

EDUCATION TO IMPROVE THE WORLD: FROM ACADEMICS TO “AGENCY”

The Emerging Alternative for K-12 Education

By Marc Prensky

WHAT WE OFFER OUR KIDS AS “EDUCATION” IN THE WORLD TODAY, — particularly K-12 (primary and secondary) education — is wrong for the future. A new kind of education is coming, and the map is already clear.

Our current education is wrong *not* because we haven’t added enough technology, or because we haven’t added enough so-called “21st century skills,” or because we don’t offer it to everyone equally, or even because we haven’t tried hard to incrementally improve it.

Our current K-12 education is wrong for the future **because it has — and we have — the wrong ends in mind.** We — the entire world — have an outdated ide about what an education should be for in the third millennium. **Up until now, education has been about improving individuals. What education should be about in the future is improving the world** — and having individuals improve in that process.

Why New Ends?

For centuries, formal education — delivered for millennia through apprenticeship and now universally delivered through the “academic model” of schools, classrooms, teaching, courses, and grades — has been about individual improvement and achievement. The assumption is that if each individual, on his or her own, learns the “basics” and makes the most progress he or she can, then, when their education is finished, they will be ready to go out and lead better individual lives, and, hopefully (but by no means certainly) improve the world.

The ends of “Improving individuals” may once have been the right ones for the world and for our kids. But they are no longer the right ends for the future.

In the future, the ends of education — the reason we educate our young — have to be to improve the world. Not indirectly — some day when the kids are adults — but improving the world **immediately, while our kids are being educated, as an immediate and direct result of that process.**

Why is it time for this big switch in the ends of education? First, because the world needs it — we can no longer afford to waste one-fourth of our human potential to improve the world we live in waiting for our kids to grow up. And second, because it is now possible, at scale. Today young people can improve the world — at almost no incremental cost, in ways that absolutely weren’t possible before — if we are willing to make it happen. The connection between academic learning success and actually improving the world is tenuous at best. The connection between real-world accomplishment as students, and improving the world as adults, is clear.

Kids Adding Value

Today, at a time when the world needs all the help it can get, we literally waste — i.e. throw away — the potential and value-adding power of, literally, one-fourth of all humans — i.e. those of school age, roughly 5-20. The waste is perhaps greatest in the kids’ younger years, because we have somehow decided that these young human beings have *no value at all to add to the world* until we “teach” them.”

But the young today are no longer buying this specious argument, and neither should we.

Today’s kids, around the world, know they are empowered and have “agency” to act — they can add value to the world right now. And they are, in more and more cases, going out and doing it, either on their own or — when they are lucky — supported by scattered adults and programs.

Primary school kids are improving their neighborhoods. 10 and 11 year olds are designing public amenities such as parks, and doing government work such as environmental reports and cryptography. 13-year-olds are 3D printing prosthetic hands (using instructions already on the internet), and using the Web to find other kids who need them. High school kids are installing and upgrading networks, testing water quality, restoring historic ships and other artifacts. Kids of all ages and genders are starting companies and NGO’s to solve world problems. What is currently being done by kids is already amazing (see, for example, globalempoweredkids.org), but their potential has hardly been tapped.

We are at the start of something completely new and positive — school-age kids able to improve the world in useful, measurable, and non-exploitive ways. What we now need — above all — from our education is to encourage this further.

Why Now?

We have entered a time when huge technological and societal changes are happening at an exponentially accelerating rate — a time when much of what used to take decades now happens, literally, in nanoseconds, and a world in which attitudes, fixed for generations, are changing (to privacy, for example) almost overnight. Although there are many unknowns on which we should be keeping a watchful eye, this new environment and context has already begun to empower our kids in ways never before seen in the world. Both *technology* and *context* are quickly extending our young people’s minds and capabilities, giving them powers that are completely new. Consider all the capabilities — from video, to calculation, to search, to translation, to super-computing, to geolocation — already in many kids’ pockets, and now imagine the power that will be there tomorrow. And the greatest empowerment of all comes from the rapidly growing *connectivity* of our young people — connecting with each other, with all the world’s knowledge, and with everyone on the planet. We now have the first truly horizontal, globally connected generation. We must learn to educate these young people for their future world.

