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# Foreword

## *Preparing Students for a World Gone Flat*

One year and seven months ago, I was asked a question by a high school principal. I couldn't answer his question then. Now, finally, I can.

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I'm often in schools, mostly middle schools and high schools, and while there I find the opportunity to have some one-on-one time with the principal. When that happens, I will invariably ask him or her my favorite question: "What type of student will *not* do well in this school?"

I like the question because it always catches principals by surprise, something that's generally hard to do. They expect the what-type-of-student-*will*-do-well question and have that answer down pat: "Students who are willing to work hard in the classroom and participate in any of our many extracurricular activities and be good citizens will do fine. . . ." But to consider who *won't* be successful in the school, one must see the school from another point of view. One very honest principal in a large urban high school took his time with this question and finally answered, "Now that you have me thinking about it, I don't think this school would be good for a student who needs big blocks of time to process information." I asked why, and he explained, "We're still working off a factory model of education, moving kids quickly from one class to the next every 42 minutes with no processing time between classes just so we can get them in and out of seven classes during the day. I think that could be a hard way to learn for some kids."

We both sat quietly in his small office, looking out the window to the school's athletic field where kids were running laps. After a moment, he continued, "Is there even any research that says that 42 minutes is enough to learn anything meaningful?" We talked about the lack of research that supports why a class period is any particular length of time and then sat

thinking about the things we do in schools that don't make much sense. Eventually, he added, "Actually, it's not just that we run this school by a bell system—something straight from the factory whistle that ushered workers back to work after breaks—but that our entire model for education comes from the industrial age. During that time, making sure each person on the assembly line could handle discreet skills was important. That's what we're doing here today in this school—making sure these kids can all handle discreet skills. I'm not sure we ever try to give them the big picture or, more important, get them to create the big picture themselves. We're teaching kids to pass a test, but I don't think we're making sure they can be competitive in the world they'll live in for the next 40, 50 years." He paused, but before I could respond, he jumped back in: "Let me answer your question again. Who won't do well in this school? Anyone wanting an education that is truly preparation for this flat world."<sup>1</sup>

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This principal was far more honest than most and probably offered too strong an indictment of his school. But, as our conversation continued, it became apparent that the students were attending a school that looked much like the school the principal attended some 35 years ago when he was in high school. Desks were still, more often than not, in rows. Metal file cabinets still sat by classroom doors. And while chalk had been replaced with erasable markers and blackboards had become white boards, teachers still used the wall as the primary teaching tool. Collaboration was still about talking with the person behind you, and publishing work was about hanging it in the hallway. Sure, in this high school there were computers in every classroom, but they were mainly used for word processing or for viewing a Web site the teacher had found. The overhead projector was now an LCD projector, and the mimeographed worksheet had given way to the photocopied worksheet, while transparencies had been put aside for PowerPoint presentations. But those changes had not affected the "show-and-tell philosophy" (to borrow the principal's words) of most of the teachers: "The teachers show the kids what they want them to know, and the kids tell it back to them on the test."

In this school, smart phones and iPods were off limits; few teachers encouraged students to blog; fewer used classroom wikis as a way to work collaboratively; and none were using tools such as Google Docs, Twitter, Diigo, or Del.icio.us. The principal concluded, "We're creating another generation of students who know how to consume information, when what we need to be nurturing is a generation that knows how to produce new ideas." Then he asked me a question: "I've got a little money. What

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<sup>1</sup> He's referring to Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

book would you suggest I buy for my faculty so that we can all learn how to better prepare our students for this flat world?"

I thought of some titles, but none of them were just right. None of the books painted a rich enough description of how to transform a classroom into a 21st-century room. None of them offered the details needed to provide the confidence one needs when attempting new instructional strategies that use new tech tools. None of them blended old technologies (paper and pen) with new technologies (blogs and wikis), with assessment rubrics I could use tomorrow. None of them allowed each of us to be at a different place on the continuum of learning as we entered the book. None of them did that because none of them were *this* book.

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*This* book asks us if the social interactivity of the Web—Web 2.0—has “transformed the way we ‘do’ school,” and then shows us, with care and specificity, the way to transform our schools. If you’re a novice, you’ll want to start with the “Short” and “Tall” chapters (think Starbucks coffee). If you’ve been thinking about new literacies for a while, then you can head to the “Grande” chapter. If you’re thinking about writing your own book, then you’ll turn to the “Venti” chapter. No matter the chapter, you’ll find excellent ideas. As Bill points out, the coffee in Starbucks is the same whether the cup size is small or large. The difference is the amount. That’s the difference you’ll find in the various chapters. If you’re only beginning to think about social networking in your classroom, the suggestions in the “Short” chapter will be perfect for you.

Regardless of the chapter, Bill asks us to consider what happens when our classrooms become as big as the world. I would change the question a bit to echo the question I asked the principal: “What happens when our classrooms *do not* become as big as the world?” I suggest that one result might be a diminished educational experience that in all likelihood prepares students to pass state-mandated tests but probably doesn’t prepare them for living in a global economy, for living in a world gone flat. We need to transform the way we do school because the digitalization of information and automation of jobs has transformed the way we socialize and work. All too often I hear administrators, teachers, or parents say that kids just need the basics; or worse, I hear them say that underachieving students need the basics. When I asked one principal to define “basics,” he said, “You know. Reading and writing. Good solid basics.” I reminded him that at one time in this country a basic level of literacy was the ability to sign one’s name. “*That* basic?” I asked. He said that was ridiculous because, “of course, what is now basic has changed.”

And that’s the point. What’s *basic* has changed. Change is rarely easy. If you are old enough to sing the first few lines of “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round an Old Oak Tree,” then you’ll remember using the big film projectors in a classroom. (And if you aren’t old enough to sing along, then you

understand immediately the importance of prior knowledge.) The film would break, and we would hope for a 14-year-old in the classroom who could splice it and get the film started again. None of us would embrace that technology today, yet many of us wondered about bringing VCRs and then DVDs into the classroom when that technology emerged. And now, we wonder again with YouTube and streaming news. We hesitate to go forward, and yet, once there, we would not go backward.

Early in this book, Bill tells us that, as he considered his own teaching, he realized that “not only did I need to ‘walk the walk,’ I needed to pick up the pace.” Picking up the pace will mean different things for different readers, and Bill recognizes that. So, no matter where you are on your own journey of creating a “socially networked classroom,” you’ll find the chapter that fits your needs. Each chapter is filled with rich descriptions, detailed explanations of activities, and rubrics that help us assess student work. More than that, though, each chapter offers us a glimpse of what it could mean to create a classroom as big as the world. That’s the real reason this book is the answer to the principal’s question. I suspect you’ll find it answers many of your questions, too.

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