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What is Quality Learning for the Information Age? *Rethinking how we create learning environments*

In the 21st century, the body of knowledge humankind has at its disposal is growing exponentially. The "half-life" of knowledge continues to shrink as the overall expansion of knowledge occurs. Put another way, this means that what may be considered the "truth" or correct information one day may become outdated and replaced the next day. Just look at a world map from a couple of years ago and compare it to today. Now expand this idea to science, art, literature, mathematics, music, engineering, technology, etc. and you will quickly see that simply teaching students what they need to "know" doesn't cut it anymore.

Our students must be able to "think" in a process where they are perpetually learning and un-learning in an ongoing cycle rather than simply learning to know. Therefore, learning environments that are built on a teacher/textbook centered learning model that expects students to memorize rapidly decaying information that is disconnected from the learners' life trajectory or fails to engage the learner in meaningful high cognitive demanding work is at best a futile educational effort and at worst a monumental disservice to the learner and to our society. In order for quality learning to prepare students for a rapidly changing world, the learning environments we create for students must also change.

To achieve this end, our practice as educators must change to support this shift in learner needs. The educational opportunity our students need today must be more of a learning platform that assists them to learn how to think independently rather than simply perpetuate the factory learning model designed to transfer knowledge from the teacher or textbook to the student as if their minds are some sort of biological file cabinet. To do this, we must create powerful, internally motivating learning environments that harness the energy behind every learner's innate human need to learn. This work must begin with a redefinition of our roles as teachers from being simply deliverers of content (sage on the stage) to seeing ourselves as learning environment leaders (guide on the side) who use the content to develop independent life-long learners. Put simply, quality learning environments must be refocused to help students *learn how to think* rather than *learn what to know*.

A *Learning to Think* classroom (or better seen as a learning team rather than as a classroom) must be focused on assisting all learners to learn to think by using the content as compared to learning to know the content. The content remains vitally important but for a very different reason than we previously thought. Think of the content as more of a learning topography that the learners immerse themselves into so as to learn to think and thereby be able to learn anything (beyond the content used) independently of the teacher. In other words, the content is a means to an end rather than the end itself. A *Learning to Think* classroom is: 1) Designed to consistently engage the learner in both real and meaningful learning endeavors that expect the learner to have cognition beyond the memorization level; 2) Allow learners to receive and add on to multiple flows of information within and around the learning targets/objectives; and 3) Be built upon a foundation of trust that everyone within the learning team (learner and leader) has an innate need to own their own learning.

In conclusion, as educators we need to have a shift in thinking around how we create learning environments for our students. Failing to do so is similar to trying to teach someone how to drive a car by only seeing the image from the “rear view mirror”. As leaders of learning environments, we ourselves must look through the “windshield” and into the future and recognize that all signs point to a rapidly changing body of knowledge that our students must face. In other words, our students must become independent learners (i.e. thinkers) for a lifetime rather than simply knowers of information. This outcome can only occur if we ourselves as educators examine and change as needed first so as to create quality learning environments that are built upon learning how to think. Then and only then will our students have a real opportunity for quality learning for the information age.

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