TIME GOES BY...EVERYTHING LOOKS THE SAME

Authors:
Dennis Littky

Most of us went to school. The path is similar for the majority of those in the U.S. and abroad: grade school, high school, some university-level course work. Some of us even go on to complete graduate school. If you are reading this article, you probably finished high school and college—you likely even completed an advanced degree from a respected university. School was okay for you. It got you a degree and a profession. It did what it was supposed to do.

So why would someone want to change schools? In the U.S., we've all accepted a formulaic method of education, which generally includes a self-contained classroom in elementary school, the 52-minute classes in high school, and the big lecture halls in college. We've accepted that school is a certain way, and if you can't make it in that environment, it's your own fault. Dropouts aren't noticeable or even worthy of notice. Yet no one ever would admit something could be wrong with the design.

The System Doesn't Work

The dropouts are now very noticeable. In fact, high school dropout rates in the United States run as high as 70 percent in some cities, averaging out at 50 percent. Dropouts are made to feel stupid, and the media and educators just say these predominantly low-income students don't have the skills, motivation, or family support to succeed.

The college situation is even worse. Of the low-income students who don't drop out of high school and graduate with good enough grades to actually go to college, only 11 percent will make it through the process. Eighty-nine percent of first-generation college-going students in the U.S. drop out. Could 89 percent of the students be that wrong? And how come no one knows these statistics? Again, educators and policy makers say it is the student's fault, and that the students have come to college unprepared. Some even say low-income students of color shouldn't go to college.

We've blamed the media, the parents, and the kids themselves. Perhaps it's time to start blaming the design of the education process—the design of the institution of education itself.

Schools were originally designed to be like factories, to put content into students' heads in a rote and repeatable fashion. But those intending to participate in modern society need critical-thinking skills and need to be able to solve problems, collaborate, communicate, and use advanced technology. These are new skills, abilities, and methods. But schools are still just trying to confer old content to students. No wonder businesses are saying students are not preparing to work in the real world.

There is all kinds of data telling us K–12 education is not working and college is working only for the middle class—and not really for them either (there is an average 50 percent dropout rate across colleges in the U.S.). We are less and less able to compete in the global economy. Our college-completion rate has gone from No. 1 to No. 15 in the world in the past 10 years. For the most part, the innovations and the changes in education consist of small tweaks around the edges, trying to make an outdated system a little better. Some high-school educators are trying 104-minute classes (double periods), a slightly more interesting curriculum, and an online course here and there. States have developed charter-school laws and an online course here and there. States have developed charter-school laws giving educators the right to start new schools, and most of these schools are smaller and more personal than those in the system they left. I appreciate that low-income parents have a choice in picking a school for their children, yet even charter schools maintain the outdated design of education and repeat the same old pedagogy.

I also appreciate that everyone is trying. President Obama putting big money into a few states. The Gates Foundation realizes the problem, and after 10 years of working on the K–12 system, they are expanding to college. But it is not enough. The ideas that are being supported are not different enough; they don't go far enough to make the necessary
In 1995 my colleague Elliot Washor—a successful and innovative educator—and I had the opportunity to think about the following question: “If we didn’t know what high schools looked like, what would we design to educate our youth?” We knew we wouldn’t have 52-minute classes and ask the students to memorize a certain body of facts. We knew we would try to personalize education, take advantage of intrinsic motivation in the youth, and create a design that would match our 21st-century world. And we would engage our students in real work that was important to them.

Working at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, Elliot and I set up a small nonprofit, Big Picture Learning. Working with the commissioner of education in Rhode Island, we had the opportunity to start a high school, The Met, as a model of what the schools of the future should look like. We started with a simple concept: one student at a time and what’s best for kids?

The school was broken down into advisories, with a teacher and a group of students who spent four years together. Each adviser, parent, and student developed an individual learning plan. The school had broad goals of reading, writing, applying math, empirical reasoning, communication, and personal qualities. Every student would have his or her own way of reaching those goals with high standards. The teacher—also acting as adviser—would help the student identify his or her interests and then find a mentor and workplace to help make the learning real.

Students start in ninth grade at an internship two days a week that is matched to their interests. They spend the other three days back on campus, using their interest and their work at the internship to learn additional skills.

Consider these real-world examples. Anita is a girl from a low-income family on the south side of Providence whose mother is mentally disabled and is constantly moving from apartment to apartment because of lack of funds. She developed a math formula to help figure out the profit in a boutique she is working in. Or take Jimmy: His uncle was shot and killed at a bar, and the assailant was never apprehended. Jimmy wrote a law to have security cameras in all bars and took it through to the legislature—as a ninth grader. All the projects have real meaning to the students. The students had to work with adults, and they had to present their work publicly.

