

Heidi Hayes **JACOBS**

Marie Hubley **ALCOCK**

# **BOLD MOVES FOR SCHOOLS**

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**How We Create Remarkable Learning Environments**

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With a Foreword by Ken Kay



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# Introduction

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In every part of the world, when the sun rises each morning, a teacher rises, too. The rituals may vary in terms of brushing teeth, making coffee or tea, getting dressed, scooping lesson preparations off a desk and throwing them in a briefcase or backpack; but there is always a sense of a new day. It is easy to imagine through history a teacher in ancient Greece heading for the agora or a Chinese scholar at the pagoda, a young Englishwoman at a manor house approaching a group of children, a sensei bowing gracefully toward his students in 19th century Kyoto, a Kenyan schoolmaster in charge of the village students—all approaching the day with anticipation, excitement, or anxiety.

As an educator, you are part of that chain of teaching stories, sharing traditional routines and roles of teacher, leader, and student. But now is a different time, and we are all learning in new ways, with new portals, new spaces, and new connection points to reach our students. The morning rituals have changed in some ways, too. We check our text messages from colleagues and open our laptops to see the weather forecast and consider how it might affect our field trip. Our classroom spaces embrace virtual platforms and our students can receive direct instruction 24/7 on a web page; we can link with faculty members in the global professional networks we have joined; curriculum can be updated and revised immediately; and students can demonstrate their learning through multimedia projects.

Taken together, all the dynamic possibilities flooding the planning desk can seem overwhelming. Questions emerge, tensions arise, and disequilibrium pervades our field. In this book we hope to address the nature of a new kind of learning that recognizes that those of us formerly called “teacher,” “administrator,” and “student” are now all new kinds of learners. On an even more challenging level, we see a corresponding need to seek new kinds of learning environments beyond the old view of school. Our aim as authors is to stimulate and to provoke active and purposeful thinking about how educators, as individuals and institutions, can make the transit from the past to the contemporary with an eye on the future. In particular, we wish to frame the transition on multiple levels that are intrinsically connected.

## The Inherent Boldness of Innovation

Innovation requires courage coupled with a realistic sensibility to create new possibilities versus “edu-fantasies.” Moving boldly is not moving impulsively or for the sake of change. Moving boldly involves breaking barriers that need breaking.

We see constant evidence of confounding resistance to matching the structure and policies of learning institutions to actual present-day needs. It seems obvious that there is a firmly established economic system that sustains itself only on a very old perception of what a school system is. Certain businesses and corporations are dependent on that old system. Consider, for example, the proportion of annual school budgets spent on reductive testing that is identical in format to tests given in 1963, the year standardized testing first emerged. This fact speaks volumes.

Although national publishers claim that they are moving to a new 21st century testing solution, the prototypes point to multiple-choice tests and limited-response items that are now simply administered online. Considering the evaluative weight and the perpetual crunch of the event-based testing ritual—that is, the one or two days or that week of the year when the most critical tests are administered—we could change mission statements to say, “Our mission is to support and to maintain the testing industry at all costs.”

Yet what are teachers and principals supposed to do? If job security is dependent on and student progress is measured disproportionately by the *event*, then decisions on curriculum and instruction will be made with that date on the calendar as the compass setting. The most fundamental structures in our schools are often inhibitors to progress: our schedules, our physical spaces, the grouping patterns of learners, and the configuration of personnel. The challenges are real and will require bold and informed moves—the kind of moves we describe in this book.

## How This Book Is Organized

In Chapter 1 we examine the need for updated learning principles and beliefs supporting a refreshed pedagogy to inform students, teachers, learning organizations, and policymakers. In Chapter 2 we consider what it is to be a contemporary teacher in terms of capacities needing cultivation for effectiveness in both virtual and physical spaces. In a very real sense, new kinds of learning require new kinds of teaching. Chapter 3 addresses significant shifts in how teachers and institutions can grapple with choices regarding the design of curriculum and assessment. We explore strategies to challenge dormant views of the subjects and to promote the need for

continually refreshed curriculum in a time of continual growth of knowledge. Given the ongoing work on shaping personalized learning experiences, we present a model for designing contemporary quests. The need for relevant and timely investigation and the possibility for compelling assessment outcomes drive the model.

