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How to Find a Sense of Purpose in Education

By Gary Marx on April 16, 2015 9:34 AM

Here's the assignment: Describe an educated person. Include the academic knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes or dispositions that would, for you, clearly define any person as well educated. Now, let's figure out how to make sure we all fit that description. *All of us, not just a chosen few.* How will we get it done? Maybe the very discussion will help us clarify our sense of purpose.

Instead of constantly striving to redefine and reset in light of new knowledge and exponentially expanding demands of a fast-changing world, we have, perhaps too often, spent our time and energy engaging in philosophical fisticuffs.

Visualize this: Two psychologists climb into a ring. It's the age of progressive education. They put on their gloves and start punching. One is *Edward Thorndike*. The other is *John Dewey*. In a philosophical boxing match, Thorndike declares that schools should be "structured around the methods of industrial management." To him, they are just a delivery vehicle. Teach it and then evaluate whether the students have learned it. Dewey, on the other hand, counters that schools should cultivate a lifelong love of learning and develop the qualities of democratic citizenship. Who won the fight? Who should have won? Are the fists still flying?

Somehow, the system and a plethora of politicians have staked their sacred honor on a debate that helped shape schools for an Industrial Age. How much more mileage can we get from *either-or* when the answer is likely some reasonable version of *this-and*?

The upshot? We have growing numbers of thoughtful educators, determined to get students ready for the future, constrained by a mentality, a schedule, and an infrastructure of another time.

Employers and civil society are demanding people who can think, reason, and problem solve. Yet, as a society, as institutions, as politicians, we all but refuse to apply those skills to solving our own multiplying problems. Purpose and substance get lost in a game of win and lose.

Of course, many of our students are moving on. They're already linked to a world of information and ideas, using interactive technologies and forming a new system of learning—any time, any place, any pace, and any way. Some ask, "How will what I'm being asked to learn in school be helpful to me in my life, today and tomorrow?" If we can't answer that question, we'd better rethink the why, what, and how of education.

[Read more in Chapter 14 of *Twenty-One Trends*](#)

We're well into the 21st century. Isn't it time we led a spirited community or national conversation that zeroes in on the purposes of education? Granted, science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math (STEAM) are important, but aren't they means rather than ends in themselves?

What are the purposes of education? That should be a question we're still trying to answer as the earth makes its final turn. For the sake of discussion, let me suggest a few: **citizenship** (of a family, school, community, country, world); **employability** (not just training for a job but the multitude of things we need to know and be able to do to be employable and to be good citizens); **the opportunity to live interesting lives** (the more we know, the more interesting life becomes); **releasing ingenuity that is already there** (which means we'll be expected to discover and develop the interests, skills, talents, and abilities of our students); and **stimulating imagination, creativity, and inventiveness**.

A few years ago, after speaking about trends and the future to a large community gathering at the city hall in Intendente Alvear, La Pampa, Argentina, the host said, "Our students have a gift for you." One of those students, Florencia Fernandez, embraced her guitar and sang "To Begin Again."

Let's take Florencia's advice and start a fresh conversation about education that will get our students ready for life in a Global Knowledge/Information Age, even an Age of Knowledge Creation and Breakthrough Thinking. It could be among the most exhilarating, memorable, and influential things we ever do. In a world of exponential change, time's wasting.