9 Elephants in the (Class)Room That Should "Unsettle" Us

April 9, 2016 By Will Richardson

At a recent morning workshop for school leaders at a fairly small New England public school district, about an hour into a conversation focused on what they believed about how kids learn best, an assistant superintendent somewhat surprisingly said aloud what many in the room were no doubt feeling.

"When I really try to square what I believe about how kids learn and what we practice in our classrooms, it unsettles me," she said. "And it frustrates me."

As it should.

One of the things I've come to realize in my many discussions with educators from around the globe is that there are a number of practices in our current systems of schooling that "unsettle" us, primarily because they don't comport with what Seymour Papert calls our "stock of intuitive, empathic, common sense knowledge about learning." But what's also notable about those practices is that we rarely want to discuss them aloud, content instead to let them hover silently in the background of our work. We know, as I suggested a few weeks ago, that in many cases, these practices are attempting to do "the wrong thing right" rather than "do the right thing" in the first place. But we carry on regardless.

Acknowledging the Elephants

Lately, I've become increasingly frustrated with our unwillingness to acknowledge these "elephants in the (class)room," if you will, because the new contexts for modern learning forged by the networked world in which

we now live are creating an imperative for new ways of thinking about our work in schools. I've been collecting a list of these "things that we don't really want to talk about in education" in hopes that it might challenge us to bring those elephants out into the open and ignite some much needed conversation about how to deal with them. Here are nine of them:

1. **We know that most of our students will forget most of the content that they "learn" in school**. As Matthew Lieberman from UCLA notes, "For more than 75 years, studies have consistently found that only a small fraction of what is learned in the classroom is retained even a year after learning." That's primarily because the curriculum and classroom work they experience has little or no relevance to students' real lives. And we all know this, because we ourselves have forgotten the vast majority of what we supposedly learned in school. Yet we continue to focus our efforts primarily on content knowledge, as is evidenced by the focus of our assessments. If we would acknowledge that true learning is unforgettable, made of the things that we want to learn more about, we'd radically shift our focus in the classroom. (For more on this, I highly recommend The Book of Learning and Forgetting by Frank Smith.)

2. **We know that most of our students are bored and disengaged in school.** According to a recent Gallup survey, only 32% of high school juniors reported that they were "involved and enthusiastic about school." Almost worse, only 17% said that they have fun in school, the same number that said they "get to do what they do best" in school. Is anyone ok with that? And, by the way, let's stop pretending that we can solve the engagement problem by handing kids iPads or other technologies. Hand them more agency over their own learning instead.

3. **We know that deep, lasting learning requires conditions that schools and classrooms simply were not built for**. When we look at the things that each of us has learned most deeply in our lives, the same certain conditions almost always apply: Among other things, we had an interest and a passion for the topic, we had a real, authentic purpose in learning it, we had agency and choice, deciding what, when, where, and with whom we learned it, and we had fun learning it even if some of it was "hard fun." We know this. But in the vast majority of curriculum driven

schools, however, students sit and wait to be told what to learn, when to learn it, how to learn it, and how they'll be assessed on it. Rarely do they get to choose, and just as rarely does the learning they do in class have any impact beyond the classroom walls.

4. **We know that we're not assessing many of the things that really matter for future success**. The reality in K-12 schooling today is that the majority of what we assess, content, knowledge, and basic skills, is the easiest to assess, not the most important. It's much more difficult to assess the literacies, skills, and dispositions that are required to succeed and lead a healthy, happy life, especially in a world where answers are everywhere via the technologies we carry in our pockets. In that world, creativity, curiosity, a change mindset, the ability to create, connect, and participate in networks…all of those are now required, yet few of those are currently assessed at all. As Mitch Resnick of the MIT Media Lab writes*,

> "Today's education systems are not designed to help people develop as creative thinkers…It is ironic (and distressing) that at the same time that machines are increasingly taking over workplace tasks that don't require any uniquely human abilities, our education systems continue to push children to think and to act like machines…We need to stop training students for exams that computers can pass."

5. **We know that grades, not learning, are the outcomes that students and parents are most interested in.** On New Year's Day of this year, high school sophomore Emily Mitchum published an op-ed in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette where she wrote,

> This system…has caused my generation to develop an unhealthy obsession over grades instead of learning, in my opinion. The harsh reality is that we really aren't learning as much as we could be. We study because we have tests, and the day after the test we forget all of the information we studied.

Whenever I reference Emily's post to school audiences, most heads nod in acknowledgement. And the same holds true for parent groups. Ask most parents what their child has actually learned as represented by that grade on the report card and you'll get little if any response. (I've tried it.)

6. **We know that curriculum is just a guess**. The way we talk about "The Curriculum" you would think that it was something delivered on a gold platter from on high. In reality, it was pretty much written by 10 middle-aged white guys (and their primarily white, middle-aged friends) in 1894 called "The Committee of Ten." They were from some of the most prestigious schools and universities at the time, and they fashioned the structure of much of what we still teach in schools today. But we know that much of what every student in 1894 was supposed to learn isn't really what every student in 2015 needs to learn. Yet we seem loathe to mess with the recipe. And as Seymour Papert so famously asks, now that we have access to pretty much all there is to know, "what one-billionth of one percent" are we going to choose to teach in school?

7. **We know that separating learning into discrete subjects and time blocks is not the best way to prepare kids for the real world**. School is the only place in the world where we do math for 45 minutes, and then science for 45 minutes, and then Shakespeare for 45 minutes. That's an efficiency that serves the system, not the students. To quote Mitch Resnick* again,

> "The creative jobs of the future will not fit into boxes as neatly labeled and divided as the professions of today. The positions that involve mastery and the use of powerful technologies will be filled by people who combine a range of different skills from different disciplines. These jobs will require not just interdisciplinary but antidisciplinary thinking and doing."

Does that come as a shock to anyone? And the same goes for separating kids into age groupings, by the way.

8. **We know (I think) that the system of education as currently constructed is not adequately preparing kids for what follows if and when they graduate**. Take a look at the recent headlines: NAEP scores are down; SAT scores are flat; Americans rank last in problem solving using technology; kids are Internet illiterate; most professors find high school grads unprepared for college or work; and on and on (not to mention the engagement issues mentioned above.) To be sure, there are many causes for this: poverty, declining budgets, lack of technology in schools, etc. And I know that as long as these are the measures we use to gauge our success (test scores, college acceptance, etc.) real change will be hard to come by. But there is a strong argument building that we have reached "peak education" as we continue to do try to do the wrong thing right and get "wronger" in the process.

9. **And finally, we know that learning that sticks is usually learned informally, that explicit knowledge accounts for very little of our success in most professions**. Instead, tacit knowledge and the ability to learn from others, in the moment, both face to face and in networks is vastly more important and effective. Most of what we teach kids we teach them "just in case" they may need it some day, primarily because the system is still operating on the belief that explicit knowledge is scarce. With the Web, it's not. Those that will flourish in the modern world will be those who can learn what they need to learn "just in time" from a variety of networks and sources and experiences.

What other elephants can you name?

Acknowledging these "elephants" should be unsettling. Our current practice and systems in school don't hew to these truths very much if at all, and that should leave us wondering about how effective our schools actually are at preparing our kids for their real lives. But we can do something about it. We can acknowledge the gaps between what we know to be true about learning and what we do in our classrooms, and be willing to at the very least engage in conversations aimed at bridging those gaps for the sake of our kids. And if we put these unsettling truths front and center in our conversations about education, we might just truly transform the learning experience in schools.