

Excerpts from "Flat World, Flat Web, and Flat Classrooms" by David Warlick

It would be a mistake, I believe, to think that we could fix education by developing more games related to curriculum and bringing them into the classroom, for the same reason that it was a mistake to think that putting computers in our classrooms would make our children smarter. What we should be doing is paying very close attention to our students social networks and their video game play. We need to identify the energy. We need to isolate and describe the fundamental elements of their experiences that make them so compelling and meaningful. And then figure out how to integrate that energy and those elements into our classrooms to engineer and power learning engines.

I would suggest, at this early juncture, four sources of energy, and five fundamental elements of the video game experience. Energy might come from...

- **Curiosity** – People want to learn. They want to know. They want explained for them what confounds them. This is true of all people unless that need to know has been shaken out of them by destructive learning experiences.
- **An intrinsic Need to Communicate and Influence other People** – We see this clearly in our students as they spend hours online writing and reading. There is energy here.
- **A Grounding in Heritage** – Learners need a context. They need something to belong to, someone or something to become, that is part of the world that they share with other people.
- **An Orientation to the Future** – This is another context, but not one that can be easily or reliably conveyed. This one should be left up to the kids, their imaginations cultivated by teaching, conversation, and curriculum.

Looking more broadly at the millennial experience with IM, Text messaging, social networks, and especially video games, we should be identifying elements of these experiences that seem to generate energy, learning opportunities, and to maintain the engine of learning. Here are six such elements that we might start to explore.

- **Responsiveness** – This is probably the hallmark characteristic of the millennial experience. All of their activities, especially video games, happen in totally responsive environments, where nearly every message, action, curiosity, inquiry, and decision is responded to in some way. Think about the clickable teacher, the clickable classroom, the clickable textbook.
- **Convert-able and Converse-able Rewards** – The rewards that students receive in their video games and online interactions are not concrete, nor can they easily be converted into concrete rewards. However, they do carry two qualities that seem especially valuable to students. One is that our youngsters want to talk about them. I frequently overhear conversations between video gamers, as they

compare their levels in various games and then discuss the strategies that they used to achieve their position. There may also be some attraction to the fact that as gamers excel to new levels of play, the play environment changes. What rewards for achievement might we invent that students will want to compare and talk about, and how might we add to their rewards new classroom experiences, opportunities, and responsibilities.

- **Personal Investment** – One of the first lessons learned by video game developers, especially games where the player is encouraged to contribute to their world, is that it can't be free. When the player must acquire, either through play, developed skills, or a virtual job, currency with which they can purchase digital assets and raw materials with which they can invent and build digital assets, the game increases dramatically in its stickiness – the likelihood that players will return.

Students spend their time, effort, emotion, and learning in their classrooms. How might the classroom convert that investment into a return that students can not only identify with, talk about, and share, but also into assets that they can re-invest into more learning and intellectual accomplishment?

- **Identity** – Most video games and social networks enable participants to claim or create an identity. One of the central features of most social networks, such as MySpace and Xanga is the profile, a page that the user can establish and maintain to express their identity. Many video games also provide for an amazing degree of personalization as players chose from an array of avatar characters, clothing, gestures, sometimes even making their own digital assets to further distinguish their identities.

At the same time that we continue to help our students to master national, state, and local standards, how might we also encourage, support, and celebrate their expertise in topics and skills of personal interest and then re-invest that expertise back into the classroom?

- **Dependability** – This one is almost too obvious to mention, within the context of teaching and learning. However, it is a core element of the compellingness of video games – that the answer is always there. There is an end and that end is reachable, and reaching it is expected. The solution to the problem only needs to be found through logic, observation, and resourcefulness. This same sense of dependability must be a part of students' formal learning, that the end is always in reach, and that the answers and skills are only a matter of working the classroom, the textbook, and the teacher.

Conclusion

When the world becomes flat, then new engines for commerce must and will emerge. The question must evolve from, “Why are we outsourcing all of this manufacturing?” to “What do I need to know to facilitate supply chain?”

When the information landscape begins to flatten, new protocols must be understood, new flows of content engineered, and audiences harnessed into content engines.

When our classrooms flatten, and our students come in more knowledgeable than their teachers about a technology that is central to our society, then the definition of teaching, learning, and education changes. Teachers become less deliverers of knowledge, and instead become engineers, harnessing their students into perpetual learning engines.

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