

The Second Debate

Date: April 7, 2011

Theme: Productivity in Learning

Are we educating our children for the dole queue? Should we be talking about notschooling, rather than schooling? What has Oxford University got in common with a tribal storyteller from Sierra Leone? Were books just a temporary blip on the education landscape?

These were just some of the strange but nearly always mind-expanding questions that arose during the second of Promethean's Education Fast Forward (EFF) global debates, held on April 7 and addressing the issue of Productivity in Education.

The event brought the intellects of 32 of the world's finest innovators in educational thought to bear on this highly topical issue. Although physically in six continents spanning all the world's time zones, these 32 met around a virtual conference table supplied by EFF partner Cisco's TelePresence technology. The entire debate was streamed live on the web with a parallel Twitter feed, so that anyone with an interest globally could not merely observe but participate.

In order to ensure that discussion never veered too far from reality, the debate was kicked off by guest presenters describing their own successful initiatives, both at the sharpest end of the educational spectrum.

From the United States, Richard De Lorenzo explained how his work as a school district superintendent in one of the most disadvantaged communities of native Alaskans had led to a new model for learning that required turning the USA's time-based education system on its head. Now enshrined in the Reinventing Schools Coalition (RISC), De Lorenzo's approach offers a blueprint for performance-based learning.

Then, from the UK, Jean Johnson outlined her work with notschool.net, which over the past decade has re-engaged more than 6,500 marginalised children with learning. She explained how this technology-based, online initiative was now crossing continents – and how it could (and should) be applied, not just with school drop-outs, but with all young learners.

Although the ensuing debate included much hard scrutiny of these claims, there was by the end of the meeting a real consensus that – if we really want to prepare the next generation for the world we're leaving them – we really have to do something dramatic about our creaking, 19th-century, no-longer-fit-for-purpose school system.