

# Doing What We Believe

## When we don't, our kids pay the price

By Marc Prensky

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**A** conversation I recently had on the phone with an educational vendor has caused me much reflection. The exchange went something like this:

**Me:** “What you are doing is really old fashioned, and is not right for the kids.”

**Him:** I totally agree with you, but that’s what our clients [publishers and school systems] request.”

**Me:** “So why do you do something you don’t believe in?”  
[stunned silence]

Later feedback from another person on the call: “You really put him in an awkward position.”

Not really — *he put himself* in an awkward position. It’s the same awkward position that far too many of us in education have put ourselves in. We don’t like to think about it or talk about it. And yes, it’s awkward when someone points it out.

Far too many of us in education — not just vendors, but also teachers, administrators, ministers and secretaries of education — are, daily, doing things we know in our heads and hearts are wrong for our kids — and *not* doing things we know in our hearts to be right for them. We do this for a whole variety of rationalized reasons: “It’s what the system asks of me.” “It’s what they pay me for.” “It’s what the parents want.” “I have to earn a living,” “I’m a team player.” “I’ll get fired if I don’t.” “I’m following x’s (or x country’s) example.” “It’s what’s politically feasible,” etc., etc.

This has to stop.

I accept that there are differences of opinion and alternative beliefs. And I accept that people may have to, at times, temporarily compromise some of their beliefs for various reasons. And at least this person was hired to change things.

But what I don't get — and won't accept — is that so many people, doing a task so crucial to the world (i.e. educating our kids), compromise their deep-felt beliefs on a daily basis and continually do something to our kids they know is not helpful, while claiming they can't (or don't have time to do, or they're just a sub-contractor) do what they know in their hearts is right. And, worse, that this behavior is considered OK.

We all know that unnecessary tests are sometimes ordered in medicine just to “cover behinds” and medications are occasionally proscribed just to placate parents. But at least there everybody agrees that going against one's professional beliefs is wrong. Nobody expects, or wants, medical professionals to go on doing something they believe is not right just because someone else says they should, or because it provides them employment.

But we accept this in education.

This is partly, I believe, because education is so top-down — judgment is too often reserved only for those who run the show. I can't count the number of teachers who have told me “I know it's not what my kids need, but have to teach what they tell me to.” Some of our curricula are even required to be taught word-for-word. Our teachers either don't have, or have not been made to feel they have, any agency at all with regard to what they teach.

But relying on top-down is only good if the people at the top get it right. And those at the top of our educational systems are, today, too often getting it wrong. This is mainly, I believe, because we are now doing education in a wholly new world context, one that all the “pre-Internet world” experience of these people has not prepared them for. The education that that we have been giving kids for the last several centuries — that once worked — is no longer effective at preparing kids for their future in our new post-Internet, technology-laden world.

Most of us – kids and adults — know and believe this at some level. Yet we refuse to abandon the past. We continue to “plaster on” fixes to our old education — more measurement, more data collection, more analysis, more testing, higher standards — in the mistaken belief that we are doing something useful for our kids.

We are not.

Better statistics, higher grades, and higher PISA scores may bring some short-term benefits to some kids. But the people they really help are politicians, who use them to convince taxpayers they are doing the right thing. We should not be fooled. Teaching the old stuff “better” — i.e. the wrong stuff — does NOT help any kid long-term. The current painful process of implementing the “Common Core standards” — consisting almost entirely of outdated skills — will in the long run, help kids little if at all.

Education today teaches a woefully narrow, outdated curriculum. Yes, advanced learning about science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is useful for some of our kids, as are advanced language skills, and many skills in the arts. But here's a (partial) list of some of the things we *don't* teach systematically today in most places: Creative Thinking, Problem-Solving, Inquiry Skills, Argument Skills, Design Thinking, Systems Thinking, Judgment, Aesthetics, Habits of mind, Self-knowledge, The "Habits of Highly Effective People," Mindset,, Resilience, "Grit", Entrepreneurship, Innovation, Improvisation, Breaking barriers, Project Management, Communication & collaboration in families, in communities, at work and online, Relationship-building, Empathy, Ethics, Politics, Citizenship, Negotiation, Conflict Resolution.

We actually know how to teach many of these important things, but we choose not to. The skills we do teach, as Professor Yong Zhao of the University of Oregon comments wisely, are neither "common" (i.e. the same for everyone), nor are they "core" (in the sense of being the most important ones.)

So what's an alternative?

Up till now there really hasn't been one. But I am preparing a new curriculum that, I believe, will better serve all the kids in the world. It is based on four new top-level subjects: **Effective Thinking, Effective Action, Effective Relationships** and **Effective Accomplishment** (with technology as an underlying foundation.) For more on this new approach see <http://bit.ly/1g9nv2n> .

Improving our education to fit our new world is a huge undertaking, and we will probably never all agree on the best path. But if we continue doing things we *know* are not right, we can be sure we'll never get there at all.

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, and consultant in the field of education. He is the author of five books: From Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom (Corwin, 2012) Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning (Corwin, 2010), Don't Bother Me, Mom, I'm Learning (Paragon House, 2006), Digital Game-Based Learning (McGraw Hill, 2001) and Brain Gain: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom (Palgrave MacMillan 2012). "FUTURE-cation" is his upcoming sixth book (from Corwin), and he is also writing a book about a new curriculum for the world.*

*Marc is the founder of **The FUTURE-cation Institute**, a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting Future-oriented and Accomplishment-Based Education, and a better worldwide curriculum. Marc is also the co-founder of Spree Learning Games, a new "curricular games" company, and is the founder and CEO of Games2train, whose clients include IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the L.A. and Florida Virtual Schools.*

*Marc holds an MBA from Harvard and a Masters in Teaching from Yale. His writings can be found at [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com) . Contact Marc at [marcprensky@gmail.com](mailto:marcprensky@gmail.com) .*