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21ST CENTURY LEARNING ■

In a World of “Us-ness”

By Sarat Pratapchandran

In the morning when a child walks into a classroom, he should feel a sense of belonging. In simple terms, this defines the world of “us-ness,” a concept that noted educator and new media expert, Prof. Stephen Heppell says plays the most important part in designing a new learning facility. Stephen, Europe’s leading technology guru, delivered the keynote address at CEFPI’s Annual World Conference & Expo in San Diego in September 2008.

In every way and sense of the word, the concept of “us-ness” urges us to change the world. In Stephen’s ideal world, “us-ness” happens through conversations and acts of helping people help each other.

As schools worldwide are struggling to define professional development...how does that relate to “us-ness?” Are teachers literate

enough to understand the fast-changing needs of today’s children? Are teachers talking to children about the quality of their learning?

For those engaged in designing and building spaces, there is a huge challenge out there: how can you build schools that are agile and responsive to the needs of 21st century learners?

As we stand at the cusp of the first decade of the 21st century, we are witnessing revolutionary technologies that not only bridge the digital divide but provide a transformative way to change learning everywhere. We need to revisit the way schools are being built. According to Stephen, investments in educating children on a per-stu-

dent cost basis could vary from \$8,000 in the United Kingdom to \$60 per annum in Kurdistan but, buildings nor per-capita investment in education alone will not make a difference unless we understand what learners need.

We need to revisit the way schools are being built.

Assess Children's Needs Before Designing Schools

Stephen advocates a critical assessment of the needs of learners before designing spaces. According to him, the old factory model is dead and today "we are competing for children's attention." The power of personalization to inspire every child has taken precedence over anything else. Learning is becoming global and transcending geographical locations where schools are housed. Communities that value new trends and opportunities in education are no longer taking cookie cutter approaches to building schools. We are moving rapidly from the fast food era to gourmet learning in terms of building schools and the most successful ones are being created with local recipes.

Competition for children's attention is the biggest thing in education these days. Old school practices of inoculating children with information are giving way to novel techniques that engage them in conversations.

In Stephen's lexicon, mutuality and sharing mark the triumphs of 21st century learning. Here, children curl-up together in an environment of collegiality, of friendliness and shared strength.

Policymakers Should Adapt to Today's Needs

From time immemorial, the world of policy-making in educa-



Children prefer personalized spaces in an environment of mutuality. Courtesy: heppell.net

tion has not changed. The bureaucratic delays, five-year and ten-year plans, short and long-term plans...Well, we do not have the comfort of waiting to make lengthy, time consuming plans and decisions. "There are no more five year and ten year plans in education as the field is moving too quickly," Stephen adds. "It's not like the eighties."

Policymakers should be determined and focused on cultivating smart, happy children. They should have a passion for learning and not just make education a repository of diploma mills. As an example, Stephen describes a school in Scotland where children play Nintendo's popular "Brain Age" games twenty minutes everyday before class begins. Will the "No Child Left Behind Act" work there? Perhaps, not.

Another myth that is being dispelled is the amount of huge investments needed to create models of educational excellence. The economies of scale are gone and today geographical proximity is not

needed to promote excellence. There is so much "thinking out of the box" going on in education today that a one-size-fits-all approach is diminishing. For example, a tiny school in Australia is experimenting with having its 11-year-old students sit in class with undergraduates. Meanwhile, a school in England has shut down its staff room and transformed it into a "chill out" room for learners.

Long-term Planning is Now Extinct

With the advent of 21st century learning, planning a school for 50 years is almost non-existent. "Why not build a school for one month, for five years?" Stephen asks. People are now challenging the basic assumptions of building schools. Excelling schools are being built into "little bases of learning" in areas such as Iceland, Australia, and Europe. According to Stephen, about 7 billion dollars worth of schools are now being built without any corridors. They are being built as open spaces in comfortable settings for people who don't need a

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New technology is changing the way children learn. Courtesy: heppell.net

bell to move from one classroom to the other. They will study in a world of project-based, mixed-age learning; mutuality; collegiality; creating a family and feeling of belonging.

Alongside, the world of conformity in education is dead. Neither is there a world of uniformity, as individual learning styles differ. Instead, it's again a world of "us-ness," a powerful feeling of belonging.

Why do we want to build schools that are still in the age of conformity? Why do we want children to listen to rigid regulations that riddle the mind with a lack of curiosity, inquisitiveness and the capability to take on challenges? Why?

Additionally, the days of mindless jobs in a heavily industrialized world are fast fading. Robots now perform the mindless jobs abundant in industrialized nations. "We don't need mindless children anymore," he says.

Engaging Children Matters Most

Children should be ingenious and they should learn to collaborate among themselves. During the factory age, curriculum was delivered

Inside an "In-betweenie space"

Do you know what an "in-betweenie space" is? This is now the most important space that designers need to consider when creating buildings. It is a rather interesting space between now and not now and somehow needs to fit in the design of the 21st century learning environment.

The *in-betweenie* space is less pressured and more reflective – a space where children take time to reflect and respond to text messages, upload information on Facebook, Tweeter... These spaces contrast with the old, synchronous model of children sitting in straight rows in uncomfortable desks. "We have to build asynchronous spaces for children living in an "in-betweenie" world and that is a great challenge," Stephen adds.

For information on this and other innovative 21st century learning examples, visit heppell.net.



Children huddle together in a world of “us-ness.” Courtesy: heppell.net

with the agility and the mutuality to develop centers of learning. Parents in these communities will work together and they will listen to the learners’ voices. They will work with children in both good and desperate circumstances and build spaces that personalize learning for every child. ■

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and wisdom was received. Sadly, in several parts of the world this remains the preferred method in education.

The “cells and bells” schools are now confined to the last century and don’t focus on creating exciting places of learning. In these days, engagement is the secret weapon in education. For example, in Thailand, family learning centers are being developed; in Denmark, there are playful spaces for children.

Planners should craft multifaceted spaces that promote collaborative work through ubiquitous connectivity.

According to Stephen, open spaces in schools reduce crime and incidents of violence. Conversely, corridors and stairwells are prime

culprits leading to stabbing incidents in schools everywhere. Planners should craft multifaceted spaces that promote collaborative work through ubiquitous connectivity.

Learning in the 21st century is electrifying, engaging and delightful. “We are in a world where we let children do it their way and celebrate their insight and wisdom.”

In 21st century learning institutions, children can’t wait to show parents what they learn at school. The one-way delivery model has met its own demise. For example, in a school in the Cayman Islands, a community is transforming education by specifying what they expect out of learners. They want learners to be critical thinkers; problem solvers and global citizens competent with technology. They also demand that teachers be adaptable, confident decision-makers and lifelong learners.

In an extraordinarily competitive world, Stephen believes there will be a few small regions that are frontrunners in 21st century learning. They will be “bright lights”