

Change Leadership for Learning

*Tony Wagner
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In this UnBoxed interview, Tony Wagner, first Innovation Education Fellow at the Technology & Entrepreneurship Center at Harvard, describes his entry into the profession, his abiding engagement with questions of leadership and change, and his hopes and concerns for the future of American education.

INTERVIEWER

How did you get started in education, and what were some of your early influences?

TW

Actually, my passion for education started with my own schooling. I hated school—was bored out of my mind, every step of the way. I left the boarding school that I was attending in the middle of my senior year, and finally managed to graduate from another school. I dropped in and out of colleges, first to write the great American novel, and then because I got very active in the civil rights and anti-war movements, to the point that the Dean of Men called me in, sat me in front of

this massive desk, and said, “Son, I just want you to know we know all about your communistic, homosexual, drug activities.” That was Richmond, Virginia, 1965.

I was radicalized by my education experiences. I started reading about education—A.S. Neill’s *Summerhill*, and Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd*. I read *The Port Huron Statement* and started one of the first SDS chapters in Virginia, back when D stood for Democratic. Having thought there was something wrong with me through all of those years of schooling, I began to realize, maybe it wasn’t me—maybe there was something wrong with the schooling. I ended up at a small experimental Quaker college, called the Friends World Program, where I studied for a year in Mexico, became passionate about the Mexican muralists, and actually met David Alfaro Siqueiros while he was working on the March of Humanity. It was an incredibly formative time.

I graduated from college feeling like I knew absolutely nothing, but knowing that I wanted to teach, so I came to Harvard for the M.A.T. program. I hated the education courses, but in one anthropology course the professor required us to take one historian’s theory of history and write a paper on it. I picked Karl Marx, because I’d never read him. It was the most thrilling intellectual experience of my life, to really try to deeply understand Marx’s theory of history. When I had written the ten-page paper, the professor said, “OK, now distill it to two pages.” I tore up my ten-page paper and started over, trying to really get every word right, and it was just thrilling.

After Harvard I taught for five years in a small school-within-a-school in Montgomery County MD Public Schools—basically an alternative high school for at risk students. Then I taught for four years at Sidwell Friends School with the absolute opposite kinds of kids. I have always tried to do educational R & D in my own teaching, trying to figure out a better way, but at Sidwell Friends I got bored, because once I figured out an architecture that enabled the kids to run the class, there was almost nothing for me to do. For me, all the creative work was in figuring out the design, and then it was on autopilot. Figuring it would be exciting to do R & D with an entire school, I took a job as head of a tiny K-8 school. That turned out to be a bad fit, as I had spent ten years teaching only high school, with no K-8 experience. I left there in my second year by mutual agreement.

Meanwhile I'd gotten concerned about all the saber rattling with the nuclear buildup at the time. A few of us started meeting regularly, calling ourselves Educators for Social Responsibility, and that spring, before the June '82 march, we began getting inquiries from people around the country wanting to affiliate with us. At that time we had about 300 people calling themselves members, and about \$300 in the bank. Somebody said, "Hey, we should think about starting a national organization." Four years later we had 125 chapters, 10,000 members and a national office staff of 16, going from nothing to something. These were heady times.

After four years I went to work with Dan Yankelovich in the Public Agenda Foundation on a fascinating adult public engagement project, but I felt I had gotten too far from my first passion, which was reinventing high schools. So I went back for my doctorate at Harvard. I hung out in three very different schools for a year and wrote a dissertation that became my first book, *How Schools Change*. My central finding has been what's driven me since: that leaders were stunningly unable to help teachers understand the changing world, and explain why practice might need to change. So that became a guiding passion for me, to be a simultaneous translator between this larger changing world and the world of classroom practice.

Teaching in the teacher education program at the University of New Hampshire, I assigned a book called *Winning the Brain Race*, by the then head of Xerox, David Kearns, making the business case for a very different skill set and a dramatically better education. I saw a clear parallel between the skills developed in the Dewey/humanist progressive tradition and the skills that are needed in the new economy. I've continued to be intrigued by that parallel, along with the whole question of the process of change, which I later pursued as Founding Director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard under a Gates Foundation grant.

To fast forward a bit, with my continuing interest in the rapid evolution of the economy, I decided to undertake the research project that led to The Global Achievement Gap. Then I became very interested in the whole idea of innovation, and how, increasingly, young people with no skills are going to be displaced in this economy, with jobs being off-shored or automated at a growing rate. I became convinced that every young person was going to need to learn the basics of the innovation

economy. So that led to *Creating Innovators*.

INTERVIEWER

Many innovators develop despite or in opposition to systems, so how do you systematize innovation? It seems like an oxymoron.

TW

Exactly, but I think there are some clear answers to that question. You encourage risk-taking, you don't penalize mistakes, and you encourage people to take initiative to pursue their passions. Intrinsic motivation is absolutely critical.

INTERVIEWER

A lot of folks are optimistic that the Common Core standards may drive a new look at teaching and learning, while others think they may lead toward standardization and away from risk-taking and the pursuit of passions. What do you think?

TW

It's obvious that Massachusetts and Mississippi should have the same approximate academics. You've got to start with "Yes, it's solving a problem." But I have several concerns about the Common Core. First, it is a curriculum entirely designed to existing college admission requirements. Those are unquestioned, and, I think, highly problematic, with advanced math being Exhibit A. Why are we not putting more emphasis on statistics, probability, computation, estimation, and financial literacy? Why do we assume every kid needs to know algebra, and then calculus? It's lunacy.

