

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

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Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

Introduction

A revolution in school design has been much discussed in the education world over recent years. The industrial design that has been in use ever since public school began in this country is failing all of us. Sir Ken Robinson has a wonderful way of illustrating this in his 2010 TED Talk, *Changing Education Paradigms*, illustrated by RSA Animate. In it he states a couple of the problems with the current model of education is that “it is based on the interests of industrialization and in the image of it” (Robinson).

Senior fellow at the Aspen Institute and former assistant secretary for elementary and secondary education, Michael Cohen, writes, “Most high schools—in face of dramatic changes in their external environments, their student bodies, and in societal expectations for the results they must produce—continue to use instructional approaches and organizational arrangements better suited for their old mission of sorting students for college *or* work, thinking *or* doing” (Cohen, 2001, Executive Summary, para. 2).

I believe the human being has the capacity to both think *and* do.

Cohen continues in paragraph 3, “That’s a crisis—for the students and their families, for their communities, and most certainly for the high schools. And this crisis can’t be solved simply by trying to push a larger number of students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them” (Robinson, 2010).

Since arriving in Brookings I have been impressed by the forward thinking of the High School administration. I highlight the high school as I have had the most dealing with them. My child with high anxiety and depression was finding it a struggle to learn in the classroom and between the school walls. The principal and vice principal, counselors and teachers put forth

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

every effort to create a program in which my child could succeed. However the constraints of the rules of movement and identification were a detriment to this. The results were a child who felt people were trying their hardest to support her learning, but that the system just isn't for her. This served to compound her guilt, as she felt she was failing these people, when in reality the existing system (not only in Brookings) has failed her. I am not saying we don't need rules and parameters. We need rules and parameters with meaning, and a new framework to hang them on.

School as community is important to me. One cannot separate the education of the young citizens from the life of the adult citizens. I believe in creating the place and space I want for myself and my children and their children too. With ESSA and the admin changes at the university and k-12 level, and economic growth here in Brookings, we have a great opportunity to pick up the rainbow colored sharpies and create a very special community with our lifeworld at the center and with our systems world balanced correctly on the periphery, as Habermas promotes (Sergiovanni, 2000).

Taking a Deliberative view as defined by Null (p. 154), I believe my goals and those of all the stake holders in Brookings and surrounding areas, can be furthered by nurturing a cohesive relationship between all of us. Bringing the community into the curriculum process at all levels and bringing the learning out into the community can only strengthen Brookings as a whole entity.

Analysis

Forty-six years ago, in 1970, Alberts Seabolt (now Seabolt George) wrote about and served as Director for the Three Dimensional Project in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. This

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

project's purpose was to develop a model for community based learning involving teacher training and preparation, administration involvement and support and citizens being drawn into the educational process. A brief search for the results of this project turned up nothing so far, I will pursue this further at a later date. Today, efforts such as Sebolt's are still taking place, with the Maker Movement getting support from the White House with the National Week of Making, and STEM teaching really taking off within communities and schools (Harold, 2016). The development of the Bobcat Academy at the Brookings High School is in response to the realization that not all children learn the same, and that our system can change to serve our citizens. I view this as a positive step toward keeping Brookings Lifeworld at the center of our culture.

The Brookings High School audio commitment statement on the website says the district is, "...committed to educational excellence by enhancing instruction to meet individual students' needs", and that the school, "...prepares students to be productive young adults in the ever-changing world we live in" (BHS, 2016).

Brookings School District (BSD) needs to define what are the 'individual needs', what does 'a productive young adult' look like in the changing environment of Brookings. The school board can, in part, derive these definitions from the citizens of our town and from the local industries and from the University. The Center for Public Education's report, *Eight characteristics of effective school boards: full report*, lists at number 4: "Effective school boards have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals" (Eight Characteristics of an Effective School Board). The vision

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

statements of several area organizations are close fitting to the goals of BSD and would facilitate this communication. As an example, Vision Brookings is an initiative created by The Brookings Area Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Brookings Inc. and the Brookings Economic Development Committee. This project has as its slogan: VISION+ACTION=CHANGE. A third phase of development begins this year with Vision Brookings III.

While Vision Brookings I and II supported the development of infrastructure and community and economic growth programs, Vision Brookings III seeks to grow the economy by building on prior investments and successes while focusing on the region's major issues and opportunities: workforce, business development and entrepreneurship.

- GOAL: Retain, attract, and educate a sustainable workforce for employers.
- GOAL: Cultivate new business opportunities and grow existing relationships.

(VisionBrookings.com).

Vision Brookings' goal, to "retain, attract, and educate a sustainable workforce", is right where BSD and the Brookings business community can engage. And maybe they do. The communications tree of this city is something for further study. I hope I find there is extensive communication. However, from anecdotal evidence, I have the feeling there is room for branching out.

The city's business organizations, added to the youth initiatives like the Boys and Girls Club Summer Workforce, the Children's Museum programs, Teen Challenge...(the list of businesses and organizations is quite a long one), create a fantastic foundation for the point I seem to be taking a very long time to get to: Brookings is ripe to become a full city learning lab.

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

Complete stake-holder engagement is vital to our young citizens' educational lives. This engagement is also vital to their civic development. The ability to deliberate, consider, and decide for themselves how to create the place and space they occupy, is developed at school as well as at home. This ability so relies on a liberal education. We do not know what we do not know until we know we didn't know it (Apple, 2004), (Null, 2011).

Conclusion

It appears to me the Brookings School District is on its way with innovation. Slow change is better change, but sometimes we are slowed by our fear. Our fear of change, our fear of the unknown, our fear of failure. If the Brookings community can just act in spite of their fear, we can create a learning environment promoting the growth mind set, embracing mistakes as spring boards and bounding out into the future for which we laid the foundation. What concerns me, in our homogenic situation, is *how* can we break free from the hegemony, *how* do we create a framework, a system, that allows for all member of society to flourish.

I am setting a goal for myself to become more involved as a stakeholder. I will attend or view city council and school board meeting and I will also return to 1Million Cups, the weekly entrepreneurial cup of coffee meeting at the Children's Museum. Perhaps I will find some means to the hows.

This paper is in no way a full study of the issue of a deliberative, community based curriculum for Brookings School District. It is my own small beginnings in exploring what exists here in Brookings, what is 'out there' regarding research and action on this subject, and my big picture thinking on where we could go with full stakeholder engagement.

For Further Study

- Sebolt's Three Dimensional Project, today.
- How to teach Core through community activities.
- The School Board Members and experience and training in education.
- The political affiliations, if any, of the various organizations and their members.
- The involvement and communications channels of the members of the School Board, Brookings Chamber of Commerce, Brookings City Council and Vision Brookings.
- Poverty and other social issues in Brookings.

Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

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Brookings, South Dakota: Learning Lab

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