

Ten School Designs: A Prologue to “The Creation of Conscious Cultures Through Educational Innovation”

Michael Strong

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it."

Alan Kay

School Design #1: A massive on-line virtual reality role-playing game (RPG) that allows travel through time and space. Students who want a “history credit” spend time traveling in particular periods, in which to succeed they have to demonstrate critical knowledge of the historical periods involved. To earn the cash credits that they need to travel through time and space, they need to complete various units in math and science; advanced students can become wealthy entrepreneurs in the virtual world by creating new technical innovations. Students interact with other players throughout the virtual world by means of chat.

The chat screens, however, provide an ongoing evaluation of their prose: punctuation, grammar, usage, vocabulary, etc. As they interact with different avatars, they need to learn to adjust their linguistic proficiency across a very wide range of possible linguistic styles and languages. The most attractive avatars, with whom it is possible to mate in this virtual world if a player is sufficiently persuasive, require the most sophisticated verbal usage. Students “attend” school when they are hanging out with their friends, at 1:00 a.m. on Saturday nights when they are bored, while at work (even though they are not supposed to) on any job where they use a computer, while traveling in the back seat of the car, etc. It becomes a problem that some young people become addicted to the game and spend all their time learning; although they are extraordinarily erudite, they need to get outside more.

"All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better."

R.W. Emerson

School Design #2: Students spend an hour each day together with the faculty practicing tai chi led by a Taiwanese Master. They then spend two hours discussing an intellectual text, in philosophy or literature or science or some other discipline, followed by an hour of writing. They eat lunch and then are led in an hour every day learning new rhythms in African drumming by a Senegalese expert. They spend an hour working at mathematics at their own pace and then learn representational drawing for an hour. They then go outside and work on building a new straw-bale building for their school; some stay for an hour, some stay for four hours or more.

"Hell, there are no rules here. We're trying to accomplish something."

Thomas Edison

School Design #3: Students come to the storefront of the strip mall any time between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. They wander in and out all day. Some

go to the history room where they watch historical documentaries. Others go to the game room where they play chess or Go. Others go to the coffee shop where they read or talk quietly. Some go to the computer lab where they work on on-line curricula. There are a few adult supervisors cheerfully ensuring that no one gets too loud. There is one academic „head learner“ in a room off to the side. Occasionally students come in and ask her a question, but mostly she works quietly on her own work as they work quietly on theirs.

"Invention breeds invention."

R. W. Emerson

School Design #4: At the age of 13, all students spend a year learning self-discipline by means of meditation and yoga. No academic work is undertaken. They are required to forego all entertainments and intoxicants: no television, music, video games, computer activity, drugs, alcohol, etc. They go to school at 5 a.m. each day and meditate and practice yoga until 7 p.m. in the evening. After their year of self-discipline training, they pursue academics with such commitment and devotion on a 12-month schedule, largely self-taught, that they fly ahead of most of their age peers academically. At the age of 15, they are taught wilderness skills and spend one month each year in the wilderness. At the age of 17, they are taught to hang-glide, and all of them become proficient fliers. In addition to their academic specialties, all of the faculty meditate, spend month-long periods in the wilderness, and hang-glide. Quite beyond the particular activities of the school, the school community is known for its extraordinary and intense commitment, discipline, and camaraderie. For many years the school remains very small, and then as more and more people meet the graduates of the school, enrollment grows rapidly and new campuses spring up everywhere.

"The vast majority of human beings dislikes and even dreads all notions with which they are not familiar. Hence it comes about that at their first appearance innovators have always been derided as fools and madmen."

Aldous Huxley

School Design #5: A school specializing in crossing cultural boundaries of class, culture, race, and gender: students develop very sophisticated abilities to understand and discuss cultural differences and ways of interacting. The differences in customs and manners between different groups are discussed frankly and in good humor. Stereotypes of upper class and lower class are explored by members of each. Different male subcultures and different female subcultures are explored. The different types of possible relationships between males and females are explored. Gay and lesbian subcultures are explored with an eye to gender roles. New cultural patterns are developed. Unlike existing „cultural exploration“ on college campuses that largely involves the elite, this school manages to maintain a voluntary working and under-class enrollment of 80% year after year. They do so by learning to become profoundly sympathetic and respectful of sub-cultures that are usually despised by elites: They learn to explore, and take seriously, sub-cultures of fundamentalist Christianity, gang loyalty, traditional gender roles, and other despised-by-the-elite cultural

foundations. Tolerant, educated students learn the compellingly-felt rationales that other people feel for being against homosexuality and abortion, for killing enemies. The real artistry of the school is in the manner in which the school manages to prepare increasing percentages of the under-class for membership in the professional classes; everyone knows that these people have the intellectual horsepower to succeed as professionals, but the cultural foundations of both the elites and the under-class are so opposed that the bridge had not been crossed until this school managed to change a posture of unstated mutual cultural hostility (based on innocent condescension on the part of the elites) to one of passionate, at times openly angry and hostile, but always real, cultural dynamism.

"Don't undertake a project unless it is manifestly important and nearly impossible."

