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The Future of Learning: Lessons From a TED Prize Winner

We often hear "our schools are broken." But are they in fact, obsolete?

That is the bold question TED Prize winner Sugata Mitra will address as he begins his journey to design the School in the Cloud, which will focus on helping students in developing countries that lack teachers, as well as change the way children learn across the globe by shifting the educational paradigm and redefining the role of educators.

Mitra states that the current system actually worked quite well in the past, before computers brought information to our fingertips in seconds, and before globalization and technology transformed what types of skills we will need for the future. The role of the teacher was, and often currently is, to impart information and help children develop a prescribed set of skills in reading, writing, and math. The world has changed since our education system was conceived, but schooling has not.

He believes children can learn from one another, and the role of the teacher should be to ask the big questions, step back and admire, and let learning happen through the use of the Internet and self-directed learning. In his TEDTalk, Mitra also mentions the role of mind/brain research in transforming how we understand learning and student engagement as well as how the brain perceives punishment and testing to be threats, which can shut learning down.

Mitra brings forward many ideas that we use to engage young people at Global Kids: student-driven learning, peer-to-peer collaboration, use of technology in meaningful ways, and using educators to facilitate exploration of critical questions and issues facing our world. While not quite widespread, these ideas have other champions. Indeed, Maria Montessori pioneered self-directed learning in education, and understanding how the digital revolution, globalization, and mind/brain research are affecting how children learn has been a recurring theme at Harvard's Future of Learning conference.

There, Professor David Perkins has probed participants to think about curriculum and what is currently being taught. He once asked an audience, "Who remembers what a quadratic equation is?" Out of 250 people, three or four raised their hands; they were either math teachers or using math in their professions. The rest of us, all educated, couldn't remember what they were or what anyone would use them for. He proposed that learning about statistics, and using them to analyze and solve global health problems, would be much more interesting and relevant to both the world and students than memorizing formulas or equations. Is knowing, as Mitra asks, obsolete? If we can have things at our fingertips via the web, do we really need to "know" stuff in the same way anymore?

Of course, students need to learn about the world around them. They should know how to read and write, develop a love of science, use and apply mathematical concepts, understand history, and appreciate the arts. I don't believe anyone who is questioning how we school our children thinks they should be ignorant, or be denied a rigorous and challenging education.

But unless they are given the opportunity to solve problems that speak to them, work collaboratively and creatively, and learn to harness the power of technology in meaningful ways, we will fail to prepare them for a future that we cannot define. This loops back to Mitra's point that we need to move towards asking children "big questions," and get out of the way to let them learn from each other and the Internet.
There is no doubt that children's curiosity will drive their learning, as demonstrated by his "hole in the wall" experiment in a New Delhi slum with children. Technology can help level the playing field and open new doors especially in areas where children lack opportunity. But I would go further than Mitra and not simply suggest that the educator/mentor watch and admire from a distance while the children figure it out completely by themselves with a computer. Encouragement, praise, questioning, and reflection are not things for teachers to bookend in the learning process. Children learn differently, and have social and emotional needs that cannot always be left to their peers to address. But yes, we need to move away from rote learning and structures that no longer have relevance in a 21st-century world, and give students the tools they need to become critical thinkers, problem solvers, and good, globally competent citizens.

But will those in the education reform movement allow it?

They keep saying our schools are broken, yet the imposition of relentless assessment, standardized testing, teacher "evaluations" and curriculum prescriptions run counter to the process Mitra is proposing for shifting our pedagogy towards meeting 21st century needs. Our teachers and principals are being burdened instead of supported, and have fewer opportunities to push forth innovative ways of learning, especially in urban schools or poor communities. They may have access to technology, but often its purpose is to transfer the old method of learning to an online format or be used for online tests, rather than the engaging ways Mitra, many educators, and we at Global Kids would like to see.

Learning is not confined to school, and interest-driven, self-directed and collaborative learning is happening naturally in all kinds of non-formal environments. Sugata Mitra's wish to help design the future of learning is one to consider, debate, and experiment with in a range of settings, including formal ones. It's time for our schools to boldly re-imagine their purpose, reconfigure their pedagogy, and allow both students and educators to tap into the innate sense of wonder and intellectual curiosity we possess as human beings, whether we live in India or Indiana.