

Solving the Organizing Dilemma with bridge technology

Manifesto By David C. Schwartz CEO Productive Education LLC April 2007

A lot has been said about teaching to the test. Here is another point of view on this topic. Clearly, everything that can be tested doesn't necessarily count, and that which does count may not necessarily be testable nor be necessary to test. So, take "lack of organization skills", which most teachers, students, and parents alike all acknowledge is a problem that is both recognizable and prevalent. As a reflection of at least some aspect of "executive function", it is both challenging to measure and test organizing effectiveness. It is also the type of problem that cannot be solved on the level that it was created. It requires innovative interventions, at the least.

Many of the solutions to this problem have been motivated more by mystery and fear than by any real understanding of what is going on. Solutions have been characterized by rules or laws created by adults, teachers, administrators, and parents. Many of these solutions are different, brittle and difficult to enforce. Many prove to be tedious, linear crowd control techniques that hold little meaning for the actual end user, the child. With the sophistication in reasoning skills emerging in our younger generations, providing tools that convey real value and purpose to the student is ever more important if the solution to the organizing dilemma is to be owned by that child, accepted early, and positively resolved.

Finding a solution that goes beyond the limits of current choices is only possible if the decision makers accept the limits of the current alternatives as painful. Offering an alternative solution that is both innovative and treats the heart of the problem requires acceptance that the current tools are barriers to improved educational outcomes. Our alternative is characterized by a tool that employs simple constructs and natural laws that enable inventive learning™. The tool employs elemental building blocks, Lego like structures, and enables universal behaviors for linking them together. The PE LLC tools work across demographics and scale. They provide a solution that is as simple as it can be but not any simpler. In so doing, PE LLC provides a viable, multipurpose tool as a true alternative for enabling student organization of academics. Our tool is an effective means to tackle the problem across varying ages, learning needs, and styles.

There is a clear need to have new tools that can be readily articulated, that meld into various classroom operating models, and that operate dynamically and adaptively to enhance learning. It is not surprising that the technology sector would claim we are finally on the threshold of computing tools and software that meet many of the enabling criteria and allow fulfillment of this operational goal. However, the benefits of using computers still remain illusive. In spite of impressive gains in the classroom, the significant concomitant improvements in teaching, operations, and learning remain ahead of us. Our approach provides a novel "on-ramp" to employing technology in the classroom and is a powerful adjunct to "one to one computing" now being implemented nationally.

It should not be surprising to any reader that the PE LLC solution is a technical one based on an understanding of computing and digital literacy. However, what will be surprising to many is that such a technical solution could arise from the otherwise "back-water eddy" of the stationery products sector. What will be surprising is a solution that implements the equivalent of a "pseudo computer" in a 3-ring binder, a binder that can be employed by young children at economies of scale in consumer stationery goods. What will delight is a solution where less is "forever more". The "forever more" is for the child, parent and teacher who have struggled with organization and a lack of improved educational outcomes for one term too long. The "more" is the intangible "executive finding" that organization is a set of uniform principles with a grammar like any well formed sentence, with a semantics that can be intuitively understood, put into immediate use as a simple machine, and that requires little or no instruction, yet can be readily taught with multiplier effects on behavior and performance.

Any solution that "just works", especially if the problem it solves is really hard, has often been compared to magic. I would not be the first one to make that observation, nor will I be the last. Taken on face value at the conceptual level, the PE LLC "pseudo computer as 3-ring binder" will, in the end, owe its larger meaning and justification to the illusion we allow ourselves to attribute to it. Since most of the systems in place today address organization using linear filing means that require tedious punching of papers and time consuming storage and retrieval, they can fairly be characterized as exemplifying a perfection of means and a confusion of ends. It is our purpose in delivering a solution to choose a design that first and foremost anticipates a meaningful end. That end is no less than the need to transition a child from paper to the computer, an end most all can agree has extreme merit and value. Going from the linear to the non-linear is an integral part of solving the organizing dilemma, and our approach takes that into consideration from the ground up. The ability to anticipate and deliver a tool with just the right entry point is essential if we are going to tap into and take strategic advantage of the non-linear wiring most all of us possess in our gifted mental mind as machine. Our approach epitomizes that design choice.

