

# The Innovation Imperative

Patrick F. Bassett

Summer 2012



In a recent blog on teaching communications skills, I remarked about being on a “Schools of the Future” panel with several prominent university presidents and deans, representing some of America’s finest institutions of higher education, to whom I posed this question: “What are you finding lacking in the group of talented students you admit?”

Among the usual suspects — lack of writing skills, lack of moderation with regards to alcohol use, etc. — was this telling observation: “Not enough intellectual risk-taking and divergent thinking.” Not surprisingly, this is exactly the same concern of Sir Ken Robinson, one of the world’s leading authorities on creativity, who routinely observes that kids come to us in pre-school as incredibly creative and inventive, but more often than not leave school discouragingly conformist in behavior and thinking.

Since “Innovation” was front center as the theme of the 2012 NAIS Annual Conference in Seattle this past February, our community had many opportunities to examine examples of programmatic experiences in independent school classrooms that bolster divergent thinking, creativity, and innovation. These signs of change are encouraging. Nevertheless, innovation in schools remains an institutional challenge. How do school leaders create the conditions that will allow innovation to thrive in their schools? How do we nurture the innovative leaders among our teachers so that their efforts leverage greater institutional change in this critical area?

Here are some observations on how we advance an innovation mindset:

- In his *New York Times* Op Ed, “True Innovation,”<sup>1</sup> Jon Gertner attributes Bell Labs’ glory days of inventiveness (the transistor, the first laser, radio astronomy, the UNIX operating system, etc.) in part to the layout of the labs and the talent within them. Essentially, they put creative people in close proximity to one another so that a stroll down the hallway inevitably produced unexpected conversations.
- In *Shine: Using Brain Research to Get the Best from Your People*, psychologist Ned Hallowell documents five steps to rich innovation: (1) *Select*: put the right people in the right job, and give them responsibilities that “light up” their brains; (2) *Connect*: strengthen interpersonal bonds among team members; (3) *Play*: help people unleash their imaginations at work; (4) *Grapple and Grow*: when the pressure is on,

enable employees to achieve mastery of their work; (5) *Shine*: use the right rewards to promote loyalty and stoke a desire to excel. (Note the similarity to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research captured in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*).

- In *Six Thinking Hats*<sup>2</sup>, economist Edward de Bono, nominated for the Nobel Prize in 2005, offers a creative approach to problem-solving and idea generation — essentially, a “parallel thinking process” that encourages us to adopt six distinct perspectives when tackling any difficult challenge. Among the perspectives, of course, is the “green hat,” which asks us to focus on creativity — to be open to possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas.

- A recent *McKinsey Quarterly* article, “A CEO’s Guide to Innovation in China,”<sup>3</sup> attributes China’s rapid emergence as a major player in innovative products to

A stream literally runs through this Bertschi School classroom.

these factors: (1) rapid development and early prototypes to market, with serial improvements thereafter; (2) the creation of “innovation hubs” (22 of them) similar to Silicon Valley, the “research triangle” in North Carolina, and Boston’s Route 28 corridor; (3) ameliorating the “fear factor” in inculcating a culture of risk-taking in a traditionally risk-averse culture by shifting the risk away from individuals to teams.

- In her *Time* magazine article “What Would Steve Do?”<sup>4</sup> editor Rana Foroohar speculates on Steve Jobs’ approach to innovation, especially the entrepreneurial impulse “to put engineers above bean counters” in the corporate hierarchy. While most of Silicon Valley stopped spending during one of the recent recessions and thereafter, Apple started ramping up research and development, hoping to invent a lot of innovative new products that would put it ahead of competitors after the downturn. The strategy worked brilliantly. Out of that recession came the iPod, the iTunes online store, Apple retail stores, and a new operating system. In their business schools now, Harvard, Wharton, and Stanford are distilling what Jobs taught the business community. “We’ve largely tapped out efficiency gains in corporate America,” says Nitin Nohria, dean of Harvard Business School. Harvard is now shifting its curriculum to focus more on Apple-like product-driven innovation and less on financial engineering.

