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WHAT DOES THE INFORMATION AGE HOLD FOR EDUCATION, IN LIGHT OF OUR JOURNEY SO FAR?

by R. E. Bixby

In my heart of hearts I believe that the drive to learn, for its own sake, is a virtue. There will always be individuals who embody this virtue and, as trusted and well-read friends, try to impart this virtue to others. The role of Teacher, like clergy or artisan, is woven into the fabric of humanity, and is fundamental to our conception of society.

But are schools? Haven't some of our greatest Teachers been wanderers? Socrates meandered about Athens employing his method; Jesus pontificated on hillsides and beside streams. Teaching and learning are not bound by bells and walls. Schools are surpassingly effective at making students perform the process of school without imparting the critical thinking and problem solving skills that are empowering, timeless, and increasingly marketable in the information age. The uncomfortable truth is that a student with sufficient motivation and internet connectivity could receive a world class education without ever stepping foot outside of their bedroom.

The existence of schools has been predicated upon their role as "knowledge repository" and providing a place within the community for ideas to be exchanged. The internet has usurped this role; whisked the rug right from underneath schools. In the information age, schools and adolescents are tasked with the same uncomfortable mission: establishing an identity in these changing times (you'd hope this would make schools a bit more empathetic to the adolescents).

Is it wise to continue to require, to legislate, that our children spend a specified number of minutes (and that is how they legislate it, down to the 60th of an hour) in the confines of public schools for 13 years of their lives if these institutions are no longer the most effective means to an education? Doesn't the time commitment alone, not to mention the financial burden, create an imperative for schools to justify their continued investment?

My powers of imagination lead only to this probability; in the next two decades we will see a divergence of Education and School. The "school movement," mired in red tape and bureaucracy, will flounder as it tries to ride wave after wave of reform, watching the vestiges of its identity drift away. The "education movement" will rise as a partnership between those who love learning or who directly benefit from it; business, non-profits,

and former school workers who have jumped ship (I, not so secretly, hope to find myself upon this life-raft).

It will be a rocky and experimental time, and who knows what may come. Will students be babysat as they are taught entirely online? Will students even have to physically show up? Imagine virtual reality school from the comfort of your bedroom. Will we have robot instructors? Or holograms? Where will these astounding technologies lead us? Could it be an impetus for the renaissance of the Wandering Teacher, reimagined in digital form? Is John Green already filling this role?

One aspect of our current school system that CANNOT abide is the factory model of school. If schools are to endure, in any form, they must embrace the flexibility and fluidity of the digital age. The factory model of school provides a framework in which efficiency and security can be maximized and school business can proceed unencumbered. It would be nearly impossible for school leaders to replicate the mesmerizing choreography of getting 2000 students through a single cafeteria in 80 minutes without the structure of the factory model. The benefits of efficiency DO NOT outweigh the limitations this model imposes on learning and personal development.

If schools are going to continue to be important to our everyday life, they are going to have to carve out a new niche. Fortunately, schools could still fill a vital role in our society. The sad truth is that schools are the safest place some children go in a day. Schools are also the only place many children come in contact with a caring adult. Since there are laws dictating when, where, and how children are to be educated, the requisite "revolution" that schools so desperately need will be bogged down in politics. Students will be stuck in pedagogical limbo as lawmakers flounder about with their nonsense. It will be slow going and ugly to try to dictate best practices for all students.

In summary, Education will continue to change and thrive in the digital age, but School will remain relatively unchanged. Everyone will be quick to acknowledge that this is foolish and that the system is broken, but little will be done to change it. The one upside? Students will still be exposed to teachers, some of whom have passion and insight that can transform a student's life. At least we'll have that.