

Letter to Francisco on a New Education

October 7, 2016

Estimado Francisco,

What a thoughtful response to "A Need for a New Education," thank you.

You wrote a beautiful description of Joe, who just passed away at age 90:

Joe was an educator for many years. He taught English, theater, and music.... He was blind from the time he was a child, but his handicap did not seem to slow him down. He had a remarkable ability to get tough, macho-type guys to loosen up enough to sing and dance in musicals...; he developed real friendships with many of his students, several of which continued his whole life. In short, he was very loved by his students and fellow teachers.... I share all of this because I think Joe's experience as a teacher highlights the best and worst of the current system of public education.

I understand what you say about Joe's experience as a teacher, and the best and worst of schooling. During the 12 years I spent as a schoolteacher, I knew other educators like Joe. And many children had wonderful, uplifting experiences with them. As you say, "There are some remarkably talented and dedicated teachers in our schools, with whom genuinely transformative learning can and does take place every day." I agree. But those experiences were not often sustained from year to year. If they occurred in the 4th grade, they might not reoccur until the 12th, or never. And I don't doubt that some of those experiences have lasted for a lifetime; they have for me. But a social institution can't be judged by the few memorable personalities that make it meaningful and humane for some. The institutions have to carry that weight, and through their structures provide a place for all people to prosper and for educators like Joe, and not like Joe, to flourish and grow. We are all educators and learners, and an environment that appreciates and reverences this can help us all become better at both.

You eloquently describe what can happen in such an environment:

When an educational space is designed well, it allows open-ended, curiosity-driven learning processes to emerge spontaneously and to build upon themselves in self-governing and self-reinforcing ways, without the need for intense interventions or policing by authority figures. This, in turn, brings out the best in educators, who can act more like collaborators and be more emotionally available to students, acting like role models of wonder and curiosity. Better learning by design! This is a profound idea, one that has the power to completely change the paradigm through which we see education and schooling. It is an idea that deserves to be heard, refined, and put into practice as soon as possible, in every place imaginable. We need learning parks, and urgently.

You are right in observing that I am categorical about the need to replace school as an institution. I believe that there are too many institutionalized habits and entrenched structures in schooling to be amenable to change. I do not believe that incrementalism can transform such an ossified institution, or one beholdng to so many powerful, external

pressures. The last fifty years of school reform would seem to confirm this view. The laudable, desirable examples of educational experiences in schools are mostly the result of some educator doing wonderful things with students. They are occasions of small heroisms—the indomitable human spirit rising up to overcome circumstances. But these experiences occur in spite of schooling's structure rather than because of it. I'm just suggesting there is a better way to educate, and it doesn't involve school.

But if I persist in this belief, you say, "I have two worries: First, it will alienate your readers, many of whom are teachers. Second, it burns conceptual bridges that may help us to imagine how to get from where we are to the possible future you describe. Can't we continue to build upon what is working in schools now without being mere reformers, polishing the brass on the Titanic? Is there no middle ground?" I'm sorry to say I think not. We have been in the middle ground for decades; I can't see the benefit of staying there for decades more. This is not a theoretical issue. The quality of lives is at stake: millions living now, for whom we could do much better. Unfortunately we live in a timid time, when present fears and insecurities make us cling to what is familiar and secure, and when nostalgia for some past, that we imagine was better than it really was, makes us reluctant to work on something entirely new. However, I believe that most teachers care more about the personal growth, genuine curiosity and motivating interests of students than about preserving the administrative, architectural, curricular and testing structures of schools.

I agree with you that many schools are better endowed and more stable than many poor or dysfunctional communities and families. So it makes sense for you to say, "And even for those students who are not lucky enough to meet a teacher like Joe, it is a blessing that many children, even those who are from poor, rural, and/or dysfunctional places, can go to school and have the chance to be exposed to things that will nourish them—and, indeed, to be forced to learn things that they would very likely not seek out if they were left to their own devices." There is a chance some will be nourished, but the dropout rates from sixth grade through college suggest that many, perhaps up to 50%, are not nourished. The fact that some people have benefited from schooling does not justify the institution, especially when many people have not. I'm suggesting that reforms have not changed and cannot change schools to benefit the majority of students, and the only genuine hope is to create entirely new environments for learning. This is not unimaginable, and in a nation that prides itself on innovation, we should give it a try.

Overcoming one's environment is an act of courage. It ought never to be necessary to recommend this to anyone as a normal or expected course of action. Yet this is a typical admonition: Just work hard, stay focused, ignore or avoid the dysfunctions or bad influences of your surroundings; you can be anything you want to be! It's what we expect from our bootstrap individualist mythology. But since we generally, yet silently, acknowledge the power of environments to shape life and influence behavior, shouldn't we be making environments that nurture becoming fully human, rather than admonishing people to overcome environments that don't? Yet we increasingly are asking young people to overcome not only difficult living conditions but also troubled school environments. Teachers are not principally responsible for this; irreparable structural inadequacies are.

