In times of drastic change,
it is the learners who inherit the future
while the learned find themselves equipped
to live in a world that no longer exists.
— Eric Hoffer

A few years ago, I asked a student in Australia to describe the education environment in his country. He said it was the Qantas theory of education. I said, “Do you mean quantum theory?” “No,” he said. “Qantas, the airline. They make me turn off all my digital devices, strap myself in for the duration of the journey, and leave me hoping the pilot takes me where I want to go. I have to wait until we land before I can get my digital life back.” It was an insightful way of saying school had not caught
up with the digital world. Unfortunately, this is still the reality. The challenge for us all is to do something about it.

I believe it’s time we stopped trying to repair and replace education and start rewiring it. This means moving with intent away from the old design that is holding us back from being able to effectively meet the needs of our digital natives. It means turning to psychology before technology and believing that all kids have the potential to succeed, so long as they have the proper motivation. It means focusing not on passive education, but on active learning, and ensuring that students have ideal learning spaces where various challenges, like those found in the CBL framework, can engage them on a regular basis. It means giving all students the access and opportunities needed to prepare for life in the twenty-first century, things like learning to build things by hand and in code. It means that we must rethink teaching and provide ongoing professional development so that teachers become facilitators of learning, rather than conveyers of information. Finally, it means raising our expectations for technology, and using it in transformative ways, so that it can unlock every student’s potential and set in motion the future of education that they deserve. The question is, how? What can we actually do about it?

It’s parents who are in the best position to stand up to leadership at all levels, but the most vocal parents are also the ones whose children tend to be in great schools already. It’s easy to assume that if your own kids are getting a good education, then there isn’t much of a problem at all. These parents are also the ones most likely to have done well in the current educational system themselves. “All this talk about how bad public education is and how much it needs reforming is nonsense,” a parent once scolded me. “It’s the same system I went through and I’m fine. The system is
good enough!” It’s things like this out-of-touch mentality that is causing teachers to continue to struggle to meet student needs, and they’re why American education has not changed much in over a century. Never mind that this parent’s ideas are just plain wrong; while the system may be the same as it used to be, the world is not, and the old educational model is far from being “good enough” to prepare our kids for it.

A CALL TO ACTION

The Pony Express was a carrier service established in 1860 to transport mail across the Great Plains and over the Rocky Mountains, both to and from California. Doing this, of course, meant riding through “Indian country,” which was not exactly the safest place to travel back then. The ad for riders at the time announced: “Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen. Must be expert riders and willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred.” The heroic Pony Express riders inspired a piece of artwork that depicted a young man waving to workman erecting poles and stringing wires for a telegraph system. He was seeing the future, a much faster, cheaper, and safer way of delivering messages. This was a transformative technology that put an end to the dangerous Pony Express service. I often ask my audience of educators, “Are we the education equivalent of the Pony Express, or are we laying the foundation for a new learning environment?”

Today, we must consider if we’re willing to continue sitting back and accepting the flaws of our Pony Express–like education system, which is failing far too many of our students, when there are ways of doing things better. Just like the telegraph system of