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 "Features of Advanced Learning Systems"

"Features of Advanced Learning Systems"

by Wayne B. Jennings, Ph.D.

Also read: ["Community Learning Centers"](#) - a previously published article on DesignShare by Dr. Jennings

Schools of tomorrow will be completely different physically and operationally.

We can't tolerate the current high failure rates in terms of graduation and possession of the competencies needed to function successfully as citizens in a democracy, productively as workers and heuristically as learners. I've listed some of the features and principles of the new learning systems now barely on the school horizon but not unusual from the standpoint of research and existing but scattered practices.

1. Headquarters for lifelong learning

A. Learners of all ages use the school as a base for planning educational programs for their growth and development.

B. The school is a center of educational, cultural, and recreational activities for all

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ages of citizens in the community. It is rich in resources, materials, equipment, activities, and events. As such, it strengthens social, community and family bonds. The school as the prime education unit of the community involves people of the community in designing programs to fit their needs.

C. The school headquarters has “theaters of learning” or kaleidoscopically stocked arenas of materials and activities for learning. Courses, events, and specialized facilities not readily available elsewhere are at the headquarters. Materials and tools for learning can be freely used or borrowed.

D. The headquarters serves far more learners than conventional schools handle because most learners would not spend all their learning time there.

E. The headquarters has a world view and global atmosphere. The body of learners is diverse. School and community activities span the world.

2. Individualized learning plans

A. The variation in learners requires individualized plans because interests, inclinations, and motivations differ enormously.

B. Each student has a learning advisor, who and is a partner to the family, from an early age to adulthood helps establish an individualized learning plan and monitors progress. The advisor assists the family in devising the best possible program of learning much as a family doctor gives advice on health.

C. The learner and advisor draw from an array of instruments and procedures for assessing interests, learning styles, and prior learning.

D. The advisor, learner, and family member (where appropriate) choose from banks of goals, objectives, and activities and periodically evaluate progress.

E. The advisor helps learners achieve their individual plan by recommending appropriate learning experiences in and out of the school, which may or may not be from school personnel or during normal school hours. Curriculum is defined as all the learner’s experiences.

F. The advisor has the power to establish conditions for learning, such as arranging a three-month internship or an exchange. The advisor can arrange access to other people, facilities and resources. Out of school learning is considered as valuable as formal learning.

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G. With individualized programming it is not necessary to arbitrarily decide what subjects are to be learned and at what age.

H. A permanent record of the learner's goals, activities, strengths, accomplishments, and learning styles is maintained.

I. The learning advisor is a facilitator, advocate, guide, friend, counselor, broker, and expeditor.

J. All are seen as learners, capable of great achievement; all are viewed as talented in one or more spheres. All are seen as capable of teaching and helping others learn.

K. Learners become competent at generating and following their own plan of growth, in effect, becoming designers of their own lifelong learning.

3. Powerful principles of learning

A. Commonly accepted, but little practiced, methods of effective teaching govern learning experiences. Students have a far more active role in courses, are involved in making decisions, carry out decisions, often work in small task forces using principles of cooperative learning, use a wide variety of human and physical resources, and are involved in teaching, tutoring, service learning, peer counseling, and running their schools.

B. Teachers integrate learning from many areas into projects. For example, a student in science might build a solar heater and in the process be involved in other subjects such as reading on the topic, calculating heat gains, researching materials for heat transfer, constructing the unit, writing a description of how it works, and evaluating the project. The single subject approach is replaced in many instances with multi disciplinary or inter disciplinary forms of integrated learning.

C. Self concept, values, enthusiasm, responsibility, initiative, and acceptance of others are key areas of emphasis because of their impact on curiosity and rapid learning of all types.

D. School experiences are "brain compatible" (that is, compatible with brain processes) with an emphasis on a stimulating environment, large amounts of input and enrichment, repeated exposure to material in different ways, use of all senses, experiential learning, feedback and a safe, secure environment.

E. Longer blocks of working time prevent interrupting the natural flow of intense

activity and immersion in creative and expressive work.

