A Dangerous but Powerful Idea - Counter Acceleration and Speed with Slowness and Wholeness

The Dangerous Idea

Speaking at the Global Summit in Sydney, Australia, last year I had the distinct impression that the ideas I presented were perceived by the audience as both 'dangerous' and 'powerful'. Dangerous ideas, as Richards Dawkins puts it, are those that '…generally run counter to and cause consternation to, the majority in a particular age, who thrive on familiarity and fear change' (Dawkins 2006, cited in Brockman 2006:304). Put simply they challenge the dominant paradigms of the time and can be described as heretic (Brockman 2006). Dangerous ideas that go beyond merely questioning fads and fashions, or even challenging memes, can be powerful ideas; ideas that foster creativity and spawn innovation in the truest sense of the word.

So what is the dangerous idea I have been exploring and why do many people across the world consider it powerful? The dangerous idea is that school reform, in India in particular, but across the world too, is impossible.

Changing education, at the systemic level or at the institutional or school level, or educating teachers and school leaders in change can be classified as largely first order change - that of school improvement, which involves doing more of the same but doing it better (where the focus is on efficiency) and that of school re-structuring, which involves re-organising components and responsibilities (where the focus is on effectiveness).

The power behind the dangerous idea is the realisation that if one cannot reform education by improving the system or by re-structuring the schools, then the way forward must be through design. The need seemed to be to re-envision and to design a new system - one that supports both personal and social transformation creating 21st century learning. This thinking resulted in the birth of Project Vision.

The Genesis

The view of breaking up schools into smaller units is not new and a leading contemporary advocate for this is Deborah Meier, part of the Coalition of Essential Schools in New York, an organisation which is supporting and driving the small schools movement in the United States.

> The CES Small Schools Project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is dedicated to creating and supporting small schools throughout the country that are instructionally powerful and sustainable and that offer challenging curricula to students who have been denied a meaningful education. The Small Schools Project is committed to effecting broader change within the public education system and meeting the needs of young people and communities who have traditionally been underserved – students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Most of the schools are located in urban areas; however, as a whole, the body of schools is diverse, representing various geographic regions and demographics across the United States. (Meier 2004:para.1)

But small schools are again schools, and in my view can run into problems, as changing size or scale and not form, involves merely tinkering with the problem and omitting to address deep rooted structural and systemic causes of school failure. So while this might improve the quality of learning for the traditionally underserved, I doubt if it would cause liberation and transformation for the young people who's needs it aims to serves. Again these dissenting views on education, such as mine, are not new. Critical educators across the world, notable amongst them being Goodman (1978), Holt (1983), Illich (1972), Friere (1985 and 1987), Miller (2000) and many others, have long been advocates of more

revolutionary ways of freeing education Their list of dangerous ideas ranges from no schools to free schools. But while I agree with their fundamental position that the modern school enterprise is faulty, in that it fosters and supports values that are not sustainable or transformative, I found it hard to accept their ideas in totality. Other thinkers, such as the philosopher cum architect and designer, Alexander (1977) advocated the use of a 'pattern language' in thinking and designing educational spaces. Alexander's patterns of the 'shop front' school and 'the network of learning' are powerful ideas that have influenced both my design and my thinking.

> Instead of building large public schools for children 7 to 12, set up tiny independent schools, one school at a time. Keep the school small, so that its overheads are low and a teacher-student ration of 1:10 can be maintained. Locate it in the public part of the community, with a shopfront and three or four rooms. (Alexander 1977: 424)

I ended my search at the Lifelong Kindergarten Research Lab of Mitch Resnick and spent considerable time studying his model of after-school learning centres called the 'Computer Clubhouses'.

> The Computer Clubhouse provides a creative and safe after-school learning environment where young people from under-served communities work with adult mentors to explore their own ideas, develop skills, and build confidence in themselves through the use of technology. Established in 1993 by The Computer Museum (now part of the Museum of Science, Boston) in collaboration with the MIT Media Laboratory, the Computer Clubhouse helps youth acquire the tools necessary for personal and professional success. (Computer Clubhouse 2006:para.1)

The Computer Clubhouse, in its original thinking and as conceptualised by Mitch Resnick and Natalie Rusk at the MIT Media Lab., based its programs on the following four core principles:

- supporting learning through design experiences
- helping youth build on their own interests
- creating an emergent learning community, and
- working always in a climate of trust and respect.

The Project Vision hypothesis was finally conceived in Boston, at long meetings between Mitch, Natalie and myself. It translated ideas normally associated with the after-school movement or not-school movements into the potential of a full day learning project.

