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# LEARNING to LEAVE

HOW  
REAL-WORLD  
LEARNING  
TRANSFORMS  
EDUCATION





## Chapter Two

# New Ways



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In this chapter, we want to explain the principles behind and the reasons for generating New Ways of doing things which provide the basis for New Forms and the New Measures that facilitate, recognize, and credit learning that happens in and out of school.

**W**e will outline the key elements emerging as we muddle through our New Ways that help educators provide for equity in the learning opportunities and learning environments that they create for youth and students. We will show you how leaving to learn and RWL as New Ways form an essential part of the new. This chapter will set the stage for describing the New Forms of BPL which are the programs that have been devised and developed since LTL for bringing these New Ways into schools and in communities with youth whether they are in or outside of schools.

When we speak of New Ways, they aren't new, but we think that the way that we are bringing and applying them to education and learning is new. When we are talking about New Ways, we are referring to schools being *primarily* focused on learning rather than teaching; we are talking about Interests-Relationships-Practice being the focus upon which we design, construct and offer learning opportunities and support to youth and students inside and outside of school; we are talking about enabling, allowing, guiding, assessing and crediting young people for "how they are smart" rather than just "how smart they are" (in the first case, we honor a person's culture, competencies, intelligence and capabilities, in the latter, we honor content and limited standardized measures used for the purposes of comparing, sorting, and selecting young people). We are talking about off-track learning complementing (and often superseding) on-track learning; we are talking about, and we will need to explain these, "getting inside the outside", "with and want", "muddling through, mingling with, mattering to", "edge to center", tacit knowledge, fluid knowledge, and *real* real-world learning.

## Learning or Teaching

Egyptian Caleb Gattegno, one of the most influential educators of the 20th century, believed there was a subordination of teaching to learning. His approach to education turned the traditional paradigm on its head when he recommended that teaching should adapt and respond to actual learning as it unfolds in real-time. McCandlish Phillips, writing in *The New York Times* (September 28, 1970), claimed that Gattegno, "does not therefore challenge American education on some point of methodology; he challenges it in the way Copernicus challenged the belief that the sun revolves around the earth - that is, at the heart of its most fundamental and most honored assumptions." Gattegno's words and insights remind us that for every statement in educational systems starting out with the phrase "know and be able to do" and not also "do and be able to know", we have lost the quality in learning and knowing.

It seems to us that if you think of nearly any school, at any level (K-College), anywhere in the world, you will find that they are designed primarily for teaching. Look, for example, at the architecture (corridors leading to classrooms, classrooms set up for a teacher to teach), the schedule and timetable (designed and refined for teaching), the formal curriculum (usually set up as separate subjects to enable teachers with specialized knowledge to cover specified content), the school rules (in place to make sure teaching can function in an orderly manner), and assessments (testing - mostly standardized - to ensure teachers are teaching and covering the content of the curriculum). Of course, any school is concerned with learning BUT they are primarily set up for teaching. And this matters as it creates the absurdity of a highly inefficient learning system even when one of its main tenets is striving for efficiency.

BPL schools, programs and assessments are designed primarily around learning. People don't just learn sitting quietly at a desk - we learn when we are walking, talking, playing, interacting, making things and breaking things, making mistakes and failing. We learn when all of our senses are engaged in school, out of school, in the park, at our part-time job, on the bus, in our room, at our grandmother's, in a garage, with our friends, through our interests, in relationships, when we are practicing - actually, we are learning all the time, everywhere. So, if we see the student as the curriculum and the community (or world) as the school, then our schools are going to look different, and so will our schedules, our exams, and the places where we are "allowed" to learn for credit and credentials.

In conventional schools, learners are often inhibited towards, if not deprived of, learning opportunities because of a well or over-organized program established by educators for teaching, where students have few or no decisions to make on a day-to-day basis. When people are told what, when, where, with whom, and how to do something, they may learn some content and gain a level of competency, mostly through memorization and repetition, but this is nothing compared to a learner making decisions about what, when, where, how and with whom to learn, most especially if it is connected with their interests and happening with others who share that interest and are willing to demonstrate their skills while allowing the learner to practice them. Of course, limiting and constraining what, when, where, how and with whom to learn stifles student agency. What turns information into knowledge that sticks is where there is agency, allowing us to pursue and practice our interests with others.

There was an increasing and well-founded skepticism even before Covid in the U.S. and in many European countries of the currency and value of a college degree. This has led (and has heightened as a consequence of families' experiences of school during the pandemic) to a questioning of the curriculum, role, purpose and practices of school, (high school in particular), which is primarily focused on teaching and preparing students for college. According to Philips and Jenkins (2018), "... the highest concern of families was this: Schools have a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching students, leaving behind those who are confused or struggling. ... Focus groups conducted with families around the country have found that ... families know exactly what their students need for an uncertain future: knowledge and skills. ... A similar project conducted by the Alliance for Excellent Education found, Students are not learning the knowledge and skills they need in the real world" (6-7). And, once again, the quality of learning is suffering because we are always putting knowing before doing and the abstract ahead of the concrete.