The standardized educational methods and evaluation procedures of our elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities are primitive in comparison to the rich and diverse complexity of human development and learning and the broad growth of

intelligence. The environments for learning in our elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities are austere and barren in comparison to the social and natural environments of the world in which we live. For most children the world they first experience is dynamic, four dimensional, participatory, and filled with countless, wonderful, unpredictable creatures and things; but after a few years in school this world has been flattened into screens or static sheets of paper. Not even in the wildest, most imaginative world of an adult can this flatland replace the education provided by living learning.

If we choose to educate to our fullest capacity, to the maximum benefit of every learner, to the greatest effectiveness and lasting value for lifelong learning; if we really make comprehensive, personal education a top national priority, then we would create entirely new environments for learning that correspond in their complexity and richness as much as possible to the complexity and richness of our social and natural world. The idea for learning parks was an attempt to accommodate this with an environment that itself assimilates the complexity and diversity of human development and learning, such that the resources for personal learning are there when developing interests and abilities require them. Personal learning is an active and social process calling on the full engagement of the surrounding social milieu and physical environment, unlike the individualistic isolationism of most school assignments, learning assessments and evaluations.

As a nation we have elevated "educational opportunity" to a slogan representing the great equalizer of democracy giving everyone equal access to the American dream. But this is a lie. We have done fairly well in giving everyone access to school, but the effect of our schooling is to restrict learning opportunities to a narrowly defined curriculum and an even more narrowly defined methodology. Schools constrict learning and unevenly distribute and award educational opportunities, and because of this and many structural rigidities, schools perpetuate inequality. The idea of learning parks seeks to correct this by preparing educational environments with so many opportunities for all sorts of learning already within them that they readily and appropriately respond to and support the needs of the developmental trajectory of each person that inhabits them.

I might add that an appropriate response to developmental learning needs is not an individualized instructional plan, nor are educational needs characterized by some deficiency, disability, impairment or lack of knowledge. Rather, what learners need are the resources of the learning environment that can be used by them in the pursuit or discovery of new interests, or in the further development or enhancement of a present capacity, or in the integration of previously disparate activities or ideas. And the response consists of the readily available opportunities to utilize these resources, along with their human support, within a context for their creative and productive use.

And most importantly, an appropriate response is a recognition, by those people functioning at the time as educators, of the readiness and needs of a learner when these are first manifested, and an understanding of what particular resources and contexts for use will be most fruitful for the learner at this time, such that the experience opens the door to further development and learning. This could be, for example, that Suzana needs to spend some time dancing with Ms. Green, or that John needs a hand drill and Pablo needs a trombone, or that Latisha needs to see what Dr. Martinez is doing with ribosomal RNA, or that Fashid needs to be slipped a copy of Brecht's *Galileo*, or that Femi needs help using a

mass spectrometer, or that Pilar needs seedlings and Andre needs a hand, or that Lily needs food and a safe place to sleep, or that Leon needs a friend and Yang needs a hug.

You suggest that, "Authority and coercion can be healthy and helpful, in some contexts, and when paired with love, integrity, and skill." I'm so glad you qualified authority, but I can't agree with coercion. I think that love, integrity, skill, respect, understanding, kindness and empathy are themselves authorities, and are all that is needed with respect to learning. This is especially so when an institutional culture has been built up and shaped by the values implicit in learning, and has the range and diversity of lifespan participants. I do reject the authority and coercion of rank or power in education, or the authority of dogma or wealth, or the authority to punish or humiliate, or to ostracize, classify or otherwise decide the fate of another person. Think of what the authority of love might look like in a place of learning.

My hope is to call out the distortion caused by oversimplified and individualistic conceptions of learning, which include oversimplified conceptions of people as learners and of the environment, the engaged world and other people, as subject matter. The elements of complex activities are unified in acts of learning, but we habitually separate them as attributes of an individual, on the one hand, from attributes of an environment on the other. A result of this habit is that the elements tend toward isolation in practice as they become defined as student, learner, user, tool, or teacher, knowledge, object, problem, product, skill and so on; or even more minutely as information, idea, phenomenon, measurement, datum and such. The effect is to disintegrate learning into discrete items that are coherent only in small packets. But learning is beautifully and unpredictably more complex and integrated, and it is essential to honor this when collaborating with anyone that is learning.

I think it is important that you: "want to warn us against the temptation to imagine learning parks as apolitical spaces. Today, schools are already supposed to be apolitical spaces. All of the messy, practical, political stuff is kept hidden from students and is relatively inaccessible to teachers. As a result, all of the decision-making about policy, curriculum, and resource-allocation is done outside of the classroom, by administrators and others who are out of touch and who tend to succumb to perverse incentive structures." For me, advocating that a learning park should be a place of education derived from principles of learning rather than from principles of politics, economics, etc., does not mean that it is apolitical or that economics, law, religion, tradition and other social habits are irrelevant. It only means that the guiding principles and values for structure, content and practice are those that characterize learning and that these principles and values determine the characteristics of the politics, economics, etc. of the learning park and not vice versa. This is in contrast to the present situation where the principles and values of economics seem to determine the characteristics of politics, education and civic behavior in general. Of course, this also means that we have to ask what we mean by learning, and what it means to be educated, and it requires us to have these conversations. Many differences in detail among learning parks would depend upon differences in the provisional outcomes of these conversations.

