



DONALEEN SAUL

Education Unplugged

Students Sound Off About What Helps Them Learn

Education Canada invited two groups of students, one on the Atlantic coast and one on the Pacific coast, to think about and discuss their own experiences with and perceptions of public education. We asked them to consider the following questions:

In your experiences as a student in an education system:
What are the things that help students learn?
What are the things that make learning difficult?

The results of their discussions appear in the following two articles.

Our thanks to the Halifax Regional School Board and the Vancouver District School Board for convening the student groups and providing the facilitators and writers. And especially, our thanks to the students themselves for sharing their time and their ideas.

It was after school on a Friday afternoon at the end of a long week, and Christmas was days away. But nothing was going to stop a group of students at Vancouver's King George Secondary School from saying what was on their minds. Sitting seminar-style under fluorescent lights in hard chairs around two pushed-together classroom tables, they were asked to talk about what helps them learn and what does not. The answers detonated from them at a speed next to impossible to keep up with, but nonetheless each student's unique point of view came through with blazing clarity.

Being challenged is the essential element for Ioana Bercea, a Grade 10 student who started her school years in Rumania, where she says the education system is much more rigorous than it is here. According to Ioana, "It may be fear-based but kids learn more." Ioana is an avid reader, a former violin player, and an active volunteer at My Sister's Closet, a second-hand clothing store that provides free clothes to clients of Battered Women's Support Services. Although she is an honours student, Ioana doesn't find school that interesting, claiming it offers few opportunities "to think outside the box."

For Tamara Mihic, the most important aid to learning is being free to speak what's on her mind. At the top of her Grade 9 class, Tamara plays volleyball and basketball, holds down a part time job as a clerk at an adult education centre, serves as student council treasurer, and plays piano at a Grade 8 Royal Conservatory level. Although not at all reticent to say what she thinks, Tamara laments, "Lots of kids hold back. They're too shy, they're scared."

Conor Mervyn is a Grade 12 student in King George's City School, a mini-school program he describes as "enriched, which means more work." Conor is a believer in "non-coercive learning", meaning that learning is most effective when it is self-motivated. Although a good student in his academic subjects, Conor's passion is music. He plays the guitar and hopes to attend the music program at Nelson BC's Selkirk College when he graduates. Of his newly acquired iPod, he says, "It just completes me."

Grade 11 student, Zlatina Radomirova, has only lived in Vancouver for two years, having previously attended school in South Africa and Bulgaria. Fond of jogging, drawing, and reading about Ancient Egypt, Zlatina notices a difference in Canadian students' attitude toward others, compared to what she experienced in South Africa. Convinced that learning occurs best in a positive environment, she says, "The kids here don't really respect the teachers or their peers... We can't learn in that kind of atmosphere."

Sarika Narinesingh, a Grade 12 student, is on the honour roll and works hard to stay there. Literature is her favourite subject, she enjoys movies and art, and she hopes to get into the Emily Carr Institute's Communication Design program after graduation. Describing a school Career Preparation course in which she had to teach a unit on Energy to Grade 7 students at Vancouver's Space Centre, Sarika says she learns best when she is able to experience and directly apply what she is learning.

EN BREF Ces élèves de Vancouver se sont regroupés afin de créer un court métrage sur une exposition au Vancouver Art Gallery en octobre 2004. L'expérience s'est avérée être l'une des plus palpitantes de leur vie scolaire. Ils se sont de nouveau rencontrés pour parler de ce qui les aidait à apprendre. Ils étaient d'avis que le contexte était aussi important que le contenu, et qu'un sentiment d'appartenance, de bons rapports entre enseignant et élèves, et le soutien des pairs contribuent aussi à l'apprentissage. Ils déplorent cependant l'importance que la société accorde à la réussite scolaire et aux bonnes notes par rapport à la créativité.

Grade 9 student, Vicki Henley, describes herself as “one of the people in the middle average, always trying to achieve better.” She writes poetry frequently and loves to sketch, draw, and paint. She also loves Science. Besides King George, Vicki has attended schools in Eastern Canada and the United States, and finds that she learns better in the absence of competition. “I go at my own pace, I will get it done, but competition stresses me out.”

Tali Foley-Herb, also in Grade 9, agrees with Vicki, saying that, “Competing is cruel at a broader level. Deserving people lose out.” Although he snowboards and cross-country skis, Tali describes himself as “mostly an indoor guy” who likes video games and reading science fiction. He is on the student council and enjoys politics, having worked for an NDP candidate in a recent federal election. Tali thinks that learning is most effective when there is a balance of different forms of learning. “Each kid learns differently, and therefore a range of different approaches is needed.”

This unlikely collection of students originally came together to participate in a unique educational experience spawned by the Massive Change exhibit, which premiered to record crowds at the Vancouver Art Gallery in October, 2004. Twenty-five King George students joined their peers from three other Lower Mainland schools to view the exhibit, attend workshops about global issues, and create some kind of project to be presented at a symposium in early December. The project had to be a response to the challenge the exhibit posed about design needing to reflect human needs and global challenges.

With assistance from Vancouver’s Pacific Cinematheque, King George students worked in small groups to create short films on topics such as overpopulation, genetically

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— Tali

spectives besides your opinion... When your opinion is changed or expanded after a discussion, then you know you’ve learned something.” Like Tamara, Vicki appreciated being able to express her opinions freely, even those that were critical of the Massive Change exhibit itself, which she found to be biased toward a white, middle-class mindset. Tamara was also impressed by the inspiration offered by the teachers and facilitators. “If you’re given the opportunity, you want to make people happy with what you’re achieving, others as well as yourself.”

