LIBERATING LEARNING

Educational Change as Social Movement

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Chapter Two. A Glimpse into the Future of Learning [edited]

. . . .In stark contrast with the fast-paced spread and growth of digital technologies for learning, the basic grammar of schooling has remained practically stable for over a century. Some leading education thinkers are now suggesting that the future of learning will flourish outside of schools, while schools might continue to exist mostly to provide custody and care for children and youth. Others have suggested that if schools fail to nurture deep learning and durable learning skills among our younger generations, they will be substituted by different, more effective and agile institutions. Whether or not most schools and school systems around the world will succeed at becoming vibrant places for learning remains an open question.

While facing many odds, I am convinced that the pursuit of renewed public education systems that embrace and build movements to liberate learning is worth our best efforts. In this chapter, I will offer a glimpse into liberating learning, as can be observed in a handful of classrooms, schools and school systems around the world.

Liberating Learning in Classrooms

There are reasons for optimism. Throughout the history of compulsory schooling, and to this date, examples can be found of classrooms, schools, and school systems organized around liberating learning for young people and adults alike. Some contemporary examples offer us glimpses into the future of learning. Some of these examples come from the Global South, a region often overlooked by scholars of educational change. Others come from developed economies.

. . . .Walk into a place where liberating learning is regular practice and you will find students working individually or in small groups on problems or questions that matter to them, over extended periods of time. You will see each student working at their own pace and in the space of their choice – in one of many work stations set up in a classroom, in hallways, or outdoors. No assigned sitting, no rows of individual chairs and desks, very little – if any – time spent on adult lectures for the whole group. Some kids may work on tables, others sit or lie on their bellies on a carpet to read, others on

rocking chairs, cushiony seats, couches, a foyer in the hallway, yet others stand up next to each other while discussing a text, a personal note, or figuring out how an artefact of interest works.

You will hear a constant buzz made up of the multiple conversations taking place, most of them centered around the work students are doing, the questions or dilemmas they're facing, or the strategies they're using to make sense of their topics of study. While there is a constant flow of people and conversation, everyone seems highly focused on their work. In fact, if you come to a place like this as an external observer, the people in the group will likely not notice you're there until you come closer to see their work and hear what they're saying. You will also notice that students seem unaware of time passing – they may be surprised when the time for recess or the end of the day comes. They continue their work during recess, at home, or on weekends. Students there work harder, but they don't seem to mind. They actually seem to *want* to work harder.

Approach any of the students in these classrooms and ask them about their work, and they will be able to articulate, on the spot and with remarkable clarity, what they are doing and why, what they are learning and how, why it matters, to what extent they've gained mastery of what they're learning, what are key areas where they need to get better at, and their plans to do just that. They may show you with pride some of the work they've produced, pointing to parts of it as they explain their learning. Ask them what they think about this way of working and you will hear genuine signs of excitement and self-efficacy.

Look for some examples of student work and learning tools being used in the classroom and you will start to see the varied ways in which students connect with the outside world as part of their regular activities. If the school you visit is equipped with internet and devices to access it, you may see blogs, podcasts or videos produced by the students to make their learning visible to wider audiences. Many students may use an internet browser to search for information or digital tools they need to make sense of the questions they're tackling. You may find evidence of exchange with experts in the fields that students are learning about – either because the experts visit the school, meeting with the class virtually to provide feedback, or because students visit them in their workplace to gain exposure to their expert practice.

Now pay attention to the color of the skin, the gender identity, or the physical mobility of students in the group. You may be surprised – for it is unusual –that the quality and degree of challenge of

the work being done and the treatment from other peers and adults remains equally demanding and respectful no matter what the student looks like.

