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## News

Today: Wednesday, September 24, 2008

# Get Kids out of the Classroom!

Plug them into their community, and they thrive. Second in a Tyee reader-funded series.

By **Nick Smith**

Published: September 5, 2008

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Rather than keep her students behind desks all day, Vernon intermediate teacher Sharon MacKenzie told me last spring, she gets her students out of the school more than half of the time. They go to museums, the art gallery, the local electronic repair shop, the car dealership down the road. As she puts it, "No one is free from my grip."

"When I go to **Walther's GM**, they dedicate three of their staff to our kids for an entire morning. I now have four teachers, and three of them are experts. My kids are holding a piston their hands, and watching an air bag blow up, and they can feel the heat and the dust of that bag."

MacKenzie says to an outsider, it may just look like her class goes on a lot of field trips. As a fellow teacher, I can tell that she is, in fact, an expert practitioner who is putting into action what is known to educators as **Constructivism**.

In 1992, when I was one of a cohort of young people enrolled in **PDP**, the teacher education program at SFU, it was Constructivism that got me fired up



Educator Sharon MacKenzie: 'This is not hard.'

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about education. My classmates and I were told that the classes that we had drudged through as children, fusty with mimeographed sheets, outdated textbooks and grainy filmstrips, were a thing of the past. We would recognize that all people must create their own way of knowing about the world, assimilating and reconstructing understanding based on what they know.

Inspires series

Constructivism, the learning theory we studied, was a way of looking at how we become human that was so real you could hold it in your hand and feel its living pulse.

**Students turn profit for charities**

Once my cohort got into the schools, however, it became apparent that the ideas that charged us were only to be talked about amongst academics and that real teachers had a job to get done and no time for airy-fairy theories. Praise was bestowed upon those who could keep a class quietly seated and facing the front of the room, against the students' natural urges to get up, talk to each other and do stuff.

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Sharon MacKenzie received the same message to just fit in and go with the flow, but somehow she was not dissuaded. "It became a real drive of mine," she explains, "to change this so that it worked better for teachers and kids and would hopefully end up making a difference in our communities."

MacKenzie describes the Christmas store that she has her class operate each year. "We run it as a full business," she attests. First, she has **Junior Achievement** come to speak to her students about business principles. "They teach their course for an hour and 15 minutes each day for four days," she explains. "They come with all of the handouts and resources. All you have to do is phone them."

She elaborates, "We sell shares in it, we make prototypes. We select a student manager who interviews for the position." This past year, the children chose to manufacture specialty chocolates, jewelry and duct tape wallets. They made over \$3,000. MacKenzie then has the children calculate how much to give to each person who bought shares, and then to work out how much profit is left. Most of the thousands will go to charities of the children's

Conservative Gary Lunn.

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choosing.

"They stand up on a soapbox," she explains. "They share why they think that their organization should have the money. They decide what percentage goes to each. We have bought wells in Africa, paid for roofs to be put on; we helped a mom in our school who had cancer so that her family could travel to see her in hospital. This is not hard. It is just what we do. The kids love it year after year."

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### Two months at a seniors centre

One might think that this experience would form the highlight of any child's school years. Not in Sharon MacKenzie's class. That honour would be reserved for the visit to the seniors centre. "I move the class in there for two months," she reveals. "I gotta tell you, this is the most wonderful thing I have had happen to me; I have been blessed to be with these senior people and these children and to have watched these incredible relationships develop."

When I ask exactly what these intermediate students do with these seniors, she is momentarily at a loss, thrown off balance by the question's simplicity. "Oh God, that is why I have to write it all down." She explains, "Well, we read newspapers with them and scribe letters, we walk together, we watch baseball."

In trying to get this, I blurt, "You do this for two months?" which causes her to laugh and back up.

"Well, we set up our classroom in the chapel," she explains. "I set up my overhead and chart paper. We borrow tables. The kids bring their supplies in tote trays. We do our school work there and the seniors come in and tell us things they know. We interview them and write about their lives. We set the tables for their dinner, we write poems with them, we help with their fitness class, we go shopping in town, we look at old catalogues and compare prices. We have a talent show where both seniors and children share their talents. It is so rich."

Mackenzie speaks with the passion of an artist in the midst of a breakthrough or of an adventurer charting new terrain when she tells me about the senior men "with bits of Kleenex stuck to their faces," because they have got shaved and dressed early to meet with their junior buddies, or when she tells me of former students who are going into teaching because "I want to do what you do."

### 'A richness that is incredible'

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When Campbell River teacher Drew Williams met MacKenzie a couple of years ago, he committed himself to doing what she is doing. As he told me, "She has completely changed the way I teach."