Related to that issue, where is career-ready? Where is vocational, technical training? I was talking with a group of 50 high school seniors in Colorado recently, in one of the highest performing districts in the state. They'd seen my documentary on Finland, where 45% of the kids choose career-technical tracks that have been developed very closely with businesses. I asked them, "How many of you are planning to go to college?" Every hand went up. Then I said, "How many of you would have chosen a career-technical track had it been available in this high school?" Half the hands went up, because they know college may not be a good bet for them. They may know that college will lead to lots of debt but maybe no jobs. And besides that, they might have

preferred to learn with their hands. Common Core does nothing for those kids. Nothing.

The third and final nail in the coffin is that what's on the test will determine what happens in the classroom. As long as we insist on testing every kid, every year, we'll never be able to afford the quality of assessments we need. And so I think the tests won't change much by way of teaching and learning. What do you think?

INTERVIEWER

I side with those who say that assessment rightly belongs with those who are closest to the learner. If we're talking about deeper learning, or Learning 2.0, then the question is, what is Assessment 2.0? If Learning 2.0 is essentially dialogical, and aimed at developing self-directed learners, then Assessment 2.0 needs to work in parallel with that. It needs to be dialogical, and it needs to develop one's capacity to self-assess. Efforts to bring portfolio assessment to scale represent a step in that direction.

TW

For political reasons, accountability isn't going away in this country, and to simply say all accountability has to be local is not politically viable. And that's why I build in this idea—and Deborah Meier was the first one to do this—of having employers and college teachers selectively audit random portfolios to help establish performance standards so that it's not just us asking self-referentially, “Do we think this is good enough work?” We've got to bring outsiders into that dialogue sitting at the table with us, not passing judgment on us.

I would also advocate for selective use, in an auditing way, of high-quality assessments like the College and Work Readiness Assessment and the school-based PISA test. It has to be done through sampling—it's the only way we can afford it. And it can't be high stakes; it's informational, not punitive. Finally, assessment reform will not in itself change classroom practice. We need to fundamentally reinvent the preparation of teachers.

INTERVIEWER

Regarding your desire to be a “simultaneous translator,” are you now thinking that the best medium for that is film?

TW

You can't ask people to believe in a school that's like none that they ever taught in or attended. So the first step is to fund many more existing proofs of better schools. Next, the question is, how do we show those to people? You can't do it in a book. I think people have to see them, feel them, touch them and taste them.

In the film we're working on now, we're trying to do two big things. First, we're trying to help viewers understand this new economy, and the demands it's going to place on kids, and how radically different these new demands are. Second, we want to show people what really high quality education that responds to this new set of challenges looks like. We'll show start-ups and existing systems that are in the process of transformation.

INTERVIEWER

What are you thinking about now in your work, more than anything else?

TW

There are tensions in all of this work. One of the core tensions is, are we only preparing people for work, or is it about citizenship? I made a mistake in *The Global Achievement Gap* by not referencing the whole moral foundation that I think is essential. My own view is that the skills needed for active, informed citizenship and the 21st century skills needed for work are the same, but I think that needs to be better articulated.

The other tension is between liberal arts and vocational education. Are the liberal arts still important? Of course they are—but taught in a completely different way—liberal arts, not as the transmission of content alone, or even primarily, but as a way of thinking more critically.

INTERVIEWER

At High Tech High we wanted to build a school where, when you walked into it, you couldn't tell if it was a technical school or a college prep school. In this country, we've been living for too long with this separation between the technical and academic sides of the house when in fact each is richer when integrated with the other.

TW

This is why I've attended so much to the business voice. Most people don't realize that Accountability 1.0 was entirely business-driven. A Nation at Risk came out in 1983. Then nothing happened for years until Lou Gerstner from IBM and David Kearns from Xerox called for a national summit on education. All the governors and CEOs came, and the educators weren't invited, because they weren't trusted. You don't trust somebody who appears to have a job for life with no accountability. I get that. So we got Accountability 1.0 done by business leaders to educators.

I deeply believe we need a new national summit that calls for Accountability 2.0 with educators. To do that we need a different dialogue between those two worlds, and they're going to have to give up their historical antipathy to one another. If you look at why Finland has been so successful in transforming both its economy and its education system, one reason is that those two worlds have worked very closely together for forty years.

INTERVIEWER

On a study tour in Denmark in 1991, I sat in a conference room with representatives of labor, management, and education. One of our group remarked to them, "Every time you speak, you say 'we.' That doesn't happen back in the States." One of the Danes replied, "If we don't say 'we,' we don't survive."

TW

We have no sense of urgency in this country. We think it's just those few poor kids here or there that are struggling, and if only we can get those poor schools up to the level of our good suburban schools, we're going to be fine as a country. That's very different from Denmark, or Finland, where they realized their future was at stake. They had no choice but to work collaboratively to save the country, and create a viable economy. We don't see that yet. That's an important element of the film we're making, that we have to mobilize around a sense of urgency.

INTERVIEWER

What gives you hope for the future?

TW

There is a lot more innovation happening in education now. The fact that the Hewlett Foundation has brought a consortium of schools together in the Deeper Learning network is huge. These aren't just schools that have signed up for a bunch of principles. They are schools that are doing things differently. EdLeader21 is an organization of education leaders that is developing in-district capabilities for change. So you've got these two parallel efforts. And thirdly, we finally have better assessments that are reliable, valid, and scalable. The College and Work Readiness Assessment, for example, is a skills test focusing on analytical reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, and writing. It's a test worth taking and worth teaching to.

The pressures are enormous. The stakes are enormous. The budget challenges are huge. Still, there's more innovation happening. But it's a race against time. It's really a race against time.

*To learn more about Tony Wagner's work, visit his website at:
www.tonywagner.com*