

Timeless Learning: How Imagination, Observation, and Zero-Based Thinking Change Schools

Ira Socol, Pam Moran, Chad Ratliff

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I have been looking forward to reading *Timeless Learning* since the recent announcement of its release. The book, a beautifully produced hardback, arrived during the timeless winter holiday recess, so there was nothing in its way, or mine. (*Disclosure: I ordered with the teeny edge of anxiety that comes when you know the authors - you want the book to be as brilliant as you know they authors are.*)

Verdict: A keeper. It was a “drop everything and read” book. The content - the story of Ira, Pam, and Chad leading and supporting change in their public school system in Albemarle County, Virginia, USA - is a clear telling of the work I have been following from afar, so this alone made it a satisfying read. It outlines how they identified barriers to student learning, and conceived and implemented ways to dissolve them over time - changing classroom structures, professional learning opportunities, leveraging all possible financial and system supports. Everything possible to be done to take a student perspective on school is done.

What lifted the book to “cracking good read” level for me was a combination of the format of the chapters, the writing style, the context, the authors, the stories, the ideas, the challenges. Each chapter ends in the same series of four open challenges [“over to you” provocations, structured inquiry prompts, reflection starters, calls to action] aimed at the reader-as-educator: which makes the book ideal for a professional book club, and as an inspiration bank for those responsible for educating teachers at any level. The context has both great contrast to our Irish system and strong similarities. This book illustrates the US public school district ‘luck of the draw’ as regards the values and vision of the Superintendent the district is dealt; the strangling legacy and grip of No Child Left Behind and Common Core echo what one reads in many US writings. Echoes of here are strong in the “cells and bells” description of schools, and the ticky boxy metrics of classroom inspections.

A thing that stands out more than once is their observation about classroom observation itself. In one story, Pam outlines her experience, as a trainee superintendent, of being shown how to observe trainee teachers; a note-taking exercise which ended up defeating its own purpose - the more that is ‘observed’, the less that may be seen. This was in the 80’s, but it sounded just like the process still used in many teacher training observations nowadays. The other eye opener was the description of the bewildered reactions of inspecting and observing visitors upon entering a reconstituted multi-age, ‘problem based learning’ space whose walls - an particular the dominant teaching wall - had been dissolved. Teachers being barely visible or audible seemed to unnerve some visitors, who had no units against which to measure the ‘timeless learning’ they were seeing. The take on professional learning is good to read too, in particular the start of year four day trip to the Maker Faire in New York City, and the long lasting effects it has on the teachers participating. One core piece of advice they thread through the book as suggestion to the reader/teacher, citing Hattie’s ‘collective efficacy’ as goal, is to continually seek out “aspirational peers”.

Each author’s lived experience comes through strongly when reading. Chad is a not just a maker himself, but a committed “maker of makers”. Ira’s unique combination of career experiences is critical to the ‘outside box’ development the three of them are bringing about in this adventure. Pam’s affinity with natural science, her weaving within a Deleuzian rhizome conceptual framework, underpins what shapes her as an evolutionary leader.

I repeat that this book would be an ideal “professional book club” choice, and would recommend to to all those responsible for teacher training and learning, initial and in-career. Enjoy. I did.

PS - I look forward to listening to an audio version read by the authors. I think others would agree.

