What is a Quality Education? What does it Look Like?

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Abstract

This paper presents the views of four authors who attempted to answer the two seminal questions: 1) What is a quality education? And 2) What does it look like? Rather than serve as a research paper, however, this is written as an opinion piece intended to generate discussion and dialogue on this topic. Does systems thinking and human performance technology represent appropriate mechanisms for helping refine our current k-12 education system? Our authors sound off on this topic.

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What is a Quality Education? What does it Look Like?

First and foremost, like any quality instruction, this is subjective to the individual learner. What are their values? What are their goals? How does education compliment the world view of a student’s parents, culture, local community, and society? In essence, the systems view of thinking and developing instruction would start with, “what are the intended outcomes and accomplishments we want the learner to be able to do and achieve at the end of instruction?” and then work backwards (backward design) from there.

Right now, most schools focus the majority of instructional time and assessment on learning academic content and skills. This, however, is not consistent with Joe Harless’ (1998) view of how one develops a high quality performance technology system or educational experience. The reason why is if you ask parents there are much higher level accomplishments we want from our children. Same could be said for employers and society in general.

What do I mean? Well, we certainly want our kids to be smart, get good grades, score well on tests, and go to a good college so that one day they can become economically independent and contribute back to society. This is a traditional middle class worldview that is, however, not necessarily shared by everyone; more on that in a moment.

My dissertation topic studied the school that Joe Harless (1998) helped develop based on his performance technology principles and ABCD model (Accomplishment Based Curriculum Design). When he posed this question to his local community what he got back was a strong work ethic that embraced respect, hard work, honesty, integrity, team work, communication, and was centered almost entirely on being an accomplished citizen in a free thinking society. In other words the ideal school (they were going to build) needed to focus on helping students build these work ethic schools and the rest of the facets traditionally associated with success would follow – good grades, a good job, a quality of life that is paved out through hard work, working well with others, and being a good citizen. The emphasis was not on doing well in school or going to college. It was simultaneously at a much more basic and higher level than that. School was just a means to a greater end.

Right now in the headlines (as of October 23rd, 2013) we are reeling from the recent deaths of two teachers from two separate incidents of school violence across the country. Bullying is associated with one of them it would appear and the other we did not know yet what happened. Bullying and suicide has also been in the news, which suggest many of our students have current needs that extend way beyond traditional academically driven and focused content. These students need more than drill and practice and discussion around math and English and arguably more emphasis placed on getting along with one another, values, and learning how to be a healthy human being in a very complex world. Being an adolescent further complicates and increases the degree of difficult (and necessity to address these issues) exponentially.

The school that was created by Harless and his colleagues was the Central Educational Center (CEC) that focused on career and technical education (CTE) because career-oriented instruction provided the performance and accomplishment-based qualities Harless and the local stakeholders wanted out of their children’s education – clear, project-based outcomes that occur in a team environment, which requires lots of communication, teamwork, and rather complex academic skills that were applied in actual performance settings. In other words, work-ethic grades
(assigned by technical colleges for decades) were as important, if not more, than the traditional academic grades and were also hands-on so that students could see how their learning was being applied immediately.

Back to the question of individual learning, however, this CTE school is a charter school and therefore a school of choice, which is an essential ingredient to ensuring learner motivation is present. Parents and students choose to attend this school and therefore overall performance is much higher because the students choose to be there and choose to take the classes they are taking.

What does this mean for the traditional curriculum? The movement to common-core standards is a large step in the right direction as it is focused more on the applied rather than just factual-based and procedural knowledge. What I think needs to occur, however, is that the social development and health (emotional and physical) of students needs to move to the front and center of the traditional curriculum. I call them “here-and-now” needs where students are being taught basic psychology, communication and teamwork is made the highest priority, and work ethic is one of the fundamental core subject areas that integrate with the traditional big four of math, language arts, science, and social studies.

Let me give you a personal example. My son has been bullied most of his school experience and it has indelibly shaped his personality (in a negative way) and has caused me to revisit my own personal values and ability as a father and care-giver. Have I raised him correctly? Have I done something wrong? How come the schools he goes to do not pay more attention to this? After careful examination, I hold myself accountable for not teaching him the verbal and social skills necessary to not be one of the kids that bullies target. As a hard working professor, I live on a daily basis the type of work-alcoholic tendencies necessary to be successful in my chosen career. He has tried to emulate this. But at the same time, ironically, the very values that I personify and hold dearest personally, professionally, and culturally are the prominent reasons why he is being bullied. You see my son is doing exactly what we have asked him to do and raised him to be – smart, quiet, hardworking, humble, and nice to people. In other words, we have taught him to be what society views as a traditional “geek.” When you really think about it if people like my son are eschewed by society as a “target” or “weak” when I view this as being a good, accomplished citizen then we have a serious problem.