## Interests-Relationships-Practice

One of the stand-out programs of BPL that will be described in detail in the next chapter is the Harbor Freight Fellows Initiative, which was designed around Interests-Relationships-Practice to enhance CTE, to highlight the rigor and vigor of the skilled trades to the public, and to identify and encourage youth with an interest in a skilled trade to participate in a 120 hour apprenticeship experience connected to their interests. The lessons from Harbor Freight convey several insights gained through implementing the program - and these insights

are not just relevant for CTE and the skilled trades but have implications for any educational program - and they are of even more relevance because most of the students involved as Harbor Freight Fellows are NOT in BPL schools but attend conventional high schools.

Stories of our Harbor Freight Fellows emphasize how youth operate in the world outside of school as they also receive instruction inside of school and how this can be brought inside of school then back out into the community as legitimate ways, forms and measures of learning. This is “getting inside the outside”. We have been learning from Buckminster Fuller by **“doing less with more”** through our New Ways, New Forms, and New Measures. Whatever level of restructuring or reforming educators might accomplish, it is likely to be built on a weak foundation because they are constantly reforming something that is not working. So, in that vein, let’s not waste more time with reforms and let’s get on with New Forms. And, once the new form replaces the old form, as Mae West, one of the many famous dropouts from Elliot’s old high school, said, “Too much of a good thing ... is wonderful!”.

That said, we realize that in a theoretical sense there is no such thing as starting from scratch. But also remember, you are not reading from a policymaker’s perspective here. As practitioners, we are informed by evidence but our stuff is not based solely on evidence from research that mostly is done by isolating to a single variable. It would be wise for both policymakers and researchers to heed that message before they unscientifically objectify their findings as if those findings are without bias. As Yogi Berra used to say, “In theory, theory and practice are the same but in practice they are different.” Call it what you like, our use of “emerging” and muddling through to get better at what we do is reserved for practitioners who can inform the field.

Therefore, it is much easier for us to start with more of a blank slate rather than patching up the existing system with its culture, structures, regulations and rules that, by definition, limit what you can do and usually stand in the way of the transformation that is needed.

How can we get students out of school and learning in the real world with mentors if we are tied to Carnegie Units and so many hours of “seat or instruction time”? Talk about agency. All this limits agency unless you break established rules and ignore the constraints of the system.

There may be some hesitations, cultural impediments, or restrictions in some schools or districts in relation to internships and leaving to learn opportunities being offered to all students, but there is no doubt that educators see the benefits. The chance for students to pursue their interests, practice and learn new skills, build relationships with adult mentors, search for meaning in their lives and expand their learning, career, and life opportunities is compelling. These opportunities create deeper and richer learning experiences where youth can explore and pursue their interests and engage in real-world practices guided by adult mentors who share their interests.

We have been asked many times and told that it is all fine a good to follow your interests but there are times, especially if you are poor or down and out, when you need to work to support yourself, your family, your children and you don’t have a choice but to take any job - even one you don’t like, so you can make ends meet or survive. This is especially the case if you are a woman, a person of color, someone with learning differences or gender preferences outside the norm that limits your options in the world we live in.

This is a very legitimate question. As a general response, what we do and what must be done with each and every student is to start at a young age when students and youth explore, figure out and try out what they are interested in with people and in places where that actual work is being done. Doing this at a young age affords the opportunities to find work that is entry-level around what you want to do, giving you skills and certifications that ensure you have things to fall back on that you like to do for a variety of reasons (i.e., what you're good at it, places and environments that treat you well, where you can make a living wage, the hours that suit you, and what gives your life meaning). Having these types of RWL experiences where you have built social capital at a young age is a way of hedging your bets about work in the future. Acting now when students are young instead of waiting for a time when you don't have the time, is the prevention to the question about living a life where you have limited your choices because you did not pay attention to this when you were younger. The more students we can have engaged in RWL, the sooner we solve these problems.

What if I don't have any interests? What if a student doesn't have any interests? Even after decades of speaking about Big Picture Learning and student interests, we never stop hearing this question. And, we never get undone by it. Although, some people ask it to undo us. Or, more likely, to avoid honestly rethinking their practice (if an educator) or considering if their child's education should mirror the one they had 30 years ago (if a parent).