The Project Vision hypothesis breaks the form of schools, moving from that of a cathedral and/or large corporate monolith into small places eg. shop fronts, They are not purpose built but occupy spaces/crevices that integrate with, and operate, at various levels of scale in a city. The structural form advocated is that of community learning centres and ateliers or studios, and not that of the contemporary modern schools. The context of the project, similar to that of the Clubhouse and of the Small Schools Project in New York and Washington state, is the underserved, the marginalised children of the rapidly growing slums of world cities of today, such as the one I live in – Bangalore, India.

Children who live in the squalor of urban slums are deprived of many freedoms; those of space, of health and of childhood. The urban slum is indeed a grim environment and the children who live, play and grow up in these neighbourhoods see little to fill them with the hope of a fairer, more equitable future. Their lives are devoid of the most fundamental freedoms - those of health and hygiene, those of learning and laughter and those of

security and choice. More often than not, they are victims of abuse, violence and injustice arising from caste, class and gender based factors.
Project Vision addresses these fundamental inequities by shifting the notion of a school from a fixed place to a set of spaces that exist and operate simultaneously within and without the community. It does this in a way where flows of knowledge and understanding are created at and through many levels - physical, emotional, cognitive and psychological – in ways that interact, making the end transformative.

The Re-Designed Concept - Places and Spaces

The Project Vision Learning System is dynamic and is made up of four distinct, distributed, interactive and inter-related components that work in coordination with one another.

- The Community Learning Centres (Spokes-located within each slum community).
- The Idea-Media Centres (Hubs or Workshops-which serve different purposes and are common and shared spaces).
- The Expedition (Using the complexity of the real and the natural as sites for introspection, contemplation and active, participatory learning).
- The Network (Wired/wireless- links that integrate the Drishya Community members with each other and with the outside world).

The Community Learning Centres are small and basic, nested within urban poor communities.

They have become powerful places for transformative learning and the place where minds awaken everyday to new ideas and new ways of constructing knowledge.

Figure 1: The Community Learning Centres

The first component in this model of learning is the community and is represented as a space in terms of interactions and experiences, and as a place in terms of a community learning centre (see Figure 1). In most cases it is not more than a room but here is where the learning is integrated into the life and needs of the community. This is where the key goal of transformation through literacy takes place - literacy not in a narrow sense of learning letters and numbers - but in a broader Freirian sense - of learning to develop the capacity to transform oneself and one's life (Freire & Shor 1987).

