Building borderlands between performing and learning

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Of all the demands made of 21st century schooling, few are more insistent than the demand that teachers respond to societal expectations of high student performance on standardised pencil and paper tests of mandated curriculum, and at the same time prepare young people for the lifelong and lifewide learning demands of a paperless, pencil-less digital age. In other words, teachers are to 'cover' traditional literacies and numeracies while transcending them in the interests of building the agile dispositions to learning so necessary to these times. Little wonder, then, that teachers feel themselves to be pushed and pulled across very different imperatives. Such paradoxical pressures are unlikely to be accommodated unless teachers are able to imagine and inhabit borderlands at the nexus of the past and the future — that is, to occupy borderlands that make it possible to improve their students' test performance and also build their capacity to learn in and for this present century.

It is no simple matter to maintain sufficient focus on *both* performing *and* learning in formal education so that neither is sacrificed to the other. Social psychologist Carol Dweck has produced research that is helpful here, in that she makes a clear distinction between *learning* and *performing* as personal goals. Dweck defines *performance goals* as focused on 'winning positive judgement of your competence and avoiding negative ones', while she characterises *learning goals* as arising from a desire to develop 'new skills, master new tasks or understand new things' (pp. 15–16). Moreover, Dweck explains that, while both sorts of goals are 'normal and universal' (p. 16), they are often in conflict, especially where there is an over-emphasis on *performance goals*, as she argues is increasingly the case for the present generation of young people. Where performance goals overwhelm learning goals, her research finds that individuals are less likely to extend their zones of competence (that is, to pursue learning goals), and more likely to blame themselves if results are disappointing. Individuals for whom learning goals are a key focus of attention continue to seek new strategies and to tolerate error without self-blame, unlike their performance-driven counterparts who are more likely to give up on the task set, berating themselves for their inability to complete it but also avoiding it in future, and thus narrowing their learning options.

The implication for educators here is that teachers, principals, policymakers or parents who stress performance above all else — trophies, awards, test results — encourage young people to be overly focused on winning positive judgement from external others, and this puts them -at risk in relation to their openness to learning new skills and strategies. Conversely, teachers and parents who seek to foster a healthy (50/50) balance of learning goals and performance goals encourage robust learners who can stick at a task — they do not need easy or instant success and constant reassurance in order to have a sense of self-efficacy.

To build a borderland, then, between performance and learning is to optimise the opportunities young people have to experience not just successful school performance as adjudged by their teachers, but also to experience the instructive complications of failure to 'break through' to instant solutions — to learn how to ask better questions, not just give correct answers. It is

to understand that not all learning converts directly into higher test performance, but that coming to enjoy reading more, for example, may be valuable for its own sake, *and* may also improve academic performance in the medium or long term. This is because the path to knowledge is not a straight line but a circuitous route with leaps, surprises, regressions, digressions and discontinuities. A borderland built with pedagogical imagination is more likely to translate into improved learning *and* performing. Put simply, young people need both, and Dweck's distinction reminds us that they are not at all the same thing.

In Australia, national curriculum developments are, for better and worse, refocusing attention squarely on mastery of approved disciplinary content as measured by results on standardised tests. This trend underlines the general point that schooling in disciplinary knowledge is still the key means by which young people move, at least in theory, from basic alphabetical literacy to the high levels of literacy and numeracy needed to function optimally in a 'super-complex' economic and social order. As expressed in a recent Report from America's National Center on Education and the Economy (2007):

> *This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members of the workforce* (NCEE 2007, p. 6).

In other words, we are living at a time when it is impossible to ignore fundamental literacies and numeracies, no matter how dexterous young people may be in using digital technologies for social networking. Yet this same report goes on to make it

abundantly clear that performing well on standardised assessment tasks will not be enough to meet the learning needs of this century's young people:

> *[The 21st century] … is a world in which comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the keys to the good life, in which high levels of education* — **a very different kind of education than most of us have had** *– are going to be the only security there is* (author's emphasis; NCEE 2007, pp. 6–7).

It follows that a better education cannot mean *more of the same* education. In other words, standardised testing of mandated content is no longer sufficient for what Daniel Pink (2005) calls our Conceptual Age, an age in which knowledge production has moved from vertical hierarchies of command and control to fluid horizontal networks in which information travels quickly, embracing valuable new nodes and bypassing nodes that have ceased to add value. This is happening, he argues, at all levels of economic and social life, not only in the professions. Knowledge production, according to Pink, is mobilised by new cultural forms and modes of consumption that demand 'high concept' capacities (facility with complex ideas) and 'high touch' capacities (ability to reach and engage others) in the community and the workforce.

