

To Educate, We Must Listen

Reflections From Travelling the World

By Marc Prensky

[1221 words]

“The cookies on my daughter’s computer know more about her interests than her teachers do.”

– Henry Kelly, President, Federation of American Scientists

I have just returned from presenting a keynote address at the International Confederation of Principals Conference in Auckland, New Zealand, where almost 2,000 principals from all over the world met to hear the latest information in their field. My topic was “Engage Me or Enrage Me,” about how our failure to engage our kids in their education has been leading kids universally to boredom and disaffection.

To my total amazement, another of the featured speakers managed to give an entire one-hour talk about being a principal without even once ever mentioning students! And it suddenly became crystal clear to me why the efforts of so many leaders, from Messrs Bloomberg and Klein in NY, to all the Chief Executives who want to be the “Education President,” to politicians and school administrators around the nation and the globe, are failing, and are going to continue to fail.

They ignore the kids.

Oh, the students are there, of course, administratively. And budgetarily. But today’s educational discussions are only about two things: how to “reform the system” (e.g. smaller schools, better management from principals, more highly qualified teachers, more parent involvements, etc) and what we do “to” kids (e.g. new reading or math programs, more or less technology, etc.) There is almost no discussion *with* students of who today’s kids are and how they want to learn. (Hint: It may not be by being taught in the traditional ways!)

The reason we are failing to educate our kids is essentially because we have become afraid to talk to them.

Why this might be the case is understandable – many of our “Digital Native” students are truly ahead of us in terms of technology, and many others put up a tough cultural front that is often hard to break through. Most of today’s teachers teach by delivering content, presenting and telling, linear stories, one thing at a time, one size fits all, and in person.

Yet their students learn from being engaged, doing, gameplay, random access, exploring options, multitasking, having things personalized to them, and going online. So when dealing with their students teachers often feel like immigrants, who speak a different language. As one student put it “there’s so much difference between how teachers think and how students think.”

But it doesn’t have to be that way. I spend my time going around the world speaking to educators, and I typically include panels of local students in my talks. It is almost always the first time that any of them have ever been asked about their own education. They say a variety of things, from that they are generally “50-99 percent” bored, to that they love their best teachers (although they think most are not that good), to that they have to “power down” when they go to school compared to what they can accomplish on the outside. But they especially say they would like to be consulted more about their own education, because they have a lot to contribute.

Today’s kids are not “little us’s” as they were in the past, and to engage them we must treat them differently, telling them where we want them to go and letting them get there, rather than just pumping information into their heads. This generation is much better than we adults ever were at sharing and teaching each other, yet we take little or no advantage of this. Today’s kids hate to be “talked at,” yet most of our teaching time is spent “covering the material” via lectures. (Educators may tell you this isn’t so, but the kids say differently. Says one 5th grader: I’m bored almost all the time because the teachers just talk, and talk, and talk.”) Kids say what they value most is discussion and hearing each others’ opinions – teachers often complain there isn’t time to do that and prepare for the tests.

It’s not that there aren’t other means to educate young people – there are. But we have become so locked into our “20 to 40 kids in a classroom” model that we generally consider no other alternatives. Combinations of peer-to-peer learning, tutoring and newer technologies (as opposed to the 10-year-old ones that just got tested and got a bad rap) can make a difference, as more and more home-schoolers are finding every day. In fact, the most future-oriented and valuable part of our kids’ education now happens not in school, but “after-school” – in computer and robotics clubs, on the Internet, in complex online games, in peer-to-peer sharing, in self-awareness and retention programs, and in many other non-school ways.

I constantly remind educators that while in the past kids grew up in the dark intellectually and our role (and value) as teachers was to enlighten them, in the twenty-first century our kids grow up in the light, connected to the world by television, mobile phones and the Internet long before they ever go to school. Sadly, rather than building, as we should, on their knowledge and connections, we instead cut off all their external links and, as they enter our school buildings, bring them back into darkness. For how long do we think students will put up with this?

I have seen elaborate rules and codes of conduct set up by administrators for students. But there need be only two rules for kids in school: Do your best every moment to learn, and Do not disturb anyone else in the process. It should only be when you are breaking one of these rules that you are failing.

Much of the answer to our education “problem” lies, simply, in listening to our kids, whose opinions should be sought at all educational levels. Bright, articulate student representatives should be on all school boards, steering committees, and curriculum and methods planning committees. They should be testifying before legislatures and teaching in our teacher training schools. They know what they need, and a good deal of how to get it.

Not that kids should “run the asylum.” But today institutions everywhere, from corporations to the military, are discovering that maintaining a healthy balance of “bottoms up” management (i.e. listening) with the old “top-down” management (i.e. demanding) is a far better way to be successful. It is high time we stop hiding behind our teaching and administration desks, afraid of our own kids, and learn to dialog with them about their own learning. After all, isn’t that what real education is all about?

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