If we are going to support the efforts of new kinds of teachers and upgraded practice in the design of curriculum and assessment, then the rethinking and redesign of schools is critical. Otherwise we have 21st century teachers operating in 19th century school structures—or, even more alarming, teachers leaving our profession frustrated and disappointed. With a focus on four basic program structures—space, time, grouping of learners, and personnel configurations—we explore in Chapter 4 a menu of options that planning teams can consider to create new learning environments. We have been inspired by some dynamic architectural designs, both exterior and interior, emerging from around the world that reflect the kind of imagination and openness to possibilities that we believe should be part of teaching and learning. The chapter features some outstanding examples that we hope will spark consideration.

The question emerges as to who will lead these efforts, and how. The word “leadership” is a compound word. Traditional models point to the “leader” as the “captain of the ship.” With more fluid professional groupings emerging in both physical and virtual settings, in Chapter 5 we examine the concept of lateral leadership, with formal partnerships appearing to be a natural alternative to one person in charge of everything. We explore future directions given the emergence of cyber faculty, leadership by talent versus role, and the opportunity for deeper ties to family and community via digital media communications. Chapter 6 explores the use and abuse of old-style standardized assessment in our schools and by our society. Certainly, thoughtful and meaningful demonstrations of learning are critical in providing feedback to students and to the professionals supporting them, but habitual pummeling based on results from limited, reductive assessment has negative impacts on the entire system. We raise the possibility of accountability for innovation in assessment and the potential positive impact this would have on learners, and we offer specific tenets for refreshing and modernizing assessment policy, with current examples from the field.

Recognizing the impact it would have on all decision makers, in Chapter 7 we propose and examine the need for a modern, robust learning system that can stand on a common platform yet provide a multitude of options. Central to moving forward is the need to support ongoing efforts for educators to become self-monitoring and modernized. Currently, the ease with which the “we/they” mentality invades our language and actions has the effect of limiting dialogue between practitioners and

policymakers. We examine the overwhelming influence of policymakers, from government officials to publishers, in relation to a learning system's effective functioning or dysfunction. We have drawn up a set of commitments to support thoughtful and conscious policymaking on a transparent platform that respects learning. We do not see this goal as impossible, nor do we see that the goal is to expect agreement on important policy decisions.

The question that drives our work from Chapter 1 through Chapter 7 is this: Are we setting a direction and taking actions to support *right-now* teaching and learning? Writing the hyphenated word “right-now,” we recognize that the present is challenging, often frustrating, and also rewarding. Educators want to make progress and meaningful moves to support their learners. Let us begin by considering the realities of the educator today.

## What Does It Feel Like to Be an Educator Today?

So, how does it feel to be an educator today? As we travel and meet groups of teachers and administrators, we have observed some pervasive negative and positive feelings. On the negative side, educators feel overwhelmed by the following:

- Changes without real change
- A culture of threat or distrust
- Not enough time

On the positive side, they may be motivated by the following:

- A joy in learning
- A belief in the importance of preparing children for future possibilities
- A connection to community building

These observations form the basis for our examination of what it means to be a teacher and a leader today.

## Changes without real change

Change is a constant. The way human beings respond to change can make the difference between productivity and decay. In our schools, we can initiate change toward growth with deliberation. However, change without the vision and dedication to support sustained growth and the creation of new structures to support learning is superficial if not superfluous. As leaders leave positions, their departure brings a shift in focus and initiatives. With so many new things to learn, this ebb and flow

can cripple long- and short-term goals. The resulting waste of resources and lack of follow-through to sustain the learning at an organizational level leaves even the most dedicated teachers demoralized and unwilling to muster the motivation to learn more. This pattern can end.

There are, indeed, increasing expectations for schooling and an acknowledgment that those expectations will continue to grow. School was once a place where all students came to learn the basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Once they had acquired the basics, most learners returned to their farms or future professions regardless of their age; it was a skills-based system. Students who were academically inclined were encouraged to stay in school and broaden their studies. It was normal, in both the agricultural and the industrial models of education, for many students who were not academically inclined to leave school during the primary grades. Doing so was not seen as failure as much as an indication of no longer needing to learn academics.

In the information age, we need a new model of education in which schools change from being a source of basic skills for all and academics for some, to a source of rigorous learning for every child. We need pedagogy that provides entry points and options for a new kind of learner. We look for curriculum platforms that develop inquiry skills and allow students to design inventive solutions. It is an age requiring new forms of meaningful assessment and feedback that are descriptive and promote learning rather than being reductive, standardized experiences. With dynamic possibilities emerging, why do so many teachers and administrators feel frustrated and overwhelmed?