In my opinion, this is exactly why our schools must place much more time and emphasis on teaching (really demanding) our students practice every day the basics of good communication, teamwork, work ethic, and, essentially, good citizenry. Those who bully need to be identified and helped – bullies reflect deep insecurities that compel them to cause pain to others in attempt to make themselves feel better. This is empowering for them and the wake they leave is harmful in every way to everyone they are around. When my son experienced bullying at one of our school district’s top performing schools, I communicated with his teachers and principals, that bullying should not be tolerated and must be addressed by dealing directly with the bullies and also ensuring that all students do not tolerate it. Back to my son who I hope can forgive me for this later on – he had two girls mercilessly harassing him both in class and in the hallways. My son is a pretty big guy and does very well in his classes but the verbal abuse and even physical bumping and tripping was starting to get to him. “Dad I hate school.” “Dad I feel horrible about myself.” “Dad, why bother working hard because I’m stupid.” Eventually, after the beginning of his second semester as a freshman in high school he finally confided in me about what was going on. I immediately turned to his teachers and principals and we collectively rectified the situation – neither of the bullies is still at his school as it was clear to everyone that they were not a good fit for this school culture. His confidence and school performance did a 360 turn and he is now the happy, healthy kid we want most of all as parents.

With this as a context, let me attempt to answer this question from multiple perspectives – as educator, as parent, and as a citizen.

As an Educator
A quality education means that each individual student is learning and improving based on his/her starting point. In other words, the emphasis on norm-referencing needs to take a back-seat to individual improvement and a trajectory towards individualized instruction and competency. Emphasizing comparisons amongst peers creates winners and losers and those that score below the norm usually are demoralized and lose further interest and motivation for school.

Systems thinking and the ADDIE model suggest that schools must establish long-term outcomes that serve as clear, measurable goals for education. This type of thinking works for small scale training sessions, whole educational programs, organizations, and performance in general. The current emphasis on content standards that drive public education does not necessarily reflect the overall expectations of parents, employers, and society in general. The good news is that systems thinking allows for local communities and their primary stakeholders to decide this. It must be a process that every local community must go through.
Content specific standards are also not well aligned with traditional learning theory (e.g. Gagne’s Theory of Learning) that posits gaining a learner’s attention and establishing and maintaining motivation towards the subject matter and content being introduced are the most critical first steps to learning. Project-based learning such as what Harless did with career and technical education reflects to a higher degree what accomplishment or performance-based education is all about — learner’s will be able to complete some kind of task (not take a test) that has been identified by society as critical for both the student’s and community’s future. Following this pathway would allow for educators to teach the fundamental core areas in a myriad of applied settings, which most often will be work environments or specific problems faced by society that need to be solved. Content and the skills they reflect are really a means to an end, which is performing some kind of meaningful skill.

I often mention to colleagues that the “nerd” syndrome in our society is a testament to a major failure of our education system. The joke is that some of our best and brightest and hardest working students that have high GPAs and standardized test scores have little to no “common sense” or ability to do “meaningful” things that help make them competent individuals in the “real-world.” Pretty ironic that our schools cannot teach bright, hardworking, and motivated students a curricula and skills that are “practical” and “meaningful” in their day-to-day lives. Another issue of course is that knowledge and intellectual capital in today’s k-12 schools are often looked down upon in favor of sports and other “cooler” activities.

As a Parent

I have three primary goals for my children: 1) To be happy in their lives, 2) To be successful in achieving their goals, and 3) To be productive and competent members of society. Much of their life lessons and establishment of individual values occur at home but at the same time they spend many of their waking hours in school. As a developmental psychologist, it is self-evident that the impact a school climate has on youth, their emerging identities, and overall emotional health while going to school (from k-12 or 5-19 years of age) is a pretty major variable.

To limit the conversation to only traditional academic content and not pay more attention to a school’s organizational culture and the values they represent and the impact this culture has on everyone involved – administrators, teachers, students, and parents – is leaving things primarily up to chance, which rarely works out well, is sustainable, or consistent. I want my children to be happy, successful in achieving their goals, and be competent and productive. In other words I want them to have a strong work ethic, be able to work well with others, and have the ability to take care of themselves, establish clear goals, and have the know-how and discipline to attain them.

Bullying and a sole emphasis on checking-off a litany of courses in the main core academic areas are not highly aligned with these goals. In the work place, if someone pushed you, bullied you, hit you, harassed you systematically, they would be fired, arrested, etc. This kind of behavior, along with quitting school, losing interest in school, and performing poorly over a long-term period of time also is not acceptable. As an instructional technologist, any student who fails reflects a failure of the system.

As a parent, I want to be on the same page with my children’s educators that we collectively are helping to raise hardworking, respectful, and well-educated kids that work well with others, are learning things at school that are both applicable in their here-and-now real world context and also on the path towards college. I care less about them being straight-A students and high test scorers and more for their happiness, positive attitude, and having the skills necessary to be highly competent, productive members of society.