Tamara’s comment speaks to a general feeling among the students, as they re-convened in December after the Massive Change symposium to discuss what helps and what impedes learning: the context of learning is as important as the content. One quality that the students agreed enhances learning is a sense of belonging. Ioana recalled having been part of a Technical Immersion program and said that, “Even though I didn’t have a lot in common with the other kids in the program, they became like family.” Tamara feels fortunate to be attending King George with its student body of less than 500 students. Having attended a larger school previously, she is delighted to be at a school in which there are few cliques and most people are friends. “If I need help, I can go to anyone. If you’re too



Vicki Henley



Conor Mervyn



Ioana Bercea



Sarika Narinesingh



Zlatina Radomirova



Tali Foley-Herb



Tamara Mihec

modified foods, sweatshops, earthquake preparedness, and urban sprawl. With no prior film experience, they had five days to come up with a topic, create a script, and shoot and edit their films.

It was a challenge that seemed impossible initially, but proved to be one of the most exhilarating experiences of their school lives. It was the kind of project that, according to the students, embodied all of the elements necessary for effective learning. Sarika said, “I learned a lot about myself – as a team leader and as a leader.” Conor was struck by how his group was able “to take four completely different ideas and pare them down to one thing. We were all at each other’s throats. But seeing the final film, everything was forgotten.” Conor also appreciated the “direct applicability of what we were learning to what we were doing. It wasn’t theoretical.” Zlatina said she “had never learned so much content... It was amazing to realize we are capable of things like making a movie in three days but we just don’t know it.” The ample opportunities for discussion were also appreciated. As Tali expressed it, “With discussion, I feel more enlightened than I do being fed information.” Sarika supported that, saying, “It helps to have other people’s per-

worried about how you will be received, you can’t concentrate.” Conor pointed out that there is more homework and fewer electives at his 25-student City School than there would be in a larger school, but “the community aspect of City School helps me. It’s more personalized; it’s easier to learn. You’re not just accountable because you don’t want to get bad grades. There’s a personal connection with the teachers. There’s more interaction and feedback.”

All of the students noted that the relationship with the teacher is vitally important. According to Tali, “The teacher needs to be willing to have a relationship, and not just be assessing us. It makes a big difference if they take the time to understand how you’re feeling, if they understand and connect.” Vicki recalled a time in which there had been a tragedy in her family and she was going through a hard time. “My English teacher saw it affecting my work habits and asked if I needed to talk about it... He knew I needed a break.” However, Tamara pointed out that “teachers need to be approachable, but also authoritative and educated in their subject area. If they’re too nice, we’ll take advantage of them.” Apart from knowing their subject, the students felt that teachers need to know how to impart it. As Conor

expressed it, “If they’re not helping us learn, then it’s just a live performance.” Tali said, “To be told ‘you weren’t listening’ is a cop-out. It’s their job to make it interesting enough so we want to listen.” In light of that, Conor gave the example of an English teacher who was receptive to student feedback. They had been studying *Macbeth* and different students were reading different parts. “Everyone would sleep until it was their turn to read. We suggested reading it in smaller groups with a person taking their turn every third line. Everybody had to pay attention and we were able to move through the material a lot more quickly.”

Peer support is another important dimension to learning. Vicki pointed out that her friends give her the courage to keep going. Zlatina appreciates her circle of friends who are motivated to do well and who support her accordingly. If that support isn’t there, as Tali pointed out, then learning is impeded. Tali gave the example of a Math class in which he would try to ask the teacher to repeat something he didn’t get. “But if you get a response from other students who are impatient to get on with it, you stop asking. Then you get stuck in a loop that is really hard to get out of.”

All seven students are highly motivated to succeed, but perhaps the opportunity afforded them by the *Massive Change* symposium to see the bigger picture has made them not only critical, but also insightful toward a society that places so much emphasis on success. Zlatina pointed out that “teachers don’t know how stressed we are.” Sarika complained that “I don’t have a life any more. All I do is sleep, wake up, and study.” Vicki compared herself to a runaway train that can only be pushed so far. Conor said that

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burning out is happening earlier every year: “You’re on the honour role, you hit a crest, and then you crash into a peaceful state of not caring.” Ioana, who is on the honour role herself, nonetheless feels that “a lot of people are smart. People who apply themselves to the demands of the system do well. Those who don’t, fail.” Conor feels the effects of “the safe bet” mentality of many universities who build their reputation on attracting “better” students. “There’s a huge demand for high grades. Creativity is not important.”

Tali took this point a step further, pointing out that “the pressure for perfection is a con for preserving a certain form of society.” Asked to elaborate, he said that changing society may need to occur outside the mainstream learning environment. “Someone like Einstein was considered stupid in his school. He dropped out and became a brilliant inventor. Now he’s mainstream. In some way, we’re being hypocrites. We accept geniuses once they’re officially recognized but not before.” While not necessarily advocating that everyone should drop out of school, Tali gave voice to a hunger for schooling in which taking risks is valued: “If schools were more open-minded and things were really discussed, we could really get somewhere.” ■

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Italian Campaign Victory in Europe D-Day Liberation of Holland



Over the next twelve months, Canadians will commemorate the 60th anniversaries of a series of events which defined who we are as a nation and what we can accomplish together.

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