F. The school operates as a miniature democracy; the school community mirrors the functions and operations of the society at large and gives students real experiences. Students make real products and provide real services, such as writing materials for publication, running radio and television studios, and using the community extensively.

G. The process of learning is as important as the content. For example, thinking skills, problem solving skills, learning how to learn, accuracy of perception, skills of synthesis and evaluation, mediation and conflict resolution, creative abilities, flexibility. All these and more are seen as important as subject matter acquisition.

H. The whole person is recognized as integral to learning; this means attention to the physical, emotional, interpersonal, spiritual, and intuitive aspects of the learner.

I. Newer concepts of learning stress the power of imagery and visualization; the power of play, whether in free play or formal role playing or simulations; the powers possible in the skills of relaxation, centering, focusing, and total concentration; the power of newer learning modalities such as accelerated learning; and, the power of control of bodily functions through biofeedback, diet, exercise and good health practices.

J. Adventure education and physical or mental challenges test skills and a sense of growing mastery. Such activities provide opportunities for leadership, assessing risk situations, problem solving, giving of the self to assist others, trusting one's self and others, and confronting fears, doubts, and limits.

K. Creative and expressive activities such as theater, dance, music, visual arts, writing, and computer programming play major roles for their transformational contribution to the growth of spontaneity, self respect, joy, flowering of the human spirit, aesthetic sensitivity and enjoyment, creativity and imagination, openness, perceptive abilities, communication skills, and self knowledge. Students are in touch with their feelings and have the ability to express them. Such experiences are fundamental to human intellectual growth as basic building blocks of sensory perception, mental constructs, and symbolic representations. Learners who have creative and expressive experiences see more, do more, and are more.

L. Some learning activities or resource areas are provided by contracting with organizations in the community.

M. Education is governed by the phrase, "we learn from experience." Therefore, the more experiences, the more learning. The more input to the brain, the more growth, connections, and linkages within the brain.

N. Learning experiences are planned jointly by students with their teachers. Each learning environment enriches itself by democratic decision making.

4. Community resources utilized

The school becomes an educational broker in arranging, facilitating, guiding and monitoring learning activities beyond its walls. In effect, the school's multi-billion dollar campus is the entire community and the world. School doors swing both ways. The school uses the deep reservoirs of society to access and amplify existing expertise. All members of the community can be teachers, and all are learners in a true learning society. This makes education life centered and reality based.

A. The many educative influences (virtually, boundless resources) in the community are orchestrated and tapped including: events, libraries, museums, airports, newspapers and other media, book stores, displays in shopping centers, record and film collections, day care centers, hospitals, senior citizen centers, mentors, church programs, partnerships with businesses, associations, schedules of speakers for other organizations, the Red Cross, HMOs, YMCAs and YWCAs, Scouts, and the 4H. These are catalogued and organized in a data base so that each unit of society is known for what it can contribute to learning for all members of the community.

B. Exchanges with other schools in rural and urban areas and with schools in other states or countries provide unique and valuable experiences.

C. Schools own or have arrangements with farms and camps for retreats and experiences close to nature.

D. Students are involved in community studies at all ages. Older students help younger students, neighborhood groups, senior citizens, local businesses and governmental agencies.

E. Coordinated approaches to education involve many aspects of human services and governmental agencies. A natural synergy and cascade of community resources is enormously fulfilling and beneficial to all of society. The bywords become cooperation, collaboration, interdependence, and integration. Protection of "turf", provincialism, fragmentation, and the isolating effects of specialization decrease as the richness of an interlaced new fabric takes form.

5. Staffing patterns altered

New staffing arrangements provide for many kinds of personnel and levels of responsibility. Outstanding teachers are extremely valuable. They are compensated accordingly and placed in positions to affect the greatest number of students and staff. Alternative routes to certification and career ladders open the system to the diversity that is the strength of America.

