



MONICA MARTINEZ

“It’s refreshing to know that the world keeps minting idealistic young people who are not waiting for governments to act, but are starting their own projects and driving innovation.”

— Thomas Friedman

Students as Smart Mobs

In a February *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Friedman wrote about two college students who embarked on a 2,100-mile climate solutions road tour from Chennai to New Delhi to train Indian students to start their own climate action programs. The students traveled in modified plug-in cars retrofitted with a solar roof to extend the travel miles on a six-hour charge and made stops in over 30 cities and villages. They filmed more than 20 videos of India’s top home-grown energy solutions along the way and uploaded those to YouTube so that more individuals could learn about climate reduction ideas. The YouTube videos generated more interest, and more individuals hopped on the caravan so they could highlight their innovations.

Friedman used this inspiring story to show that today’s youth aren’t going to wait for business or government to solve problems. Instead, they will take collective action to find new solutions. “After a year of watching adults engage in devastating recklessness in the financial markets and depressing fecklessness in

the global climate talks, it’s refreshing to know that the world keeps minting idealistic young people who are not waiting for governments to act, but are starting their own projects and driving innovation,” he wrote.

This is more than an experience unique to two upwardly mobile college students. Look around and see how many individuals under age 30 are creating new social programs or becoming business entrepreneurs. Those two students are among the many makers, creators, and innovators who recognize the significance of collaboration for citizenship and economic leadership.

Growing up Digital

Read Don Tapscott’s *Grown Up Digital* or *Wikinomics*, and you’ll quickly understand that Friedman’s optimism isn’t dependent on those two students. Tapscott surveyed 11,000 young people and found that today’s youth yearn for and demand participation, deep customization of products and services, collaboration, and an opportunity to contribute to solving local and



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global problems. As a result, we have a generation that doesn't want to be and won't be passive recipients of products, problems, and services. Instead, today's youth want to be active in co-creating value with their favorite companies, organizations, or peers to change the world, to support their local communities, to learn, to fulfill personal needs, or just to have fun.

Maybe you're wondering what's innovative about this. After all, one could argue that individuals have always been willing to come together to affect change. And that's true. But until recently, individuals didn't have the opportunity to link up through loose networks of peers to create and produce goods and services collaboratively in a very tangible and ongoing way. The simplest, most accessible, and common tools — such as e-mail, mobile phones, and web sites, including social networking sites — enable individuals, and particularly youth who have “grown up in the digital age,” to have unprecedented opportunities for mass collaboration and action. Last year, these tools helped President Barack Obama win the election. Before this, youth in South Korea, Spain, and the Philippines tipped elections using their cell phones and PDAs to get friends to vote. These are examples of what Howard Rheingold (2002) calls a “smart mob” — “a group that, contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially increasing network links.”

>> **Want to listen to Don Tapscott talk about what he's learned about the Net Generation? Check out a recent interview at the Future of Education web site. www.futureofeducation.com/forum/topics/don-tapscott-talks-about**

Shifting Culture

So, given that we're shifting toward a culture of open peer to peer co-creation, are experiencing economic turbulence, and have new tools to harness collective knowledge and action, isn't it time to provide today's youth with opportunities to “remake” the current structure and systems that drive social, cultural, and economic production?

If so, then what kind of learning experiences would ensure that students are collaborative and critical thinkers who can find problems and solve problems to improve our collective future?

We already have some public schools that

have shown how we can harness this innate desire by youth to create and to do so collaboratively. For instance, 40 schools that are part of the New Technology Network (www.newtechfoundation.org) use one-to-one computing and problem-based learning to engage students in learning and the acquisition of 21st-century skills. Students work in teams that approach projects through collaboration and that are akin to teams of professionals, whether they are checking soil samples on the Hudson River as part of their environmental science course or using algebraic expressions and chemical reactions to develop a sustainable fuel for a fictitious oil company.

Over 50% of the New Tech High Schools are in low-income areas. More than a third of the schools are in urban areas, a third are in rural schools, and fewer than a third are in suburban/first-ring neighborhoods. New Tech not only prepares students for the future and to become tomorrow's innovators, but it is helping turn low-performing schools into high-performing schools

At the Fremont Business Academy in Oakland, California, students who are part of the “Students in Free Enterprise” program have started several businesses, including a food cart business, tax consultancy services, and tutoring services for other youth or adults. They also started their own small school (www.edutopia.org/student-entrepreneurs-win-big). This school is located in a low-income neighborhood, and many of the students' businesses have a “service” component to contribute to their community.

At Tinkering Schools, students ages seven to 17 explore basic and advanced building techniques and principles by actually “playing” with power drills and other machines as part of an exploratory curriculum (www.tinkering-school.com). Students can also augment their desire to create with their peers beyond the school's walls through such web sites as Instructables, a web site where one can learn how to do anything, such as build a wind turbine (www.instructables.com).

Today's youth are not as naïve as Friedman suggested in his editorial. These youth can and will transform the way we work, learn, play, create, innovate, and communicate. They will be the innovation engine. And education leaders must ensure that their learning needs and experiences are met. As Tapscott says, “If you understand the Net Generation (30 and under), you will understand the future.” **K**



What kind of learning experiences would ensure that students are collaborative and critical thinkers who can find problems and solve problems to improve our collective future?

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