Where can we find many of these ideas in play? At Google, for one. “The best company to work for” in the world, according to many, hires smart people who can collaborate and communicate, puts them in an open-space office environment; takes care of their kids in on-premise Reggio Emilia pre-schools; and gives them 20

percent of their time each week to do whatever they choose (from which new ideas for Google's business spontaneously emerge).

So, from the business sector, we learn that “creating the conditions for innovation” involves hiring talent, putting talent together in close proximity, investing in R&D even when the economy tanks, creating teams with rapid development time frames, and making experimentation (including failure) safe for individuals. It strikes me that all these conditions exist — or could exist — at NAIS and its member schools.

As one enters the (LEED-certified) open floor plan of the new NAIS headquarters in Washington, DC, one immediately senses how the light-filled, playful nature of the environs complements and inspires NAIS's four core values (independence, interdependence, inclusivity, and innovation) and its vision (sustainability in all dimensions).

Likewise, the new urban elementary school building at Bertschi School in Seattle, featured at the NAIS/NBOA Town Hall symposium at the 2012 NAIS Annual

Conference, embodies the school's mission and vision. Beyond the standard of LEED certification, the new Bertschi classroom building...

**“The root of all trees meet in the center of the Earth to drink water together.”  
—Four-year-old Boulder Journey School student**

- achieves the higher goal of “net zero consumption of energy and water” via active and passive solar-produced energy and water-recycling systems;
- incorporates the elementary schoolchildren's wishes, including open-space and a rivulet running through the urban-bound campus building;
- demonstrates, with its “living wall” of tropical plants that treat and recycle the gray water the inhabitants produce, how nature cleans itself;
- blurs the distinction between outside and inside by its transparent membrane of walls of glass;
- manifests the “garden to table” movement by not just using local produce, but by growing its own vegetables and thereby acculturating kids to choose “slow food” over fast food and allowing the cafeteria to become what Lawrenceville School (New Jersey) Executive Chef Gary Giberson calls “the inconspicuous classroom”;
- creates the ultimate new goal of a school building, where the building itself “generates” a new perspective and behavior toward the fragile planet on which we live, literally empowering kids to choose a sustainable future.

Thus, in the words of Josh Hahn, assistant head of school and director of environmental initiatives at Hotchkiss School (Connecticut) and the moderator at this year's NAIS/NBOA Town Hall symposium, we move beyond the concept of sustainability to the concept of generativity, literally generating all the water, energy, and change we need.

Innovative thinking about design and learning spaces begets innovative thinking about new design for teaching. I believe independent schools and faculties have an obligation to sustain serious conversations about what the MacArthur Foundation calls "The Big Shifts in Education."<sup>5</sup> These are the six paradigm-shifting revolutions (to which I've added a seventh) that are rocking the foundations of what we know as "school." The Big Shifts are:

1. From *Knowing* to *Doing* (*Project-Based Learning*)
2. From *Teacher-centered* to *Student-centered*
3. From *the Individual* to *the Team*
4. From *Consumption of Information* to *Construction of Meaning*
5. From *Schools* to *Networks* (*online peers and experts*)
6. From *Single Sourcing* to *Crowd Sourcing*

And my addition:

7. From *High-Stakes Testing* to *High-Value Demonstrations*<sup>6</sup>

These Big Shifts are, in fact, emerging and gaining traction in independent schools, as manifested in my list of the "Top Ten Most Promising Innovative Ideas for Schools":

1. Adopting backward design and mapping of curriculum around skills and values rather than subjects.
2. Documenting student outcomes via formative assessments and "demonstrations of learning."
3. Connecting appreciative inquiry, the strengths approach, and growth mindsets — all subsets of the positivist psychology movement.
4. Globalizing independent schools.
5. "Greening" independent schools.

6. Developing STEM (and beyond) signature programming.
7. Professionalizing the profession.
8. Developing “Public Purpose of Private Education” initiatives.
9. Creating online learning consortia for independent school-branded courses.
10. Embracing “design thinking.”

Judging by the schools that are engaging in such innovative practices, we have already started the migration away from the 1,600 years of organizing education around subjects toward organizing teaching and learning around skills and values — especially around the six essential competencies (“6 C’s”) that graduates need: critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and cosmopolitanism/cross-cultural competency. We are doing our part to move away from what Liz Coleman, president of Bennington College and NAIS board member, calls an experience of teaching and learning “more and more about less and less.”

