

Blame Our Young? Or Use Their Passion!

We can do better than just laying the responsibility for solving our nation's problems on the backs of our kids

By Marc Prensky

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Obama does it. Colin Powell does it. Newt Gingrich does it. Columnists and editorial writers have been doing it for years. Even professional educators do it.

What is it? First they trace our country's problems to education, and then they lay the blame squarely on the kids.

"Pull up your pants!" says Colin Powell. "What you make of your education will decide nothing less than the future of this country," says Obama in his recent address to students. And by the way, (he implies) you're not living up to our expectations or meeting your responsibilities—or else I wouldn't need to give you this lecture.

You can read it in hundreds of columns in thousands of variations: If our country has no future, it's all our kids' fault. Why can't they work harder? Why can't they stay in school longer and get better grades? Why can't our kids be like the kids in Finland, Singapore, you name it? Why can't they stop our competitive decline by going into math, technology, science and engineering careers? Come on, kids, step up and solve our problems! It's what I call the "discipline" approach to education. In a recent Meet the Press appearance, Gingrich used the word "discipline" almost a dozen times.

Unfortunately, the "discipline" approach to education (i.e. external pressure, not self-discipline) is ineffective long-term, unfair to the kids, and, most of all, counter-productive. It is unlikely to get us any of the things we really need, and at worst, it will turn our kids off even further than they now are to formal education and learning. Because of this, all these attempts to reach young people by talking about "discipline" and "patriotism" have little effect.

A Better Way

There is, however, a different and much better way to approach and motivate our kids to learn. Not through *our* needs, but through the kids' own interests and passions. John Seely Brown of Xerox PARC and USC calls it "passion-based learning."

Nicolas Negroponte of MIT wrote me many years ago: "I believe that learning comes from passion, not discipline." Sir Ken Robinson, author of *The Element*, a worldwide best-seller about finding one's passion, agrees.

Our kids today are incredibly passionate, even our dropouts. If one were to ask them—which, incredibly, most of their teachers (and even most parents) never do—one would find passions ranging from the environment, to cars, to motorcycles, to space, to sports, to the Internet, to music, to dance, to medicine, to people, to coins, to history, to singing, to nature, to animals, to programming and robots, to business, and lots of others. Recently on a bus I heard a kid who dressed and sounded like the quintessential gang member say to his friends: "I'm a real Civil War buff—ask me anything."

Given today's powerful new tools and enormous opportunities to learn about whatever one is passionate about via the Internet, You Tube, Wikipedia, etc., our kids are getting their most important education (and the only one they really care about) after school, on their own time. Alone and with their peers they are watching, reading, making, sharing, and, most of all, learning.

We do not capture even a tiny fraction of all this learning-related energy in our schools. In fact, it's the opposite—we turn it off, by telling our kids, in no uncertain terms, what they have to learn (the curriculum), and how they have to do it (no cell phone learning allowed, for example.)

What if, instead, we asked the kids what their passion is, and invited them to follow and use that passion as a gateway to all kinds of learning—learning that will help our country and the world.

Wherever this has been tried—in scattered public, private and charter schools, and even MIT—it has been a resounding success. Kids flock to be part of something that allows them to follow their own interests.

A teacher said to me recently: "I spend so much time trying to put my own passion into my teaching; it just never occurred to me that each of my students has a passion too." They all do, and they're waiting for us to discover and use these passions. And when we do, we will get all the results we want, and more.

"Learn for the country?"—"No thanks." "Learn because there is something you love and are passionate about?"—"Where do I sign up?!"

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