## **A culture of threat or distrust**

Our profession, as a whole, exists in a culture of threat. As a group, teachers, administrators, and education policymakers sense people's distrust and disappointment in our public system. Individually, parents and students describe a positive feeling about their schools, but when surveyed about education in general they describe performance as being lower than expected and a system that is neither efficient nor cutting edge. These last two items are troubling because they reflect a general public perception that within our profession we are not communicating with each other or coordinating our efforts.

Politicians are calling for accountability and states are working feverishly to show growth in student achievement. The emphasis on testing and results has created knee-jerk responses from school personnel. When it is appropriate to assess the

performance of a teacher or an administrator based largely on a single standardized assessment without input from professionals within the field, then we are working in a culture of high threat.

What are the effects of a culture of threat? People do not make their best decisions when they are working amid threat and distrust. It is intimidating for teachers and administrators to take responsible risks when they have a palpable fear of failure. In a culture of threat, they begin to worry about being blamed for decisions, and thus the fabric of unity and community grows thin. The culture of threat erodes innovation, creating a conflict between short-term gains and long-term planning. Educators who are loyal to learning are frustrated by the culture of threat. Good teachers are forced into actions that ultimately result in bad decisions, and they are sickened by the helplessness they feel. Finally, there is a perception within the profession that no one can actually change the process.

We would like to challenge that perception. Key to making the shift in perception to one of growth and future-oriented learning is the reconsideration of time.

## **Not enough time**

“Not enough time” refers to the perception that in our education settings we keep adding to the to-do list without removing items. The agricultural and industrial systems of education acknowledged demands on students’ time that allowed them to leave school to meet family responsibilities or financial needs. It was not within a school’s purview to force students to stay. Now that schools are a required institution of learning, the logistics of monitoring children’s academic achievement, physical health, and emotional well-being are exponentially more complicated. These demands create conditions that have a tremendous impact on the quality and distribution of time in school.

The use of teachers’ and administrators’ time is a matter that is under constant debate in contract hearings and negotiations across the United States. Certainly the underlying question should be, what are the optimum time frames to meet the needs of learners in a specific setting? Given that learners of all ages can spend time regularly in virtual environments, teachers are devising new solutions and advocating for networked learning for their students and for themselves. One of the concepts we explore in this book is how distributed leadership and the sharing of responsibilities can allow adults to focus their work time to achieve greater efficiency. In the end it comes down to what we do with the available minutes. The issue we see in many classrooms and school hallways is that teachers are constantly trying to be all things.



The teacher is the academic leader, behavior model and manager, guidance counselor, emotional nurturer, physical therapist, joy and fun promoter, safety patrol officer, assessor, and learner. It is as much a chore to sit down and plan how to do it all as it is to actually fulfill these roles. This is the heart of the problem described by so many professionals, and it is why we propose a new job description for the contemporary teacher.

## **Finding Joy in Learning, Future Possibilities, and Community Building**

We enter this profession for many reasons. Certainly immediate circumstances can prompt a pragmatic decision to go into the field of education *to get a job*. We become educators through the notion of a *calling*, an internal mission that moves an individual to enter the world of learners, teachers, leaders, and schools. It might be the joy in seeing people learn; it might be a commitment to helping to shape the future or a passion for contributing to a learning community. Performing the art and craft of teaching and learning induces this joy, which is crucial when facing difficult challenges. Students know when a school leader or a teacher has the “spark” and when that person has lost it. Making moves to improve the quality of learning for the present-day learner ignites the joy and is essential to progress.

Making moves may emerge from a realization that rigidity is not strength. Obvious dangers emerge when institutional memory calcifies around habit, laurel-resting, and *the way it has always been*. Idealizing and romanticizing the “glories of the old school days” impede the creation of right-now places of learning. When dated teaching methods become institutionalized, it is tempting to rely on them and defend them. Breaking set—doing something in a way that differs from the norm—is critical because so much is possible when we explore different options, challenge what we know, and commit to learning more. Breaking set requires bold moves.

In this book, we express our commitment to and reliance on the existing talents and expertise of educators to advocate for and move our profession toward contemporary practices that better align with future needs. We hope to further the discussion of what is important and issue a challenge to what is habitual. We believe deeply that if we focus on what is strong in our calling, we can find the courage and determination we need to do what is bold and important. We support bold moves rather than tepid reiterations of the past because boldness sparks innovation, propelling the useful and informed actions that are required to complete the transition to “right now.”