

It surprises me how often educators who know better lapse back into “mindless progressivism”, a theory that children learn best by participation and immersion in interest-driven activities.

People can participate in an interest-driven group and still gain few of the higher-value skills that participation in the group leads others to attain. That is why an emphasis on production is important. Learning to produce the knowledge or outcomes an interest-driven group is devoted to leads to higher-order and meta-level thinking skills. If only a few are producers and most are consumers, then a group is divided into a small number of “priests” (insiders with “special” knowledge and skills) and the “laity” (followers who use language, knowledge, and tools they do not understand deeply and cannot transform for specific contexts of use).

Rather than mindless progressivism, I advocate what I will call “post-progressive pedagogy” and a particular variety of it I call “situated learning”. This requires well designed learning environments. Their key features of such environments are:

1. Multiple routes to full and central participation for all members of a group, a group organized around an interest and a passion to which the interest might lead.
2. Multiple routes to everyone learning to produce the knowledge, dispositions, skills, and tools necessary to sustain, extend, and transform the interest and the passion.
3. Interest kindles motivation and the desire to explore. The interest must then be channeled into a passion so that learners persist towards mastery via a great many hours of practice. Otherwise learners need to find another interest that will lead to a passion.
4. Learning is well designed so that learners are immersed in well-structured, well designed, well mentored, and well-ordered problem solving inside experiences where goals are clear and action of some sort must be taken.
5. Feedback is copious. Lots of data on multiple variables across time is collected and used to resource learners, assess their growth and development over time, and assess, compare, and contrast (for both learners and stakeholders) different possible trajectories to mastery, including ones that lead to innovation and creativity.
6. Learning and assessment are so tightly integrated that finishing a level of learning is a guarantee of mastery at the level, a guarantee that learners can solve problems and not just retain facts (but use facts as tools for problem solving), and a guarantee that learners are well prepared for future learning.

7. All learners must master one or more specialties at a deep level, be able to teach that specialty to others, and be able to learn new things when needed from others.
8. All learners must be able to pool their specialty with other people's different specialties and integrate their specialty with other people's specialties by seeing the "big picture" so as to be able to solve problems that no one specialty can solve.
9. All learners are well mentored by "teachers" and peers at various levels, as well as by the presence of smart tools and well-designed problem-solving environments (both real and virtual). All learners must learn to mentor.
10. "Teachers" are designers of learning environments that meet all the above conditions and they resource people's learning in an adaptive and contextually responsive way.
11. Direct instruction and texts are offered "just in time" (when learners can put them to use and see what they really mean) or "on demand" (when learners feel a need for large amounts of instruction or text in their trajectory of problem solving).
12. Failure is used as a learning device, so the price of failure is, at least initially, kept low so all learners are encouraged to explore, take risks, and try different learning styles.
13. Learners are shown through modeling and made well aware of adult or professional norms for the skills and dispositions they are developing and held to high standards based on these norms in ways that make clear every learner can reach those norms should they choose to put in the time and effort.
14. Learners come to see and be able to use the relationships and connections among different types of skills and knowledge, often "stored" in different people, as well as to understand the larger social, environmental, and cultural implications of any proposed solution to a problem.
15. Learners can integrate and see the connections among science, mathematics, social science, the humanities, ethics, and civic participation. In today's world this often means seeing how the same social and digital tools can be used for different types of discovery and interventions in the world across the arts, sciences, and humanities.
16. Learners are well prepared to learn new things, make good choices, and be able to create good learning environments for themselves and others across a lifetime of learning.

17. All learners are well prepared to be active, thoughtful, engaged members of the public sphere (this is the ultimate purpose of “public” education), which means an allegiance to argument and evidence over ideology and force and the ability to take and engage with multiple perspectives based on people’s diverse life experiences defined not just in terms of race, class, and gender, but also in terms of the myriad of differences that constitutes the uniqueness of each person and the multitude of different social and cultural allegiances all of us have.