

*Solutions for Modern Learning*

# Freedom to Learn



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# Table of Contents

<b>About the Author</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction: Blueprints for Learning</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Starting Points .....	2
What's New .....	5
<b>Chapter 1: The Current System</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Low Engagement .....	13
Low Retention .....	16
Outdated Definition of Success .....	19
A Different Definition of Success .....	20
System Structure .....	22
<b>Chapter 2: Learners Versus Knowers</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Access .....	27
Choice .....	29
Freedom to Change .....	32
Requirements for Change .....	39
Case Study: The Mosaic Collective .....	40

<b>Chapter 3: The Freedom to Teach</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Eliminating Obstacles .....	49
Barriers to Freedom .....	53
Tradition and Nostalgia .....	54
Assessment Regimes .....	55
Postsecondary Requirements .....	57
<b>Epilogue: The End of the Beginning</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>References and Resources</b> .....	<b>63</b>

# Introduction: Blueprints for Learning

*What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch  
of a free, meandering brook.*

—Henry David Thoreau

Sophomore Jeremy Dortch has a huge roll of blueprints under his arm, and as he navigates across his classroom at Castle View High School in Colorado, it's all he can do to bend his way around fellow students and computer desks and the occasional teacher without knocking into them. With his free hand, he signals across the room to a maintenance man who is standing next to a solitary, off-white square pole with a capped-off junction box at the bottom. It's smack in the center of the room, and it's about to be transformed.

"I'm Jeremy," he says as he extends his hand to the somewhat befuddled-looking middle-aged man looking at the pole.

"Ron," the man says without looking at him. "Now, what's the problem here?"

"Oh, no problem," Jeremy replies. "It's just that we wanted to make sure the power was shut off when the construction guys get here Monday to start building the walls."

Ron looks up. "Walls? What walls?"

“These walls,” Jeremy says as he drops to his knees and rolls out some architectural drawings of the classroom. He points to some blue lines. “Right here.”

Ron glances down and squints. “But Monday is the first day of break . . . no one’s even going to be here.”

Jeremy smiles. “Well, we will. We’ll be here all next week helping and redecorating. So if you could shut the electricity to this pole off for us before you leave today, I’d really appreciate it.”

Ron looks even more confused. “So wait, you’re going to be here? In the classroom? During break?”

“Yep,” Jeremy says. “A bunch of us are helping with the construction. It’s all here in the blueprints if you want to see them.”

Ron looks down to the stack of drawings on the floor. “Will there be a teacher here?”

“Mr. Schneider and about six other students will be here,” Jeremy says. He jerks his thumb over his shoulder and asks, “You want to talk to him?”

Ron glances up and eyes the teacher, then looks back at the pole. “Who capped off the electricity here?” He points to the silver plate where an outlet used to be.

“Well, I did,” Jeremy says. “I got permission.”

“You an electrician?” Ron asks, looking the boy in the eye.

“No, but I learned how to do it.”

“Well, now,” Ron says slowly, “who taught you how to do that?”

## Starting Points

How do we learn most powerfully and deeply in our lives? Over the past decade or so, I’ve been shocked at how little we pay attention to this fundamental question in the context of schools. It is rare that I visit a school where conversations about what powerful

learning is and how it actually takes place are held on an ongoing basis. Only occasionally have I seen that question be the starting point for decisions regarding curriculum, classroom design, technology purchases, pedagogy, assessments, staffing, and more. It's difficult, in fact, to find a school where all the teachers, administrators, and students can articulate a consistent vision of how learning happens most effectively in classrooms even though the most stated goal in education seems to be to "improve student learning," at least the type that's easy to measure by standardized assessments.

The irony is that almost every one of you reading this book, whether you are an educator, a parent, a policymaker, or just an interested observer, knows the answer to that question. Each of us need only reflect on what we ourselves have learned most powerfully and deeply in our own lives to craft a response. And I would bet that the consistency in the answers we give would astonish us. We've learned most deeply those things that we truly cared about, those things that had relevance in our lives. We've learned those things with other people with whom we shared that interest. We've learned them haphazardly; rarely is there a fixed or linear path. And we've learned best what we've applied in some way in our lives. In other words, understanding how powerful learning happens isn't rocket science. We're all learners, and we know what it means to learn.

Though we in education are loathe to admit it, however, our dilemma in schools has always been the disconnect between the way we learn naturally in our day-to-day lives and the way we approach learning in schools. To put it bluntly, we know how learning happens in real life, yet we seem to ignore that when we step into the classroom. Few put it as succinctly as author and educator Seymour Papert (1993), who has become one of my biggest influences and teachers about learning:

When it comes to thinking about learning, nearly all of us have a school side of the brain, which thinks that school is the only natural way to learn, and the personal side

which knows perfectly well it's not. . . . Every one of us has built up a stock of intuitive, empathic, common-sense knowledge about learning. (p. 28)

For the last 150 years, the narrative that schools are the places that we go to learn the things we need to be successful in life has grown deep, deep roots. The majority of people in the developed world have looked to schools for an education, and we've adopted what author Frank Smith (1998) calls the "official theory of learning" that our systems promote. Smith (1998) writes that this "official theory" is an extremely powerful one:

It is a theory that learning is work, and that anything can be learned provided sufficient effort is expended and sufficient control enforced. The theory has gained supreme power in educational systems from kindergarten to university. It has become so pervasive that many people can't imagine an alternative to it. (p. 4)

Smith (1998) calls this "official" view "totally artificial, a theory contrived solely for the purposes of control" (p. 4). And since the form and function of current schools evolved from the techniques used by the 19th century Prussian army to train soldiers, techniques that were then applied to preparing a 20th century industrial workforce at scale, it shouldn't surprise us that much of the school experience is about control. A school's view of an "education" is one that is clearly defined, efficient to enact, easy to measure, and applicable to all. While in our heart of hearts we know that school-based learning flies in the face of our "commonsense knowledge about learning," it's a powerful mix of tradition, policy, and nostalgia that keeps it firmly in place.

But there is, as we know, another way to think about learning. Smith (1998) calls it the "classic theory," one that is closer to what we know it looks like in our own lives:

It is classic because it is archetypal, universal, deeply rooted, and uncontaminated. It says, very simply, that we learn from the people around us with whom

we identify. We can't help learning from them, and we learn without knowing that we are learning . . . Learning is continual, effortless, unpremeditated, independent of rewards and punishment, a social activity, all about growth, and never forgotten. (pp. 3, 6)

If that gives you pause, think of any four-year-old you've ever seen on a playground or in a home surrounded by toys. Or think of the members of any athletic team or musical group. Think of a team of scientists engaged in solving a challenging problem. Or, again, think of your own learning.

I'm not suggesting that there's anything earth-shatteringly new here. Jean Piaget and John Dewey and Maria Montessori and Lev Vygotsky and a whole host of others have been talking and writing about this for more than a century. That we learn by doing, that learning happens through play, that learning can't be forced, that learning is real life—these ideas and more have formed the foundation for a progressive view of education that has struggled to gain credence in a world where the idea of highly organized and standardized schooling has become pervasive. In fact, one could argue that the systems and structures of schools have effectively repelled those progressive ideas in a form of self-preservation.

By and large, the classic theory that describes our own best learning is not the way we conceptualize what student learning should look like in schools. But here's our challenge: if schools are to remain at all relevant in our kids' lives, it's becoming increasingly clear that we're going to have to start embracing the classic theory inside the classroom walls, and the sooner the better.

## What's New

Why do we need to reconceptualize learning in school? Because something incredibly important has happened in the last fifteen years in human history when it comes to learning: the web and an array of accompanying technologies have created a totally new