

School of the future: Stargazing into a School of the Future...

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Imagine what it would be like to work in a school with no boundaries to learning? What would it look like? What would describe such a place? Would it be very different from a school of today, and what would be similar?

What would the technology in such a school look like? How would it work for learners and teachers? How would the management and the staff operate? What would the home-school relationship be like? Interesting questions...

For the sake of argument, I will call this 'school' a place of learning - for I believe our notion of 'school' may be quite different from what actually happens in many schools today.

Systems Thinking

What are the systems that would support learning in a school of the future?

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of looking at this new place of learning as a system is the idea that it will be what you could call a 'learning organisation'. A learning organisation is a place where everybody, at all levels, all the time, is learning to improve themselves and consequently the organisation. A learning organisation is one where every system (like ICT) is part of the whole, and change in the system is examined holistically in terms of how it affects the whole system. Feedback and information is constantly sought to feed into the system.

Crucial aspects of this are:

- team learning for staff and the concept of continuous improvement
- management that practices the same philosophy

Life is made up of activity systems

What is the significance of applying systems thinking to learning and teaching? Could it be the ability to help us analyse things more deeply, to look at things in parts and then the interaction of these on the whole? If we are to exploit the learning potential of ICT, and really use it to try to develop NEW ways of learning for both teachers and students, systems thinking might help us to avoid just clipping ICT onto school systems which, in many respects, are incompatible with societal demands and needs. Such as?

- *Team Learning*: This helps us to look at fundamental sources for problems rather than surface sources.
- *Experiences for Children & Staff*: This place of learning would provide quite different experiences for staff and children. This would be mainly due to the 'different' nature of the curriculum, where students would have much more control over what is learned, how it is learned and where it is learned.

The adage 'learning anywhere - anytime' would really describe this place. Children would be able to come and go as they please, allowing technology and real life experiences to drive and enhance their learning. They would have the teacher support and technology to generate and constantly co-evaluate their learning plans and goals with 'teachers', including a range of specialist mentors with highly developed content or technological knowledge in particular fields. These people might be part of a 'virtual' school - not the learner's particular learning site.

Teachers would be constantly inquiring into their own teaching effectiveness, using multiple ways of gathering information and feeding this information back into the system so that the systems changed constantly. To do this they would work closely with many people - from industry experts for real life experiences for children, to educational consultants, ICT consultants. Teachers would become designers of learning and facilitators of the conditions that support this type of learning. They wouldn't always know the answers. This would challenge our current concept of curriculum. The emphasis would be on helping children to acquire and apply learning skills and knowledge in a variety of authentic contexts, making use of ICT in every aspect of this quest to involve a far wider range of people in helping students to build a skill and knowledge base.

This new learning place will support a greater convergence of work and play, and also strengthened home-school relationships? It won't, necessarily, be a 'virtual' school with everyone home-schooled, but it may well be a school with virtual boundaries where the technology will be able to support and enhance very different relationships with caregivers and community.

Imagine if parents, children and staff could communicate and collaborate in ways they cannot now. Future technology will be much more flexible. Staff and children will be able to work together to monitor and decide on the pathways children take in their learning. This would increase accountability for learners, understanding for parents of the learning process and yield perhaps better results for all. The involvement of parents in this process would bring the learning much closer to the parents' understanding and therefore strengthen the relationship that parents have with this 'school'.

Above all else, rethinking the school from a systems perspective would support the idea of much more flexibility and fluidity - and much more choice for caregivers, community, and teachers.

The one thing we know is that the technology will arrive before we have the system designed to exploit it effectively. Instead of just worrying about how we can use technology to do 'now' things in schools, we should just assume that the technology will support us, and work out what exactly we would like to see in our ideal 'learning organisation' school system.