

Vaulting the Cusp?

The future of Ed Tech

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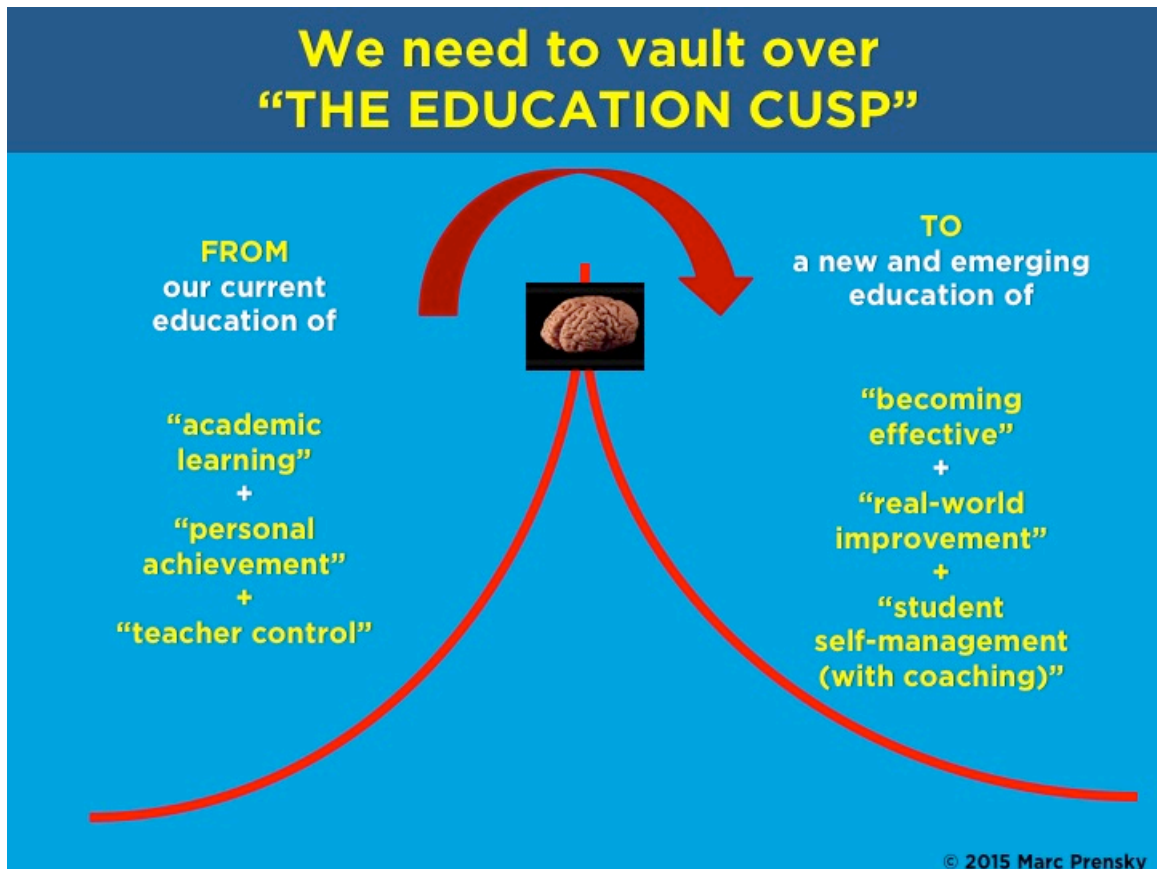
Ed tech is exploding all over Silicon Valley. Incubators like GSV labs and 500 Startups, funders like New Schools Venture Fund and many venture capital firms are eagerly searching for companies and technologies to invest in. New ventures are raising, literally, hundreds of millions of dollars. Money is flowing into Ed Tech like never before.

Is this good?

Many of education reformers outside of Silicon valley say no. "The people in the Valley think technology will solve everything," says one observer. "It won't. There's a human side to education that won't go away."

Both sides, tech and non-tech, do have a role in education. But here's what I see happening.