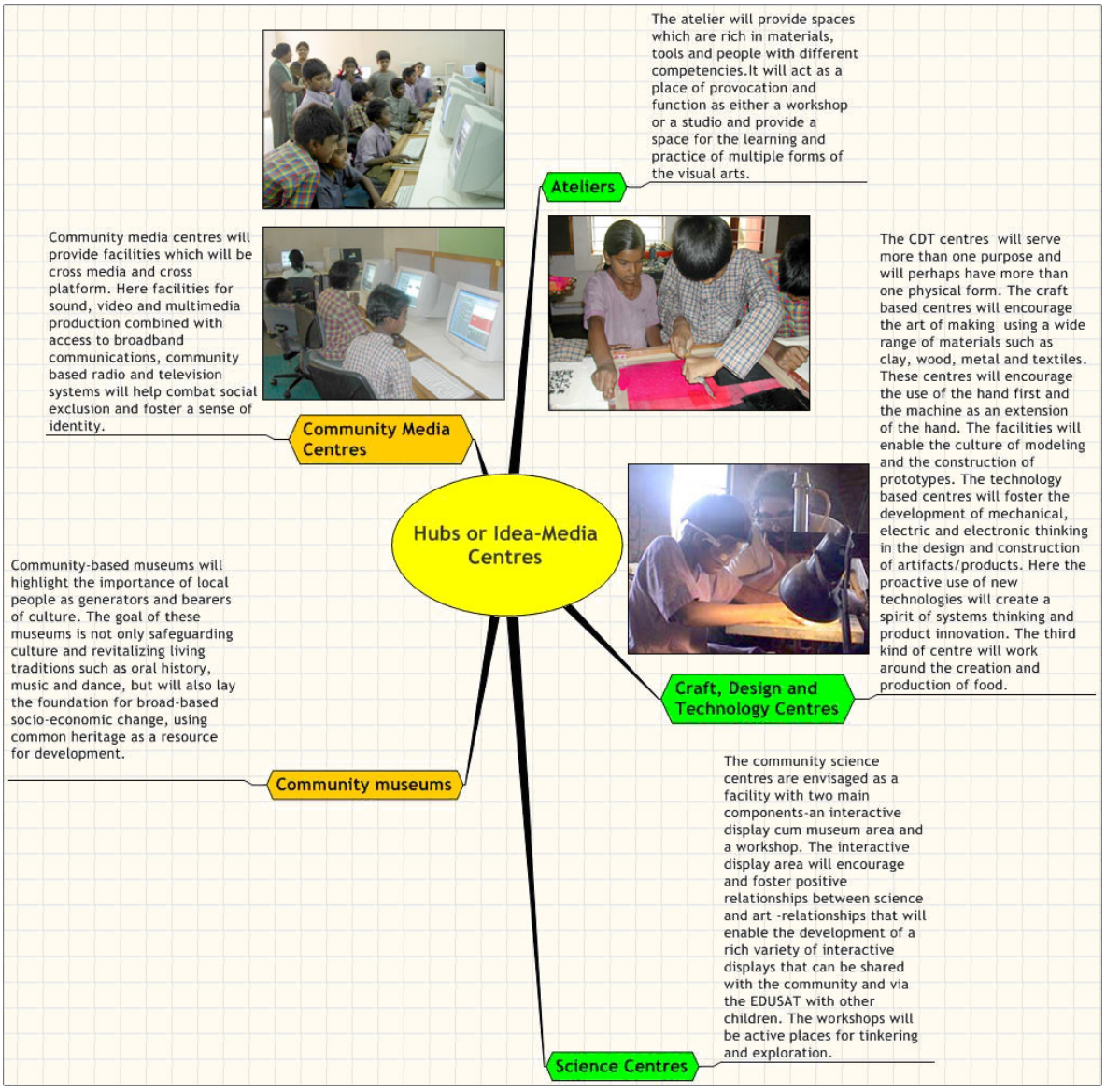

Figure 2: Hubs or Idea-Media Centres

The second components are hubs for learning which is specialised (see Figure 2). The hubs represent the spirit of the commons and constitute facilities that can be shared with many communities and which can serve several purposes in different ways. They could be community media centres, community museums, ateliers, or laboratories. At these hubs or idea-media centres students can access resources, materials and tools, with which they can think, create, design and invent. As a space they are represented as opportunities and materials and as a place as studios, workshops and labs. The hubs/centres tagged in green are studios; labs or ateliers that are owned by non-governmental agencies and

which are open to young people from different backgrounds and with differing learning needs/styles. The hubs/centres tagged in yellow are those owned by the urban poor communities or by other communities of learners – such as after-school learning centres, located at local high schools/colleges.

Location: Nandi Hills – about 40 kms outside Bangalore.

The learning project was on the theme of 'Survival' and children, seated here in the serenity and calmness of the real woodland are discussing the complex interactions they have observed between living organisms and non-living components in a natural habitat.

Location: Kokkerebellur – a village around 75 kms from Bangalore - home of the famous painted stork and the pelican.

In order to understand concepts such as interdependence and change the children are mapping the village using participatory learning and action tools in collaboration with the local village community.

Figure 3: The Expedition

The third component (see Figure 3) is an outward bound one - where students get the opportunity to walk, to climb, to trek and to seek and work through challenges that are both physically challenging and emotionally satisfying. Learning through expeditions and in an experiential manner brings a sense of wholeness and harmony to those who rarely move out of the squalor of the inner city ghettos.

Media – demystified and owned absolutely.

The younger members of the community are listening to a radio program that was written, performed and recorded by their peers especially for them.

Taking the first step to building emergent networked communities.

Figure 4: The Network

The last component and perhaps the most critical one is of networking and community (see Figure 4). This would involve looking at space in a critical way - looking for both fear spaces and collaborative spaces within the individual children, and in terms of place it would alternate between wired communities and the wider world in a recursive and self referential manner.

Summarised, the project conceives of learning happening, not in a fixed place such as a traditional school, but in a set of dynamic interactions that occur in different places and spaces. It consists of a set of hubs, which are ateliers – with a studio, lab or a workshop philosophy and spokes, which are learning and knowledge centres located within the urban poor community. The learning opportunities offered within this project are not fixed – but emerge continuously in dialogue and negotiation with the community and students. Therefore, in contrast to conventional pedagogy, which aims to be child-centered and teacher driven, this pedagogy, is child-negotiated and teacher-framed. Beauty and rhythm, aesthetics and ethics form a core to a process of learning that is design based and project driven. Learning by and through design; using the arts as ways of seeing, looking and telling, form valuable approaches to this vision.

The Powerful Idea

Breaking the form of conventional schooling, thereby investing in the future, is not a dangerous idea but a powerful one. But changes in structure and form are meaningless without corresponding changes in pedagogy. It is here that Project Vision has achieved significant breakthroughs. Building on and developing the ideas of Holt (2000), Fuad Luke (2002), Manzini (cited in Thackara 2005) and Capra (2002) and by consciously embracing the core value of slowness – both as way of being and as a way of learning - has created the real capability for substantive change.

The concept of Slow emerged from the Slow Food and Slow Design movement in Europe and the United States and builds on and develops the ideas of sustainable living as a desirable future. Slowness as a pedagogy allows students to learn not at the metronome of the school day or the school bell, but at the metronome of nature, giving them time to absorb, to introspect, to contemplate, to argue and rebut and to enjoy.