Educators and parents both feel the need for change, but most are caught looking in the wrong places for answers. One place they rarely look is within children themselves. Adults often opt for telling, instead of asking, frequently letting their interests get in the way of finding out what the young person is actually interested in or what their needs are. They jump into problem-solving mode without the child's help. And, sometimes what they've identified as a problem is actually a child simply looking for an affirmation about how they're feeling. They just want someone to sit with that feeling with them.

Starting with the learner and their interests causes dynamic shifts in how we approach education and our engagement with students. When you start with interests, you don't know what a child is going to say, so you have to listen. This immediately changes the dynamic and the role of the teacher from one who knows content and answers to one who has to learn and find out. But, listening is not the only way we discover interests. Teachers need to observe students, and parents have to see what their children are doing. And, together, with the child, they need to design learning experiences that honor those interests.

When framed around interests, practice, and relationships, the benefits of leaving to learn are evident in the rich learning that happens when students leave school with a purpose. Students will encounter adults skilled in their interests, have opportunities to practice and develop new competencies, and they will experience new and interesting things. The research indicates that when this is the case (i.e., when students are pursuing their interests), this generates some of the best conditions for them to learn and benefit, to engage in exciting situated learning opportunities, and to develop autonomously. BPL and its programs are based on this well-

developed theory of learning, and there is a large body of research as well as recognized best practices showing that student interest, serious and deep practice, and relationships with adults lead to high levels of learning (Bloom, 1985; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Deci and Ryan, 2008; Coyle, 2009; Blustein, 2011; Kenny, 2013; and Freeland-Fisher, 2017).

Here's a TGIF from Elliot that attests to the power of leaving to learn built around Interests-Relationships-Practice and demonstrates the tacit knowledge youth gain when they have opportunities to practice and learn the "tricks of the trade" with experienced and supportive adults.



***Our Harbor Freight Fellows sessions at Summerfest featuring our Fellows Julie Torres, Fiona Nelson and Rakau "Rocky" Boikanyo were just amazing. We went from building Tiny Homes in Maryland to airplane maintenance in hangars in Vermont to a metal shop in Oakland. People stayed long after the sessions were over. Rocky's session included a live tour of the shop where he and his mentor Brian work. Rocky took out some of his metal art and a discussion ensued on where crafts, art and trades merge. In all of these conversations and demonstrations, it was apparent that our Harbor Freight Fellows' and mentors' use of language can only come from having done and knowing how to do work well. That's what tacit learning is and what schools need to be educated on, because in human development, grasping can precede and then forms language, but in schools that is rarely the case.***

***When Rocky talked about cold forging you knew he knew what he was talking about. There is a nuance and feel you get from someone who really knows. Another important point around how our education system is miseducating is when Brian Enright, Rocky's mentor, spoke so eloquently about being a mentor: "To be a mentor you want those you are teaching to become better than yourself." This is the difference between working for someone and working with someone, between teaching content and teaching a person. The system misses that one by a mile.***

## Off-track Learning

We wrote an article in Education Reimagined called "What are we losing by keeping learners on-track?", and we want to flesh out the importance of off-track learning as a new way. We argued that policymakers use big data to monitor student progress because they believe, as they always have, that by doing so, we can immediately identify who is on-track and who needs redirection, so everyone can graduate "on time." But, what does it mean to be on-track? What does a student know when they are on-track? Who knows they know what they know? What do we really know they know? And, when a student graduates "on time," what important things have we predicted in the process?

Policymakers and districts use graduating at 18 years old as an anchor because, from their vantage point, it is one of the only ways they can "easily" keep track. Therefore, "staying on-track" becomes an important phrase. This sounds simple to understand until you look at an individual person unattached to statistical averages. Once you do that, you

have to know the student and where they are in many more ways than we currently take account of. Policymakers are placing a heavy bet that a narrow set of measures will suffice in determining whether or not a student is ready to graduate into a world where they will be measured by employers and their communities in ways far more complex than a simple score on a test.

Can we make off-track learning “legal”? When we were kids, the only betting that was legal took place at the racetrack. Of course, there were plenty of bets being made off-track (Scott’s dad used to “run numbers”, in other words take bets for a bar on the south-side of Chicago called The Sulky Inn). Rather than continue wasting resources cracking down on it, off-track betting was legalized. What was illegal became legal. Like betting, learning occurs off-track. And, like the betting days of old, only on-track (in school) learning counts. Off-track learning isn’t illegal, but in the eyes of our education system, it’s seen as second-rate or of no concern of the school and what students need to be achieving. In the world at-large, so much profound high-quality learning is happening off-track. To meet policymakers in the middle, why can’t we use the same technology that tracks big data in the classroom to keep track of what students are learning in places beyond school - in the real world?

