Accomplishment-Based Education

**Not content or skills. Not artificial problem-solving.
Education should be about students improving the
real-world — NOW**

By Marc Prensky

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In all our discussions for and against technology in education, one of its biggest and most obvious benefits is being almost completely overlooked — technology's empowering of our youth to accomplish huge amounts of desperately-needed tasks in the world.

Perhaps this is because before technology kids really couldn't accomplish much until they were older. Perhaps it is because we are conditioned by our Pre-Internet past against exploitative "child labor." Or perhaps it is because for so long we have kept our young people from accomplishing anything, we have forgotten what they are capable of.

But now a great deal has changed. Half the people on the planet are under the age of 25, and they are, increasingly, individually and as a group, hugely capable and powerful — and linked to each other in ways which never existed before.

We ought to all be taking advantage of this. Until we liberate our young people to accomplish for the world all the positive things they now can, we are wasting half the world's capability — much as for a long time we wasted much of the capability of our women.

Not only can today's youth, with the aid of technology, accomplish much that is truly useful in the world — and the places in which they live — but in the process of doing so they will grow into precisely the kind people we want. Some of this will likely happen whether we act or not. But if we help our young people accomplish, rather than hold them back, the process will go much faster.

In the past it was assumed — mostly correctly — that students could not compete with adults for work. We expected our young people to learn first, and earn later. Doing it the other way was scorned, either as exploitation, or "dropping out."

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But those beliefs — like most of the beliefs and attitudes of today's adults — were formed in pre-Internet times. Today's students, around the world, are much more capable than in the past. "Millennials worldwide are more similar to one another than to older generations within their nations," wrote Time Magazine last May.

Today, many adults are dismayed to see elements of their local cultures fading as their kids grow up in new global world. Many are afraid of the generation that is now growing up, and of their own children. They moan about what they perceive as negative, such as young people communicating through screens rather than face-to-face. But their fear, unfortunately, also blinds them to the positive side of how much power these young people have to do good for the world.

In today's Internet world not only can young people complete with adults in many areas but they can often do the work better — as people in more and more fields are finding out to their dismay. Even today's primary school students can build professional Web sites.

Our young people are starting early, and they are flocking especially to the world's "new" jobs, such as search engine optimization and social media strategy. It would be a mistake to see the few well-known individuals who have started billion-dollar companies in their dorm rooms as exceptions in their essence — they are exceptional only in the magnitude of their accomplishments. All today's kids are totally capable of accomplishing real things during the years that we used to think were only about "learning."

Not Grades, Accomplishments

When school administrators want to demonstrate what they are doing right they increasingly point not to test scores, but to accomplishments of their individual students and groups of students in the world. One superintendent cites a team of 4th graders who saw the need for, planned, pitched the city council, obtained funding for and supervised the construction of, a new water park, beating out professional architects. Another cites a pair of high school students who are building a robot so that a severely handicapped fellow student can attend classes from his bed.

Huge numbers of such student accomplishments exist — they are sometimes referred to as "impact education" — but they are typically isolated, unconnected, and outside of the educational mainstream. Yet, in actuality, this is the most important part of our children's schooling. In doing these projects, kids learn whatever skills they need, and typically much more. They also develop something that school rarely provides — a real sense of accomplishment in the world. Not the "school world" but the "real" world.

If the goal of education is for our children to become becoming better, more competent people, well-prepared for the future, "accomplishing" is a far better means to that goal than is the "learning" that almost all our schools are fixated on today. Very little of our current curriculum prepares our students for real-world accomplishment. Our students are

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increasingly realizing that they can, in many cases prepare themselves better for the future on their own than by the "education" we currently offer them.

Why Our Current "Reforms" are Failures

Many educators have now realized that just learning "content" — however well — does not lead to kids becoming better, more competent people. Many places have moved to skills-based education (e.g. "Common Core"), and others have added problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning and project-based learning to their curricula. But while this is, in some ways, a step in the right direction, it misses something truly basic: none of it is "real"

Almost all of our school problems and activities are all just "made up" ones, designed to include the maximum number of "learnings" or "standards." They are NOT designed to accomplish anything useful in the world. What we need instead is an education where the outcomes make a real difference, and provide real improvements to the world. This is what I call an Accomplishment-Based Education.

The students I talk to, around the world, are crying out for this kind of real-world education. Raised in large part on the Internet and games, they are far better at both cooperation and competition than we ever were. They know their power and capabilities, and are frustrated at not being given the chance, daily, to use them. When they focus on tasks they are truly interested in and passionate about, the amount of enthusiasm, energy and intellect that they put forth is prodigious.

Accomplishment-based Education is certainly not a wholly new idea — there are students around the world already devoting large chunks of their energy to real problems. The issue is rather that this kind of education is almost completely haphazard, scattered and random, depending on, and limited to, individual teachers, administrators and schools. We can, and should, help organize this this to a much greater extent for all our students.

For example:

- We moan, in many places, about the sorry state of our network infrastructure and connections. Our young people are totally capable of fixing this – most of the instructions are already on the Internet.

- We hold science, robotics and other competitions that are marvels of student creativity and enthusiasm. But too often teams compete only to shoot balls through hoops or do demonstrate something they have "learned". Why couldn't they competing to drill wells, clean up dumps, put out fires, or do other useful tasks?

- Where physical infrastructure doesn't exist (e.g. in villages that lack clean water) or is crumbling (e.g. throughout the United States) students could be doing much

of the work of designing, planning, funding and even fixing or building the infrastructure — putting the necessary steps and procedures online is trivial. Often adults are needed only to keep students from breaking laws or hurting themselves.

So why can't this kind of real-world accomplishing BE our school curriculum? How hard would it be to put together, as a start, all the examples in the world of kids doing real projects during, or as part of, their school years? How simple would it be, using these as examples, to build upon that base in every school and classroom? How complex would it be to compile a list of needed accomplishments in places and let students chose the ones that interest them? For how long must our education remain artificial preparation for accomplishment, rather than accomplishment itself?

Education has been out-of-touch with the world for so long that some people see a move to a set of new standards for the old curriculum, or a move to artificial "problem-based learning," as a big step forward. But those things are not what we need. We need to be teaching our kids how to, think, act, relate and, most of all, *accomplish real projects* that make the world a better place. How different would it be if our students left school not with a diplomas and a transcript, but with a resume — a list of real-world personal and team accomplishments that they could proudly point to and by which we could judge their capabilities and merits?

Whatever issues there might be — such as children taking adults' jobs, or compensation, or other things, we can and must work through them. Because if we don't do this, in partnership with our kids, they will only go around us and do it themselves.

Accomplishment-Based Education is something we can—and must—do. And, hopefully, soon.

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Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed thought leader, speaker, writer, consultant, and curriculum designer 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). His writings have been translated into 10 languages.*

Marc is the Founder and Executive Director of The Institute for Global Future Education*, a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting Future-oriented Education, Accomplishment-Based Education, and The Future Curriculum in the world. He is currently speaking and writing books on these subjects.*

Previously, Marc founded and ran Games2train,com a corporate game-based learning company whose clients included IBM, Bank of America, Pfizer, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Los Angeles and Florida Virtual Schools. He is the Chief Design Officer of Spree Learning Games, an education-focused "curricular games" company.

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