

Foreword

By Milton Chen

Once every few decades, an education thinker comes along to fundamentally change how we think about teaching and learning. They lead us to think in much more expansive ways about education, a field notorious for its narrow conceptions of teaching and learning. The human being is a marvelous learning organism, but the politics and traditions of school districts often obstruct children's natural desire to learn.

At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey advocated for curricula that connected with children's own lives and communities. He predicted how the vitality of the American democracy would hinge on the quality of its school system. (In the tumult of this 2016 election year, he was prescient, indeed.) His contemporary, Maria Montessori, working a continent away, also promoted active, hands-on learning and connecting classroom life to real life. Both emphasized the natural curiosity of children and allowing them more voice and choice in their learning. Armed with new tools and research, today's progressive educators are creating a renaissance for Dewey's and Montessori's ideas.

Fast forward to the 1980s, when Seymour Papert of the MIT Media Lab developed the children's programming language, LOGO, to teach mathematics and procedural thinking. Back then, teaching high school curricula—the arcane skills of computer science, no less—to grade school students seemed incredulous. Today, in our digital society, the benefits of learning to code are widely accepted. Papert compared American students' mediocre performance in math to their disappointing mastery of French, after several years of high school instruction. The problem with both subjects, he argued, was that students were not being immersed in the richness of those cultures. After all, French children seem to learn French quite naturally!

Enter Chris Livaccari, with similarly bold—indeed, revolutionary ideas—for both educational theory and practice. His rich professional and personal life, as a student, diplomat, teacher, and school administrator, informs this essay with the tantalizing title, “New Ways of Seeing”. His ability to speak three languages beyond English—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, toss in Russian, too—gives him unusual standing as an American to reveal a broader and deeper view of language learning.

I first met Chris when he was working at the Asia Society as associate director of education at the Asia Society. While his facility with multiple languages is striking, his ability to teach them is infectious. Just check out his online videos, as I have. Students who have studied with him are fortunate, indeed, to learn Chinese or Japanese in an entirely new way. Now, in this book, he shares his approach.

He begins by reminding us Americans of an inconvenient truth: multilingualism has been the norm throughout history and continues to be widespread around the world. The American focus on English-alone is an accident of our history, politics, and geography. While we have been slow to embrace global learning and languages, the movement to multilingualism is growing in our increasingly multicultural society. Many educators and parents now recognize the benefits for students and their future careers. It's now abundantly clear that students who learn other languages stand the best chance to thrive in the global economy.

But Chris Livaccari urges more fundamental purposes as to *why* language learning is important. Just as Seymour Papert argued for the value of learning computer language, he believes that learning another language can improve how you learn everything else. “Mental flexibility”—recognizing patterns, seeing deeper connections, trying other approaches—is critical to complex

Just as Seymour Papert argued for the value of learning computer language, he believes that learning another language can improve how you learn everything else. “Mental flexibility”—recognizing patterns, seeing deeper connections, trying other approaches—is critical to complex problem-solving and creativity in all domains. Emerging research is also suggesting that bilingual children might be more socially adept as well, better able to take another person’s perspective and, perhaps, be more tolerant of and even curious about other peoples and their cultures. Language learning can be one of the best hopes we have for ensuring a more peaceful world.

Livaccari also shows us *how* language learning can be dramatically improved. I found his comparisons to music, architecture, and visual art to be especially profound. He writes:

“Just like all music shares a common set of characteristics and formal properties, successful language learners must tune into the particular character of whatever language they are learning. Musicians must learn the idioms of classical, jazz or rock; the language learner must be attuned to the common properties of Japanese, Dutch, or Amharic.”

He puts forth an exciting idea: that learning a language might best begin by illuminating the principles embedded in all languages, the common DNA of languages, their genotype. Then, instruction could focus on how a specific language expresses those principles—using the genetic analogy, its phenotype. Now, that’s a course I’d like to take. As a college senior, I took my first Chinese language course, using the textbook and a language lab. But the instructor never bothered to reveal the beauty and meaning of families of Chinese characters, for instance, that characters relating to water all have “three drops” on their left side.

This essay practices what it preaches about the emotional side of learning. It is fun and enjoyable to read. You’ll breeze through it and end up wanting more. That’s my definition of a powerful learning experience for which Dewey, Montessori, and Papert would be proud.

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