About a year ago, I was reading a story in *Craftsmanship Quarterly* featuring a high school student from Oakland (who we met above as a Harbor Freight Fellow). Rakau “Rocky” Boikanyo had been recognized as a Future Master for his abilities and skills. Rocky was shown displaying a prosthetic metal hand he had constructed in

two week’s time. Is this student off-track? Does his unique creation of prosthetic hands count even though it’s not part of any curriculum? Or, by doing what he loves, are he and students like him on-track? Can students get credit for being off-track from the standard measures? Are the schools adapting to the students or must it be the other way around?

At sixteen, guitarist and inventor of the multi-track Les Paul, another high school dropout, was asked by his mentor, Joe Wolverton, to join his band. Les Paul went home and told his mom,



***I don’t care about algebra and who sank the Titanic. Nothing means nothing to me, just Joe.”***

Was Les on-track or off-track? Why can’t we have schools that allow students to leave the school building, engage in their communities, and credit their learning around their interests and what is meaningful and matters to them? Isn’t this what micro-credentials are supposed to do?

Such stories aren’t anomalies; they are completely natural. And, they shouldn’t be ignored. By conventional school measures, Connecticut Congresswoman Jahana Hayes was way off-track. She left school to have a child, graduated from a high school that specifically served expectant mothers, took low-wage jobs, went to community college, and got a teaching job. While teaching, Jahana went on to graduate school and eventually became National Teacher of the Year.

Her story doesn’t stop there. Twelve days before Connecticut’s Congressional Democratic Primary, Hayes decided to run and came out victorious. She is the first African American

woman ever elected by Connecticut voters to be in Congress. She is one of only a few black members of Congress serving a district where the majority of the voting population is white.

We are motivated to keep our kids in school, but what's the why behind it? To keep them on-track? What if Congresswoman Hayes never had the experiences she had? Would she have made history? Do we take the time to understand or evaluate our decisions differently for the benefit of the individual student? These are difficult questions to answer, but if we had a system that credited off-track learning, Hayes would be off the charts. What can we make of that?

How can we credit off-track learning? Perhaps you think there are great risks in trying to account for off-track learning. But, what if with the technology we have, we change our system so that every student had a learning plan whether they are on-track or off-track by conventional measures, and we manage learning longitudinally? At BPL, we have been advocating and using a personal learning plan for every student for decades.

We could consider all of these people with all of these stories off-track. Some graduated "on time," and some did not. Perhaps you are side-tracked or, like Les Paul, you are multi-tracking. Even when you are on-track, we are all always learning somewhere off-track. Hopefully, someday soon, our system will learn how to fit every student, to honor and count the many ways students really learn, and to make off-track learning "legal."

The combination of on-track and off-track learning relates to fluid intelligence - a new way of thinking about learning for many. Fluid intelligence is how you connect what you are doing to other things you start doing. This is Van Gogh's quote -



***As you go deep you learn many things."***

School is the antithesis of this by going a mile wide and only inch deep. Andrea Kuszewski (2011), amongst other researchers, points out that all of the following increase fluid intelligence - discovering new things, thinking creatively, challenging yourself, doing things the hard way, and networking and socializing. All five of these ways largely describe the "how" of BPL and the New Forms for doing that in our programs B-Unbound, Harbor Freight Fellows Initiative (HFFI), Los Angeles Leaves to Learn (LALtL) and Project InSight.

## **Tacit Knowledge**

An interesting finding from the research that has been done on HFFI is the tacit knowledge that Fellows appear to have gained through their mentor and from practicing in a workplace. Tacit knowledge by definition is knowledge that is difficult to express or explain, and it is knowledge that one cannot get from books or simply from being taught. Such knowledge can only be obtained through actual engagement in specific activities in the context within which that knowledge is used and needed. Unlike school, classroom-based, online or simulated learning, RWL provides for the experiences from which real tacit knowledge can be acquired, practiced, embedded, improved and assessed. As renowned musician and teacher, Wynton Marsalis (2008) stated: "The best musicians know this music isn't about 'schools' at all. What is true about what musicians know is true in all fields and endeavors. Like my father says, 'There's only one school, the school of, "Can you play?"' (51).

Induce, reduce, deduce, produce and all the other ...duces are more commonly used by us than educe. Most knowledge that people have is the knowledge they don't know they have. This is tacit knowledge, where you know more than you think you know or you know more than you can say. This is where you educe what is already there but has not yet appeared - this is the meaning of educate, "to lead out".



