

In Our Flat World, Don't Forget the Hills and Valleys

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The world is flat.

Thomas Friedman told us so with the release of his international bestselling book by the same title in 2005. Soon after its publication, education reform circles frequently referenced the work in the context of suggestions for new directions for our schools.

Seven years later – June, 2012 – we have learned a lot about ourselves and our world.

Even if educators accept the general conclusion that the world is flat, we must be reminded that hills and valleys persist. In our quest to paddle ahead of the flattening waves, educators could be compared to aerialist Nik Wallenda who recently completed a tightrope walk across Niagara Falls.

Wallenda, that is, without the tightrope.

Imagine if Wallenda tried to simply jump from the U.S. side to the Canadian side. The result would not have been good.

In these times, it is imperative for educators and education reformers to recognize that the distance between *here and there* might be too far to jump. In other words, before we attempt to emulate or connect our students to such places as Shanghai, Finland, Singapore, Japan, Australia, or – yes – Canada, we would be well-served to pause and balance ourselves. We should look within to increase our capacity within.

Current reform efforts, be they with good intentions, do not offer educators a strong and secure tightrope on which to tiptoe to the targeted destination.

In our flat world, there is endless chatter about the necessity to connect continents and countries.

Pause. Balance.

However, in our ever evolving world it is now ever so important to take the first steps to connect states, counties, and local zip codes. In these times, we cannot afford to leave our neighbors behind. Schools should serve as conduits to forge new connections among neighbors.

Bypassing the first critical steps, the latest education reform efforts are skipping flights of stairs while racing to the 102nd floor observatory; a literal race to the top. (The optimist in me remains

hopeful that when the education reformers get to the top they will realize that the world is not flat afterall. They will finally see the countless untapped hills and valleys that hold so much promise and potential.)

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is an example of reformers leaping from floor to floor without paying attention to the realities being skipped over at the foundation of our schools. As a result, the realities that the standards ambitiously set out to change are almost certain to remain unchanged. Adopting the Common Core State Standards in the absence of fostering meaningful relationships and connections among the 45 states and 3 territories that share them will not address the realities on the hills or in the valleys.

But let's not put the cart before the horse.

Does it make any sense to attempt to foster meaningful partnerships among states before successfully fostering meaningful partnerships among counties? This would be similar to teaching students Calculus before teaching them Algebra.

Skipping steps.

Let's continue with the equation.

Does it make any sense to attempt to foster meaningful relationships at the county level before cultivating meaningful relationships among stone's-throw-zipcodes?

I guess I am saying that there are prerequisite skills for forging meaningful relationships among states. Unfortunately, I am not sure that we have met any of them except for the hard work which was engaged in drafting the Common Core Standards. Now that New Jersey and Nevada have the same standards, I do not know what impact there will be on the hills and in the valleys of the respective states. The realities in the respective states seem likely to remain unchanged relative to the new standards.

In *The World is Flat*, Friedman outlined ten major political events, innovations, and companies that flattened the world: the collapse of the Berlin Wall in '89, Netscape went public in '95, work flow software, open-sourcing, outsourcing, offshoring, supply-chaining, insourcing, informing, and "The Steroids" (digital, mobile, personal, and virtual.)

It is time for educators and education reformers to stop ignoring the hills and valleys and design flatteners of their own. It is time to tap our greatest potential and stop swinging for the fences when we could get the job done with a hit.

The Asia Society is a leading educational organization dedicated to promoting mutual understanding and strengthening partnerships among peoples, leaders and institutions of Asia and the United States in a global context. In 2009, the Society partnered with the Council of

Chief State School Officers (CSSSO) to define the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students need to be globally competent. The partnership led to the development of the *Global Competence Matrix* which describes four capacities of globally competent students: they investigate the world beyond their immediate environment, they recognize their own and other's perspectives, they communicate their ideas effectively with diverse audiences, and they translate their ideas and findings into appropriate actions to improve conditions.

In my opinion, the *Global Competence Matrix* is a document which all educators should keep on their desktop. Educators should keep in mind that the knowledge, skills, and dispositions outlined in the matrix could be and should be applied locally and regionally as well as globally. Don't miss the first steps. If educators embrace and enact the matrix at the local level, I believe we will begin to flatten education in a positive sense and realities might actually have a chance to change for the better.

Jeff Wang, Asia Society's Assistant Director for Education and Chinese Language Initiatives, contributed to a post for *Education Week's Global Learning* blog in April titled, "Five Tips to Strengthen International School Partnerships." Wang begins, "With travel and exchanges becoming increasingly affordable to more schools and students, we have an opportunity and responsibility to build effective K-12 level school-to-school partnerships with student exchange programs that are much more than vacations abroad." His first tip is regarding vision. Wang states, "The most effective way to cultivate a shared vision for exchange of activities is through learning about each other's society – economics, history, youth culture, and education system. He continues, "...it also leads to discoveries of common concerns and varying approaches to issues within each other's education system and school community."

Pause and balance.

Imagine if educators embraced Wang's insights and thinking but focused on the local and regional level rather than abroad as a first step. Could educators and their students discover common concerns and varying approaches to issues within each other's education system and school community with their neighbors within a 10 mile radius?

The second tip Wang highlights involves design. Wang explains, "In a school-to-school partnership, students can be channeled to apply foreign language skills, to jointly solve a math problem, to compare each other's measurements of local air pollution for a science unit, to perform an ensemble for the community, to fundraise together for an exchange visit." The third tip Wang offers is about resources. Wang writes, "You may be pleasantly surprised to learn how many businesses in your area have dealings with the home country of your partner school...You may task your PTA with discovering and pursuing interest and support for your exchange program from these locally vested businesses."

Pause and balance.

Again imagine Wang's tips playing out between schools across town or county from each other or between two schools from different states.

Ah, flatteners.

Wang's fourth tip for strengthening international school partnerships discusses persistence. He states, "International school partnerships connect two systems' students and educators as well as their communities, where bureaucratic process and communication style can vary a great deal... What I find most interesting is that often the issues that one side runs into, such as funding, timing, leadership support and approval, are perfectly appreciated by the other side and even a source of commiseration." I could envision two nearby schools or at least two schools within the same country rallying around such issues and helping each other to develop new solutions to old problems.

Pause. Balance. Flatten.

A chance for real change.

The fifth tip Wang describes as "a little bit of luck." Wang explains: "Sometimes, the best idea, the best conversation, the best result come through serendipity, such as over a meal, during a car ride, or a homestay. Serendipities are invaluable and impossible to plan. What we can do is build in space and time that simply allow exchange to happen naturally, unscripted."

Talk about a flattener! Imagine local or regional schools getting together with the sole agenda to share conversations about issues pertinent to them, to tell their respective stories, to exchange best practices and model resources, or to flesh out new possibilities together.

Serendipity, a flattener. A tightrope of some sort.

In our flat world, I am growing more and more convinced that the work needs to be done on the hills and in the valleys. Educators need to look at their local and regional surroundings in new ways and consider new means of collaboration as professionals and for their students.

As Dr. M.F. Stephenson or Mark Twain or Yosemite Sam (depending on your education and your teachers) said, "There's gold in them thar hills!" Just know that the valleys offer riches too.

Educators need to lead the way in flattening education.

I had a dream and read a headline on the front-page: *Flat Education in the U.S.*

...and only then will we get to the top.