

Solutions for Creating the Learning Spaces Students Deserve

Embracing a Culture of Joy



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Introduction

In 2011, I was invited to participate in a unique experience called UnPlug'd. It was a gathering of forty educators from across Canada who were very connected and very “plugged in.” With the purpose of exploring the big question of what really matters in education, we spent the better part of a weekend on a remote lake in northern Ontario completely disconnected from the outside world. Each of us came with our own story or idea. I had been immersed in technology and had witnessed first-hand the way it had changed many of my views about learning and the possibility of something different for schools. Yet, as I pondered what matters, I kept coming back to the simple notion of joy.

As a student, I didn't really like school but loved learning. I didn't hate school; it was merely a rite of passage to adulthood. The idea that school should be a pleasurable experience was nonexistent. That's not to say it never was fun—fun just wasn't a priority. In some cases, fun was seen as the antithesis to real learning. I never really challenged this belief as I began my teaching career in the late 1980s. Whenever I did experience moments of joy as a student and a teacher, the inevitable question emerged: Why isn't school like this all the time? Of course, as the routine of the day returned, I suppose I relegated joy to a *nice but unnecessary* component of school. I was wrong.

Sitting at that remote lake, I realized that learning and joy are inseparable. Real learning always includes joy. Sometimes joy needs to be sought out and experienced if learning is to take place. As I considered what I believed mattered most, I could not escape the word *joy*.

The group came together and cowrote an education manifesto, *UnPlug'd: What Matters Most in Education* (Siemens et al., 2011), on what we believed were the most important ideas for change.

During the writing of my brief chapter, I had the privilege of collaborating with and getting great feedback and questions from my writing partners. My colleagues probed deeper into my beliefs and asked me to consider why joy meant so much. I thought about my own habits and actions as a classroom teacher and realized that while I was by no means as diligent and intentional as I should have been, I often

Chapter 1

The Expectations of School

We have to stop thinking of an education as something that is delivered to us and instead see it as something we create for ourselves.

—Stephen Downes

How would you describe the state of education today? Are schools better places for students than they were when you were a student? In some ways, they are. Great teachers are able to utilize a richer library of resources, and technology—when used effectively—creates unprecedented opportunities. In other ways, however, I wonder if we’ve lost something. Our obsession with analyzing test results and measuring learning has done its share of damage to students and teachers alike. But nostalgia is often a skewed lens to view the past through. Corporal punishment, a lack of resources, and an emphasis on lecture and memorization were not exactly ingredients for creating cultures of joy. However, in my opinion, teachers and schools faced fewer restrictions and less scrutiny from the public, making it easier to pursue joy. This lack of accountability certainly had its downsides, but today, increased emphases on standardized tests, public reporting of school results, and media coverage have teachers and schools walking on eggshells. The slightest stray from the curriculum can attract unwelcomed attention. Specifically, schools’ overemphasis on standards and the general language of school can negatively impact culture and, therefore, learning.

An Overemphasis on Standards

Today, almost everything a teacher does needs to align to curriculum standards. As a beginning teacher, I know I wouldn’t have been able to articulate it, but my

College and Career Ready

College and career ready is another mantra spreading throughout our schools. Although it's a seemingly positive and important mission, I see two major issues with this theme.

First, it tends to ignore that schools serve many purposes. Horace Mann's education model, which is the foundation of our current public system, was established to fill factories with workers (Rose, 2012). The unwritten agreement between schools and parents had been "You take care of the social and emotional aspects of your children, and we'll look after the academics." Over the years, this agreement has been tempered, and we've recognized that schools need to do more than simply teach content. Regardless of who's responsible for students' emotional development, we know that learning becomes more difficult when students suffer from emotional, social, and physical challenges. While the debate as to who should take responsibility for these needs remains unresolved, schools do have a greater purpose than simply enabling students to find work. The college-and-career-ready focus might be a step back as it indirectly diminishes important benefits of a public education. I like the idea of *future ready* as a way to update our teaching to do a better job of preparing students for the new world of work, but *college and career readiness* is too narrow.