As you point out: "Funding for the construction, maintenance, and programming will need to be secured and accounted for. People will need to fix the plumbing and lights when they break down. Decisions will need to be made about what to do when, and conflicts over

resources will need to be resolved. Dangerous people will need to be kept away.... On and on." Yes, there are a great many details that will have to be worked out. Though many people have asked me to describe in detail the organization, operation, administration, and curriculum of learning parks, I have not done so because in order to remain true to the needs or the principles proposed in "A Need for a New Education," such details would have to be created by the people participating in each of the learning parks as they develop over time. Each one could differ from the others in detail. I realize that this could make the search for funding difficult, especially to fund the first demonstration project, because funders generally want detail, and most of them also want something that guarantees "success," however that is defined. But I expect that the details would develop quickly as soon as a coherent group began planning a learning park. We can only hope that some people no longer want to invest in 19th century education, and will risk investing in a 21st century educational experiment that may have great promise.

Your suggestion, as follows, is a good example of one of many possible starts on this detail:

All of this will require lots of administration. My suggestion is: Do this administration in the learning park itself, by the learners themselves. Just as learners will construct their own tools and learning materials in on-site wood shops and computer labs, so, too, let them construct their own policies and management practices. Let them develop their own fundraising enterprises, do their own accounting, fix their own plumbing, grow and prepare their own food, paint their own walls, resolve their own conflicts, run their own security, decide on their own how the schools resources might be used to help address issues faced by the community, local and global. As I envision it, a learning park would be like a society within a society. As a small, self-sufficient community, and it would practice a form of direct democracy that is most feasible in small, self-sufficient communities. Learners would thus be highly politicized, and they would spend a great deal of time gaining the skills needed to make such a society run well.

So I support your suggestion for learning parks to be operated, administered and maintained by the participants themselves. Also, I think your characterization of them as societies within a society is somewhat accurate insofar as they could be partially residential local neighborhoods and semi-self-sufficient and self-governing, yet still be dependent on the surrounding community for links to municipal infrastructure, some professional services, commerce, communication and residences, and fully participating as an organizational member in the life of the surrounding communities. Based on a participating population distribution representing a typical eighty-year, or so, age span, I expect that a fully operational, lifelong learning park would include about 4,000 participants. This would allow for some form of direct democracy, as you suggest. And this democracy would depend on people representing each other's interests even more than their own, on face to face conversation and shared work and purposes, and on a very high level of dynamic coherence, mutual respect and trust, and fearless openness.

I had experience with some of the experimental schools of the sixties and seventies that functioned somewhat like this, but they were quite small and the participants were young children, their parents and teachers. They did not reach the complexity in demography or activity of a learning park, or resemble the community at large. They did, however, often make decisions by consensus. I remember a meeting of a comparatively large school run by

parents in Tesuque that ended at 2:00 AM, only after unanimous consensus had been reached on a very important issue affecting everyone. My guess is that learning how to do the direct democracy that you suggest, and through it to resolve conflicts, would be a major, ongoing educational focus for mutual simultaneous learning in any learning park. As you say, "This would be hard work, but the education they received in the learning park would be truly revolutionary, because it would give them the very skills they would need to take back control of the other major institutions in their everyday lives."

You write that: "Any large-scale system for cooperative decision-making needs something like a constitution, and the statement of principles you articulate here [in "A Need for a New Education"] seems like an excellent source for that. But if it were to be used for this purpose, then I would like us to think more about Dewey's insights into the deep connection between education and democracy." I have considered the suggestions of John Dewey for many years, and much of my thinking and educational practice has been influenced by the ideas of the American pragmatists. I agree that we should contemplate and discuss the relationships between education and democracy. But I also would consider the relationships between education and other governing or political systems and other forms of civic behavior and social organization. I don't believe that our present form of democracy is the ultimate end of political evolution. And it is quite possible that a well-functioning learning park could see the germination of a new politics.

I am inclined to think that our democracy may inevitably favor self-interest and may unintentionally perpetuate various forms of social, political and economic inequality; but I also am inclined to think that we eventually can develop a politics that favors mutuality and empathy over self-interest and that promotes a new concept of equality which feels more like brotherhood and sisterhood. It might be inspiring if, while asking what kind of education is necessary to maintain our democracy and economy, we stopped and asked what kind of democracy and economy are necessary to sustain a new education, lifelong learning, personal and nourishing growth, social peace and respect, becoming a better neighbor, living well every day, and freeing the human spirit to continually reach its full potential.

With regard to your concluding remark, "One last thing: As an academic — I'm currently in a PhD program... — I can't help but wish there were conferences and edited volumes of resources for those who want to conduct this sort of conversation," maybe we can organize a meeting of people who want to have a conversation about what an entirely new vision of education might look like; perhaps it might look like a Learning Park.

Thank you for helping to think about how to realize a new education for everyone.

Con agradecimiento, respeto, y un abrazo,
Paul