We are still learning about how our kids’ “plastic” brains are reacting to their new environment. But we know for sure that the young people whom it is now our task to educate can usefully be thought of as “Extended minds, all networked together,” with whom we have to explore jointly. They are no longer the young people we were i.e. “kids who need to be taught by adults before they can act.” They are people who have the power — while they are still kids and with proper guidance — to vastly improve the world: personally, locally and globally.

A New Mindset

That is precisely what their education should be about — empowering them further, applying their individual and collective passion to making the world a better place. Our education should have as its ends “world-improvement,” and “making each young person into a good, effective and world-improving adult.”

We already have the tools we need to do this, but we lack the mindset. Education, everywhere in the world, is stuck in an “academic mindset” of “learn first, act in the world later.” This academic mindset has completely taken over education in the past several hundred years. I call it the “Academic” model, or for short “Academics.”

Today, the Academic “learn first, accomplish later” model is ubiquitous in the world — albeit with a wide range of quality and success. It is, in fact the *only* education we have. Our current education systems ask of our newly empowered kids pretty much the same things we have been asking kids for the last hundred years: to learn content and skills in a narrow, proscribed range of subjects, to achieve academically and get good grades, to succeed in the system (i.e. to “graduate”) and — even in this new age of networks — to “do their own work” and achieve individually.

Our “Academic” K-12 education is based, universally, on a narrow “basic” curriculum of math, English (or local language), science and social studies. The acronym for these subjects — “MESS” — is apt. “Academic” K-12 education is based, fundamentally, on the academic premise of “learn ‘The MESS’ first, so you can accomplish later.” Just about everything that today goes on under the name of education reform, is about doing the Academic model, and “the MESS” better — by serving more underserved kids, by adding new types of schools (e.g. charters), by adding so-called “21st century skills,” by adding STEM and the arts, or by adding more and more technology.

The Academic model no longer works — even if we incrementally improve it

But “an improved Academic education” is not what today's and tomorrow's empowered kids want or need — The “Academic” model no longer fits the world in which these kids live. These already empowered kids need an education that empowers them further. They need, want and deserve an education that enables them to develop the “agency” to make the world a better place. They need an education that moves from the academic model of “learn now so you can accomplish later” to a new model of “accomplish now, and learn as you do.” They need an education that allows them, while they are still students, to be continuously accomplishing projects that improve the world, locally and globally. They need a “different” K-12 education, based on their newly acquired empowerment and agency. And, fortunately, that education is now beginning to emerge.

An “Agency-Based” Model of Education — Better for Kids, Better for Us

What should we be asking — though our education — of our future, empowered kids? We should be asking them to become educated through *actually improving the world, in whatever way inspires them, by fully utilizing and actualizing their unique passions and skills*, and not, any longer, through though learning knowledge and skills that might possibly be used later. We should ask them not to improve the world someday, when they become adults, but now, while they are still in school, and still students. We should ask them to complete an

education based on their personal “applied passions,” and not on a universal “MESS.”

Improving their personal, local and global worlds is precisely what today’s young people *want to do* and what they *can to do* with their newly enhanced power and connectivity. It is certainly what the world needs. Imagine if any country declared that education, for the future, would be *only* about improving that country — utilizing student power to do so in myriad ways (and having students improve through that process.) How much would that country improve?

Today we don’t, anywhere, have our kids “improve the world” as their education. But we could, and should do this in the future. That is what kids want, it is what the world needs, and that is what our K-12 education should be. Our kids need, and deserve, an “Agency-based” education.