**The Nose Knows - Jimmy Durante -**  
*"Your data sheet is not going to smell it."*



*This weekend, I got together with friends I have known since before we could talk. As it turned out, most everyone was interested in what I was up to but frankly, I thought what they were doing was just as interesting. Two of these friends were brothers, 14 months apart. One was a trauma surgeon at Daytona Hospital and now has a practice*

*working specifically on wounds that are hard to heal. The other went into commercial refrigeration and knows this work inside and out from fixing and repairing to the business. It appears that what they do for a living couldn't be further apart but what does this work have in common? What does healing wounds and fixing refrigerators and freezers have in common? It turns out quite a bit.*

*When I started talking to Steve about his medical practice and how he learned about trauma surgery and healing wounds, he revealed that he is a practitioner first and foremost. He's not a researcher or a policy maker and is proud that he has a practice. He's hands on. He told me that being a practitioner, "it is better to be thorough than brilliant" - a line I'm going to spend time thinking about. Interesting thing, when his brother Robbie overheard him talk about being thorough, he chimed in and agreed; the same is true in his line of work. But, that wasn't the big revelation. The big eye-opener came when Steve told me he smells the wounds as part of the diagnosis and treatments. Different infections smell differently. Once again Robbie chimed in, "I smell the oil from the compressor." They both agreed this important diagnosis is learned in the field, not in a book or classroom. You can't smell this stuff in a book. It takes time to get good at it and know what the smells mean and what to do next.*

*Working Nation and the Ad Council are doing a really nice job getting the word out in the media with a campaign to remove the "paper ceiling" that prevents people from advancing because they don't have degrees. Here we have an old issue for us - qualified but not certified. Until tacit knowledge is accepted and counted as a measure acknowledging you can do way more than you can say, the paper ceiling will remain.*

*Outside of school, you see tacit learning discussed all the time but without people using the term. When I picked up The New York Times, I read an article about Willie Nelson turning 90, “Willie Nelson’s Long Encore”. For lots of reasons, I’ve had an interest in Willie Nelson. One being a story written about him years ago pointing out how whether in his music or politics, he is always working at the edge but somehow resonates with the center. Most people trying to make change start in the middle and never get to the edge - the place of their vision - let alone appeal to such a huge cross-section of people who did not start out agreeing with them. Like Willie, at BPL, we aspire to be more edgy and resonate with the center. I believe this is how to bring changes we want to happen.*

## Edge to Center

As with so many stories of young people’s potential being unlocked, it is often when they are exploring, adventuring, going out to the edges that they discover and find not only their interests but themselves and meaning in their lives.



*A decades-old meme has been trending among educators - student-centered learning - also known as personalized learning, personalization, and students at the center; doubtlessly, there are other variations. I fear these terms have been captured and held hostage by educators hell-bent on transformation that simply replicate what they have already. It is not clear how a system based on rigid and narrow learning standards, testing and centralized systems*

*and structures can aspire to place students at the center. And so, the debasement of language so common in our society continues unabated.*

*Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2022) advises: “As the criminal is sentenced in the court of law, so words are sentenced in the court of explication. Here in this court, academics are both judge and jury, both author and reviewers. Between them, they conspire to hold all words captive.” Admonished by Ingold, and yet wishing to contribute to the discourse, I offer here an operational definition of “students at the center.” It might be more accurate to say **student at the center**, since our BPL schools focus on helping each individual student - “One student at a time in a community of learners” - find their center, their stance, and their chosen pathways.*

*The key for me is to help the learner find and explore their interests deeply, part of which involves exploring the edges of their interests and using that exploration to then “center” their own pathway. The process of centering includes getting edgy - pushing back the boundaries of what is taken for granted. Inspired by Jane Jacobs (1993), a genius in thinking about our cities, might we have every student declare their edge as their center?*

*A centering process involves helping the learner to explore many edges to expand the learner’s vision and open up possibilities. Schools then help the student move between the center and these edges, often forming a new center. Schools can prepare the student to engage such center-to-edge, edge-to-center thinking and doing this as a lifelong learning process. The best*

*CTE programs and performance schools engage their students in such a process.*

*This work is guided by a strong evidence base but also by the observations of people who found their center - and keep rediscovering it - by going to the edge. Yo-Yo Ma reflects: “There’s a part of me that’s always charging ahead. I’m the curious kid, always going to the edge.”*

*I find that we’re good at talking about getting edgy, but too often it’s only lip service. Once the rubber hits the road; namely, once students actually start showing their edginess, we pull them back. As Zat Rana points out in his article, “Why Only Rebels Find Real Fulfillment” (2018, 18), we tell students:*

- **Don’t be an artist because you will never make a living.**
- **Don’t be an entrepreneur because you’ll probably fail.**
- **Don’t quit your job to travel because it’s shortsighted.**
- **Don’t take the road less traveled because it’s risky.**

*The world provides abundant examples of young people going to the edge and declaring it their center. In the civil rights movement, the Little Rock Nine did it. In the environmental movement and in the Women’s movement, it was those youth who broke new ground, just as it was in sports. The X games, surfing, and snowboarding were all started by young people. Similarly, in math, science, and the performing arts, it is our youth and their adult trustees, coaches,*