Because processes of production and distribution have accelerated the pace of change and disrupted traditional industrial processes, it is unlikely that our young people will be spending long periods in any one place doing only one thing. With so much technological innovation driving new ways of engaging in social activity, young people are much more likely to be engaged in fast-moving,

complex problem-solving than we have been. If our young people can learn to cross borders of all types — disciplinary borders, geographical borders, relational borders — they are more likely to be successful in the world of 21st century work. Young people who can engage fully as 21st century citizens will combine high concept and high touch capacities – that is, high levels of alphabetical, digital and scientific literacy and numeracy, with highly developed personal, interpersonal and aesthetic sensibilities. Such capacities will be best acquired in a pedagogical borderland that responds to *both the imperative to perform and the imperative to learn*.

It is my view that teacher-librarians, for reasons to do with their location and their vocation, are better placed than many of their classroom colleagues to imagine building and maintaining a borderland space that services performing and learning. The history of the development of the school library as connected to, yet in many ways discrete from, the formal classroom, has allowed librarians to occupy an interim space between formal and informal learning, and to know how such a space might look and feel to clients. In other words, librarians have been more attentive to client preferences, including the aesthetics of learning and access to information, than those involved directly in teaching and testing the mandated curriculum. Traditional teachers, who come like Gulliver among their little people, find it difficult to let go of the idea that *my* business is to teach and test *my* students in *my* classroom *my* way. Centuries of working as a solitary adult figure in an autonomous space has made it harder for the classroom teacher to imagine how to work as a collaborative broker and co-

learner, a 'prod-user' (Bruns 2006) of cultural products and learner-oriented services. Moreover, given that schools continue to be organised, in the main, around lock-step, one-to-thirty pedagogical arrangements within an antiquated and poorly funded industrial architecture, it is unlikely that we will see a serious commitment to borderland building in classroom culture any time soon. So it is to teacher-librarians, as a group of client-centred co-workers, that mainstream educators might well look for pedagogical models that build and sustain the complex nexus between performing and learning.

Re-membering borderlands

In imagining a borderland space for 21st century learning as well as performing, there is value in reflecting on how the coffee house of centuries past operated as a space of possibility for learning between school, work and home. In 17th to 19th century Britain, the coffee house provided a convivial space, a place of sociability, learning and public display where social learning opportunities transcended class barriers. Thus it worked as a borderland between spheres of production and leisure, with daily visits being, for British men (customers were exclusively male), a vital means of establishing a social place in venture capitalism, colonial expansion and small-scale manufacturing. Members of the public came to coffee houses to learn whatever they wanted to and in whatever way they chose — to share conversation, newspapers, coffee, food and gossip, to read and to be read to if they were illiterate. Coffee houses were performative spaces for displays of social capital, where aspiration was built and scrutinised without formal assessment or evaluation. They were spaces for opinion-making and opinion-sharing, operating as

sites of scientific demonstration (Isaac Newton dissected a dolphin caught in the Thames in a coffee house) and as disseminators of advertising and employment opportunities. Warm and as well lit as superior domestic dwellings, they invited the individual to relax and linger, as well as to learn with and from like and unlike others.

As a space of informal learning and conviviality, the coffee house was a far cry from the space that was deemed appropriate for the formal education of children, notwithstanding Joseph Lancaster's early 19th century efforts to design healthy environments for the mass education of British children. Despite the fact that, by 1880, the government-regulated school had become both an affirmation of the democratic ideal and a powerful institution in its own right, the school was nevertheless designed fundamentally to prepare a nation's children for the social conditions of an industrial economy. Alvin Toffler, writing in his classic prophetic book, *Future Shock*, half a century ago, sums this up succinctly:

> *Mass education was the ingenious machine constructed by industrialism to produce the kind of adults it needed. The problem was inordinately complex. How to pre-adapt children for a new world — a world of repetitive indoor toil, smoke, noise, machines, crowded living conditions, collective discipline, a world in which time was to be regulated not by the cycle of the sun and moon, but by the factory whistle and the clock* (Toffler 1970, p. 362).

Toffler saw the Victorian education system as 'an anticipatory mirror' (p. 362) of industrial work, with its regimentation, lack of individualisation, rigid systems of seating, grouping, grading and testing, all in the context of an

authoritarian 'boss' teacher. The ecology of the classroom was itself an unrelenting lesson in regimentation and order, and thus very different from the 'home away from home' that the café came to represent for so many.

Yet, however ambivalent we may now be about the relevance of the industrial classroom for 21st century education, we cannot deny its resilience over the last 200 years of schooling. It lingers on as the dominant model of schooling in most parts of the colonised world, and particularly where performance on high-stakes tests is the overwhelming priority (for example, in Singapore), given its suitability as a site of 'sage-on-the-stage' instruction and as a means of separating children to sort and grade them, while mitigating possibilities for cheating.