He confesses, "I used to look at my students and think, 'You gotta be bored out of your minds.'" What keeps his Phoenix Middle School students interested these days is that all of his classroom activities are hands-on and community-based. "When you look at what your community has to offer," he declares, "there is a richness there that is incredible."

At MacKenzie's bidding, Williams successfully applied for a Ministry of Education grant to pilot a project-based learning program at the Grade-9 level starting this fall. Word must have got out, as he received 60 applications for 30 seats in a program that has never run before.

This past school year, he began testing the waters of community-embedded learning by taking his students to Yuculta Lodge, a seniors' facility. He recounts, "Out of the 23 kids, they only had positive things to say. Six of them took volunteer forms. These are 14-year-olds who aren't supposed to give a hoot about anyone else."

This approach has reinvigorated Williams' teaching practice. "For the first time, I can say that I love what I am doing."

This year, says Williams, "We will write letters to city council to give us bus passes for field trips. We are going to set up a living museum for Grade 4 students that shows what it was like when the explorers arrived. We will put together a quarterly magazine about what we are doing."

Williams insists that he is no longer concerned about preparing students for life. "School is life," he alleges. "Why should they have to wait 12 years?"

### **Crafting an island field guide**

Jeff Hopkins, superintendent of the [Gulf Islands School District](#), might agree with that. He says the mission for his district is to "create more opportunities for our students to be learning in a Constructivist way," where they can learn things without having to memorize and regurgitate. "We need to get away from looking at education as a product and begin to treat it as a process."

Hopkins' district also received the ministry grant and is using it to expand the [Saturna Ecological Education Centre](#), which Hopkins chose to set up rather than close the Saturna Island Elementary School. "The school had a dwindling population," he reports. "We decided to create a high school program on the island that is completely Constructivist-based." The nine remaining elementary students will be paired with a senior secondary partner, he explains. When he tells me about the pair of students who created a field guide to [Winter Cove on Saturna](#), it is with a hint of pride. "They have become experts on the flora and fauna of the shore and the foreshore. It is filled with photos and descriptions." A local biologist worked with the pair, he lets me know.

"One boy is studying the Spanish history of the Gulf Islands," Hopkins relates. "He has been paired with a community mentor who has a Spanish longboat."

He trained to become a coxswain so that, as his final project, he was able to take his classmates on the longboat and they circumnavigated [Saturna] island. As they were coming back into Lisle Harbour, they were hailed aboard a naval vessel and had lunch with them." He states, matter-of-factly, "School should be like that every day. The only reason it isn't, is that we have decided it isn't."

### **Raising the bar for teaching**

Many of Hopkins ideas have been developed through his friendship with Constructivist educator, speaker and author Dr. John Abbott. I recently had the pleasure of catching Dr. Abbott in his office at the [21st Century Learning Initiative](#), an organization that he founded and which he runs from the town of Bath in the U.K. During the course of our discussion he explained that adopting a Constructivist approach will require educators to "take children seriously in all aspects of their lives." He goes on, "That puts more demand on adults to treat children as individuals and on all members of the community to realize that children are children first and school children second."

Throughout our conversation, Abbott insists that, as a society, we have committed an error in making schooling synonymous with learning. Education, he articulates, consists of school, community and family. "It is like a three-legged stool, which, you might know, can balance on any surface, but it must have legs of equal length. If any of the legs are too long at the expense of the others, then the balance in education is lost."

He explains that in Finland, a country he has visited many times, when there is a problem with youth, the adults ask, "What is going wrong in the community?" not, "What is wrong with the school?"

Abbott makes no secret of his admiration for the much-lauded Finnish education system, where children do not start school until they are seven. What also distinguishes Finnish education "is very simple," according to Dr Abbott. "They believe in good teachers -- full stop."

"You cannot become a teacher in Finland without a three-year honours degree in a specific subject and a three year pedagogic [teaching] degree." With that kind of training, teachers know how to do a good job, and can be given the freedom and responsibility to do so. "There is hardly any national curriculum or external monitoring," according to Abbott.

### **Unleashing teen creativity**

Other than Finnish education, the model that Abbott looks to, especially when it comes to the education of adolescents, is the apprenticeship system that existed in England and throughout much of Europe, until the advent of the Industrial Revolution. In his forthcoming book, *Overschooled but Undereducated* (available for download [here](#)), which he wrote with Canadian counterpart Heather McTaggart, he says, "We treat teenagers as a problem, not an opportunity. They come wired to learn in a particular way that we should take advantage of."

Teens are pre-disposed to figure things out for themselves through

experience. Abbott explains the reason for this. "Adolescence is a recent adaptation," he explains. "It drives human development by forcing young people in every generation to think beyond imposed cultural limitations and exceed parents' aspirations." Abbott warns us, "If teens are too tightly controlled, they lose their creativity."