*and teachers, who are with them to break through boundaries where they find their center at the edge. This navigation of student centering is not at all relegated to only the best in their field but to each and every young person wanting to do their best at the things they love to do.*

*Years ago, a friend, Herb Childress, wrote a wonderful ethnography that turned into a book titled, **Landscapes of Betrayal, Landscapes of Joy (2000)**. Herb documented his observations of young people who attended a Northern California high school. He notes the happiness the students experience outside school, where they can be themselves and pursue their interests, and the unhappiness and boredom they experience in school. These students maintain a kind of equilibrium between the pull of the outside and the push from the inside that develops because inside and outside learning cannot be blended. There are many ways students get centered, but schools put students in situations where they can do little else but what schools want them to do. How edgy is that?*

*If we want to be student-centered, I suggest we start where students are meaningfully learning outside of school at the edges, mingling with people they want to learn from, inventing, discovering, creating, and seeking to understand. They go there to give their lives balance and find their center. They go to find the people and things that matter to them. It is then, as they “muddle through” and “mingle with”, that our work with them as teachers and mentors and supportive adults emerges to guide, manage, facilitate, enrich, and instruct. It is often then that they feel that they “matter to” and that their interests, skills, abilities, competencies and learning matter.*

## Muddling Through- Mingling With- Mattering To

In LTL, we made lots of references to Seymour Sarason's use of the term productive learning, a phrase he coined that meant for teachers to start with what a student wants to learn - don't leave them there but start there. The key word here is WANT. To move forward from LTL we are now taking WANT (interests) and WITH (relationships) in combination, saying this makes for one of the most powerful learning environments there is and one that is attainable for all more easily outside of school than inside and facilitated by a teacher. With and Want together is a one-two punch where a student and a mentor share an interest and develop a relationship which in turn generates high levels of what researchers and educators alike refer to as social capital.



**Livia**

*From the moment she was born, Our daughter was filled with anxiety. She was hard wired that way. Livia came out of the womb crying, and didn't stop for years. It wasn't just from hunger, or being tired or needing to be changed, it was because of the strong footsteps and the loud voices of strangers. It was the bump in the road and the honk of a horn. Livia met all of her age related milestones, but it was a just a little harder for her because of that anxiety. She was the last kid in preschool to transition away from her parents and the first to run to us at the end of each day. As she got older, school never got much easier for her. She did well in her classes, but she didn't love being there.*

*The one thing that was constant in Livia's life was her love for the ocean. Since she was tiny, she loved everything associated with the sea - the animals, the fish, swimming, boogie boarding and surfing. Whenever she*

*was assigned to write an essay or do some sort of a project, she'd always try to weave in an ocean theme. As she got closer to high school, Livia was not excited to enter the 2,000 plus student filled high school we live near. It just so happened that a new project based learning high school had formed and Livia was thrilled to hear that it had an internship component. One day a week, students would leave campus to pursue an internship based on their own passions.*

*Livia knew exactly what she wanted. She had her sites set. When she started at the new high school, she went to work securing an internship. She made a cold call to the executive director of the Bay Foundation, she set up an interview and requested an internship. Livia was paired with Katie, a young new aquarist who was heading up a program to raise and repopulate abalone on the Palos Verdes peninsula. Our shy, anxious Livia suddenly loved Wednesdays. Livia came out of her shell with Katie, because they shared the same passion. Livia could actually spend a school day learning by doing activities that she loved. She learned so much about aquarium care, the abalone species, and participated in research projects. Her confidence began to soar and she became excited to talk to people about what she was doing. She was proud of her work at her internship.*

*The school's leaving to learn program has given so much to Livia. She has gained confidence in her academic abilities, in interacting with peers and adults, and it has given her a sense of pride. She now can't stop talking about college and where she wants to go. Who is this kid? Our shy, anxious daughter has truly come out of her shell. She has confidence in her goals for the future and is excited to pursue higher education.*

Studies consistently elucidate the educational, economic and social benefits of internship and mentoring programs, and in recent years, research has become more nuanced to identify key variables or aspects of internships that generate the most benefit for learners. The research suggests that meaningful relationships are of most benefit to learners and indicates that relatedness is most likely to generate autonomous motivation in students. The newest research on this comes from a book, *The Good Life* (2023), the Harvard study which is the longest running longitudinal research of its kind.

The key finding about happiness and well-being has consistently been “having healthy relationships”. This cuts across being rich or poor and across race, class and gender. So, why haven’t schools paid attention to this data and made it a large part of their work? We feel everyone should, and although an obvious point, schools and colleges often overlook the fact that learning and interests become deepened through relationships with professionals in the community which in turn enhance life and employment skills. This happens because they are practicing and learning the “tricks of the trade” and receiving tacit knowledge in the relevant workplaces in relationship with adults who are working to real-world standards on interests which are shared.