Building borderland spaces

The industrial classroom has done important work, but it has not facilitated the sort of learning that was made possible in the space of the café. The factory model of schooling taught post-Victorian generations that a preparation for work meant one must learn to eschew temporary gratification and to tolerate, indeed welcome, repetitive and routine experiences in the expectation that these habits would lead to long-term job security, which, in turn, would bring economic and social prosperity. It also expected that schools produce dropouts as well as credentialled workers. Just as the factory, self-propelled conveyer-belt process made it easier to identify and eliminate product failures, so too the lock-step, sorting and credentialling processes of industrial-model schools made it easier to spot and reject under-performing students. As the 'raw materials' of the educational factory, children could be channelled

into 'streams' — academic, general, vocational — that served to delimit their life chances from then on.

This is not to argue that the industrial-model school has remained intact — it has indeed seen wave on wave of unrelenting attempts at reform — but it has proved to be very resilient in terms of its custodial, sorting and credentialling functions. The important point is that *schooling as a preparation for the future continues to anticipate a social order that is on the wane*. In this century we will continue to care for, teach, test and credential young people in more efficient, effective and socially sanctioned ways, but we must also be seen to value and build the relentlessly curious disposition to knowledge and understanding that allows learning to flourish long after schooling is over. The quest for lifelong, lifewide learning is *thus a matter of working optimally at the intersection of both school culture and café culture*, and it is in an increasing number of school libraries that we are able to detect embryonic developments to this end.

An important lesson we can learn from café society is the importance that attaches to the physical environment once people have discretion about how and when they learn. Again, librarians have picked up on this lesson more readily than many of their educational counterparts. Enabling learning environments are not just social and pedagogical — they are also aesthetically inviting, and this is understood in the way many school and university libraries now organise the space, seating and stacks. When young people enter a space for learning — whether physical, virtual or a combination of both — they receive strong messages about what their experience of learning is likely to be. If the messages they receive tell them that 'this looks like a nice place

to be', that 'something interesting might happen here', that 'people who are like me seem to enjoy being here' that 'there is something special going on here', and that 'I will be respected and assisted here', they are much more likely to linger and to learn.

It is a sad comment on schooling that few classrooms in post-welfare countries give genuinely positive messages about learning. They could learn from those among them, such as teacher-librarians, who know what it is to design, with limited budgets, spaces that seek to put student learning needs and preferences first, spaces that work as borders between the formal demands of curriculum coverage and test performance, and those which invite a broader and deeper engagement with knowledge and knowledge-building communities.

In connecting the best of the school and the café, the aesthetic of cutting edge 21st century libraries can help young people to renegotiate their roles and responsibilities beyond the command and control ethic of top-down institutional behaviours — in business, school and family life — towards *self-agency*, with people acting on their own behalf, eschewing intermediaries, templates and hierarchies in favour of self-fashioning according to personal needs, desires and belief systems, as in cafés of old.

One hallmark of this new aesthetic is the extent to which the 'stacks' are physically giving way to open areas that allow comfortable access to a wide range of information, as well as to social interactivity. Now that the 21st century has ushered in a shift in the culture of reading from singular and silent to multiple and spoken, many libraries are reflecting a trend to optimise social interaction in their

ecology. Moreover, librarians, like their counterparts in museums, have been quick to exploit the affordances of digital technologies for the purposes of opening up learning possibilities for their users. This has meant, among other things, that librarians have been quicker than others to join a number of diverse learning networks, rather than continuing to see themselves as part of a supply and demand educational chain. Therein lies a crucial identity shift for other educational professionals because, as hierarchies flatten and vertical fixities of educational delivery get supplanted by horizontal nodes for value-adding to learning, nodes that do not add value will get bypassed. In other words, where individuals can exercise discretion about where and how they learn, they will quickly jettison what is of little value and vote with their feet in the direction of better, faster, more personally customised resourcing.

Conclusion

Formal, mandated testing, including assessment of the memorising of content and simple routine transactions in literacy and numeracy will not be abandoned any time soon, notwithstanding the strongly held views of Zigmunt Bauman (2004) and other like-minded sociologists that social success no longer depends on 'the acquisition and entrenchment of habitual responses to repetitive situations' (p. 22). Australia's growing emphasis on standardised testing of mandated content notwithstanding, we do need to look more closely at what content and processes we are testing and how relevant they are to our times, bearing in mind the responsibilities and accountabilities of schools and universities as socially sanctioned institutions that perform a key role in ensuring a literate, numerate, culturally and

socially informed population. It is not a matter of jettisoning the traditional school as a public space of performing and learning, but of imagining how our within-school cultures might be rendered more relevant to our espoused educational goals in this century. There has been a reluctance in policy interventions to make the aesthetics of social space a central issue for improving the quality of learning and teaching. Policy interventions tend to be limited by a blinkered obsession with either curriculum (what is taught) or assessment (when, what and how of testing). It is time to put the matter of designing new spaces for learning at the front and centre of our thinking about quality and standards in the 21st century school. In paying attention to the possibilities at the intersection of the café and the school, as many innovative libraries have implicitly done, we may be able to build more effectively the capacities for lifelong learning that are so well rehearsed in the rhetoric of educational reform.

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