In B.C., our biggest hurdle is creating an education system that does more to empower students and less to control them. That is a message that Sharon MacKenzie has decided to spread far and wide. This year she is taking a break from teaching at Vernon's Kidston Elementary School in order to give workshops to educators and parents in B.C., Alberta and Ontario. Her aim is to promote [intergenerational learning](#) in the way that her own class mixed with seniors, and also to help move learning out of the classroom and into the community.

As MacKenzie put it, "We are stuck in the mentality that we prepare children for life, but at the speed we are travelling, we cannot afford to do this. They have got to be in it, and they have to be doing it, and we have to assist them in doing it well, because there is no way that any of us is going to be able to keep up."

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Nick Smith is a veteran public school teacher who lives on the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia. This series was made possible by those readers who gave to the Tye funds for Investigative and Solutions Reporting. [Donations](#) are tax deductible and you can find out more about the Tye Fellowship Funds [here](#).

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**But what about spelling?**



Chris H  
2 weeks ago

If the students learn from real situations and go out in the community, they might not become the greatest spellers in the world. For G West, this would be tragic.

In all seriousness, teachers that provide experiences outside the classroom bring so much to education. It would be great if school districts and the provincial government didn't throw barriers up that make it difficult for teachers to provide such experiences. What if you wanted to go on some field trips in February this year? Too bad, your grade 4 and 7 students will be busy preparing for and writing the useless FSA exams. Compliments of the misguided Accountability Agenda.

**Suggest as offensive | Help**

**This is what education should be.**



Rhea  
2 weeks ago

Modern education is focused on creating a "product"....in other words, a person who has the same experiences and knowledge as everyone else who came through the education system. What we get are bored, detached little consumers who quite frankly have zero practical life skills. Little wonder society is going down the path of selfish individualism...that's what's taught and exemplified by schools and parents!

You can combine good, solid basic education (reading, writing, communication, numeracy) with broad-based practical experiential education that gets kids out and connected with the community. The results are kids who have a much deeper grasp of how things really work, and who are far better prepared for life challenges than kids who simply memorize and regurgitate.

Pity the government prefers to keep people restricted and ignorant.

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**A great teacher**



Lynn  
2 weeks ago

I really don't think it's as easy as equating "experience outside the classroom" with superior learning.

Years ago as a student teacher in the PDP program at SFU, for my final practicum I was placed with an older, very traditional and quite authoritarian teacher. I was quite disheartened as she represented everything that I thought learning was *not* about.

I was wrong.

She turned out to be wonderful. The respect she demanded as a teacher she returned generously in kind to her students.

She could create an exciting learning experience with just a piece of chalk and a blackboard.... (sometimes a few props were added to her sparse but magical repertoire). She was imaginative, and she rewarded curiosity in her

students.

More than anything she really listened to her students, valued the discussions and I think because of that her students excelled at critical thought.

Midst all that *uncool* tradition, her students excelled ....and developed a real and loving loyalty towards her..... as did I.

I don't think the answer is necessarily in the stuff of experiential learning. It *may or may not* be beneficial depending on the quality of the person, the teacher, guiding and monitoring that learning environment.

I really think it's more about "the stuff" the teacher is made of.

Some people are naturally great teachers.

The focus should be on helping student teachers to become that.

**Suggest as offensive | Help**  
**there we go!**

Christopher Robin  
2 weeks ago

That's the way to do it! It's the best way to engage children to be active. i would even encourage **Dancing** to get kids more active.

**Suggest as offensive | Help**  
**And some are not**



snert  
2 weeks ago

Quote:

Some people are naturally great teachers.

I think most children are reasonably flexible when it comes to dealing with the quality of their teachers but too many bad or mediocre experiences in a row can really mess up their heads.

The "cream", however, will continue to float to the top, no matter what.

**Suggest as offensive | Help**  
**Great food for thought...**



Name  
2 weeks ago

Excellent article, Nick - very inspiring to me as a parent. As much as I enjoyed it, however, it felt a tad evangelical. I kept waiting for the part where you quote a critic of this approach pointing out some caveats and counterpoints so that I could leave with a richer understanding. I had to wait for Lynn's comment to get a taste of that.

My experience with blogs like the Tye is that addressing counterpoints in the main story leads to more productive debate that doesn't get obsessed with tangential issues in the comments section, so I hope you'll consider that in future instalments.

Some questions. How well does this wide-open approach work for those kids who do better in structured environments (I'm thinking autism spectrum/Aspergers and the type who fails miserably in public school only to



thrive in - horrors! - a military academy)? Or those who know at 10 that they want a career in genetics research or higher mathematics and need a really rigorous academic grounding? I'm still not fully clear whether there is some trade-off involved or not.