The educational purpose of starting with interests is not singular. When you start with interests, you don’t know what a child or student is going to say or where their conversation is going to go. This is muddling through and mingling with, but listening is not the only way we discover interests, we also observe. By watching, you learn.



*It’s not always what you ask, but where you ask a question, that matters. There is loads of research on situated learning showing that you will get a completely different answer depending on where you ask a question. Asking in a student’s home, in a park, on the street, in an office or a classroom will conjure up all sorts of different answers or no response at all. Where you ask the question and what objects and people surround the student when you ask matters. This is why learning situated in a place of interest is so important.*

*It should be noted that interests are not careers and should not be used to direct students on specific pathways; instead, they should be harnessed as contexts for student learning. Most students in schools assume when an adult asks them what they are interested in, that the question is about what they want to be when they grow up. What we need to be asking is what students are interested in now. What do they want to get better at now, rather than what interest do they have that can be shaped into a career path. Asking for students’ current interests is very different than inquiring about what job they want when they are older. We ask about and seek to discover student interests for a very different reason.*

*In schools, students are asked or given an interest inventory to place them on a pathway - “to put you in a box and sort you”. When you ask, “What are you interested in now?” it is to engage them, to show that you are interested in what students are interested in and thereby develop a bond around interests. By asking what a student’s interests are, you are saying, “I’m interested in you through your interest”. This is*

*powerful and goes a long way to create a bond because “if you are interested in what I’m interested in, you are interested in me. I feel my interests matter and that I matter”. Now we are talking, and eventually we will get to interests that may lead to not one but many career options. “Students don’t care what you know, until they know that you care.”*

*I remember working with an advisor who felt she was stuck with one student, Chris, and just couldn’t uncover what he was interested in. As it turned out, I was right there when the student came over to her before the start of the day and showed her a sculpture of a sneaker he had made. Chris was telegraphing one of his interests but the advisor missed it. We spoke about it and then off Chris went in pursuit of those interests. This is an example of observing; the advisor had been “listening” for Chris’s interests but hadn’t “seen” what they were. It is a learning journey not just a pathway to employment.*

*When Johnny started at a BPL school it appeared that his interest was being a bike technician. He did have an interest and already had lots of mechanical skills in bike technologies. Although he learned a great deal from his mentor that translated into academic skills and social-emotional learning, it wasn’t until another year had passed that he took this ability to focus on procedures into the field of becoming an EMT (emergency medical technician) and then the next year a nurse. It wasn’t the mechanical, procedural skills that were the real motivators. The reality was that it was Johnny’s need to help people through the skills that he had. Johnny was all about caring for people. This was the interest he was pursuing. Unless you knew him and went on the journey with him, your guidance as an educator would have sent Johnny down a mechanical related pathway that was really not his interest. Mattering matters.*

## The Game Not the Score

Mae West who dropped out of Elliot’s high school in Brooklyn, Erasmus Hall, is famous for saying: “The score never interested me, only the game.” Schools should pay attention to this double entendre because we have a system that mostly pays attention to the score and not the game. Could it be that Mae West was onto something? Could it be that a key to engaging students in learning is to pay attention to the game and not so much the score?

“You’re wasting your time!” - how many times have teachers and parents told us that? Whether it was comic books, sneakers, video games, motocross, skateboarding, yo-yos, rock ‘n roll, hip-hop, graffiti and all of the accoutrements of clothing, coiffing and merchandising that align with these multi-billion dollar industries, schools told you that you were wasting your time.

Wasting time is precisely the point of play and gaming, but that doesn’t mean that the learning may not be deep. The French intellectual Roger Caillois (1958), called play, “an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money.” (But, he goes on to say), “Therein lies its utility, as a simulation that exists outside regular life” (6-7). Play is voluntary, not part of ordinary life, unserious, unproductive and uncertain. Bernie DeKoven (2013) in *The Well Played Game* states: “Play is the enactment of anything that is not for real. Play is intended to be without consequence. Play is for fun” (21).

It is fairly apparent that the difference between games and traditional academics taught in school is that the latter violates all of the rules of play. Precisely because school bills itself as serious and certain, it becomes the foil of gaming. In the hearts, hands and minds of students, it is often school and academics that become a pure waste of time and energy because school lacks what video and board gamers (and no doubt Mae West) refer to as the

pull of the game and its environment where players share an emotional connection that allows the participants to go deeper and practice longer.