To describe the current state of the world's education I've been using the metaphor of an "education cusp," (see diagram) with one side representing the academic and achievement based education of today, and the other representing the world-improving, accomplishment-based education of tomorrow --- with a very high barrier between one side to the other that we all need to "vault" over. Today I see far too many in education -- and in ed tech in particular --- whose work serves only to marginally improve the education on the old side of the cusp. Many do see the other side, but can't go there, and find themselves "impaled" on the cusp's sharp inflection point.



Almost all the ed tech startups I see are intended to act, and add value, only on the "old" side of the cusp. Their aim is to make education, as most people today know and accept it, more efficient, more effective, better at data collection and feedback, easier for teachers to provide, rather than to provide a "new" education. This makes sense, as the investors are looking to make money, and the market most of the startups are targeting is current education, teachers and schools. Some good products have, and will, come out of this.

But here's the problem. Innovation on the old side of the cusp is happening so furiously, that just as something begins to catch on, other products emerge that are better, go farther, are more Common Core aligned, etc. Teachers are reluctant to keep trying product after new product. It is extremely hard for anyone to get a lasting foothold. Even the biggest big players, like Rupert Murdoch and Joel Klein with Amplify, are stumbling. The failure rate among ed tech startups is estimated to be over 80 percent. It may reach close to 100 percent before the solutions we need are reached.

So what's the alternative?

The alternative is to create products that help us vault the cusp. Right now almost all of the ed tech startups are focused on ways of marginally improving an outdated and expiring educational system. In the short term they will certainly succeed in a few cases,

and the products that emerge may help prop up the old system for a few more years --- or even decades. But in the end that system is bound to fail --- even though it is in use around the world --- because it no longer fits the world's needs.

A much better role for educational technology startups and researchers, in my opinion, would be to begin thinking about, and building products for, *replacing* the system we have today.

I believe we already have a good idea of the kind of education that will (gradually) replace our current system. It will be an education whose goal is not just “learning,” but helping all young people become good, effective and world-improving people. It will be an education that has all our kids adding value to the world by doing real-world projects and accomplishing important things and solving real problems in areas --- infrastructure, historical preservation, science, healthcare, environment, government --- areas where we really need the help the kids can provide. It will be an education that will be based on a far broader set of skills than just today’s “MESS” (math, English, science and social studies), a skill set that includes, in addition to a broader definition of “thinking”, the almost universally-excluded domains of “relationships” (including social / emotional) “action” and “real-world accomplishment.” It will be an education that will be focused on a keen awareness of improving the local and global world in which our kids live, and on identifying, amplifying and developing kids’ individual passions in and for that world, rather than on having them master a set of outdated “proxies.”

We don’t yet fully know how to provide this education --- we are still in the early stages of experimenting and learning. But there is no doubt technology will be foundational for the new education, just as reading and writing have been foundational for the old one.

We should be looking for guidance to the technologies our young people are flocking to --- to Facebook, Google, YouTube and other expanding companies -- companies that are conducting, in fact, the world’s largest educational experiments, and who, unlike too many in "education," are unafraid to experiment as they see the world, and their customers, evolve.

What Ed Tech should *really* be doing is not supporting the old educational paradigm, but rather helping create the new and emerging one, of which we are currently seeing small sprouts all over the world --- sprouts which desperately need cultivation. How can technology help kids identify, explore and grow through their passion? How can technology connect kids efficiently to the kinds of real-world projects that will *be* their education in the future? How can technology support kids’ becoming good, effective and world-improving people? How can technology help teachers shift to a new way of thinking about what education means in our new world? These are the kinds of questions Ed Tech startups should be asking.

The Ed Tech startups that are moving in these directions --- moving us over the cusp into the new and future educational landscape --- are the ones that are truly adding long-term value, and whose progeny will eventually survive and thrive in our new and emerging

world. Marginally improving our outdated system through Ed Tech is of very little long-term value to the world. We need to use technology to “vault the cusp” to a new one.

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