I was one of those kids who had the most appalling, boring old-school education and yet I thrived on it, especially when the teacher was inspirational. In general, that old-school approach was clearly disastrous for many others, but I do believe that whatever the approach, the really big factor seems to be the individual teacher and his/her ability to connect with the kids.

And as a non-expert/parent, I've come to believe that the central challenge lies in how to make a classroom work for diverse kids with diverse needs, aspirations and interests - in other words, how to get outside that box where it's all about trade-offs and compromising re competing needs & interests, to a really different approach that embraces that diversity?

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**Excellent Story!**



Chevy  
2 weeks ago

This is an excellent, excellent positive piece. I strongly encourage The Tye to keep publishing these pieces. This is a positive article about some teacher who has decided to think out of the box. If you look at it, it is not much more work and it places kids in their community. It also, on the other, places a responsibility onto the community to positively influence young minds. There is a time for some structure and quietness and there is a time to be in the community. That testing the provincial gov't recently started is totally stupid. It makes teachers have to teach to the test which screws up getting any other experiences beyond the classroom. This story makes me feel good about knowing that at least one teacher cares and where there is one, I'm sure there will be more like her and kudos to SFU for teaching constructivism!

Well done,  
Chevy

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**Industrial Schools vs Learning**



Jay Currie  
2 weeks ago

A century ago it was important to create a large number of functionally literate people. The public, industrial, school was born. Since then we have kept the model of a small child going in one door and twelve years later emerging as a finished "high school graduate". We hope, often in vain, that the diploma (or leaving certificate) certifies a person who can read, write and do basic arithmetic.

For this we demand 12 years of a person's life. Along the way, for some students, a window in the world of history or science may open; but for a lot of kids the 12 years must simply be endured.

Ms. MacKenzie at least has the kindness to let her students spend some time in the community. Her kids are pretty lucky because most of their peers are stuck inside classrooms like battery hens plopping out crusty nuggets of exam

worthy information on pop quizzes and standardized tests.

There are better ways. Constructivism, unschooling, co-ops - almost anything will be less soul destroying than 12 years of kids exactly your own age being force feed lesson plans.

Children like to learn. They are very, very good at it. Given half a chance they will teach themselves and with a little guidance, a decent internet connection and a library they will learn effectively.

Which is why we homeschool. I can't think of anything my kids have done to deserve 12 years in class. So, instead, everyday is a field trip, the dining room table a desk and Brainiac on You-Tube the science room.

**Suggest as offensive | Help  
author response**

nicksmith  
2 weeks ago

First of all, thanks for your comments, both those that praise and those that present questions. I will do my best to address some of your queries and to resolve some of the issues that have come up in the discussion.

I describe Constructivism as a "learning theory," but need to clear up that it is not just one among many, but the only theory given any real weight in education right now. It is a theory in education in the same way that evolution is a theory in biology. It is where we are at until better knowledge comes along. The difference however, is that it is seldom practiced in schools and sadly, little understood by many educators. So, within this context, it is difficult to give the journalistic balance to which we have become accustomed.

With this said, Constructivism is not a method of teaching in the way that "chalk and talk" teaching is. It can describe dozens, if not hundreds of ways of allowing children to actively make sense of the world around them, and to negotiate this understanding with their peers.

One commenter asked how the experiential kind of learning practiced by McKenzie works for kids who need a structured environment. The project-based learning grant awarded to Williams was targeted specifically toward students at-risk of dropping out of school. What we know is that the more engaged all learners are, the higher the retention rate.

You might notice that McKenzie does have her students in class nearly half of the time. She uses chalk and blackboards and conventional tools when appropriate. This is what distinguishes great teachers from the good ones: they have a huge repertoire of tools at their disposal and they know how and when to use them. No matter how well a carpenter can swing a hammer, if he doesn't know how to use a level and square, he is limited in his abilities. The skilled carpenter with the full tool box is not anti-hammer.

I think that you get my point. Classrooms aren't bad, just terribly overdone. They teach us more about how to be a good student than how to live in the world. Constructivism says that you can't learn to play guitar by watching music videos. You have to batter that six string, badly at first, and get sore fingers, before you can play.

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**Thanks**



Name

2 weeks ago

Much appreciate the added comments, Nick

[Suggest as offensive](#) | [Help](#)  
**...sounds like...**



HawkEyes

2 weeks ago

*TO SIR WITH LOVE!*

Dating myself here.

Every teaching story I read reminds me of that film, a classic ...that inspired many true success stories, quite a few became movies...

It is always the teacher...a good setting cannot improve a bad teacher -and I've met quite a few.

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