Our solution embodies key underlying principles of “how mind organizes”, can be introduced to and owned by the most important end user, the student, and positively delivers on the promise of teaching filing, organizing, and categorization. The PE LLC solution takes the organizing process from the concrete to the symbolic by enabling a mapping into naming, storing, and finding. We offer a solution that anticipates what many are saying about search. Search may be a critical tool, however it is not the desired entry point to the learning model that gets the best outcomes for understanding filing and organization. Our solution is a simple and superior substitute for other linear alternatives to binder organizing in the class room. Both children and teachers can agree on our tools and use them effectively to the joy and understanding of the parent as well.

In order to succeed with our approach, two challenges must be confronted. The first challenge is to accept that a tool such as ours exists and that it surmounts the limits of existing alternatives. The second and far more critical challenge is to non-disruptively implement it as a critical intervention. It is actually easier to do this today than ever before. The emergence of inquiry based learning, collaboration, and use of new interactive tools for discovery are extending learning in science, technology, engineering, and math. These are timely enablers making it a perfect to go forward and work with us to solve your organizing dilemma. This can be done in parallel, while other teaching and learning challenges hold sway: improving reading, writing, content absorption, understanding, and expressive reasoning. Our tools and the approach for delivering them anticipate pre-existing curriculum and classroom teaching methods and blend into classroom operations as an intervention that is orthogonal to curriculum. Schools that want further enrichment in their traditional curriculum can employ, adapt, and seamlessly integrate new threads in organizing literacy into existing processes and curriculum, further multiplying the gains.

Of course, there remains a universal challenge ahead for any technology based solution that proposes use of a tool. Any such tool placed in the hands of a parent, teacher, or other influencer with a profile that personifies “I don’t know, I don’t care, and I can’t make a difference” will fail in the implementation phase. No amount of experimentation and demonstration of results can prove any new tool to be right, i.e. that it works, if only one of these “don’t know/don’t care/can’t make a difference” influencers can prove it wrong, i.e. “that it doesn’t work”. An interest in positive change, making a difference one child at a time, and an open mind is required by all.

In choosing our proposed path, and making the decision to proceed, it is of great value to see our approach as part of a larger set of solutions that provide an opportunity to serve our children’s self-esteem, intellectual and personal development. As with many of these choices, the goal is to serve early and with simple enabling tools, anticipating that most of the technology these children will employ in the future will no doubt outstrip our humanity. Choosing a simple path and choosing early is a fantastic opportunity to take the lead and provide the highest form of service. Namely, serve by offering the student learner a choice that enables ownership of an inventive learning modality. We offer such an opportunity, one that could be a meaningful catalyst in the child’s earliest school experience. Most other solutions might appear to work but are characterized by rules that do not anticipate meaningful ends. PE LLC’s tools are characterized by discovery of the natural laws of organizing with the end game, transition from paper to the computer. This is of necessity, a very meaningful end indeed.

We offer either a grade level pilot or a full school implementation of the Inventive Learning™ Module in combination with the BinderBuddies® tool kit. Employing our tools in study skills or the academic learning block allows the educator to perfect the supreme art of teaching, a process that allows teachers and parents alike to join in the creative expression of knowledge through improved organizing. Our approach has the child lead in and own the discoveries. What about testing for educational outcomes. Changes in executive function for each child might be a challenge to test and measure; However, with our intervention, the underlying shift in executive function and behavior genuinely occurs and it may well occur at a rate beyond our ability to test, let alone predict. We have teacher tools to enable data collection so that behavior shifts and improved educational outcomes can be tracked and linked. These tools are easy to use and are provided in both the pilot and in the full school implementations.

When you do elect to employ new tools, a key in the choice to proceed will certainly be whether the tools are proven. Our tool kit is the result of 15 years of R&D and extensive testing, design, engineering, and quality improvements. Over this period we have shown www.bookwindows.com/research/rshreader.html the tools do yield measurable increases in average grade point, effort performance, attitude, and success. In the hurdles along the k-12 learning road race, let’s put springs in the sneakers of the children we enter into that race. Let’s not hesitate to recognize their improved self-organizing skills, implementation of best practice educational methods and processes, and their enjoyment in learning, just as we do sports heroes. Let’s congratulate them for doing the best they can and relish in their new levels of achievement.