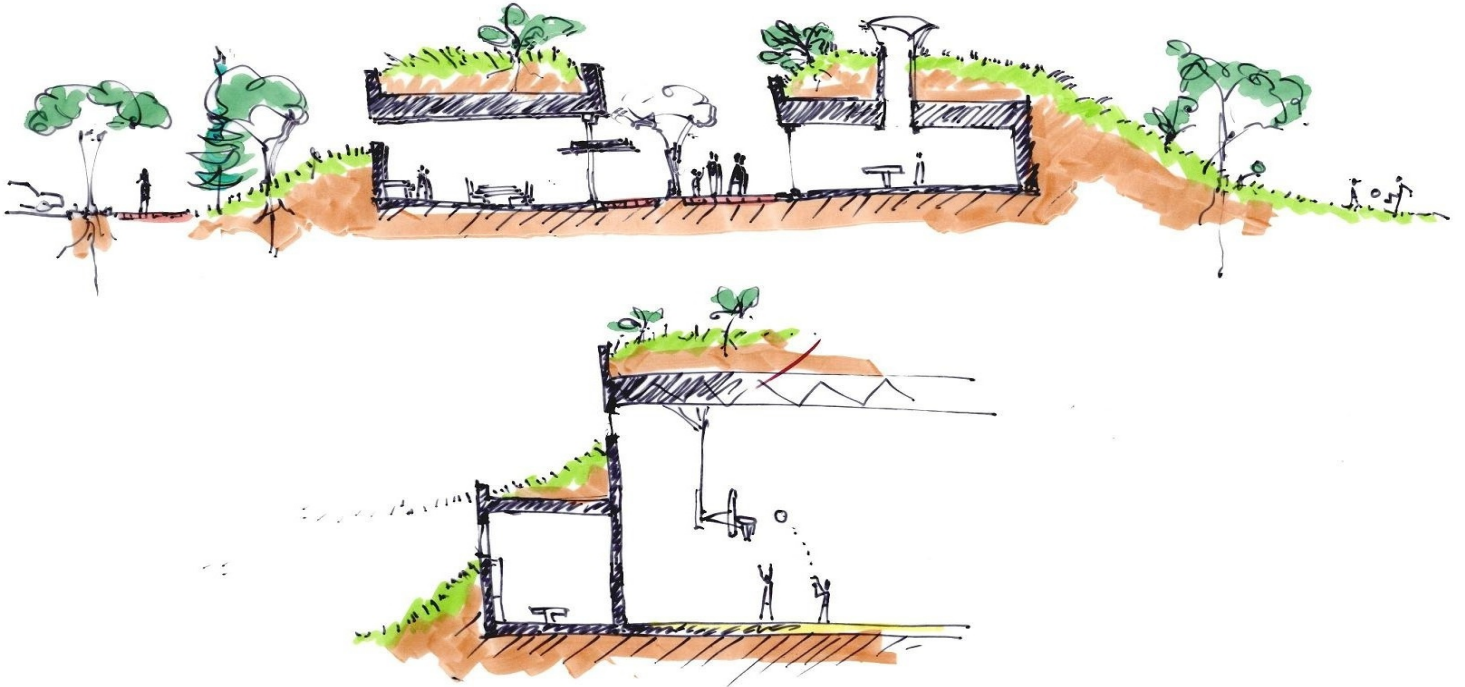
Such an amalgamation might constitute a *Learning Park*, where people of all ages and backgrounds go by choice to learn; to meet, do and talk, create and make all manner of things, experience and pursue matters of mutual interest; to meditate, to play, to think freely, to challenge each other, to experiment with new things and new ideas, to exercise mind and body in an environment that enhances their relationships with nature, tools and culture, and with each other as thoughtful, curious, creative, and enthusiastic human beings.

It's the institution of schooling, from preschool to university, that lacks the ensemble of these characteristics and the qualities from the list of needs, not teachers or learners, and it is the structure of schooling as an institution with entrenched habits that needs to be replaced. If good educators can let go of the school structure and replace the mantle of teacher with the relationship of colleague, co-learner, educator, they might feel liberated and empowered with something entirely new.

It may be worth saying that there will not be one model, necessarily, that works to create a new education. So long as the purpose is to nurture learning in its own right, free the human spirit to enable it to reach its potential, pursue the whole ensemble of needs for a new education, and no coercion is involved in the process, then any gathering of people committed to this new dream might accomplish what is needed.

Ultimately, this is about creating the best possible environments for learning, about applying a new educational ecology of learning for everyone. Let us reimagine and reinvent education with a new dream, and make it happen.

A LEARNING PARK



Drawings by Mahlman Studio Architecture, June 20, 2008