As a US Citizen and American

The statistics are pretty compelling that high school drop-outs are much more likely to be incarcerated, be unemployed or underemployed, use drugs or alcohol at higher rates, etc. than those who graduate with a high school degree. In other words, the cost to society for every individual that drops out is extremely high both for the student and the community in which they live. Basic systems thinking would tell you that any organization or system that has a high failure rate is not working properly and has many opportunities for improvement. Studies on drop-outs show that it is a gradual and long-term disillusionment with the curriculum, formal schooling, etc. that is clear for everyone to see. While the solutions are not easily identifiable as the factors behind drop-outs vary, the evidence is pretty clear that public education is not working for a lot of our school-aged youth, their families, and local communities.

As a manager of such a system the first question we must ask and have answered is why is the student disillusioned and what can be done to help change that? On the university level, a growing trend is to hire adjunct professors whose sole job is to provide direct support to all of a department’s students and pay special, hands-on, and personal attention to those who are struggling and showing signs of dropping out. With the growing use of data
and big data to analyze trends and provide analytics and informatics that helps organizations identify and respond to such “red-flag” indicators as student drop-outs and at-risk students, the time has come for us to begin addressing these issues and others such as emotional distress, mental health issues, etc. that are non-curricular but very important for the well-being of our nation’s students.

As a citizen I want hardworking, respectful, and competent high school graduates who have the 21st century skills necessary to be happy, successful, and competent citizens of our global economy. 21st century skills must incorporate previously considered “soft skills” such as self-regulation, work-ethic, teamwork, communication, etc. Current problems such as high dropout rates, bullying, a curriculum that is too academic, and an under-emphasis on the wonderful qualities of just being “nice” and “smart” need to be addressed.

Systems thinking would help identify and establish clear systemic pathways for making this happen. As many have said, the paradigm of public education must shift based on the needs of the community schools serve.

Kenneth Prest, Ph.D. - Fishery biologist, ecologist, environmental engineer, inventor, information management consultant, and father.

What is a Quality Education?

It depends…on how we frame the concept of “education” in our minds; what we want from the education we’ve envisioned; and how we define the nature of the gap between what we want and what we’ve got.

In my thinking, “education” is not an “end” but a “means.” It is the process of recursively producing the selves that we need to be to live in the environment—of people, things (natural and cultural), and information—within which we find ourselves at the time.

Education is the forward-looking, life-spanning process of continually developing and redeveloping knowledges and skills—specific and contextual; concrete and abstract; individual and social—that enable us to adaptively make connections, facilitate transactions, and build and sustain relationships that matter. Whatever our social roles or circumstances, education is about becoming intentionally informed, enabled, and, ultimately, deeply engaged within the ever-evolving complex adaptive systems we call life.

In a systems context, educational enterprises would create educational experiences that were intentionally and tightly coupled in the world. Both enterprise and experience would be defined by a focus on: (1) creating real long-term value for stakeholders—the customer, supplier, and community beneficiaries of the education; (2) an alignment of operational ends and means; (3) an integration of interests of members working to create the educational experience on the inside with the interests of stakeholders benefiting from that experience on the outside; and (4) feedback loops to enable both the enterprise and the experience to be readily adjusted as knowledge, skills, tools, applications, and people change.

As framed and focused by vision, alignment, integration of interests, and feedback, a “quality education” would emerge as the enterprise defines itself: To what ends at what organizational performance “level” by what means under what circumstances?

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<tr>
<th>I. To what ends at what organizational performance “level”…?</th>
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<tr>
<td>A. Society (Unity defined by city, county, state, or nation political boundary or by world physically constrained)</td>
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<td>B. Community (Unity emerging from integration of individuals, families, and organizations with a shared history)</td>
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<td>C. Organization (Unity differentiated as government, business, or civil society organization)</td>
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<td>D. Family (Unity of individuals living together)</td>
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<td>E. Individual</td>
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<th>II. By what means…?</th>
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<td>A. Public Education (Focus on laying the foundation of performance knowledges and skills—specific and contextual; concrete and abstract; individual and social—that are common to all organizations because they are core to the life processes of making connections, facilitating transactions, building relationships that matter among people, things, and information in minds, markets, and world.)</td>
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<td>B. Private Education (Focus on building on top of the public education foundation by customizing or supplementing the performance knowledges and skills for a specified result in context of an intended outcome—whether in government, business, or civil society.)</td>
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III. Under what circumstances…?

