

Goodbye to Obsolete High Schools

A REVIEW OF *TEACHING THE DIGITAL GENERATION: NO MORE COOKIE CUTTER HIGH SCHOOLS*

BY FRANK S. KELLY, TED MCCAIN, AND IAN JUKES. CORWIN PRESS, 2009. ISBN: 978-1-4129-3927-0

I groaned when I read in the final summary of *Teaching the Digital Generation*, “At the risk of sounding repetitive, we need to restate what we wrote at the very beginning of this book.” These authors (one Canadian and two Americans) had already repeated to the point of tedium that the industrial model of schooling is obsolete and that ‘digital kids’ need and have a right to an education in harmony with the information revolution.

That, of course, is true, and for that reason *Teaching the Digital Generation* should be taken seriously by those who care about secondary education in the 21st century. In particular, parents, school officials, and trustees who cling to 20th century assumptions about school architecture, programming, classroom instruction, and student assessment should read the book with an open mind.

Although the book is unnecessarily repetitive – a tough editor could have reduced it to 150 pages – persistent readers will find more wheat than chaff in these 265 pages and may agree that the authors are remarkably prescient about what needs to be done to improve public education. Teenagers, they insist, must be freed from such minimum-security prisons as the high school in southwestern Ontario where I began teaching history in 1949. Thousands of such schools still soldier on, unchanged except for the facade, an updated curriculum, and lots of fancy technical equipment. The print-oriented libraries, interchangeable classrooms of fixed dimensions, centrally mandated textbooks, teacher-centered instruction, standardized tests, and report cards are now obsolete, a drag on student enthusiasms and capabilities, and an obstacle to digital learning.

In each of ten chapters, the authors present a different kind of high school with an opening description of its capacity to serve the needs of ‘digital kids’. They conclude each chapter with a heavy-handed effort to reinforce their main argument, presented in a series of horizontal bar graphs representing various

features of the teaching-learning process, from outdated on the left to up-to-date on the right, with a large dot indicating the merits of the particular model.

For example, in the Industrial School model, ‘21st Century Thinking Skills’ range from ‘Knowledge Skills’ on the left to ‘Content + Problem Solving Skills’ on the right. The dot is firmly placed at the extreme left of the bar, as if Problem Solving Skills cannot possibly be learned in such a school. By contrast, for the school model entitled ‘Instructional Centers’, which feature individualized instruction using digital technology in the hands of teachers and students, one of the graphs evaluates ‘Responsibility For Learning’. Here the dot falls on the student end of the graph, far removed from any effect of the teacher.

While these evaluations may be helpful in simplifying and summarizing the authors’ positions, they appear to be subjective judgments and raise doubts about the authenticity of their claims.

This is a pity because the book addresses the critical need for bringing education into harmony with the reality in which kids are “exposed to new kinds of input from digital experiences for sustained periods of time on a daily basis” (p.23). The authors persuasively argue that the gap between the thinking of young people and those who teach them is greater than ever, with serious negative effects on learning in the traditional classroom.

Nothing less than a revolution will satisfy these iconoclastic authors. The old mainstays of the schoolhouse must be jettisoned – the textbook, the print-oriented librarian, compulsory attendance, standardized testing for information recall, and assessment of progress based on mastery of print information – to be replaced by visual learning, community resources, student engagement in out-of-school work situations, assessment of student progress based on student-teacher initiated projects, school architecture for individual or small group instruction, teachers as advisors, and asynchronous learning, with everything synchronized with the textbook, the timetable, the exam/test schedule, etc.

The authors’ list of existing models for ‘21st century education’ is proof enough that the revolution has already begun:

- Academies of small learning communities with an academic bias
- Instructional centres with workspaces for teachers and students instead of classrooms
- College preparation schools
- Learning labs that emphasize multi-disciplinary projects
- Self-directed learning
- Schools without time constraints and featuring earlier graduation
- Individualized instruction which may complement home schooling
- Cyber schools where teachers and students connect by internet only

It is obvious from scanning the list that these models overlap, supporting my point that editorial stringency would have improved the book. But the authors’ main argument is intact: obsolete high schools dot the landscape. They must be replaced ASAP. |

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