



EMINENT MENTORS

A Conversation with Steve Seidel

The Museum of Learning

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Close your eyes. Imagine a space carved out of a deep curiosity for the birth of ideas. Picture yourself walking through the evolution of a thought. Envision a place that honors teaching and learning as cornerstones of the human experience. Welcome to the Museum of Learning.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Steve Seidel, director of Project Zero and head of the Arts in Education Masters Program at Harvard University, to find out more about his Museums of Learning Initiative. As a graduate student in the Arts in Education program, I was naturally curious about how he plans to convey the dynamic process of learning within the static confines of a museum and how he hopes to interest the general public. For Seidel, however, education is not the exclusive domain of pedagogical theorists, “learning is a basic human function.” Everyone experiences teaching and learning at some point in their lives, he explained, and we all have instinctual notions about the best ways to teach and learn.

To illustrate that point, Seidel told a story about visiting an innovative preschool in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where he observed a group of children creating stunning artwork. Behind him, a grandmother and four children were working contentedly at a wooden table making cookies. He was intrigued by the art making but his colleague from Reggio, Carlina Rinaldi, pointed to the scene at the table and whispered: “You see, the intuitive pedagogy of the grandmother.” Each of us manifests our own intuitive pedagogy. We teach and learn in ways we are not always aware of and therefore cannot articulate. The Museum of Learning, which Seidel began to brainstorm with his colleagues in the spring of 2002, invites a critical consciousness of the fundamental urge to teach and to learn.

“A great irony,” Seidel says, “is that the institutions that we create for the explicit purpose of promoting learning are often the very institutions which struggle hardest to make that happen.” Schools, for instance, “are not always very effective learning environments, and are constructed in ways that make learning, on some levels, and in some ways, very difficult, if not impossible.” In Seidel’s many years of teaching in public schools, he can recall very few real conversations about learning that were a part of the official school day. Seidel expresses frustration and sadness about the fact that school is often “a place where you go to get your work done—it’s a very work-oriented culture.” In his collaborative research with teachers, they noticed that the students often judged “a good learning experience” by how quickly the project was completed and almost never about the learning process itself.

The idea for a Museum of Learning stemmed from a deep concern that “much of the educational conversation or debate in this country has little to do with learning itself. We wanted to see if we could find ways of making learning visible, bring it to the surface, connecting micro-instances in specific learning environments with larger ideas about how learning happens.”

But what, exactly, would be made visible in a Museum of Learning? Seidel recognizes that there’s a long history of thinking of learning as something that happens in the mind, and of thinking of the mind “as something that we have no access to.” But he believes that “we’re at an interesting point in human history, because we have technology now that allows us to see the action of the brain. That’s very exciting and very promising on many levels for understanding human learning, but that’s not going to be commonplace with widespread access for teachers and students in the next couple of years. In the meantime, we’ve still got the fundamental problem: If you want to know whether fundamental learning is taking place, where do you look?”

Seidel points to the heavy reliance on standardized tests as evidence of the prevalent belief that learning can not be made visible. “Tests are seen as being able to capture a good inventory of what’s in storage in the mind. We’ve gone astoundingly off-balance in our reliance on tests and one of the costs, one of the prices we pay, besides the billions of dollars that are spent on them and the amount of time that goes into the administration of them, one of the deeply serious costs is an erosion of confidence in teachers’ professional, clinical judgment.” Seidel believes that veteran teachers who reflect on their work develop “tremendously sophisticated clinical judgment, both about what’s going on (what kind of learning is happening or not happening) and what to do about that.” The teaching profession as a whole has become “a victim of that general lack of confidence in clinical judgment. In a sense, many teachers have begun to accept that assessment of them, so there’s an internalized lack of confidence. I think that’s tragic. And deeply problematic for the profession,” Seidel laments.

Contrary to widely held beliefs about the invisibility of learning, Seidel and others at Project Zero champion the notion that close observation of learning and teaching can illuminate the learning process. The Arts Propel Project, in which members of Project Zero looked at the creation of portfolios of student

work as a means of assessment, and the documentary work of preschool educators at Reggio Emilia were both crucial influences on the evolution of the Museums of Learning Initiative. Seidel speaks of the great privilege he and his Project Zero colleagues have had in working with accomplished educators and researchers from around the world, Reggio Emilia being one of many rich partnerships. “With privilege comes responsibility” to share ongoing developments of learning and teaching with others who do not necessarily have access to this information. Hence, the spark of an idea to create an exhibit, a bunch of exhibits, to have a whole “Museum of Learning.”

Initially, the Museum of Learning was conceived as a site to be located at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education and connected with the library. Seidel envisioned a place where the educational and research communities could convene to reflect on the nature of their complex endeavor. But as the idea developed, Seidel and his colleagues realized that they were interested in fostering the creation of “exhibitions of learning” in all kinds of learning environments, not just at Harvard University. So a year ago, the plan for a Museum of Learning evolved into the creation of the Museums of Learning Initiative. The initiative aims to work with and nurture these exhibitions in schools, museums, community centers, and other settings where teachers and learners can share their experiences with their communities. In time, Seidel hopes there will be a virtual site where many of these exhibitions can be gathered into one virtual museum of learning.

Recently, Seidel and his colleagues Shari Tishman, Dorothy MacGillivray, and Cindy Quense have met with educators, researchers, and funders in Seattle, Los Angeles, London, and Boston to begin to hammer out the nuts and bolts of the actual museum. Seidel emphasizes the need to work on two tracks: to build a museum on site at Harvard University and to create a system in which the creation of exhibits can remain open to educators “in all types of settings in this country and in other countries, working with the young and the old, in school and out.” The exhibits could include artifacts of that process, documentation of the conversations that have been happening, the products that have emerged, the problems that people have been trying to solve, the solutions that people came up with that didn’t work, and how

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those failures led to ideas that led to the ideas that led to the ideas that became the solution to the problem.” For example, explains Seidel, “there could be an exhibition in the lobby of the school theater that chronicles how a small group of students figured out how to represent the fairies in the forest in *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream* without the traditional fairy costumes (no one wanted to wear tights!) or ropes to simulate flying.”

The exhibits will try to capture and draw attention to what feels often like “the subterranean movement” toward the development of new ideas and new understandings. This subterranean dig exercises the eye, it helps you to draw attention toward this movement so that you can begin to notice it in your own life. Seidel hopes people can leave the Museum of Learning and see the world with different eyes. “It’s wonderful when that happens,” says Seidel, “because there’s been a challenge to your habitual ways of perceiving the world around you. When you begin to notice and pay attention to evidence of learning, you can become much more supportive of it.” When pressed, Seidel couldn’t give an opening date for the Museum. He admitted to having no idea when this vision could become reality, but said, “sometimes the work of envisioning and sharing that vision can provoke others to join in the enterprise.”

All human beings will teach and learn in their lifetimes. Seidel hopes that we explore the subterranean landscapes of teaching and learning by asking ourselves: “What could I see if I dug deeper?” He encourages us to live in the spirit of the “intuitive pedagogy of the grandmother,” trusting our instincts for learning and teaching and training our eye to perceive this phenomenon in new ways. This way, we’re bound to give birth to new ideas.