Follow one or more adults in the room and observe their interactions with students. Teachers move across the multiple learning spaces to engage in one-on-one or small group conversation with students. They constantly ask students to articulate what they are doing and why, offering specific feedback to their work. They listen attentively to what students have to say and remain alert to evidence of what they have learned, how they are thinking about the problem at hand, to what extent they are transferring knowledge and skills learned previously to tackle a new situation, or what misconceptions, mistakes, or dilemmas remain unresolved. Only after careful listening does they offer feedback, ask a carefully crafted question to help students find their own answers, or suggest possible next steps. Adults make themselves available to respond when a student has a question or feel stuck, and intervene when conflict or another problem arises in a group of students working together. Whole group activities are brief and agile, used to make announcements for the class or to share insights or questions from individual students and small groups with the larger group. In a group like this, you will see spontaneous signs of affection between teachers and students – a tap on the shoulder, a smile, a joke, a big laugh.

In places like this, adults are constantly learning in public – perhaps by saying "I don't know" when they don't have an answer to a question asked by a student; by learning about a topic or how to use a digital learning tool from a student who masters it; by making mistakes in public, acknowledging and correcting them; by expressing genuine surprise and excitement when a student comes up with a good solution or idea that they had not thought about; by acknowledging confusion and going through it in public; by expressing aloud what and how they're thinking about and through a puzzling question or problem; or by publicly opening their most hard-wired assumptions to scrutiny.

Liberating Learning in Schools

If you happen to be in one of those unlikely sites where liberating learning is embraced by and nurtured in the whole school on a regular basis, shadow a teacher for a day. You will become aware of the multiple occasions on which she interacts – formally and informally – with her colleagues and the principal to talk about and strategize around pedagogy and student learning. It won't take long to

notice that, just as students, teachers have multiple opportunities to experience liberating learning in their everyday work. Teacher and principal learning is a constant and highly visible activity in these schools. Adults in the school may be offered the time and space to explore topics or learn to use tools that they're not too familiar with. They will also have allocated time to meet regularly with their colleagues to work in teams, either by grade or in cross-panel fashion – teachers from multiple grades in elementary schools, or from multiple departments in intermediate or secondary school. In these teams, they co-plan and co-design common learning activities, analyze student work, assess whether and how deeply students are learning, examine pedagogical practices in light of these assessments, and continuously devise, test and refine their strategies to enhance and deepen student learning. As with students, if you ask them about their work, teachers will be able to explain with eloquence what their students are doing and why, to what extent and how deeply they're learning, how they know this, what is working and what isn't in their current practice, and what are their plans to get better. And it won't take much effort to perceive a genuine sense of excitement, pride and hope in their words and expressions.

Visit the school for a few days in a row and you will notice the active role parents play in the learning of their children. Parent meetings are mostly focused on student learning – for example, to discuss what students are expected to know and be able to do as a result of going to the school, to look at evidence of student learning, or to clarify why the work students are doing is so different from the schooling experience of parents. Administrative and logistical announcements use up only a minimal part of the agenda. You will realize that the notes sent home by the teachers request parents to discuss to with their kids about a topic they're exploring way more often than they remind them to complete menial tasks.

Liberating Learning in Districts

Now, if you're lucky enough to be in one of those very rare places where an entire school district is organized around powerful learning for students and adults alike, you will see that a vision for deep student learning is embedded in every aspect of the district's work. This vision is used as the basic point of reference to orient the work of the system, to review existing initiatives, let go of those not aligned with the core vision, and develop and select strategies to liberate learning across the system. District leaders and staff will be able to articulate with specificity and precision what powerful learning looks like in action, what are key observable features of the pedagogical practices that

liberate learning, and how their most prominent activities as district leaders connect to improved teacher practice and deeper student learning. You will identify a wide range of supports and conditions that the districts offer to the adults in the system to experience liberating learning themselves and change their practice to liberate learning among their students.

You may find material expressions of the system's commitment to powerful learning in the architecture and organization of learning spaces across the district.

