

Inspiring Youth to Reach Great Heights

Written by David Batstone

Pedagogy - a word rarely used. And in our age of achievement testing, a bit of a lost art. For nearly 15 years I have been a professor in the university system. I guess by now I cease to be annoyed by the students who approach school like an obstacle course: hurdles they need to crawl under or jump over in order to achieve the grade they want.

I make it my personal challenge each semester to inspire these students to love the process of learning. I tell them that they soon will enter a world of work that will value individuals who can apply intelligence and emotional tools to evolving environments. Memorizing a set of data or mastering a skill has a value, to be sure. In the 21st century, however, a law of diminishing returns immediately kicks in to depreciate the value of those personal assets.



It jars my students - who obsess over the major of study they should choose - when I proclaim, "It really doesn't matter what you study, but it does matter immensely that you study with curiosity and passion." At this point, I imagine more than a few parents with teenagers roll their eyes and mutter, "If only." They would be content to get their kids to complete their homework, and do so in a way that does not feel like pulling their teeth. If this battleground scene sounds all too familiar, your teen sounds like a good candidate this summer for a SuperCamp.

Meet Bobbi DePorter, who started the SuperCamps over 25 years ago and continues to run them as part of her Quantum Learning Network. More than 43,000 youth are now graduates of her camps that focus on learning and life skills. The camps operate in 10 countries and take place on top-grade university campuses - Stanford University and the Claremont Colleges host the camps in California - across the United States.

"Most young people are not taught to learn effectively," Ms. DePorter told me. "They do not understand how to discover their strengths, pursue goals, make decisions, solve problems and resolve conflicts," she added. Ms. DePorter launched the SuperCamps to give kids confidence to develop and follow their own interests and curiosities. Over a 10-day SuperCamp experience, youth learn better strategies for reading, writing, public speaking, memorizing, note-taking and test-taking.

Sounds like an intensive summer school, doesn't it? Yet kids want to keep coming back. The SuperCamp experience shows that to pique a kid's curiosity translates into a fun experience. I imagine they are inspired once they look inside themselves and find new ways to reach out to everything around them.

The SuperCamps engage in some bold myth-busting: Myth: Teens waste their minds on video games. Reality: Teens decode and create games as well as play them. SuperCamp Insight: Getting inside video games can help teens reconsider their cognitive boundaries.

Myth: Teens believe they are entitled to whatever they want. Reality: Teens yearn to know how to take responsibility to earn their success. SuperCamp Insight: Teen's struggle for independence is also a search for ownership of their personal achievements.

I latched onto Quantum's program because it became obvious to me that, with notable exceptions, our school system is not preparing young people for a society of hyper-connected networks. Many parents - and teachers - wish that young people would not be so mega-sensory oriented and drawn to producing their own knowledge more than they are absorbing the classics. Instead of berating youth for being wired differently, wouldn't it be better to help them feel confident about themselves and help them to build bridges from classical knowledge to emerging ideas?

Ms. DePorter has a big vision for her SuperCamp. Yes, she is boosting student performance; The Wall Street Journal reports that SuperCamp "turns so-so students into academic achievers." Yet her more expansive dream is to set a new standard for learning and life skills that fills the social and leadership gaps of our institutions. Helping kids gain tools for the little things leads them to big ideas that can change the world.