

Student-Driven Learning

Small, medium, and big steps
to engage and empower students

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Introduction

Education-as-usual assumes that kids are empty vessels who need to be sat down in a room and filled with curricular content. Dr. Mitra's experiments prove that wrong.

—Doc Searls, “Natural Curiosity” (2002)

In the urban slums of New Delhi, Sugata Mitra installed an Internet-connected PC in a hole in the wall. Following the activities of the children through a hidden camera, Mitra and his colleagues watched what happened when children were given free rein. Their natural curiosity took over and within weeks many of the children were computer literate and had begun to teach other children from the neighborhood. Sugata Mitra went on to repeat this experiment in urban and rural areas throughout India and the results were always the same. Children will be inspired to learn in the right conditions and with the right stimulus.

This story would not surprise many educators—we have all observed what happens in our classrooms when students are provided with a compelling problem and discovery time. But as educators we are caught between worlds. We are locked into a system we need to follow and report on. We need to meet our curricular expectations, as well as the many new programs thrust into our agendas. We often feel we cannot cover the expectations in the limited time we have. We don't have time to wonder why certain systems exist or to ponder the value of the expectations we are struggling to meet. We are trapped by curriculum objectives, testing, understaffing, lack of resources, lack of time, classroom discipline, parental concerns...and the list continues to grow. This book is not about adding to the list; rather it is about looking critically at how to engage and support our students in discovery, problem-solving, and, most importantly, igniting the fire for lifelong learning.

With the influx of digital technology, the world is changing. The ways in which we communicate and share information are changing. We are the digital immigrants and our students are the digital natives; we are trying to navigate through their world. What's more, we are trying to determine what skills our students need and how we can teach them. We are struggling to catch up and be the bearers of knowledge in a world where information is no longer static. If we cannot trust time-honored habits of thinking and doing, how do we understand the nature of our teaching practice? We are trapped in the overwhelming pressure of preparing our students for an unknown future, all the while looking into their world and trying to bring out the excitement, wonders, and magic of learning.

We are preparing our students for jobs that do not currently exist, to use technologies that have not been invented, to solve problems that we don't even know

are problems yet. As educators we are entering a time when the former ideas of pedagogy no longer suffice.

OUR WORLD

- The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 10–14 jobs by the age of 38.
 - The top in-demand jobs of 2010 did not exist in 2004.
 - As of December 2011, there are more than 800 million registered Facebook users.
 - There are more than 12 billion searches on Google each month.
 - The number of text messages sent and received every day exceeds the total population of the planet.
 - More than 4000 new books are being published every day.
 - It is estimated that 40 exabytes of new information will be generated worldwide this year.
 - 228 million laptops and tablets were shipped worldwide this year.
- (Rose et al., 2012)

Our new digital era also opens a world of possibilities—literally. We are becoming more global. We are interacting with peers around the world, instantly and easily. We no longer need to rely on formal channels for acquiring knowledge. On a global scale, anyone can express an opinion; all people can add their ideas and publish their thoughts. In this new world we take action to help ourselves and others we feel are in need. Using digital media, we can gather, rise up, show strength, and affect social change. Knowledge is fluid; we all add to and take from this global knowledge pool.

Why do we need to shift to student-driven learning?

Students 10 years from now will be less self-motivated, less creative and less excited about learning. [We] worry that future students will think if something isn't on a test, it doesn't matter.... This could kill innovation. Company executives bred on bubble answers would stick closely to what they know and what's been done, possibly latching on to a new idea here and there but rarely having their own. Medical research would stall; advances in technology would stumble. Poems and novels would languish undiscovered in the brains of our young people... This would stifle the economy by crushing creativity and drive. (Muzslay, 2004)

There is a growing awareness that a conventional education system, one in which we provide our students with all information, is not meeting the needs of our changing world. Our students are not thinking critically about the world around them. Our students are memorizing facts and data for outdated tests. This means we need to shift our practice. Educators are looking for solutions, looking for ways to prepare their students for unknown futures. As a result, student-driven learning is becoming more prominent in conversations in and out of the classroom.

In addition to preparing for the future, we are also seeking ways to engage and motivate our students in the present. We need to get our students passionate about learning while they are still in school. We also need to recognize that learning has become more fluid, more independent, and more informal. We can no longer hold to the structured classroom where the teacher knows all. Our

students are the drivers—their daily experience is their reality and what they are doing now matters. We need to create an environment that motivates, empowers, challenges, and pushes our students now so that they engage in their current experience and are prepared for the future.

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