

Teaching Your Way Around the World

Teachers and administrators share their experiences in international schools around the world

Uplift: Contextual Exploration and Building Student Confidence

Posted on [February 10, 2020](#) by [Paul Magnuson](#)

This is the third in a series of four posts based on ongoing conversations with Bill Tihen.

On a recent Sunday morning I was playing badminton with my nine-year old daughter. Our rallies were extraordinarily long, we had really gotten the hang of it.

Then she said, “Let’s count how many we do!” She served the birdie off the edge of her racket into the net. “o.” She sent the next one over and I missed it. We couldn’t get another good rally going. Soon she asked if we could switch activities.

During the long rallies we experienced a feeling of “uplift,” the sense of each one of us doing well on account of the other, the sense that we were able to help each other have the next good shot. Individually we were a good team and being a good team made us good individually. We were in a state of “flow.”

When Bill speaks about uplift, he focuses on the creation of an atmosphere in which students build on existing strengths and grow their self-confidence. Bill feels that students are more likely to find joy in learning when they start from a position of strength, and that redirecting them from distracting activities toward helpful activities is easier. An uplifted atmosphere is full of exploration and meaningful context, one in which stress is reduced by focusing on what students do well.

Dangerous to an atmosphere of uplift are traditional assessment practices. Assessment shouldn’t hinder motivation or impede performance – think of our terrible badminton shots when we started focusing on assessment! We need to avoid letting our assessment practices lead to student behavior that is safe for the assessment practice but damaging to a creative sense of exploration. *Assessment serves learning*, not the other way around.

For example, in our 3D Nautical Design class, where students designed and printed plastic boats, students tested the boats in a pool of water so that everyone could see what boat designs work and which do not. Assessment (and reflection) is needed to advance the learning. Students test as they are ready to test, not to demonstrate mastery, but to discover the next step, the next improvement. The students are experimenting with the performance issues that they are designing for. They don’t need a teacher to tell them if a boat is right or not, they will see for themselves if it can’t handle a payload or gets swamped by a wave. Assessment becomes personal, with a goal of iterative improvement, which can actually contribute to the atmosphere of uplift. Assessment is not a teacher’s judgment of ability, which ranks students against each other or to levels on a rubric. Assessment is what is needed to take the next logical step, discovered by the student.

Uplift by focusing and building on strengths. Increased ownership and student agency will follow.



About Paul Magnuson

Several years ago, Paul Magnuson founded a research center at the high school level in collaboration with colleagues at Leysin American School. The center supports professional learning through a variety of programs, including year-long action research projects by faculty who receive competitive resident scholarships. In addition, the center works with schools and universities around the world, hosting 10 to 15 visiting scholars annually, and consulting and presenting at schools and other organizations. Paul has created a number of tools and programs, including classroom observation schemes, language immersion summer

camps, the middle school at LAS, and most recently, edge, a high school program which offers an alternative to traditional school through greatly increased student agency. His current interests are the documentation of edge, pulling agile into education, and self-regulation for both students and teachers.

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