The second issue I have with the term is the intensity and pressure it places on students and schools. As Best-Laimit states, "We are responsible for preparing children for college and career" (Strauss, 2014). Remember, she's speaking about five- and six-year-olds. Playing in the mud, painting, running, and singing have no place in this skewed version of the world. Without intending to, we're robbing students of their childhood. When someone tells five-year-olds that they need to be thinking about their future, or even tells this to their teachers, we create a culture where play and the joy of childhood are replaced with preparing for adulthood. The influence of business and society to compete in a global economy creates schools where students are forced to relinquish their childhood and get on with the serious business of life and making money. Indeed, part of the purpose of school is to prepare our students for college or careers, but it is every bit as important to prepare them for a life of learning. Sadly, it would seem we've accepted the fact that life must be a stressful existence, so why not begin it while we're young? Studies show this continues throughout high school with as many as half of students saying they experience a great deal of stress on a daily basis (Leonard et al., 2015). The major sources of their stress? Schoolwork, grades, and college admissions. Do we eliminate these? Maybe not, but do these need to be causing undue stress? When learning is joyful, stress does not dominate the culture. (Also, see Jain, 2015, for some positives of stress.)

The good news is that leaders are beginning to acknowledge this unhealthy obsession with grading and its harmful effects. David Aderhold (2016), superintendent of schools in West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District in New

Chapter 2

The Definition of Joy

Joy is what happens to us when we allow ourselves to recognize how good things really are.

—Marianne Williamson

If we're going to talk about moving away from a focus on standards and toward one on embracing a culture of joy, it's important that we define *joy*. While there are a few definitions we might choose, I'm going to focus on these (Joy, n.d.):

1a: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires

b: the expression or exhibition of such emotion

Joy isn't about being happy all the time. It isn't a fleeting emotion that comes and goes depending on changing circumstances. It is about contentment and satisfaction and expressing those feelings. Sometimes that expression is visible, and sometimes it's not. But joy requires an awareness that things are right. While it's a deeply personal state, it's also something that, when given the opportunity, will spread. Creating a culture of joy applies to both the environment and the learning itself. As it relates to learning, it's the outward manifestation of success, achievement, and being. It's learning for the sake of learning, not because of a grade or compliance. These are the moments we naturally seek.

Identifying Joy

The good news is that our schools are still full of joyful moments. Perhaps we don't always acknowledge them as such, but they are there.

While grocery shopping, his son asked an interesting question:

“Do bananas grow with tips up or with tips down?” Since we don’t have a lot of banana plants in Regina, I didn’t actually know off-hand. But, being the connected father I am, I pulled out my iPhone, Googled it, and in less than 30 seconds, we were looking at photos of banana plants and we no longer had to wonder. *We no longer had to wonder.* (Couros, 2012)

The Internet is a wonderful invention and is a wonder in itself. While we all marvel at the ability to find answers instantaneously, losing our ability to wonder is a dangerous byproduct. Couros’s son has a natural, childlike view of the world, and his question represents an attitude and perspective that will bring continued joy if it is fostered and valued.

Remember those friendly arguments and discussions you had with your friends before we had technology at our fingertips? Who played shortstop for the 1983 New York Yankees? What year did *Schindler’s List* win best picture at the Academy Awards? While these aren’t necessarily wondrous questions, the fact that there was doubt led to recollections, conversations, and even rabbit holes of thought that simply don’t happen today because these questions are answered immediately with a simple google.

At the same time, to ignore the access we now have to information as a way to foster a greater sense of wonder is also a mistake. Being able to pull up a video of an animal in nature can trigger great conversations and questions. Using tools like Google Earth or Google Street View to reference an exact location can further curiosity. I rarely watch a movie or documentary without searching Wikipedia or other sources to extend my learning and understanding.

Like Couros, we all need to recognize when we eliminate wonder from our lives. Technology indeed offers many new opportunities to wonder and explore, but our familiarity can rob us of moments when time in thought leads to much more than an answer.