An “Apprenticeship to the World”

“Agency-based” education is, in a sense, a third millennium update of the apprenticeship model that served as education for thousands of years, before the academic model took over. “Agency” is about students apprenticing to the world — using all their new powers and connectivity to become people who can accomplish effectively — before leaving school.

It is not just our young people’s passion that we care about, but their “applied passion.” Agency-Based education lets kids apply their passion — what ever it may be — both to solving world problems and to becoming the people they want to be and that we want them to be — i.e. good, effective and world-improving, in their own areas of interest. Agency-Based education allows kids to identify their areas of interest early, to truly understand their unique passions and capabilities, and to connect those interests, capabilities and passions to the kinds of real-world projects that stretch them to reach their full potential as human beings.

The Agency-Based model is a far better education, both for tomorrow’s kids, and for us. It is better for our kids because it offers them independence, applied passion, a strong sense of accomplishment, along with a strong sense of how they fit into the future world. It is far better for us because it liberates huge amounts of unused potential — the potential of our students — to improve our communities and our planet.

Never Before Feasible

Agency-Based education was not feasible in the past — our kids were too powerless and isolated. But in the new era of “empowered kids” and “extended minds all networked together” — The Agency-Based model is the best —and perhaps the only — way to take our education forward. The “Academic” model

— the old, individual, “learn before you accomplish” model of education — is dying. We must give birth to something new.

As yet, the “Agency-Based” model is not fully implemented anywhere, but it is definitely coming. We are beginning to see the elements of Agency-Based education emerging, at all levels, in scattered places and pockets around the globe. Education through real-world projects is already happening — in professional schools like medicine and business, in the workplace, in colleges, and recently in K-12 schools, both private and public. The world is currently entering a transition period from the “Academic” model to the “Agency-Based” model, with both side-by-side for a time. But “Academic education” is the past. “Agency-Based” education, with real-world achievement — is the future of education. And as we all know the future is arriving at an accelerated rate.

New Ends, New Means, New Support

To summarize, the big differentiators between today’s “Academic” education and tomorrow’s “Agency-Based” education are these:

- **NEW ENDS.** The “ends” of today’s “Academic” education are individual achievement, typically expressed as grades, scores and rankings. The ends of tomorrow’s “Agency-Based” education are improving the world, and in so doing, becoming good, effective, world-improving people. Imagine, again, if any country, large or small, declared “henceforth our education will not be for improving individuals but for improving our country, in as many ways as possible.” Do you think we would see a difference in a year? Over a decade?
- **NEW MEANS:** The means of “Academic” education are academic courses, completed successfully in some number and sequence. The means of “Agency-Based” are real-world projects, completed effectively in teams, local and global, in ways that lead to increased ability to accomplish effectively and to utilize every student’s “applied passion.” With so many problems and opportunities in our world, such projects will never be in short supply. We must learn to recognize all these problems and to make them addressable by our students.
- **NEW SUPPORT:** “Academic” education consists of carefully constructed and proscribed curricula — mostly MESS-based — that provide knowledge and skills to be absorbed now to be used later. “Agency-Based” education has a far wider, almost entirely skills-based curriculum in a “support as needed” role. The “Agency-Based” “curriculum” consists of all the component skills that make up the needed-by-all abilities of Effective Thinking, Effective Action, Effective Relationships, and Effective Accomplishment. In the Agency-Based model these abilities are acquired

not in sequence, but as needed to accomplish projects, from peers, teachers, curated applications and the Internet.

The Real-World Projects

The key element of the Agency-Based model is identifying real-world problems and creating and connecting student teams to solve them, with adult (e.g. teacher) coaching and guidance. This requires that there be a constant supply of real-world projects at every level and in a wide variety of areas. Finding such projects and connecting student teams to them may once have been a daunting or impossible task, but it is fast becoming trivial with today’s technology. We will soon see a global database of real-world projects already completed by students — in government, environment, technology, peer-to-peer help, historical preservation, etc. — along with a place for individuals, teachers, companies and government to input project ideas. The kinds of mechanisms that would allow companies, governments and others to propose problems for students to solve already exist – they would need only to be repurposed.

