

Student success in the 21st century: envision it; achieve it

Tom March

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Background

Large organisations rely on people, each with their jobs to do. And what each does impacts on the whole. Decades back it was recognised that how people 'saw their jobs' undermines or adds value to what they do, thus affecting the organisation's overall success.

Management guru Peter Drucker illustrated the power of one's attitude in his classic analogy where three men were busy cutting stone for a building. When asked what they were doing,

The first replied, "I am making a living." The second kept on hammering while he proudly said, "I am doing the best job of stonecutting in the entire country." The third one looked up with a visionary gleam in his eyes and said, "I am building a cathedral."¹

We can feel the difference such an attitude

makes. Rather than mindlessly going about our separate tasks, when *everyone* is inspired by the same goal, the same *vision* of what they are working toward, disparate and multifaceted tasks take on a concerted momentum. Furthermore, in times of great change like our own – where the rules keep changing and the job is ever-evolving – a well-articulated and shared vision acts as an inner guide for each individual: if we aren't sure how to get where we want to be, a vision points the way and can inspire innovative solutions to get there.

The disconnect

Soon organisations everywhere set about identifying a vision. Today, every school has one – but how many motivate the community toward inspired, unified action? In fact, visions

can inspire little more than cynicism because regardless of the lofty verbiage adorning websites or letterhead, everything seems to be 'business as usual.' This is particularly true for schools where people are exceedingly busy and habitual routines abound: we start the school year, prepare the curriculum, work with students, pursue professional learning, provide feedback and write reports, meet with parents, support co-curricular activities... the list seems endless.

Due to this busyness, many decisions are reactions to specific problems or issues: how do we raise test scores; decrease bullying; or motivate students to graduate? The truth is that when an organisation only reacts, many of the 'solutions' work at cross-purposes and actually undermine each other ('raising test scores' and 'motivating students to graduate?').



A clear vision helps us keep our sights on the real reason we do what we do: are we 'teaching to the test' or 'fostering lifelong learning?' A vision, well-developed and integrated into daily practice, is the first step toward a positive cycle of continuous improvement and offers advantages too powerful not to pursue. The remainder of this article elaborates on a process for developing a vision and the subsequent steps to achieve its realisation.

Define the vision

Michael Fullan, school change expert, champions a shared 'moral imperative' as the most important tool for managing positive change in schools. Capturing a common sense of 'this above all else' can inspire every aspect of how people see their jobs. And technology has fundamentally changed the tasks society expects of us. Last century's goals of uniform basic literacy and numeracy fall short given this era's challenges. Therefore many have identified critical 21st century skills, but because we've heard them so often, the words have already lost their urgent poignancy: global citizens, lifelong learners, creative-problem solvers, etc. Thus a first challenge to defining a vision is to make sure it will actually meet the needs of successful contemporary learners who arrive equipped with previously unknown personal devices and digital habits.

Begin by recalling a time you were engaged in an experience when you felt you were really learning. That energised, alive state where you could sense yourself growing

After working in this area for years, I've come to a process that seems to resonate with teachers and schools, one designed to viscerally remind ourselves what it feels like to 'learn'. The premise being that feelings carry an inner wisdom that information and ideas can fail to mobilise and that when a person knows the joy of learning, he or she is better prepared for taking advantage of our unforeseen opportunities and surmounting obstacles. Use the following reflection to help everyone get in touch with a personally meaningful experience they've had as learners.

Begin by recalling a time you were engaged in an experience when you felt you were really learning. That energised, alive state where you could sense yourself growing. The experience could relate to your profession, but could just as easily be drawn from hobbies, recent interests, long-standing pastimes, traditional family activities,

anything. Take as much time as you need to focus on one specific experience.

Now see if you can remember your goals or motivation for the activity. Did anything specific get you going? Were you inspired to act – did something provoke or prompt you – or maybe you just began doing it?

Great, now let's think about any of the 'things' you may have used in the experience. Some learning requires specific tools, equipment, gear or instruments. Did yours? What other tools or resources could have been useful? Were there any books, tutorials or media that supported your learning?

Next, recall the activities and people that might have been involved. What did you actually do to learn? Were the activities formal or ad hoc? Did you receive feedback? Did you share your learning or maybe benefit from the guidance of mentors?

Finally, try to remember how your learning progressed. How did it unfold? Did you make conscious decisions that changed the experience or did it seem to flow naturally? Did your goals change during the experience? Did you access other tools or resources as the process evolved? Did you seek out different activities or people? How did it go? Did things turn out the way you thought they would or did something very different emerge from the process?

Reside in the feelings surrounding this reminiscence. Particularly see if you felt an 'ah-ha!' moment or a sense of flow or being in 'the zone'. Linger in this visceral recollection.

Allow people time to trade stories with colleagues. It's always interesting to hear people's stories and this can be a powerful community-building experience. Also consider making the learning more visible by using a collaborative writing space like a shared and editable Google Doc or PrimaryPad. Here staff jot down a few words that best capture what made their learning experience so memorable and meaningful. Depending on the size of the group and your WiFi, all staff, or scribes for groups, quickly type onto the shared document. Rather than study this community brainstorm, copy the mass of text and paste it into Wordle.net. As if by magic, you now have a word cloud illustrating the collective view of your group. It might look something like this graphic.