Learning about metamorphosis and about the web of life in real time, by maintaining a butterfly garden, growing larval plants and simultaneously engaging in reflection, role play and scientific observation, is powerful indeed. The short flash presentation that accompanies this article illustrates the power of slow pedagogy as a counter to the current

culture of acceleration, which is necessitating the rapid learning of more content in less time.

In this small case study, I present the learning about metamorphosis and change and show how it can only happen in synchronicity with the actual real life processes being observed. The anticipation and the inquiry that resulted from this were very, very powerful and technology served, here, only to document and to create stories of the process.

The learning opportunities which foster slowness are created in such a way that they operate on three levels which are not discrete, linear or sequential. Taken together they enable experiences which foster genuine and sophisticated understanding.

The layers are:

- looking and listening
- exploring and thinking
- making and being.

The goal of our slowness pedagogy is to generate the more creative, more lyrical and the playful aspects of learning and represent it in the many languages of children - the language of movement or music; the languages of colour or shape; the language of images and of forms; the language of sounds and of feelings and many more.
In order to do this we arrange learning differently, because we are not-school.
The learning arrangements that we find foster and promote slowness are:

1. the circle which represents symbolically the spirit of unity and equality within the learning community
2. grouping learners in collaborative, vertical heterogeneous teams
3. using large blocks of time
4. themes or topics for study are not prescribed but are emergent. The topics are selected from student talk, through dialogue with the community or based on the individual experiences of a family or the interests of a child. It is not static and a given but is the constant subject of negotiation.
5. the learning is organised into projects - some seem to go on for as long as a term and others last just a few weeks. The facilitators at the centres help the learners frame their learning plan, research the topic and make decisions on the representational medium that will demonstrate and showcase their learning.
6. the learning materials are made using local content, in ways that allow them to be used and re-used and to be produced within the community at low cost
7. all learning is the result of direct first person conscious experience. This method or tool focuses on the transformation of the self and the awakening of the mind rather than on the transfer of knowledge and the acquisition of skills.

Conclusion

We live today in times of accelerating change. The pressure this puts on current educational systems and institutions to continuously modify and adapt is simply not sustainable. Further, this pressure is resulting in a disconnect between the means and ends of education. The larger democratic ideals of social justice, of interdependence and of co-evolution through cooperation and collaboration are being increasingly marginalised in favour of greater accountability through testing, the drive towards nationalised curriculum, which suffers from a ‘one size fits all’ mindset, and the need to develop competitive advantages in a networked world that has a globalised economic structure.

Accelerating change produces conditions of freefall and a culture of immediacy. This culture of immediacy in turn fosters and values fast knowledge which in turn runs counter to the development of both the self and the mind.

What slowness has allowed us to do is find the time to work on the mind and the body as one whole and not as two distinct and separate parts. Slowness has allowed us to work and focus not just on learning but on unlearning. Lao Tzu, Zen master, makes this point:

> To learn
> One accumulates day by day.
> Through reduction and further education
> One reaches non-action,
> And everything is acted upon.
> Therefore, one often wins over the world
> Through non-action.

Wholeness has allowed for us to be mindful and contemplative. To be mindful involves the conscious developing of the practice of emptiness, which facilitates recall through the activation of visual attentive memory. Our 'Memory Books' are tangible and vibrant artifacts that provide rich evidence of the value of this process.

But where is technology in all this? Technological fluency is critical to any growth and development today. But technological fluency should not be confused with technological determinism. The thoughtless and widespread use of technology as the universal solution to the rising need for fast knowledge is wrong and must be questioned. Often in developing countries, such as India, the term 'digital divide' is used to support the argument that the use of new technologies, alone, will create conditions of learning and hence social and economic change. That is not true and I remain deeply saddened by initiatives such as those that I see here in Bangalore where vans outfitted with computers are sent to the slums as an alternative to real, substantive learning opportunities. To me the new digital technologies are tools that allow for learners to develop their imaginations, to be able to play and to have fun, to be able to tell stories in different and exciting ways. But in order to generate value they need to be integrated into new forms and structures in an invisible and contextual manner, so that they work slowly and with great finesse to create an unquiet and critical pedagogy - one where new media arts can sustain social change.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Anita Reddy, The Dwarkanath Reddy Ramarpanam Trust and the Association for Voluntary Action and Service for supporting the ideas expressed in this paper at the Drishya Kalika Kendras in Bangalore India.

Useful Links

Overview of the CES Small Schools Project
http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/ssp/overview.html

Intel presents the Computer Clubhouse
http://www.computerclubhouse.org/

The Computer Clubhouse: Technological Fluency in the Inner City
http://web.media.mit.edu/~mres/papers/Clubhouse/Clubhouse.htm

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