



Education research is showing that students are intergenerational change agents.

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Why Helping Humanity Should Be Core to Learning

Students themselves are agents of change.

There are enormous push and pull forces emerging in education and something is going to have to give. The push force is the fact that traditional schooling is boring, and the more you go up the grade levels, the more boring it becomes. By the time you reach grades 9 or 10 only about a third of all students are engaged. The pull forces include the allure of explosive technology having a life of its own. This tension — between the dullness of schooling and the unbridled expansion of technology — makes the status quo untenable.

There is a way to escape this, one that I explored in report form with Maria Langworthy in “[A Rich Seam: How New Pedagogies Find Deep Learning](#)” which was published by Pearson in 2014. We’ve now extended this enquiry with over 500 schools in seven countries, that we are working with as part of our New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) initiative.*

We are helping clusters and networks of schools implement deep learning outcomes that we define as the 6Cs:

- Character education
- Citizenship
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Creativity
- Critical thinking

Moreover, as in “The Rich Seam,” we are working with school and system partners to establish the conditions and strategies at the local and state level to support NPDL in action. It is in the early stages, but we are discovering that students themselves are agents of change. They are catalysts for changing teaching and learning; they are also partners in changing the school and forces for change in society itself. In a very real sense, they are intergenerational change agents.

For example, our partner schools in Uruguay were given simple robotic kits with instructions via YouTube. The kits sat on the shelf until one day the students, which are 10 years old, asked the teacher if they could start to use them.

Quickly, they created the following: One group studied World War II and built a device that could detect land mines; another group solved the problem of birds eating vegetables in the garden by building a simple robot that vibrated when birds came near. A third group took up the issue that lightning killed five people on a beach, so they built a device that could detect imminent lightning and then sound an alarm.

One 10-year-old observed, “I am supposed to help humanity, so I decided to start in my own neighborhood.”

As another example, a school in Australia built its learning around what they called “enigma missions,” which are complex problems or issues to be solved. One group studied autism because they knew relatives who were autistic; another took up the issue of homelessness, and still another tackled DNA, which one boy observed is an enigma in itself. The students were incredibly engaged and came up with great insights. One pupil who examined homelessness and drew some important conclusions said, “I feel so complete,” not in the sense of being finished, but having brought something valuable to fruition.

We have vastly underestimated what students can do and what they value. We now say that one of the core learning goals for students is to help humanity. Children naturally take to this not because they are altruistic, but because they see this as a basic human motivator — they want to do it for their own good as well as for others. They learn a strong set of values and skills that will serve them for life. Teachers play a new role: helping students focus, giving them scope to engage with each other, examining learning designs, assessing results and deriving lessons for improving learning.

We are in the first phase, and it is very clear that the ‘seam’ is being opened and has the potential to be very rich indeed.

We have a feeling that from here on, these developments will move very fast for the very simple reason that it unleashes the individual and collective spirit for deep learning that gives all learners a role in helping humanity, thereby helping themselves. We will have more to report soon.

*Thanks to fellow NPDL directors Joanne Quinn and Joanne McEachen and all of our school partners.

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