Thus after a brief activity, you've tapped into and solicited input from every staff member on what makes learning a vital and meaningful experience. Isn't this the 'moral imperative' we're after? Isn't such vibrant learning what we'd hope each of our students regularly experience in your school? One beautiful truth of the 21st century is that personal technologies support one-to-one pathways into and through learning as well as empower unique expressions of excellence. Thus, that great feeling of learning aligns better with contemporary reality than the confines of 20th century schooling.

The purpose of this group reflection is twofold. First, we have helped an entire staff focus on what really matters: not 'teaching' but 'learning' and how great that feels. Second, you now have some of the words to begin, or refine, a school vision for student success, one that sings with group ownership and a shared sense of moral purpose.

Choose your initiatives

Once your school has defined its vision of learning, a roadmap is needed to help you get there. This is a critical step often missed by schools: choosing an evidence-based pedagogy directly linking your goals to daily classroom activities.

Standout frameworks include, but aren't limited to, Marzano's *High Reliability Schools*, Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding (and Schooling) by Design*, Hayes-Jacobs' *Curriculum Mapping* and Project Zero's *Cultures of Thinking*. These models become the *initiatives* used to guide goal-related decision making.

A second tier of *strategies* make the achievement of the initiatives more likely by bringing big ideas to day-to-day implementation. These strategies include approaches such as differentiation, problem-based learning, concept attainment, performance assessments, BYOD, etc. Many would already be components of the initiatives, but explore as many

professionally tested strategies that might be needed to support your vision. Beware, however, that any strategies must align with your vision and overarching initiatives or they can be rudderless expenditures of precious time and finite human energy.

Backward design units for success


Whether you opt for Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by Design*, using a backward design approach to unit development is critical. The idea is that once you have a well-defined view of your goal, the next step is not racing off toward it, but to equally define what successful accomplishment looks like. From a school perspective this means that teachers build every curriculum unit both aiming towards the vision and informed by the initiatives and strategies chosen for realising your goals. A tip is to develop a unit template built around the pedagogical framework to prompt teachers to address its core components. Schools typically use Word documents for this, but we will see shortly that an even better idea is to use online software that allows for easy collaboration, sharing and duplicating units.

Deliver this curriculum

Developing well-designed units is a worthy and important goal, but at this stage, all we have is an exceptional 'written curriculum'. Obviously the next phase, the 'delivered curriculum', is where things come to life and students get the opportunity to experience the outstanding learning so thoughtfully designed for them. In the old days – say a decade ago – this meant the classroom, but today, as more schools use a learning or content management system (LMS or CMS), we get a digital archive of how teachers bring to life the goals, initiatives and strategies through their activities, rich media resources and interactions. Furthermore, the online delivery can also capture students' discussions, comments or digital productions. An added bonus is that the online space is archived, and

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thus provides a starting point for later re-use or a library of exemplars for staff professional learning or action research.

Track student performance

The superiority of the *delivered* over the *written* curriculum is clear, but a gold standard exists that should be pursued. Isn't the 'learned curriculum' really what we're after? Our intentions matter, but the proof of their achievement matters most. We used a backward design approach so that rather than merely 'engage students' in interesting things related to the topic, we engaged them in experiences specifically designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Also, backward design was used so that we'd recognise success when we saw it. Thus current best practice 'closes the loop', where vision informs all curriculum units, which in turn are realised in learning experiences, and result in student performances that provide evidence for where we succeeded and where we came up short. Rather than see this as a defeat, such evidence is valuable information that feeds-back in a closed-loop to refine the written and delivered curriculum.

Let software help

This far into the 21st century, it's likely your school uses a variety of platforms to address aspects covered in this article. For example, schools often

house their curriculum online, deliver their lessons in a digital space and perhaps use software to track and analyse student performance. Something to consider is a smarter platform that integrates all these steps into one environment. The benefits of such a system are obvious: teachers learn to use one interface, all data is housed in a single source of truth and the work done in each step is carried into and informs the others. Using separate systems invites 'data leaks' between each step: for example, how do you know that quality units developed in a curriculum mapping software will transfer to the content delivered to students or that students' demonstrations of learning are assessed based upon the success criteria in your vision? Challenge your software providers to see if they can integrate each step into one system and plug the gaps between applications that inevitably 'leak' organisational knowledge and vital data.

Dared to dream? Now take the steps

If you aren't convinced, or don't think your school has the time to invest in an updated vision and curriculum development, try this experiment: keep doing what you're doing and, in a few years, see if it's gotten you where you want your school to be... If you are convinced, realise that none of this is done overnight, but is a multi-year journey of discovery that, while demanding, can also energise your teachers,

students and parent community.

Finally, this is one adventure that will never end, only evolve. Pursuing self-defined and community-invested continuous improvement allows busy schools to get off the endless bandwagons of good ideas and to avoid the pendulum swings of well-intentioned but ineffective reform movements, letting you get on with significantly improving what matters most.

Reference

- 1 Peter F Drucker. 1974. *Management Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, pp 336-337.

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Tom March frequently keynotes, writes, facilitates workshops, consults with schools and designs software, all focused on shifting education from mass production teaching to personally meaningful learning. When people are motivated by the joy of learning, they achieve outstanding accomplishments. He is principal consultant – teaching and learning at Hobsons Edumate. He can be reached via email: tom.march@hobsons.com

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