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On My Mind: Teachers as Master Learners

If we're to really understand the new learning opportunities for our students today, we ourselves have to be learners first. We have to build networks and communities online around the things we love so we can use them to teach and model for our kids how to do so on their own. Yet that's a difficult shift for many teachers to make. We think of these tools for instruction first, learning second. How can you become more selfish about learning? Can you give yourself the time to follow your own passions first? Is it hard to see yourself as a master learner? If so, why?

The roles and expectations of teachers are changing, but I wonder if we'll still be calling the adults in the room "teachers" in 20 years. The most important thing we can impart to our kids is a love of learning and the skills to learn well. Our expertise needs to be in connecting to other people, creating our own learning opportunities, and consulting with our students as to how they can achieve the same things autonomously. Maybe one day we'll be called "Master Learners" or something similar, because that's where our real value lies.

24 Feb 2010 08:45 am

As we continue to have conversations around change with the 800 or so practitioners we're **working with in PLP** (tinyurl.com/c48f92), I continue to be struck by the frustration I'm feeling at the seeming separation between teaching and learning. I know that this isn't new; **I've been writing about teachers' difficulties with being learners first here for a long time** (tinyurl.com/3vdmplj). When presented with the concept of building learning networks for themselves through the use of social learning tools, of making connections with other learners around the world who share their passions, many just cannot seem to break through the teacher lens and be "selfish" about it, to make it a personal shift before making a professional shift in the classroom. We want to teach with these tools first, many times at the expense, it seems, of making any real change in the way we see that learning interaction for our students because we don't experience that change for ourselves.

More and more, though, as I look at my own kids and try to make sense what's going to make them successful, I care less and less about a particular teacher's content expertise and more about whether that person is a master learner, one from whom Tess or Tucker can get the skills and literacies to make sense of learning in every context, new and old. What I want are master learners, not master teachers, learners who see my kids as *their apprentices for learning*. Before public schooling, apprenticeship learning was the way kids were educated. They learned a trade or a skill from masters. When we moved to compulsory schooling, kids began to learn not from master doers so much as from master knowers, because we decided there were certain things that every child

needed to know in order to be “educated.” And we looked for adults who could impart that knowledge, who could teach it in ways that every child could learn it.

My sense is that we need to rethink the role of those adults once again, and that we’re coming full circle. **George Siemens had a great post** (tinyurl.com/yknuclq) last week about “Teaching in Social and Technological Networks” and he asked the same question **that we had asked at Educon** (tinyurl.com/3ebcsr7): What is the role of the teacher? It changes:

Simply: social and technological networks subvert the classroom-based role of the teacher. Networks thin classroom walls. Experts are no longer “out there” or “over there.” Skype brings anyone, from anywhere, into a classroom. Students are not confined to interacting with only the ideas of a researcher or theorist. Instead, a student can interact directly with researchers through Twitter, blogs, Facebook, and listservs. The largely unitary voice of the traditional teacher is fragmented by the limitless conversation opportunities available in networks. When learners have control of the tools of conversation, they also control the conversations in which they choose to engage.

George goes on to suggest a totally different way of thinking about “teaching,” one where “instead of controlling a classroom, a teacher now influences or shapes a network.” And he discusses seven different roles that teachers will play, all of which are worth the read. The one that sticks out for me at least is the role of **modeling**, (bit.ly/mOyvfi) where he writes:

Modeling has its roots in apprenticeship. Learning is a multi-faceted process, involving cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions. Knowledge is similarly multi-faceted, involving declarative, procedural, and academic dimensions. It is unreasonable to expect a class environment to capture the richness of these dimensions. Apprenticeship learning models are among the most effective in attending to the full breadth of learning. Apprenticeship is concerned with more than cognition and knowledge (to know about)—it also addresses the process of becoming a carpenter, plumber, or physician.

But I would argue it goes further than that, that apprenticeship for every student in our classrooms these days is not so much grounded in a trade or a profession as much as it is grounded in the process of becoming a learner. **Chris Lehmann** (tinyurl.com/yrz6yu) likes to say that we don’t teach subjects, we teach kids. And I’ll add to that: we teach kids to learn. We can’t teach kids to learn unless we are learners ourselves, and our understanding of learning has to encompass the rich, passion-

based interactions that take place in these social learning spaces online. Sure, I expect my daughter's science teacher to have some content expertise around science, no doubt. But more, I expect him to be able to show her how to learn more about science on her own, without him, to give her the mindset and the skills to create new science, not just know old science.

How we change that mindset in teachers is another story, however, and I know it has a lot to do with expectations, traditional definitions, outcomes, culture and a whole lot more. But we need to change it to more of what **Zac Chase** (tinyurl.com/3lnme6d) from **SLA** (tinyurl.com/3m56jfw) talks about in this snip I **Jinged** (tinyurl.com/ppnb3p) from the **"What is Educon?" video** (tinyurl.com/3kyce2z) posted by **Joseph Conroy** (tinyurl.com/3nqpe74). (Apologies for the audio and the stupid pop up ads.)

We still need to be teachers, but kids need to see us learning at every turn, using traditional methods of experimentation as well as social technologies that more and more are going to be their personal classrooms. How do we make more of that happen?

Sources: tinyurl.com/3ddbz7; tinyurl.com/ybejmwz

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