Four years after creating our school, the first 50 students were ready to graduate. Our first graduating class had a dropout rate of 3 percent, compared with the 41 percent dropout rate in the city. There was a 97 percent attendance at The Met versus 77 percent in the city. Ninety percent of our students went off to college. These students were all low-income, first-generation students (50 percent were Hispanic, 30 percent African American, 15 percent white, and 5 percent other).

On top of that good news, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had been watching The Met’s progress. After a visit to see for themselves, they asked Big Picture to set up 12 schools like The Met around the country. Three years later, after successful starts in Oakland, Detroit, San Diego, and other large cities, we were awarded a grant to start 40 more schools. Ten years later there are 70 of our schools in the U.S., as well as 22 in the Netherlands and Australia. The results have continued to be excellent. The schools throughout the U.S. average 95 percent graduation and 90 percent attendance rates, all in cities where dropout and attendance fall below 50 percent.

We continue to observe our students after they graduate from high school. The students from Big Picture Schools are holding their own, with college completion rates that are much better than those of other students with similar demographics. But when we looked more broadly and observed the 89 percent college dropout rate in the U.S. among first-generation students, we knew something had to be done at the college level.

In 2010 students need more than a high school degree to be successful. They need technical training and skills, and they need to become greater thinkers and doers. Big Picture Learning has decided to turn college education on its head, just as we did with high school education. In the fall of 2009, in partnership with Roger Williams University and with support from the Lumina Foundation and the Nellie Mae Foundation, we started a college.

The college is being built around student interests, real work, and a personalized curriculum. The goals of Roger Williams remain the same; the methods of engaging students are different. The work and learning is positioned as “life to text” rather than “text to life.” One of our students is working with a design/architecture firm, doing drawings, presenting at conferences, working in the field, and helping with actual building all while being mentored by brilliant designers in the field. Back at campus, seminars are set up to broaden the students’ thinking through readings, discussions, and writing. Each of the students is at a different internship and brings with him or her that specific knowledge to the liberal arts seminars. Our program—“College Unbound”—is a three-year, year-round program.

It will be an interesting next few years as we see if colleges are willing to redesign their curricula to meet the needs of their first-generation students who are failing. Slowly, colleges have started inquiring about our model and how it can be applied at their university. Time will tell. We don’t have to accept schools as we knew them and as we experienced them. I encourage you to ask tough questions and help change education.

Author

Dennis Littky is co-founder and co-director of The Big Picture Company, The Met School, and College Unbound. He is nationally known for his extensive work in secondary education in urban, suburban and rural settings, spanning more than 40 years. Littky holds a double Ph.D. in psychology and education from the University of Michigan. His work as a principal...
at Thayer Junior/Senior High School in Winchester, NH, was featured in an NBC movie, “A Town Torn Apart”, based on the book, *Doc: The Story of Dennis Littky and His Fight for a Better School*. He also published a book, in collaboration with Samantha Grabelle, on The Big Picture’s philosophy, *The Big Picture: Education is Everyone’s Business* (ASCD, September 2004). Just recently, Littky founded, a new college program, College Unbound in partnership with Roger Williams University, which challenges the way colleges work with first generation students.

Footnotes

DOI: http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1806491.1806500

Figures

The Met high school is the model of what schools in the future should look like.

©2010 ACM 1072-5220/10/0700 $10.00

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

The Digital Library is published by the Association for Computing Machinery.
Copyright © 2010 ACM, Inc.

It's 2017, and things seem to stay the same. Web design has become predictable. You would most likely see the same design over, and over again, maybe with a little variation in color and icons. One could argue that the web design of old days was atrocious aesthetics-wise but it was, in all ways, imaginative and experimental. Nowadays, it feels like you're browsing through websites that look strangely similar to the ones you've visited before. When did web design become so boring? It's hard to be unique, and it's understandable but sticking to the same type of design can spell bad for you as time goes by. As a designer, you would want your creativity to be sharper, thus the process of experimenting with designs, building them up from scratch can help. So, everything's going wrong. Let's say that you lose your job, break up with your partner and have a huge bill come through the mail. The next day your car breaks down, you get a cold and your friends all seem to be distancing themselves from you at the same time. We notice when a collection of things go wrong at the same time, but if any SINGLE one of those things happened in isolation we wouldn't really notice or mind that much. If we JUST got a cold, but everything else was fine then we'd just treat it as a normal part of everyday life. Well, start by just letting go. If you're upset because your partner has moved on and you want them back but they're already happy with someone else, just let it go. Realize that you have to let it go, because there's nothing to hold onto. The problem with using the same tools every time you can is that you don't have enough arguments to make a choice because you have nothing to compare to and is limiting your knowledge." The solution is "to keep looking for the best possible choice, even if we aren't very familiar with it". This includes using a computer language with which one is unfamiliar. He noted that the product RubyMotion enables developers to "wrap" unknown computer languages in a familiar computer language and thus avoid having to learn them.