Edwin Land

School Design #6: A school is based on the development of wisdom and good judgment. The founders are a group of people who share an understanding of wisdom and who hire a leader whom they agree is wise. All faculty are hired strictly based on their reputation for wisdom and good judgment. Ongoing "teacher training" consists of meetings, visits, and ongoing relationships with others who are considered wise. Students study biographies of individuals considered wise and discuss their own paths to wisdom.

Students maintain lifelong relationships with their mentors and their peers; the wisdom culture is a living force throughout society. (A version of school design #6 for skeptics: suppose that initially there are 100 such groups seeking to create an institution to pass on wisdom. Of those, perhaps 80 produce ridiculous garbage instead of wisdom. Of the remaining 20, only 10 are marginally competent. Of the remaining 10, only 3 combine an authentic wisdom tradition with the professional and entrepreneurial skills needed to succeed as a growing organization. Of those 3, only one makes it. Or perhaps it does not. Perhaps we need to start with 1,000 instead of merely 100 in order to get one good one that can grow and succeed in disseminating wisdom.)

"Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship. The act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth."

Peter F. Drucker

School Design #7: A for-profit school for the poorest of the poor. By means of a brilliantly-designed training system, multiple tiers of student assistants allow one professional teacher to lead schools of 500 students. Ultimately each student benefits from an effective 6:1 ratio offering incredibly individualized instruction, and most students benefit from being teachers themselves and thus learning and understanding the material far more thoroughly than do students at conventional schools. Although difficult to design and launch, once the older students have learned how to fulfill their roles responsibly, a peer culture develops in which younger students vie to take on the roles of a teacher, and student teachers vie to outdo each other in terms of the excellence of their teaching. Although

tuition is extremely low, the school makes a profit because only the one adult receives a salary. Students universally admire the community's leader and it is considered the greatest of all possible honors to be hired by the company after one graduates.

"If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it."

Albert Einstein

School Design #8: A school for interpersonal genius: People with a magical flair for fine interpersonal relationships develop a curriculum and program for improving and disseminating their skills. The school is created by a group of people who are all widely desired in both their personal and professional lives for their sensitivity, humor, leadership, and mysterious ability to create happiness wherever they go. Before starting the school, they spend several years meeting, thinking, and discussing exactly what traits they use in order to delight other humans and to form stronger, more positive social bonds in their communities. They gradually develop a curriculum and teacher training program designed to transmit and intensify their abilities. They, too, start very small, and for the first 20 years their schools only produce 40 graduates per year. At first the results are inconsistent and problematic. They slowly improve their abilities to pick appropriate staff members and to pick appropriate students. They realize that, in order to maintain their reputation, they have to provide honest evaluations of just how good each student is at "interpersonal genius" after having gone through the 12-year program. After 20 years, they are ready to expand their program and replicate it. As they grow, and people see how this program consistently provides an accurate assessment of the extent to which its graduates possess "interpersonal genius," a dramatic market forms for its graduates: Companies offer to pay college tuition for these graduates in exchange for one year's service, 18 year-olds are offered high-priced consulting contracts, the hospitality industry advertises what percentage of its employees are graduates of the "interpersonal genius" program, companies with many of their graduates consistently rank as the top corporations for which to work, a massive copy-cat education industry is launched. Gradually, over the course of many decades, happiness and well being come to pervade most workplaces as these skills become more common. Interpersonal genius spreads like a virus throughout society; electronic addictions (television, video games, the addictive learning school, virtual reality addictions) come to seem boring and largely disappear as human interaction becomes consistently the most magical experience in life.

"If you dream of something worth doing and then simply go to work on it and don't think anything of personalities, or emotional conflicts, or of money, or of family distractions; ... it is amazing how quickly you get through those 5,000 steps."

Edwin Land

School Design #9: Graduates of several of the above programs, and others not described here create a residential educational program that requires 12 year-olds to commit the next six years of their life to monastic discipline

and isolation. Although the details of the program are not public information, it is known that, except for holidays with their families, the young people spend all day, every day, during the remaining 12 months learning intellectually, physically, and spiritually. The school is free for anyone who is willing to accept the required discipline. The graduates are known for the extraordinary ability to complete any assignment; they are offered high-paying jobs immediately after graduation and advance through career ladders far faster than do others. They are better disciplined, more articulate, more intellectually flexible, more skilled with respect to human interactions, and more capable of learning new material on the job than are "normal" people. They are also known for their personal commitment to simplicity, their commitment to helping others, and for their laughter. Always dressed in simple clothes with no make-up or ornamentation, they come to be known as "the laughing do-gooders." Although they spread a spirit of laughter and fun in every one of their assignments, when they gather together in groups of their own they burst forth in joyous laughter constantly. They constantly maintain a light perspective as they dedicate their lives to helping others.