You will see district leaders and staff acting as 'lead learners', that is, as leaders who create the conditions for everyone to learn while learning alongside them about what works and what doesn't. You will see them engaged in joint work – with their colleagues, with school leaders and educators alike – to examine, try out, test, and continuously refine pedagogical practice in classrooms. You will hear constant messages encouraging teachers and students to try and do things differently, to fail, learn from failure, and get better over time. People across the system will tell you that their school and district are places where they feel safe to experiment, make mistakes, and constantly get better as a result.

And you will see district leaders learning in public. You might see them learning from students in student-led workshops or tutoring sessions to learn how to leverage digital devices and resources to enhance learning. They participate in learning walks to constantly refine their skill to observe classroom practice and offer teachers useful feedback focused on improving and deepening the learning of students and adults alike. And they meet periodically with school leaders to share and develop solutions to their problems of practice.

You will notice that in systems like these, leadership and power are distributed and remarkably flat: Teachers and school leaders have direct access to a senior leader in the central office, and system leaders intentionally interact with actors in the system through dialogue, open communication, and co-development of solutions. Across the board, you will see signs of system coherence, or the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). In your conversations with people across the system, all the way from classrooms to the central office, you will notice consistent narratives in their talk about the core priorities of the district, the key strategies to pursue those priorities, and the specific ways in which their everyday work connects to the priorities and strategies of the system.

Liberating Learning Across an Entire District[1]

The Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) in Ontario is a system where learning – of students and adults alike – is visible at every layer of the district's activities. Let's take a look, layer by layer, from the inside out. In some of the schools leading the way on pedagogical innovation and learning environments in this district, you can see elementary school kids moving freely within and between 3 or 4 rooms over extended blocks of time, working individually or in small groups on tasks of their choice – either selected from a variety of tasks carefully designed by a team of teachers or co-created between students and teachers – constantly presenting and refining their ideas to their peers and the adults in the room. Tasks and questions students embark on vary widely, and include things like:

a) *exploring how to re-establish beauty in the world around them, fleshing out essential and divergent views of beauty, designing and implementing plans to re-establish beauty in their school and community.*

b) *grade 10 students interviewing and interacting with grade 1 students, asking for pictures, videos of themselves and their families, what they like, to create narratives capturing who these young people are.*

c) *grade 2 students engaging in all stages of creating a school garden, from reaching agreement and planning around what to grow, what to do with the produce, pros and cons of each alternative; creating the garden; and maintaining it throughout the year.*

d) *Students creating video games with the support and feedback of an expert video game designer.*

e) *Students creating a totem that represents them individually, with presentation and assistance from a First Nations elder.*

In these schools, there is a learning function in almost every aspect of the school building. Learning commons offer space for study and collaboration, with ample space to walk around, movable furniture, projectors that students can access at any time and tablets and other digital devices for borrowing. There is Wi-fi across the entire buildings. Students are allowed to and often bring in and work with their personal devices. Floors in the hallways have different sections painted in different colours indicating which areas are for work and which are for circulation. There are green walls through the building for students to record videos to which they can later add moving or still backgrounds. There are small glass-covered holes in the walls here and there that reveal the internal structure of the building, with bar codes that can be scanned to find information about that part of the building structure and how it functions. Colourful student-made art is displayed across the hallways, in the form of large murals on the walls, painted panels encrusted on the ceilings, or posted on large boards.

Teacher and principal learning is a constant and highly visible activity in these schools and across the district. Teachers meet often to work in teams, either by grade or in cross-panel fashion to co-plan and co-design common learning activities, examine student work to identify depth of understanding of the topics at hand and degree of development of core skills such as collaboration and citizenship, identify areas of improvement, and constantly refine their practice. But the visibility of teacher learning is not confined to teacher collaboration during prep- and planning time. It carries over to classrooms. There are schools where learning alongside or directly from students has become part of the regular activities of teachers, either to explore ideas or questions students come up with which teachers themselves don't know the answers to, or to learn to use new digital devices or resources teachers are not familiar with.

