Hathaway Brown School’s Education Innovation Summit – Day Two Opening Remarks

November 5, 2010

Welcome back. For those of you who were here last night, I hope you found Daniel Pink’s presentation as fascinating and relevant to our work as I did. In many ways, his ideas explain why we’re here today. We’re a group of people driven by his higher order motivators – autonomy, mastery, and purpose. His theories can also help us design our academic programs more effectively. To draw out the best from our students, we’ll need to be creative and cognizant of the unfortunate fact that many of the conventions of incentivizing education may in fact be inhibiting creativity. It’s a complicated enterprise that we’ve all signed on for. We’re going to have to innovate our way out of some of the habits we’ve inherited and practices we’ve perpetuated.

Today, we dig deeper into the process of innovation. If you look at your program, you should see that we’ve organized the sessions quite deliberately. We want first to figure out how innovation happens, and then we want to explore how organizations build cultures of innovation.

Once we have all that easy work under control, we want to figure out how to make schools more adaptive. This surely isn’t news to you, but as wondrous as they often are, schools can also be slow to hear the call for change. “Waiting for Superman” shows us the heartbreaking costs of large scale inertia and stagnation, but mammoth bureaucracies aren’t the only causes of resistance. Teachers often balk at change. This isn’t always a sin by the way. The nature of teaching is to repeat that which bears repeating. We are the custodians of great traditions, and we take that charge very seriously – as we should. We are, by our nature, counter culturalists. We push back against what’s outside our walls because much of what’s out there is antagonistic to the great principles of education – reason, prolonged and extended examinations of complex philosophical quandaries, and math.

But schools cannot operate under this paradigm anymore. The forces at our gates are not antagonists; they are grand opportunities. The question before us at this moment is how we, as a collection of committed educations, can design our schools to surface and ignite the creativity and authentic engagement of our students.
It's a question that we at Hathaway Brown have grappled with for more than a decade. As an independent school, we did our job well for more than a century. We educated our students. We launched them forward with confidence. We taught them to be good citizens. As the twenty-first century began bearing down on us, though, it became clear that these ambitions were no longer sufficient. The world's problems were simply too big, the opportunities too profound, the cost of business as usual too high.

We knew we had to invent our own solutions, but we didn't know precisely what those solutions would look like. We didn't have a grand plan or a clear roadmap, but we did have a really good motto. We teach not for school but for life. Those simple words have provided a calling for us to be a school of urgency. They've also provided a reliable source of light as we've tried to find our way through the labyrinth of change. To teach for life requires that we constantly assess what life means today. Once we committed to truly teaching for the 21st century life, we started to develop our responses.

If you're interested in the details, I invite you to attend our session later today. But even without the details, you might hear in our story some of the essential elements of innovation. The first is self awareness. We all need to know who we are. The second is reality-laced ambition. We all also need to commit to preparing students for the world as it is, not how it used to be or how we wish it were. And the third is the courage to fail. We all need to accept that innovation requires a bit of messiness and a willingness to experiment.

I know that our opening speaker Liz Coleman, President of Bennington College, can attest to the challenges and benefits of pushing an educational institution to engage creatively with the changing landscapes of our time. A bold leader, Ms. Coleman has transformed Bennington College during her tenure. The president of what was once the most expensive college in America, Coleman made a radical, controversial plan to snap the college out of a budget and mission slump -- by ending the tenure system, abolishing academic divisions and yes, firing a lot of professors. It was not a period without drama. But fifteen years on, it appears that the move has paid off. Bennington's emphasis on cross-disciplinary, hands-on learning has attracted capacity classes to the small college, and has built a vibrant environment for a new kind of learning. I know we'll all gain from her insights. Please help me welcome Liz Coleman.