"I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

L. Frank Baum

School Design #10: In 2020 we finally obtain a tentative and partial commitment to educational freedom in the U.S. In 2040 compulsory education is abolished and full educational freedom begins in earnest. By 2060 "schools" have become almost unrecognizable to beings from the early 21st century. Indeed, most young people learn academic content by means of software or by means of brain implants and develop their other human characteristics in deliberate, chosen communities. On my 100th birthday I apply to visit "The Wellness Community." This community is known for growing the best organic computers, for its eco-habitats, and for its healing resources. The community sells custom evolved computers to major clients around the world to manage complex organizational systems. Its own communities are managed by their evolved organic computers to ensure constant improvements: the system automatically monitors brain waves, gene activation, hormonal levels, immune system functioning, and hundreds of specific biochemical markers in order to optimize well-being. The inhabitants, immune systems are such that they almost never become ill; the communities spend almost nothing on health care. They have developed habits that prevent the onset of chronic diseases; combined with new techniques to slow aging processes, the expected life expectancy of people from this community is 160 years and growing. Because of their profound expertise in human well being, sick people from the mainstream culture pay for limited recuperation periods in the community. There is a long waiting list to have one's children accepted by the communities, despite the fact that the communities are replicating themselves as fast as they can while maintaining the integrity of the community structure.

There are 10 levels to this community. After a comprehensive physical and emotional examination, it is determined that I am capable of visiting the 6th level. Prior to entry, I must undergo a 6-day preparation period in which I live in a special chamber in which my diet, activity, and sensory

input are carefully managed. The preparation includes exercises, meditation, bodywork, a soundtrack that combines music and mythical experience, special baths, and mineral and vitamin treatments. Apparently, prior to preparing outsiders to visit these communities, some people would have heart attacks, or experience mental breakdowns, or become incontinent, or otherwise lose control over basic functions. It is explained to me that visitors from regular life are not prepared for the intensity of experience available in the community.

I awaken. As I transition from dream-state to consciousness, I am first aware of warm lights and fragrant tropical smells. Then waves of distant sounds, waterfalls, surf, voices, and singing in the distance. I then feel female fingertips almost, but not quite, touching my temples and my ankles. Gradually a warm energy begins to flow back and forth from my head to feet and back again, initially small and gentle, and gradually with greater and greater warmth and intensity. Finally I open my eyes and am helped to sit up. I am given a flask of cool, silky liquid, which I drink slowly. And I look around. I am in a semi-enclosed space with a waterfall crashing over a bright-green, moss-covered cliff. At the base of the waterfall is a small, deep pond, and then a short river flows through a sandy beach and into the ocean. There are transparent sheets of a clear substance that partially enclose the space; I've been told that climate control is achieved by means of a combination of changes in the air flow through the crystal sheets combined with the activation and de-activation of heat-producing or absorbing micro-organisms that live in the moss on the waterfall. The level 6 community in which I have been permitted entry is devoted to young people between the ages of 13 to 25; I am told about 300 live in this community, visiting their families whenever they please. They are scattered around the space, some alone, some in small groups. Some are reading, some are using a technical device, some are engaged in some type of martial art, some are preparing a meal, and some are diving through the waterfall into the pond. There are caves off to the side that apparently contain study quarters for those who want isolation or technical equipment.

What is most striking is the constant singing and music. It varies and undulates constantly. Sometimes there are high-pitched solos, then group a cappella, then a flute. Sometimes drums would start, and then chanting. Sometimes the music would all emanate from one corner of the enclosure; at other points voices and instruments would appear from all different places. The patterns were strange and unfamiliar; every moment flowed seamlessly into the next, there were no sharp changes, and yet the whole set of sounds was constantly changing. Somehow the group as a whole seemed to know what should come next.

The sound was accompanied by waves of emotion that were felt throughout my whole being. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, I would feel deliriously joyful, and then apprehensive, and then I would start to laugh, realizing that laughter was bouncing all around the enclosure. At one point I felt a burst of bright orange anger; my guide pointed to a group of young people swinging across the cliff. She said that the anger was from one of the students taking an irresponsible risk, and her mentor had corrected her sharply. I asked why I felt the emotions of the community so directly and intensely, and she explained that they had been working on an experiment in

radical emotional openness; my preparatory period had been designed to allow me to open me up so that I could sense, at least partially, the community's current project. The various biochemical sensors and organic computers were then determining the ways in which this particular phase of emotional openness improved or diminished both individual and communal functioning and well being. I then felt a wave of happiness that literally knocked me down onto the ground; I had to be helped back up. My guide explained that people from the outside world, whose limbic systems had been so thoroughly contaminated by our upbringing in the still chaotic world, were not fully capable of experiencing life in the community. She laughed and said that perhaps a level 6 community was a stretch for me. She then said that she had visited a level 7 community and almost been knocked over herself. I looked enviously at these young people bursting with health and well being and became dizzy from the music and the smells. I knew that many of them would eventually leave this community in order to create more level 1 communities that would allow more and more people to begin a path of deeper happiness and well-being. And I knew that this was but one of thousands of experiments going on around the world, and that I would never know a fraction of the well-being projects that were being developed everywhere.

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Entrepreneurs Creating a Better World

"Criticize by creating." Michelangelo

Review copies available of my new manuscript, "Whole Lives: The Creation of Conscious Culture Through Educational Innovation."

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