Education staffing learns from changes occurring in other fields. For example, in medicine, a physician is backed by a large support staff with various levels of responsibility and function. Lawyers employ administrative assistants to manage the office and are supported by paraprofessionals, law clerks and junior partners who research and prepare cases. An example of contracting out a vital service is the budget director for a major city who found the work could be done more quickly than in the regular fulltime job and proposed terminating the position and doing it as an independent contractor, an arrangement which was accepted.

A. Teacher productivity is greatly increased with the assistance of paraprofessionals, clerks, and volunteers. Helpers provide valuable services such as: preparing teaching aids, tutoring, giving special lessons, and assisting on field trips.

B. Students themselves, and various kinds of interns assist in the educational process as teachers, tutors, and helpers.

C. The teacher's role changes from information giver to facilitator of learning experiences, clearing obstacles and barriers to learning, suggesting possibilities, helping students with personal goals, and being a friendly guide.

D. Some staff have major curriculum planning functions.

E. Some staff tutor students one to one.

F. Some staff work part time as in the case of a gifted historian contracted to lecture once a week.

G. Other staff are educational advisors to learners over a major block of the students' lives and process a range of options in determining learning experiences.

H. Some staff oversee learning equipment, handle transportation, manage the building, and handle other tasks necessary for the functioning of a complex educational program.

I. Some staff are not certificated teachers. Some are trained in other fields. Some

serve in the category of support personnel to teachers, far more than at present.

6. Extensive use of technology

A. Equipment is issued to learners for use wherever needed. For example, a team of learners uses video tape equipment and supplies off site or in the studio. Almost any portable equipment can be borrowed.

B. Each learner has access to a computerC in fact, is issued one.

C. The learning bank of resources has thousands of computer programs, DVDs, video tapes, books, and records for use by the learners, access to data bases, and subscriptions to several thousand publications through the Internet.

D. No attempt is made to duplicate the public library; it is considered an essential part of the totality of learning materials in the community. An accessible school library belongs to the community.

E. Technology is harnessed for learning. For example, a satellite receiver at headquarters taps into hundreds of programs raining down on every inch of the country, some of which are broadcast from other countries but reachable from school antennas.

F. Printing equipment, radio, videodisk and other technologies are accessed in the learning center or from other sources.

G. Some types of learning lend themselves to home based instruction through technology. Learning at home is common because of the rapidly expanding library of resources, easily available equipment and convenient programming.

H. Technology makes it possible to personalize and individualize education and reduce the routine teaching of skills and information. Record keeping and monitoring learning is managed with technology

I. Expensive technology is capitalized over several years. Widespread use of technology in education empowers staff and students.

7. The school as a self-sufficient unit

Learners participate in all phases of school operations. Students are the greatest untapped resource available to schools. Teachers use students as helpers and students assist in the office, library,

maintenance, etc. With guidance and training, students assume many responsibilities and in the process feel important and needed. The school is the triple winner because students improve in skills by applying learning to practical settings, feel more positive about schooling and needed work gets done.

A. Students see the direct results of their contributions to the functioning of the school. They work at real tasks and make a difference.

B. Depending on their age, students operate and help run the audio visual center, the lunchroom, the computer and technology labs, help maintain the building and grounds, decorate the building, make displays, teach classes, tutor students, make self instructional posters for how to use equipment and follow procedures, guide visitors, make and repair school furniture, print forms and publications, operate small businesses; in short, students are involved in every aspect of the school. They do these things for the learning involved and to increase their ownership of the school.

C. Students learn: to organize and carry out a task, how events and school activities are managed and run, what adults do, develop a sense of identification with adults, and cultivate great commitment to the school.

8. Competency based education

Key competencies necessary for effective people and responsible citizens in a rapidly changing world are identified. Graduation from school indicates attainment of the identified competencies. Validation that students actually have these competencies is a basic process of learning. Students know what specific skills they are expected to learn. Graduation is based on the acquisition of skills and knowledge or competencies. Students are judged for competency by persons qualified to validate that the student achieved a level of proficiency in a given area.