A. Education Levels (Reflect incremental learning process “starting points” and “value-adding segments” through which we educate ourselves—individually and collectively; formally and informally—subject by subject, over a lifetime in a continuous flow.)
   1. Elementary
   2. Intermediate
   3. Secondary
   4. Post-secondary
   5. Adult

B. Learning Frames—(Frame all learning in terms of (1) the life process outcomes of connections, transactions, and relationships that matter among people, things, and information that are brought forth in language that, in turn, emerges from applying technology innovatively, managing information purposefully, communicating effectively, and living and working with others collaboratively—in short, by “information management”—and (2) the fields of endeavor that make the life process outcomes meaningful.)
   1. Life process outcomes (Connections, transactions, and relationships that matter within minds, markets, and world.)
   2. Fields of endeavor (Subject matter areas across the arts and sciences through which life processes meaningfully operate.)

C. Learning Perspectives (Emphasize both theory and practice recursively engaged through research to perpetuate self-developing, knowing-doing abilities across fields of endeavor, life processes, and lifetimes.)
   1. Experiential (Research)
   2. Conceptual (Theory)
   3. Applied (Practice)

D. Performance Areas (Align learning with the way the individual works in a nested and networked world—concurrently focused inwardly on the task in context of the value created in relationships that matter to the team and focused outwardly on the team in context of the value created in relationships that matter to stakeholders.)
   1. Personal knowledges, skills, and abilities (Enable the individual to create value in knowing, deciding, and doing things related to the task.)
   2. Interpersonal knowledges, skills, and abilities (Enable the individual to create value through knowing, deciding, and doing things related to the team.)

In sum, “education” is effective action in an ever-changing world. Within a global society of increasingly diverse, interacting individuals and organizations, our ability to produce, adapt, and sustain ourselves is a function of our ability to act effectively in creating valued outcomes in relationships that matter to families, organizations, and communities within which we are engaged.

In my mind, a “quality education” emerges as educational enterprises catalyze a life-long educational experience through which we continually learn how to learn to make connections, to facilitate transactions, and to build and sustain the relationships that matter regardless of the environment within which we find ourselves.

So, “What is a Quality Education?” My simple answer is: The essential tool we—as families, organizations, and communities—intentionally deploy in order to thrive, not just survive, in a pluralistic, rapidly-changing, nested and networked world.

Beth Rajan Sockman, Ph.D. – Professor, instructional technologist, mother, and educational reformer.

1) What is a Quality Education?

A quality education can only be completely described within the time period addressed as it is determined by the beliefs and values held within society. It is dependent on what we know about learning at any particular time, further characterized by the tools available to support the learning environment.

Since society needs drive what is defined as quality education, education should provide the foundation so that individual persons can survive and thrive within the given economy. Being a product of the United States, thriving means that that education should provide the access to skills and processes so that the learners have tools to the betterment of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776). Quality ensures that very learner has access to be engaged in stimulating environment for that time.
At this particular time period, most agree that students learn in different ways and at different times that we need to prepare learners to thrive within a democracy. A quality education will emotionally and academically support learners within the learning environment. To function within a democracy, there needs to be a respect for differing values and perspectives along with supportive learning in communication, creativity and problem solving skills within the domains of language, numeracy, science, arts, and civilization development.

2) What does it Look Like?

A quality education embraces what we know about learning at this time, and uses the tools available to create the learning environment to best support the process. This process begins with wise educators that value the uniquely wonderful learning differences within each individual. This acknowledgement of differences leads to the need for learner customization.

The educator support and tool support engages learners within the domains of language, numeracy, science, arts, and civilization development, which are further divided into the basic skills, problem solving and creativity. This requires individual learners to learn basic skills at a pace and means which is best for them. We know that people learn in different ways and different times, but too often education’s structures as if all people learn at the same pace and at the same time. If students learn these basic skills in different ways, then various technology including computers, manipulative, and pacing resources should be used to guide the process.

Within the content domains there should be significant tasks that require learners to use their skill knowledge to creatively solve problems. These problem-solving tasks are often cross disciplinary and require collaboration with others. Throughout the process, individuals should engage in group deliberations so that they learn to communicate about the domains, seeking to understand other perspectives and refining their own perspective. Krishnamurti said, “the very instruction of these subjects is to bring about a change in your (student’s) mind” (1974 Pg. 126). Student subject or domain learning should not just be for the regurgitation of information, but so that learners can see the world differently. Ultimately, learners should be making the world a better place for that upholds the equality of humanity.

Frank Duffy, Ph.D. – Professor, scholar, community leader, father, and educational innovator.

What is a Quality Education?

For me....a quality education is one that prepares children to live a successful life.

A quality education is one that identifies the unique needs, interests, and abilities of each child and then helps each child learn what needs to be learned by providing him or her with learning opportunities that are aligned with his or her needs, interests, and abilities.

To Discuss This Topic Further

To discuss this topic further please go to http://systemicchange.wordpress.com/ and a discussion area has been created for this paper and presentation at the 2013 AECT Conference.

References