The world is replete with problems to be solved — we need only to create a methodology for identifying and addressing them. Because “Problem-Based Learning” (PBL) has now been around for some time and many are familiar with it, we are already well down that path, making the next step of moving from the “fake, made-up problems” of today to “real-world problems” far easier. Once the databases and methodologies are in place, we will need a mechanism to help students identify their passions and strengths, and a dedicated “recommendation engine” — something we are already good at creating — to connect students to projects and roles of appropriate scope and level, to help them advance.

The Benefits

Imagine if kids, after leaving school, entered a college or job recruiter’s office not as today, i.e. with a transcript of grades and (at best) a vague idea of what they would like to accomplish, but with, rather, with an actual resume of accomplishments, with scores of projects completed over a K-12 career, in multiple areas and roles, and a clear idea of the kinds of roles and projects that suited them best and that excited their passion. This alone would be a reason to change to the Agency-Based model. But we can add to that the benefits of thousands or millions of projects actually completed during the K-12 years — projects that would be adding, potentially, billions of dollars of value to the world.

How to Get There — Building the Detailed Road Map(s)

The broad outline and map of an Agency-Based education is clear, but the details still need to be worked out and adapted to the highly diverse individual situations around the world. “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty...” wrote

St. Augustine many years ago. Today, the essentials are making “education” about “improving the world through real-world accomplishment.” Individual school systems, schools and teachers will need to figure out how to do “real-world accomplishment” in ways that work for their local students and communities — bearing in mind, as they do, that their students and the world are now all connected. So we can all help each other in this process — using our connectivity and the global databases and other tools already emerging. And in our evolution to the Agency-Based model we must be sure to utilize, and rely on, our young people to help us. Education, in our new age, is no longer just a top-down process, but rather a far stronger combination of top-down and bottom-up.

The move to Agency-Based education has already begun in scattered schools, classrooms, in after school programs and individual and team student projects around the world — although not yet in any massive or unified way. To make that happen, what is needed now more than anything, is a change of mindset on the part of parents, educators, politicians and other adults. What is required is a realization that the “academic” model — despite the fact that it got all of us adults to the place we are — is no longer right for our kids and for the future. The time has come for “Agency-Based” education. Those who maintain their allegiance to the “academic” model, and who devote their efforts to improving it incrementally — whether through technology, 21st century skills, STEM, STEAM or anything else beside real-world projects — do so in vain, and are bound, long term, to fail.

Our Education Must Support Our Students — and The Future

We have a new generation of empowered kids in the world, and the only trend worth supporting is for them to become further empowered in the future. Our choice is either to accelerate this trend, and guide it in the positive directions most of us want (including the kids) or to stand in its way, and continue to tweak an expiring the “academic” model. The map to “Agency-Based” education is already clear — NEW ENDS of world improvement, NEW MEANS of real-world accomplishment, and a NEW, SUPPORTING CURRICULUM of Effective Thinking, Effective Action, Effective Relationships, and Effective Accomplishment — with young people acquiring those abilities not *before* doing, but *through doing* real-world projects.

Any school or class that now offers *only* an “academic” education is failing its students, no matter how many bells and whistles — from iPads, to Mandarin, to critical thinking seminars — it may be adding to its program. Schools are already moving to “mixed Academic-Agency plans, with academics in the morning and Real-world projects in the afternoon. Schools with long-standing “service projects” are adding more of them and granting them more importance. Former “capstone” projects are becoming the actual “building stones” of an education.

The era of the “academic” model of education — “learn first, accomplish later” — is ending. It may have been useful in the past, but “learning before doing” no longer works, and is no longer the education our kids want and need. Today more and more people — both kids and adults — are realizing we must move to something new.

What I’ve tried to do here is to give that “something new” a name: “Agency-Based.” It’s now time to make it happen, universally.

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