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Manifesto for a New Culture of Learning



Maggie Smith Taplin

Douglas Thomas (left) and John Seely Brown

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By Goldie Blumenstyk

It would not have been hard for Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown to find an academic press or some other traditional publisher for **A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change**. After all, Brown, the legendary former director of Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center and a well-known futurist, and Thomas, an associate professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and an expert on the culture of computer gaming, certainly have the academic credentials and publication record to attract any number of publishing houses.

But for this slim philosophical volume, a clarion call for invigorating education with the kind of self-discovery and creativity that so often flow organically from play, such a conventional route just seemed, well, a tad conventional.

"It would have been less true to the themes of the book," says Thomas.

Instead, befitting a book that says notions of literacy should be expanded to include "how information is transmitted through new phenomena, such as viral distribution," the authors dived head first into the world of self-publishing with a digital on-demand publishing service. The result is a 100-page publication that may be significant not only for what it says but how it came to say it.

As self-styled book "orchestrators" (their term), Brown and Thomas hired their own editor and their own designer. They then worked collaboratively to produce and package a book that they see as an example of the very kind of "tacit" education that *A New Culture of Learning* argues is vital in this "world of constant change." Although between them they had published a dozen books, this was an entirely new exercise in experimental learning. "Neither of us had ever built a book," says Brown.

The experience proved to be even more educational than they expected.



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For starters, they were surprised (and, they say in retrospect, delighted) to find that the editor they hired, Lilith Z. C. Fondulas, was a ruthless enemy of academic jargon. She made the book half its original size and tremendously simplified it, says Brown, yet she preserved key ideas, like the notion that old ways of learning can't keep up with our rapidly

changing world and that new-media forms are making peer-to-peer learning easier and more natural.

And, suitably enough for a book that reflects a world where learning can now be empowered by the wisdom of the "collective," Brown and Thomas included a selection of 18 blurbs and short reviews of their final manuscript from an eclectic roster of academic and digital-culture all-stars, among them James J. Duderstadt, president emeritus of the University of Michigan; Joichi Ito, chief executive of Creative Commons; and Beth Simone Noveck, a professor at New York Law School and an authority on the role of technology in a democracy. The inclusion of those reviews, the authors say, fits with their hope that the book's ideas seep into the consciousness of educators through conversations that begin in the book itself. "We probably did 10 times the peer review that a university press would do," says Thomas.

The book, which is being sold through an on-demand printing site at Amazon.com (my copy came with the notation: "Made in the USA, Lexington, Ky., February 15, 2011"), is at once scholarly and folksy.

Mixing erudite concepts with simple anecdotes and examples, *A New Culture of Learning* begins with some familiar notions about the value of intuitive learning—the way the Harry Potter phenomenon excited children to continue to explore ideas about geography and history (albeit fictional) through fan blogs and wiki sites; the way multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft connect gamers worldwide in common quests for solutions; even the way students have learned to read and dissect Wikipedia entries. Those "learning-based approaches" to education work better than "teaching-based approaches," write Brown and Thomas, because they engage the imagination.

The most effective education will engage learners' passions, as well, say Brown and Thomas, invoking the theory of "indwelling" popularized decades ago by the Hungarian-born social scientist Michael Polanyi. "The basketball player who knows how to shoot a jump shot has not only a greater motivation to learn about biomechanics because it might

improve his game, but he also has a vast stockpile of tacit information that can help inform him of what might be good questions to ask about how to shoot a basketball effectively," they write.

Indeed, a class in which students are assessed by the questions they ask is probably much more effective than one in which the answers count, they argue: "That's because the process of inquiry results in useful information regardless of the outcome."

A New Culture of Learning has stirred some striking responses from both within and beyond academe. In an [online interview with the authors](#), Steve Denning, a management guru and author, pronounced it "short, clear, and profound." Daniel E. Atkins, a professor of information and electrical and computer engineering at the University of Michigan, praised it for its richness. "The framework developed in this book is relevant to, spans, and blurs boundaries between notions of formal learning, informal learning, teaching, education, and research," he said in a review posted on Amazon. It "may be the most profound contribution to date from JSB and friends, topping even *The Social Life of Information*" (Harvard Business School Press, 2000), an acclaimed book Brown wrote collaboratively with Paul Duguid more than a decade ago.

Thomas and Brown say their book makes the most impact if it's read twice (at least). Leaving aside the shameless immodesty of that advice, it's actually true. Concepts that come off as simplistic on the first reading grow in importance the second time through; likewise, some of their denser ideas about topics like "collective indwelling," "agency," and "disposition" become clearer.

In an interview, Thomas says the changes he and Brown are espousing are subtle but significant: They require a shift away from traditional teaching skills and toward cultivating in students a "disposition" toward and an environment for learning. It's the difference, says Thomas, between getting lectured at and "experiencing, playing, and occasionally failing."

A seminar on virtual worlds that Thomas taught at the University of Southern California in 2004, which is described in the book, proves it can work, he says. By the third week of the course, his students had become so excited about the issues and problems they were finding in their game that Thomas barely had time left in the weekly meetings to go over the readings. Still, when the exams were turned in, he found that the students had learned not only from the materials he had assigned but also from each other. "What, did you think we were just playing games all semester?" one of the students asked Thomas.

For a nation in which so many schoolchildren and college students still lack basic skills, Brown and Thomas acknowledge that their call to remodel education to reflect passion for learning might seem hopelessly idealistic.

But for the same reasons, they say, their argument is all the more timely and compelling. The book is designed to help teachers "cultivate the imagination of students," says Brown. But equally, or more important, he says, it is also meant to inspire and challenge the teachers. Faculty might ask themselves, "how much do they manifest these cultures themselves?"