

Reflections on education

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June 24, 2011

I had the occasion not long ago to read Daniel Pink's "A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future" (Penguin Books, 2005) and Tony Wagner's "The Global Achievement Gap" (Basic Books, 2008). What follows are Pink's thesis, Wagner's compliment, and implications for K-12 education.

Pink's Thesis

Today's leaders, those with long-sought after "left-brain" skills such as lawyers who craft contracts, computer types who crack codes, and MBAs who crunch numbers will not dominate the work world to come. Instead, says Pink, the future belongs to those with "right-brain" skills - creators, artists, empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers.

In short, we are moving from the logical, linear, computer-based "Information Age" to a new "Conceptual Age" in our economy and society where creativity, innovation, empathy, and big picture thinking will be that which is rewarded and recognized.

Pink suggests that the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) has replaced the more traditional MBA (Master of Business Administration) as the choice of America's leading businesses. Why?

It comes down to abundance: 88 percent of U.S. households own mobile phones for mass communication. There are more cars produced than buyers. Self-storage is a \$17 billion industry just to put away our things. Despite recession, Americans still possess lots of stuff and the left-brain industry that accounts for it is increasingly overseas.

It comes down to Asia: Millions of computer savvy Chinese, Indians, Filipinos, and others can now craft the contracts, crank the codes, and crunch the numbers and at a salary of \$15,000 per year putting them in the upper middle class of their respective countries.

Given that the left-brain work of Americans is now being exported, and given that American schools have tended to facilitate the left-brain over the right with their emphasis on standards and testing, where then must K-12 education go to remain atop of the business world?

Says Pink, our students and workers, while retaining their "left-brain" abilities must begin to engage their "right-brain".

Wagner's Compliment

While elementary and secondary educators can certainly figure out how to better engage the "right-brain" through Pink's "six senses," Tony Wagner offers language a bit more familiar.

Wagner maintains that standards-based testing and content mastery, given Pink's "abundance, Asia, and automation" triad is "hopelessly outdated." "What I have seen in some of our best public schools over the past decade is that while Johnny and Juan and Leticia are learning how to read, at least at a basic level, they are not learning how to think or care about what they read; nor are they learning to clearly communicate ideas orally and in writing.

They memorize names and dates in history, but they cannot explain the larger significance of historical events.

And they may be learning how to add, subtract, and multiply, but they have no understanding of how to think about numbers. Not knowing how to interpret statistics or gauge probability, many students cannot make sense of graphs and charts they see every day in the newspaper.

They are required to memorize (and usually forget) a wide range of scientific facts, but very few know how to apply the scientific method."

Insists Wagner, "Effective communication, curiosity, and critical thinking skills...are much more than just the traditional desirable outcomes of a liberal arts education. They are essential competencies and habits of mind for life in the 21st century."

Implications for K-12 Education

Change the mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum we offer to reflect less content; not less rigor. (Content is abundant and readily available on the Internet, while rigor is less evident.) Says Wagner: "Rigor is not about more content; it's not just about more complex content. It's about deepening the quality of analysis."

Teach students how to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate that which they read on the internet. This is truly a seminar of writing, discussing, meaning making, and ethics. Says Wagner: "Rigor is about discerning among the avalanche of content that's coming at us all the time - and increasingly so in the Age of Google."

Allow for greater emphasis on "right-brain" assignments in schools which call on creative, innovative, and highly motivated forms of work. The curriculum must leave room for this as it nurtures both sides of the brain. Says Wagner: "Rigor also results from hands-on learning and having to show what you know."

Prompt and reward curiosity among students in all disciplines to prevent boredom and dropout.

Says Wagner: "Students with an information-age mindset expect education to emphasize the learning process more than a collection of knowledge. Schools need to engage students with passion."

Provide for both oral and written communication in all classes on a routine basis. To be truly educated, one has to communicate meaning about what's being learned in any subject. Meaning making is not best done through multiple choice, even as thoughtful multiple choice is still a needed and viable option for content mastery.

Change state assessments to reflect more "excellence" in what and how they assess student progress. It is more expensive to assess a research paper, a lengthy essay, an oral presentation, a student portfolio, or real-world problem solving through team actions and effective technology use. It is also more instructive and more of what will be needed in this century.

It may take "a whole new mind" to close the global achievement gap given right-brain rising. But, will those in charge amend curriculum, amend assessments and reinvigorate teaching?

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