Mindfulness

How often do we forget to see the wonder that exists all around us? We are all guilty of rushing through the day and missing out on the simple moments of beauty and mystery. The idea of stopping to smell the roses is an antiquated concept in a world where being busy is revered and not being busy is associated with laziness and sloth. Most of us refer to our lives almost daily as busy. We want our students to be busy. Free time is a reward for getting your work done. Rarely do we encourage students to slow down and take time to think, breathe, and wonder. The school day is often crammed full of up to eight different class periods with students moving quickly between subjects. Add homework and nonstop after-school activities, and

The advent of the Internet and digital technologies offered a resurgence in my enthusiasm and provided new possibilities for play that I never had previously. Access to ideas and people meant that I was exposed to a plethora of ways to engage my students. Using digital media meant I could supplement my teaching with visuals that took my students to places not possible before. Sites like Discovery Education, YouTube, and Skype added even more means to teach differently. Watching my role shift from instructor to guide and designer was both effective and challenging. When I shared something new with colleagues, I was often met with uncertainty around its value, how difficult it might be to implement, and how it fit with the research. The problem was that for many of the things I was trying, like Skyping in experts or creating videos, there was no research. The best I could do was read what others around the world were doing via personal blogs.

Blogging

While blogging educators were not researchers in the traditional sense, their posts about what worked and what didn't was invaluable to me. Bloggers such as Will Richardson, David Warlick, and Vicki Davis were sharing ideas and opinions that both supported my work and stretched my thinking. My experimentation led to many innovations in my own classroom. When I took on a district position, I continued to connect educators with others by sharing new practices, tools, and ideas. By using free tools such as Blogger and Google Earth, these were fairly low-risk efforts. Soon, teachers I worked with began sharing their new finds and ideas. For some teachers, tools like Blabberize or GeoFlickr were superficial or simply didn't resonate and ended up being discarded quickly, while other ideas like creating classroom wikis and blogs were transformative. Learning is indeed joyful, and for me, this was a new and uncharted way of learning that reinvigorated my career. The ability to connect with people from around the globe quickly and easily was transformative.

The Internet exploded with the advent of blogging. I began my personal blog in 2005. With little knowledge of what blogging was, I signed up for a free account on Blogger. Previously, I had learned HTML and taught teachers how to create webpages to use with students. A handful of teachers in our district seemed interested in improving communication with parents, and we borrowed heavily from an idea of Tony Vincent's, a fifth-grade teacher in Omaha. Vincent had his students provide class updates and summaries of their learning every day on their blog *The Daily Planet* (<http://mps.mpsomaha.org/willow/p5/log/log.html>). This was a powerful way for classrooms to better connect with parents and explore the Internet. Many teachers adopted this concept, and, using tools like Dreamweaver, the teacher updated these pages as a joint writing activity at the end of each day or week. They

School Community

Of course, the notion of community extends well beyond the classroom. In fact, when we associate the word *community* with schools, we likely think of parents and other interested folks who may not be students. These are also part of the idea of community that when nurtured and honored leads to more joyful learners. There are some great examples of leaders, particularly principals, who actively and intentionally foster and build community. I reached out to my network via Twitter to ask how educators foster community in their classroom, school, or district (Shareski, 2015).

One of those who responded was Curt Rees. Rees is the principal at Northern Hills Elementary in Onalaska, Wisconsin. He's been very intentional about building and fostering community within his school:

My teachers are great about building community among the students. Each class has a buddy class of older or younger students and they get together at least once a month to do an activity that requires them to work together.

We also make sure we are having fun and make sure other people know we are having fun. We use our social media accounts to help with this. By looking at our Facebook page and YouTube channel, one will see photos and videos of important community building events that happen within our school. I've learned a lot from Tim Lauer on how to do this. He said too often our schools are black boxes where no one really knows that happens within them. Use social media as a giant window into our schools so parents and the community can see all the good that happens in our schools. (as cited in Shareski, 2015)

Rees is a wonderful example of a leader who sees community not as a concept that just happens but as a result of intention. Speaking of intention, Rees references social media. It's definitely a powerful communication tool, but its use varies. For many, it's simply another way to distribute newsletter items and information. But for those like Rees and Tim Lauer, social media is a clear way to showcase learning and, more specifically, joyful learning. You can't help but look at the images and videos from leaders like this and not think about joy. Educators who use it effectively share photos and videos showing groups of students, student work, and lots and lots of smiles. The message is clear: "We love learning, and we love learning together." Leadership plays a critical role in establishing this joyous culture. For a teacher, principal, or district leader, the accumulation of these messages creates culture. Leisa Reichelt (2007) calls it *ambient intimacy*: "being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible."

Communities aren't perfect, and they don't always work or happen the way we might like. Members aren't always engaged; they don't always treat each other well.