

PART 1

RETHINK EVERYTHING: Ask 'WHY?'

The brain likes to nibble; it does not like paradigm shifts.

Eric Jensen

Whenever something brand new comes along – something that isn't just a “new and improved” version of what we are familiar with – our first impulse is to reject it. That is probably some sort of a survival mechanism that a neuroscientist could easily explain, but that's not important right now. What I do know is that our human brain *does* like to daydream to *imagine*. My purpose in writing this book is not to try to reform education – or even to change the way you do things in your classroom. It is, however, to ask you to take some time to reflect on the question “Why?” (If possible try to avoid that default answer: “Because we've always done it that way!”)

As you read on, try to calm that logical, inner voice that will be cataloguing all the reasons why none of this will work for you and let yourself imagine an easier, more fun, more *natural* way to think about learning and teaching.

In 1997 I attended a workshop in my district and saw a poster entitled ***Citizens of the 21st Century***.¹ Since we were already hearing speculation about what “Y2K” would mean – especially in the area of technology – the poster caught my eye and I haven't been able to get it out of my head since.² The poster was meant to remind us that we were teaching a new generation of children who would be taking us into the new millennium:

¹ 1996: *Program Quality Review Program Training*: Arcadia Unified School District, Arcadia, California

² Explain Y2K

CITIZENS OF THE 21ST CENTURY:

Problem Solvers

Cooperative Workers

Information Managers

Flexible Thinkers

Multilingual

Effective Questioners

That poster didn't originate with educators. Rather, it came from leaders in business and industry who *were* looking forward and anticipating the sort of work force that will be in demand in the 21st Century.³

Soon after that workshop, my own life took a couple of unexpected turns and in less than two years I found myself retired from classroom teaching and living on the Oregon coast with lots of time on my hands to think. From my new vantage point *outside* the classroom walls, I began to question how well our school *were* preparing students for success in the 21st Century. Sadly, what I saw was a system that was shifting to turning out competent test-takers – ignoring much of what neuroscience was discovered about the human brain and how it learns.

You are preparing your children for your past, not for their future.

Neale Donald Walshe

If we accept that statement to be true, the next question that begs to be answered is **“How can we know what they will need to know when we have no idea what the future will bring?”**

³ Find poster – research source ... Forbes?

That question brings us back to the poster. The workshop was part of our *California Program Quality Review*. That was over 20 years ago, and I now realize that the work that had started in the 1990's seems to have been put on hold. Not only have educators been focused on increasing test scores for the past 20 years, they have also needed to adjust to fact that since technology has revolutionized the world, education must now catch up and enter the 21st Century with everybody else.

What that means in terms of how we think about education is profound. We can no longer assume that the schools we remember with such fondness will serve our children very well as they enter adulthood. What *will* serve them is competence in the six areas listed on the poster I saw in 1997:

- If we want our kids to be problem solvers, we need to give them age-appropriate real-life problems to solve. We need to be flexible enough in our own thinking that our students will feel safe venturing “outside the box.”
- If we want them to be cooperative workers, they need to be spending at least as much time working on projects they care about with their peers as they do preparing to take standardized tests where working together would be called cheating.
- If we want them to be able to navigate the increasingly overwhelming onslaught of information available to them, we must get real with them (and ourselves) about their online choices and behavior – as well as our own.
- If we accept that *flexible thinking* will be a characteristic of the successful citizen of the 21st century, then we need to think about our own rigidity and resistance to change
- Being multi-lingual can mean much more than simply being able to speak other languages. It can mean understanding how language and culture can divide or connect people, and being willing to have honest conversations across boundaries.
- Finally, we must believe, and communicate to our students, that asking the right question is at least as important as arriving at the right answer.

What if we were to build our schools around those six qualities and attributes. What we saw them as our desired outcomes rather than high scores on tests What if rather than following a rigid, linear curriculum or lesson plan, we took time to observe our students and notice their level of competency in each of those six areas? What if we could let go of the need to “keep score” and started to encourage students to practice the skills that they are really going to need in the 21st Century?

In 1893 the *Committee of Ten*” believed that they were creating a system that would prepare their (male) students for leadership in the 20th Century. A railroad now linked the East to the West and with Stanford University established on the West Coast they felt the need to standardize education. The President had called it their “manifest destiny” to settle the country “from sea to shining sea” – and wealthy landowners assumed that the future of the country was in their hands.

Looking back with over 100 years of hindsight, we may not share their values, but perhaps we can let go of some of our anxiety about the future and share their enthusiasm as we consider creating a system that will prepare ALL of *our* students for success in the 21st Century ... and even beyond.

*In times of change, learners inherit the Earth,
while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world
that no longer exists.*

Eric Hoffer