

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

In the Arts, Repeating Our Actions and Expecting a Different Result Defines Insanity

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, February 16th, 2012

About a month ago I read an article in the *Atlantic* on the [phenomenal success of Finland's primary and secondary education public school system](#)—a success which, the article suggests, the US has failed to understand.

There are some notable differences between the US system and Finland's:

1. Teachers in Finland are given prestige, decent pay and a lot of responsibility.
2. Finland has no standardized tests; teachers are trained to create tests and assess students independently. (Periodically the government assesses all schools.)
3. The system is cooperative rather than competitive. Schools are not ranked or measured against one another.
4. There are no private schools in Finland. You can shop around at different public schools, but they are all of the same high quality.
5. Finland pursued education reform by aiming its teachers and schools at the goal of achieving social equity (“every child should have exactly the same opportunity to learn, regardless of family background, income, or geographic location”), not excellence.

This last point (no surprise) is the one that Americans studying the success in Finland seem to miss. Education in Finland “is seen first and foremost not as a way to produce star performers, but as an instrument to even out social inequality.” Finland has achieved excellence through the pursuit of equity.

A couple weeks later, with Finland's approach and success still on my mind, I came across another [intriguing article on education reform](#), this one at the university level.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a piece on Sebastian Thrun, a research professor of computer science at Stanford University, who recently gave up his tenure track position to found, [Udacity](#), a start-up offering low-cost online education. What prompted Thrun's move? Evidently the professor watched as the IRL enrollment for his artificial intelligence class dwindled while its popularity (among students at Stanford and around the globe) exploded online, eventually reaching 160,000. Thrun has set a goal of reaching 500,000 people with one of Udacity's first course offerings.

When addressing his motivations for the move, Thrun commented that when universities were first being created, “the lecture was the most effective way to convey information” but that despite the invention of new tools (like film and digital technology) “professors today teach exactly the same way they taught a thousand years ago.”

Here's what I've been thinking the past couple weeks, in large part because of these two articles.

In ten or twenty more years does the nonprofit arts and culture sector want to be the US education

system: excellent art for rich people and mediocrity, lack of resources, and lack of opportunity for everyone else? Or do we want to be Finland's: high quality artistic experiences (or "an expressive life" as Bill Ivey might say) for every man, woman, and child? Like most universities, do we want to limit our reach to those that have the time, money, privilege, proximity, and courage/comfort (see Nina Simon's brilliant post [Come On In and Make Yourself Uncomfortable](#)) to access us at our venues? Or do we want to collaborate as a sector with the goal of making it possible for anyone to have affordable (online, big screen, small screen, gaming system, etc.) access to high quality arts education and performances?

At the end of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article Thrun is quoted saying:

I feel like there's a red pill and a blue pill ... and you can take the blue pill and go back to your classroom and lecture your 20 students. But I've taken the red pill and I've seen Wonderland.

The clock is ticking.

The arts and culture sector in the US needs to be reformed.

Just because the arts have been an elitist form of entertainment as long as most of us can remember is no excuse for that to continue to be our story in the future.

Just because we have wrongly and self-servingly bought into and sold to others the idea that to be 'talented' you had to be a 'professional' and to make 'art' you had to be a 'nonprofit' doesn't mean we need to continue to make the same mistake.

We got it wrong the first time.

If our goal for the next century is to hold onto our marginalized position and maintain our minuscule reach—rather than being part of the cultural zeitgeist, actively addressing the social inequities in our country, and reaching exponentially greater numbers of people—then our goal is not only too small, I would suggest that it may not merit the vast amounts of time, money, or enthusiasm we would require from talented staffers and artists, governments, foundations, corporations, and private individuals to achieve it.

Let's be Finland. Let's pursue Wonderland.

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