Principals and district administrators also learn in public. They attend student-led workshops or tutoring sessions to learn how to leverage digital devices and resources to enhance their own learning and improve their pedagogical and leadership practice; they participate in learning walks to constantly refine their skill to observe classroom practice, and offer teachers useful feedback focused on improving their practice and deepening student learning. Every month, all principals attend a Catholic Learning Leaders meeting, together with district coordinators and superintendents, to share and develop solutions to their problems of practice; and, as reported by teachers, principals also model learning in their meetings with staff – as, an elementary school principal said: "in staff meetings the principal is only one of the voices on the table. It is very common that teacher voice subsides that of the principal."

OCSB has managed to literally put deep learning front and centre of its efforts. A graphic that places 6 deep learning competencies (Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Character and Citizenship) at the centre, surrounded by the four elements of Pedagogical Practices, Learning Partnerships, Learning Environments, and Leveraging Digital has been designed and distributed across the entire school district, and can be found everywhere from the board room in the central office to school and classroom walls. But far beyond the graphic, the most remarkable accomplishment of OCSB lies in its purposeful creation of an organizational culture where deep learning lives in the minds and hearts of growing numbers of people in all 83 schools in the system, and all the way from classroom to the central office.

The district leadership at OCSB operates as a remarkably flat structure, which allows robust two-way communication between the central office and schools. A coherence committee has been created to maintain a constant flow of communication and collaboration between all the units that make up the district, avoid the duplication of efforts, and to work on defining with increasing clarity how the key actions of the central office are supporting the development and spread of pedagogies that liberate learning across the system.

Liberating Learning Across Thousands of Schools

Now, imagine visiting a nation or a state where liberating learning has spread to thousands of schools, across entire educational systems. What you will find is examples of lively and strong movements of pedagogical change where everyone, all the way from students and teachers to state and national leaders maintain a relentless focus on fostering learner-centred pedagogies, with a special emphasis of reaching the most remote and historically marginalized communities across the territory. Talk to actors across the system and they will be able to articulate, with remarkable clarity and simplicity, what are the core features of their pedagogical practice, why they decided to adopt it, and the profound effect it has had in their own lives and the lives of their students. You will witness the strong presence that parents and the larger community have in the everyday lives of the schools

involved. This might be evident in the presence of parents during public demonstrations where students showcase what and how they're learning; in the participation of parents as mentors in their areas of expertise; or in the creation of community development projects designed and run with the active participation of students. Across the entire system, you will hear expressions of pride and hope coming from the shared feeling that those involved, all the way from children to teachers to system leaders, are learning better and feel part of a cause larger than themselves. Furthermore, ask about trends in student outcomes and you will likely find that schools involved in movements of this kind are improving student outcomes at a faster pace than schools serving more privileged students. This will be the case despite the fact that improving test-scores is barely present in the purposes and the everyday work of movement participants.

If you talk to system leaders involved in these movements, you will discover that their discourse and leadership practice are remarkably different from that of a bureaucrat in a conventional public education system. They are very familiar with – if not living examples of – the pedagogies for liberating learning that they seek to nurture and spread. They know the bureaucracy well and have learned how to leverage its infrastructure to facilitate the widespread dissemination of the new pedagogies. They are finding ways to change the institutional logic of the system where they operate, leaving behind vertical relationships of authority and control over schools, and nurturing instead horizontal relationships of dialogue, co-learning, and mutual influence between central leadership and schools. They spend a lot of time in schools and classrooms, not to evaluate teachers and principals, but to assess whether and how the strategy of widespread pedagogical change is working (or not) and to identify what needs to be changed, refined, or discarded for a more effective strategy.

There are examples of movements of this type, although not so much in the places where the educational change field has been looking – in so called developed economies such as Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Japan, Singapore, or the United States. The most powerful examples of pedagogical change movements reaching thousands of schools come from the Global South –the regions of the world that share a history of colonialism, often called "developing countries" or the "Third World.". . . .

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[1] Some of these school networks include High Tech High, NuVu, Big Picture Schools, New Tech Network International Network for Public Schools, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, Envision Education, EdVisions Schools, and EL Schools.