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We Need Gates

John Spencer

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Educational contexts open to and self-directed by children promote learning, but traditional direct instruction also is appropriate in many areas. Gates, not walls, are what we need.

It's a few hours after sunrise on a blazing hot Phoenix morning. Still, my three kids are enamored of the learning that's happening around them at the neighborhood park. After chasing lizards and trying to make sense of the behavior of an ant trail, my oldest son notices that there is an echo near the racquetball courts.

"Why does it do that?" Joel asks. If this were a classroom, I might draw a detailed diagram of wavelengths or send him to a science web site. But it's not a classroom. It's the park, where learning is totally untested, and we have all the time in the world (at least before we melt away in the sun).

Joel moves to the edge of the court and listens again. He takes a step toward the court, yells his sister's name and notices the difference. Brenna runs to the middle of the court and tests her "hello, hello, hello" aiming in different directions. Micah stands at the edge of the second court and yells, "It's echoing in two places. You have to check this out."

"I didn't hear your echo," Joel yells back. "Let's switch spots and see what happens."

And so it begins. The questions. Why does it echo in some places instead of others? Why do the echoes change? Does volume make a difference? Bass? Distance? Would the shape of what you speak into change the sound of the echo? Would it sound different in a bowl or a box?

Most of the questions are left unanswered. We may take a few objects and test volumes on shapes and textures. My son has a theory about sound, that it is "stuff" that can be absorbed, blocked, and bounced. He still doesn't comprehend waves. I didn't front-load the vocabulary, and I don't intend to have him write a lab report when it's over.

At the park, I get to observe learning instead of measuring it. And that's the beauty of summertime. It's an ongoing, informal cycle of inquiry, action, and reflection. Here, the assessment is a conversation rather than a one-sided rubric or a multiple-choice test. Here, we move from topic to topic and subject to subject based upon contexts and interests instead of a curriculum map. As a dad, I get to be everything that I want to be with my students — a guide, a mentor, a counselor, an expert, and a learner.

Do we need walls?

Initially, it has me yearning for open spaces. There is a chain-link fence that separates my sons' school from the park where they experiment with sounds and make sense of ant behavior. I want my kids to leave the rigid, sterile space of the classroom to explore the world around them. I want them to visit parks, libraries, museums, and businesses guided by their interests and passions.

On a digital level, it has me wishing schools wouldn't block social media but would embrace opportunities for students to use videoconferencing with experts, blogging with students across the world, curating research on social bookmarking sites, and engaging in conversations via social networks and micro-blogging.

In the summer months as I hang out with my own kids, I feel guilty about setting up structures for students. When I hear about kids learning in noninvasive environments, I start wondering if I'm doing it all wrong. I am mired in a mindset that anything systemic is unnatural and simply a negative byproduct of industrial schooling. Soon, I spiral into a place of self-doubt where I wonder if I'm crushing student creativity if I ask them to do an assignment that I created instead of something they developed on their own.

However, I'm not sure that openness is the ideal solution for all students. Walls have a place. On a physical level they create spaces that become communities. They create boundaries and parameters that children can navigate. These boundaries aren't always a bad thing. Critics are quick to point out the similarities between prisons and schools. And yet, when I asked my students last year to create a metaphor of school, the majority called it a "refuge," a "safe place," a "family." These metaphors wouldn't exist without walls. After all, homes have walls and few people are advocating

JOHN T. SPENCER (john@educationrethink.com) is a 6th-grade ELL teacher at a public school in Phoenix, Ariz.

homelessness as a solution for freeing up children.

On a more figurative level, walls can play a valuable role as well. The structure of school, including the mundane routines, is why both of my sons are able to read. Phonemic awareness and blending didn't simply come naturally through open exploration. Although I tend to be a constructivist, I recognize that the deliberate planning of curriculum and standards have helped my kids learn things that they might not have been drawn toward in a purely inquiry-based learning environment.

In terms of digital walls, I am struck by the need to abandon social media and be present in the physical world. I experience this reality on a Philosophical Friday, a weekly social studies discussion activity, as the students discuss the meaning of truth and reality. I structure it as a Twitter chat and an in-person discussion. However, all of the students eventually set their devices down and ask if we can just talk, tech-free, in person. This leads to a discussion about the danger of social media creating a constant reality show. A few students express the desire to disconnect in a sort-of digital detox. As one student puts it, "I want to be in one place sometimes and not feel like I have to be connected to the whole world."

How about gates?

Perhaps the solution is not a binary option of open versus closed spaces. Instead, as a teacher, I can choose gates, which allow me to develop flexible structures — physical and curricular — to help students navigate the decisions about being open or closed

In terms of physical space, I don't have to knock down the walls in a 1970s'-style open classroom. Nor do I have to set up rigid rows and plaster anchor charts and word walls all around. Instead, I can push for flexibility in the space. I can set up standing centers, small group areas, and spots where students can go to be alone. I can vary the groupings based on student choice and teacher choice, depending on the activity. Here, the gate mindset works, because we shift between closed and open space depending on the specific task. This means students might be sitting on the ground during blogging but sitting in chairs with their eyes on me during direct instruction.

On a digital level, instead of blocking social media entirely, the gate metaphor encourages students to wrestle with when it is best to be online or offline. Here, I can ask students questions such as, "What is the best medium to express your learning?" And, "Which platform will you use for collaboration?" In the process, students begin to think critically about the social media platforms they're using.

With regard to instructional design, the gate mindset allows me to push for student inquiry and provide freedom in student assignments while also recognizing that direct instruction and guided practice are still necessary. I can work with students on the structures needed in the essential questions and the project framework. However, I can embed the projects with student choice so the framework is flexible enough for them to experience a higher level of agency.

I don't have it all figured out. Sometimes I create too many structures and students feel stifled and walled off from relevant learning. In these moments, I watch students wrestle with boredom or get confused by trying to follow my procedures rather than focusing on the learning. Other times, students struggle with the freedom that I allow and ask for more guidelines on assignments. I end up wasting time reteaching concepts or modeling skills that students might be missing.

However, the solution is neither an entirely open nor an entirely walled-off context. Instead, I want to strive for flexibility. I want to set up gates that allow us to be open and closed depending on the context of learning and the needs of the students.