In the new vision of school, we’ll still teach traditional subjects, but not as ends in and of themselves (to pass a test and then be forgotten), not “just in case” there is a remote chance a student would ever need this fact or formula sometime in his or her life. Instead, we’ll manifest the promise from both the earliest days of civilization and the recent days of 1:1 laptop programs and access to the Internet: teaching ideas and skills in the service of doing something meaningful. Examples abound in our schools.

But for innovation to truly take hold, it must be led from the bottom, the top, and the middle. We must empower the 20 percent or so of faculty who are early adopters of innovation in our schools to continue and expand experimentation in all 10 of the arenas noted above — and in any other ways they are inspired to do so. But we must also have the institutional vision that contextualizes and legitimizes such experimentation and transformation.

And, indeed, a grand institutional vision is what I’m starting to see in some strategic plans that cross my desk, the most recent being one from William Penn Charter School (Pennsylvania). Approaching its 325th anniversary, the school has established a strategic vision document that cites an observation from educator Heidi Hayes Jacobs: “Mind shifts do not come easily, as they require letting go of old habits, old beliefs, and old traditions. There is a necessary disruption when we shift mental models. If there is not, we are probably not shifting. Growth and change are found in disequilibrium, not balance. It takes some getting used to.”<sup>2</sup>

The essence of a new vision for the school emerges from William Penn Charter School’s vision/values/goals statement:

*Vision:* We will educate students to live lives that make a difference.

*Core Values:* Excellence. Innovation. Collaboration.

*Goals:*

- Quaker Values: Invest in character — “Let your life speak”;
- Faculty Growth: Invest in professionalizing the profession;
- Innovation: Reimagine time and repurpose space;
- Re-engineering Teaching and Program: meaningful engagement, project- based approaches, and differentiated instruction; and
- Achieving financial sustainability.

It strikes me that if a 325-year-old school steeped in tradition can be so bold, any independent school can do so. In fact, “tradition” — a school’s long history of excellence — implies that schools must change to remain great.

Bill Gates, our 2012 Annual Conference kick-off speaker, tells us that “innovation is the means, and equity is the end goal.” One powerful way we can meet our objectives of “the public purpose of private education” is to model the best 21st-century education in the world.

---

*Patrick F. Bassett is president of NAIS.*

## **Notes**

1. Jon Gertner, “True Innovation,” Op Ed, *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 2012.  
[www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/opinion/sunday/innovation-and-the-bell-labs-miracle.html?\\_r=3&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/opinion/sunday/innovation-and-the-bell-labs-miracle.html?_r=3&emc=eta1).
2. See Edward de Bono’s *Six Thinking Hats* rubric at  
[www.debonogroup.com/six\\_thinking\\_hats.php](http://www.debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php).
3. Gordon Orr and Erik Roth’s “A CEO’s Guide to Innovation in China,” February, 2012 *McKinsey Quarterly*.  
[www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Strategy/Innovation/A\\_CEOs\\_guide\\_to\\_innovation\\_in\\_China\\_2919](http://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/Strategy/Innovation/A_CEOs_guide_to_innovation_in_China_2919).
4. Rana Foroohar, “What Would Steve Do?” *Time*, February 27, 2012),  
[www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2107005,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2107005,00.html).

5. See “Education Futures: Teachers & Technology,”

<http://spotlight.macfound.org/blog/entry/education-futures-teachers-and-technology/>.

6. See all “Six Cs for the 21st-Century School of the Future” at:

[www.nais.org/about/index.cfm?ItemNumber=147270&sn.ItemNumber=4181&tn.ItemNumber=147271](http://www.nais.org/about/index.cfm?ItemNumber=147270&sn.ItemNumber=4181&tn.ItemNumber=147271).

7. See *Curriculum 21: Essential Education for a Changing World*. Edited by Heidi Hayes Jacobs, [http://ebookey.org/Curriculum-21-Essential-Education-for-a-Changing-World\\_900852.html](http://ebookey.org/Curriculum-21-Essential-Education-for-a-Changing-World_900852.html).