

# Do Schools Disappear, Or Do Classrooms?

By Marc Prensky

Published in *Educational Technology*, Mar-Apr 2015

## **D**o we still need schools?

Many argue that in the not-too-distant future schools will go away, and become a historical artifact of a former era, like clipper ships. This is because — say these people — technology will take over so many of school's current functions that bringing kids together for an education will no longer be necessary.

It is true that many functions in education, such as explanation, repetition, practice and even feedback are very well-served by technology. (Although many other functions kids need, such as being listened to, being respected, being empathized with, being motivated, and having their passion discovered and brought out, are not.)

But it is important to remember that even if technology can take over many, if not all teaching functions, schools exist to serve multiple purposes. In some places, schools are institutions that deliberately take kids away from work at their parents' farm or business (where the kids are often needed to help) in order to provide those kids additional skills not found at home. In many places in the world, it is still a struggle to get parents to send their kids to school.

In other places—places that have gone through the industrial revolution and now the information age (where I assume most readers of this publication live) — school removes kids temporarily from their parents for a different reason: to assure that those kids not under the watchful eyes of parents who have gone off to work, are safe and well-occupied with tasks that are useful for their lives and for society.

Both the taking kids away from manual labor for education in some places, and keeping them in a safe place for education while their parents work in others, are very important functions for society. Both argue strongly for the continued existence of schools — even as technology takes over, at various rates in various places, many teaching functions (again, certainly not all).

There are, of course, many additional arguments for schools' continued existence in the world, such as socialization, participation in music and drama, sports, and other group activities.

### Are Classrooms Needed?

But there are fewer good arguments, I believe, for the continued existence of classrooms. Their existence is certainly not mandated — or even required — pedagogically. There are many other ways to organize kids for learning or becoming. Nor are classrooms required (once all the kids are in the building) in terms of safety. Classrooms are a result, rather, of economics. It is far less expensive to move groups of kids around from room to room with as high a ratio possible of kids to teachers, than to do anything else. Scheduling of teacher and student time may be easier. And it remains less expensive, perhaps, to build new schools on the old model with classrooms than to create more flexible structures.

Although the classroom may well have served a useful function once, in times less demanding of individualization and personalization, pedagogically, in today's world, the classroom is quickly being supplanted and becoming obsolete. Despite the many attempts to make what goes on in classrooms “relevant,” it is the *model itself* of putting X kids in a box that is increasingly irrelevant to a third millennium education. This is true whether the classroom door is open or closed, the walls opaque or transparent, the electronic connections to the outside present or absent. Students are now figuring out how to learn from each other, from the Internet, and from doing real projects in the world — both with and without technology. The sage-on-the-stage model of teaching is dead or dying. Kids are also realizing that what they get in classrooms — mostly the same program for everyone — no longer meets their individual needs.

Bloom demonstrated that tutors could be up to 2 standard deviations more effective than classrooms. Many new and far less expensive versions of the “tutors” of old are now emerging — from peer-to-peer to “intelligent tutor” programs — both with and without technology. We now realize that kids work, learn, and “become” in many different modes — individually, in pairs, in small groups, and in virtual groups, and even in very large groups — depending on the situation. The increasingly large number of kids now being homeschooled in the US (a recent estimate in the *New York Times* was just over one million, or roughly 2 percent) may never know classrooms at all.

Classrooms — and classroom teachers — may be trying to “adapt” —for example with “gamification” — but this is often akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, as more and more of them are realizing.

Those who run our schools will have to find better ways to organize them. We are now far past the time when an education requires classrooms. Classrooms are not *necessary* for educating kids, they are, rather, a *necessary evil* from the past, held over vestigially. They are kept on life support by a combination of a system that is known to all and easier to repeat than to alter, of parents and others who know (and therefore demand) no alternatives, of existing buildings that are hard or expensive to redo, and administrators who may be reluctant to try a better approach for our times.

My sense, therefore, is that our third millennium quest, both as educators and technologists, should not be to eliminate schools, but rather to *eliminate the classrooms* that allow us to constrain large groups of kids behind closed doors — a form of “herding” that has many drawbacks, and few educational benefits other than reducing costs.

Perhaps it is time for students and teachers, along with their administrators, to take matters into their own hands, and — as in Berlin — tear down those classroom walls, metaphorically and physically, for a better education for all our kids.

(See associated video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3O-I4jh9SE> ).

*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, and consultant in the field of education. He is the author of six books: *The World Needs a New Curriculum* (The Global Future Education Foundation and Institute 2014), *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). **Reimagining K-12 Education for the Future: a New Core for a New Age** is the title of Marc's upcoming seventh book (from Teachers' College Press), about a new curriculum for the world.*

*Marc is the founder of **The Global Future Education Foundation and Institute**, a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting Education as Becoming, Accomplishment-Based Education, and a better worldwide curriculum. Previously, he spent six years at the Boston Consulting Group, was the founder and CEO of a learning games company whose clients included IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the L.A. and Florida Virtual Schools, headed an early prototype charter school, and taught at all levels from elementary to college.*

*Marc holds an MBA degree from Harvard (with distinction) and a Masters in Teaching degree 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) .*