Over the years, through our practice, observations and research, we have come to find out that the engagement and learning in these games are something that educators have missed the boat on in developing meaningful ways to engage students in learning that is “deeper than you think.” The deep construct, development and learning that ensue in games are things to admire and learn from not dismiss and condemn out of hand.

Could it be that gaming is tapping into something deeper within us about who we are and how we learn? The big question is: What can we learn that gaming is good at to keep students engaged and learners at the center? Let’s take a quick look at what is often referred to as Deeper Learning. Here are the five components normally associated with Deeper Learning.

- **Mastering Core Academic Content -** (specified outcome)
- **Thinking Critically and Solving Complex Problems -** (assessed primarily by prescribed examples and hypothetical situations)
- **Working Collaboratively -** (usually one grade given to a group for producing a result)
- **Communicating Effectively -** (only through text and verbal)
- **Learning How to Learn -** (based on prescribed tasks)
- **Developing Academic Mindsets -** (specified outcome)

Schools tend to violate the principles of play and gaming and in many cases the principles of being learner-centered. First off there are pre-determined outcomes that are decided on by the school, not the students. These are Mastering Core Academic Content, Thinking Critically and Solving Complex Problems and Developing Academic Minds. Next, it appears that deeper learning is only about working collaboratively and not working alone. Gamers do both. There is a time to work/play alone and a time to be in a network that is chosen by the player. Then, there is an assumption about communication, so the outcomes measured by school are judged by a written test or a verbal performance. Games are much more visual, tactile and tacit. The inclusion of these senses opens up access to young people who use these skills to learn. Furthermore, there is an assumption by schools that children can’t figure out how to learn and have to be instructed in learning how to learn. The opposite is observable almost immediately when children are gaming and learning naturally for that matter.

Here are a few more things that can easily be contrasted to school. While schools struggle mightily to engage students, gamers and players are engaged by the intentional pull of the game. While schools deal with set outcomes and narratives that have endings, play and games are frequently improvised and open-ended, and often controlled by the gamers. Schools are in charge of lessons and outcomes; gamers and players are in charge of making their own decisions in an in-the-moment environment - that’s agency. Schools are certain. Games are uncertain, filled with surprise and mystery. Games engage a person deeply when they have just the right amount of challenge and repetition. So much of school has either too much repetition without challenge or too much challenge without repetition. The result is boredom or low self-esteem for many students.

In case you have an outdated notion of the skills people use in gaming, it is not merely simple hand-eye coordination, pushing a button to destroy an alien or asteroid. In addition to knowing and manipulating ergonomically and anthropometrically designed game controls with a multiplicity of functions, gamers normally have to create and operate a character, manage and address a series of interconnected short and long-term objectives, and engage in text or verbal chats simultaneous to playing and responding to emerging situations.

In its present form, most of online learning mimics school and not the deeper underpinnings of gaming. Worse yet, some educators think the trick is gamification; this misses the point. What on-line learning is hoping to accomplish is what some video and board games have done. Through play, gamers have figured out the right combinations of challenge and repetition; sharing and feeling; narrative and improvisation; mystery and surprise; motivation and ownership. Significantly, all games involve interaction - with things, with people or both. Chris Crawford in *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1984) makes it clear that the crucial element to any game is interaction.

Thus far schools have consistently failed to do the combinations listed above with high percentages of students, and schools generally do not provide the crucial element of interaction to make learning meaningful. The sad fact of this is that school and its consequences are not a game - they have real meaning for fairness and equity in life, for young people, their families and our future. What can we learn from gaming and play to engage students? When players play the game, they are in charge of making decisions and dealing with the consequences in an in-the-moment environment. Are schools ready for the game or are they only interested in the score?

## Avanti

All of these New Ways in one way or another come back to or connect with RWL, and RWL is where it's at. So much of school learning, the old and present ways, can feel fake, forced, unnecessary, pointless or "only for the test". So much of schooling is future oriented and concerned with preparation - preparation for the test, preparation for next year, preparation for high school, for college, for work, for life - but where is the relevance for "now"? "Children, we have to do this because you will need it when you get older". The answer to so many questions that students ask about school and the answer to why they are being asked to do things they don't like, aren't interested in, don't care about or are struggling to understand is ... "it might be on the test", "you need it to get good grades", "you'll use it one day" or "you will understand when you are older".

Often the best way that people "spot a fake" is through our senses, by feeling that it isn't real, "there's something not right about this". RWL is only real when it starts from students' interests, when those interests are cultivated and furthered in the real world with real people who are doing real work, and when youth can practice "those things" for real, right now.

We believe and we have learned since LTL that the New Ways that flow from RWL are the way forward. They lead to New Forms and they call for New Measures. In the next chapter, the New Forms of BPL will be presented. These are all new since LTL came out in 2013 and it is from these practices, from doing and playing, that we see the way forward for transforming education.