9. A paradigm shift to learning

In an advanced system of education, a fundamental change in thinking makes learning the focus, not courses, credits, grades, and all the other details of schooling. It is not seen as necessary that learning occur only under formal circumstances.

A. Much learning results from: assuming responsibility, jobs, friendships, travel experiences, testing new ideas, hobbies, working with media, and discussion. These learnings are as valued as formal course work.

B. Barriers to learning are identified and removed. For example, the learner may

have difficulty learning under noisy circumstances, others under quiet conditions. This knowledge is used to arrange learning environments.

C. Decisions are made for the benefit of the learner within the limits of feasibility and consistent with societal needs.

D. Learning attributes of enthusiasm, initiative, responsibility, and interpersonal skills are seen as keys to further learning of all types.

E. The teacher's role is facilitating learning, clearing obstacles, suggesting possibilities, helping students over barriers, and relating activities to the student's learning plan.

10. A longer school day and year

The time periods for learning are longer than the present six to seven hours not because of new regulations, but because there is much to learn and students are busy doing it. This doesn't mean that the learner is physically in the school building longer than at present, but spends more hours per day on fulfilling learning programs, some of which are in the community. Schools operate year round, sixteen hours a day. The curriculum is defined as all the experiences of the learner, irrespective of where, when, or from whom they occur. The old defined school day and year becomes meaningless under these principles.

11. Cost effective

The new system operates for the same costs as conventional education and provides more stimulating learning experiences with better results. The three Rs of school finance are Redesign and Reallocate Resources. There are sufficient resources in the human services sector to far exceed current levels of productivity and performance.

12. All ages of learners

The school headquarters serves learners of any age. Older learners help and comfort younger learners. Younger learners provide stimulation and their special brand of creativity and joy to older learners. A great mix of ages from grandparents to very young children offers excitement. The richness and experiences of older people have fascination for the young. The variety of people means mentors for youth seeking to master an interest.

The very diversity of people resources means helping each other in forming clubs, arranging to visit shut in persons, entertaining, and serving neighborhood needs. Younger children have many role models to study for their development. Older students have leadership roles with the young and

management responsibilities. Younger children make an important contribution to older students and adults by their freshness of outlook, enthusiasm, rich imagery, and fearless disclosure of foibles.

13. Shared decision making

The school operates as a miniature democratic society with decisions shared by those affected by the decisions. Governance of the school is by staff, students, parents and other members of the community within broad public policy guidelines and the purposes of the school as expressed in its charter. Decisions are based on careful study and research of problems, consideration of alternatives and their implications, attempts to reach a working or trial consensus on steps to take, and evaluation of the decision over time with reconsideration of issues as necessary.

This process helps ensure better decisions, greater satisfaction by all parties, more enduring practices, commitment, and a shorter implementation timeline of decisions. Decision areas include program, budget, staffing, evaluation of all facets of the school, and new directions.

14. Staff development

Little will change in schools unless staff change. Present "staff development" resembles a few words of advice, one-shot workshops, and well wishes. Few districts exceed five days of training a year. Major advances in education are unlikely until twenty to thirty days of training are provided each year for every staff member.

15. Variety and choice

As the practices above are adopted, the uniformity of schools will disappear. Citizens have choices in virtually every sphere of life except schools. Provided a variety of programs to choose from, parents and children exercise judgment and study the offerings. Staff, unconstrained by the outdated notion that all schools in a district must be the same, create programs of distinction and responsiveness.

Author Info:

Dr. Wayne B. Jennings is the Chair of the [International Association for Learning Alternatives](#) (IALA).. For over fifty years, he has served as a teacher, principal, superintendent, professor and school board member. He has authored several books and numerous articles in education. He believes all students are gifted with powerful brains and it is the school's responsibility to present learning environments that promote their gifts.

The mission of the International Association for Learning Alternatives is to lead, promote and support learning alternatives and choice options. This mission signals their interest in seeing that parents and students have choices of educational programs to meet their needs, interests, learning styles and intelligences. IALA believes that one-size education program does not fit everyone and that education is best served by having choices for all.

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