

Starting From Scratch: The Companion Guide

What is Starting From Scratch?

Starting from scratch is not about re-envisioning pencils, paper, or the playground. It is not about maligning the industrial model of education, critiquing No Child Left Behind, or decrying a broken system of teacher training and professional development. Instead, Starting from Scratch is about changing the ways that we talk about education, envisioning for the first time a classroom in which the novelty for both technology and pedagogy has worn off. It is about writing out and framing all that we want for ourselves as educators and parents and then striving for it instead of complaining about a lack of resources and visionary leaders. When I say Starting from Scratch, I do not mean that we should metaphorically clear all off the piles of knowledge and tradition from our desks that go into our planning and thinking about schools. Rather, I mean that we should design a new desk, an artist's desk, with an angled surface so that we can do the work of our calling, not simply pursue the process of catching up.



In this presentation I hope to convince anyone who is listening or watching that the ways in which we act and talk about school directly impact the type of school we have, and that doing these things well can show the obstacles to change for the facades they really are.

Framing Change:



The concept of framing isn't a new one. Using certain words and ideas to evoke the desired reaction is a standard part of most debate theory. Yet, somehow we believe that we are not a part of the debate over the future of education. In doing so, we are in passive agreement that nearly everything we do in our classrooms is equal, that the status quo and authentic use of technology will lead to approximately the same success for kids and for us. That is part of the frame that we have bought into, and unless we present a new one, it will prevail. George Lakoff of the Rockridge Institute describes framing as “the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality—and sometimes to create what we take to be reality.” This means that every word that we use to describe our vision of school can either fit into an old frame or design a new one. Our actions too can work be productive or counterproductive. Although this insight may seem to put undue strain upon our everyday choices, perhaps it is only fitting that we start to take our task of creating change seriously.

What does the frame look like?

Knowing exactly what kind of change we are looking for is essential to getting it. Speaking and writing intelligently about a vision is just a first step, though. We have to be able to distill our efforts into to a few palatable words and one irrefutable cause. This can look like a lot of things, but in order to make this vision more concrete, the following is an example which I originally created for The Academy of Discovery and later eDCSD.



The Academy of Discovery is an exercise in framing that started out with very innocuous roots. Over the past four years, my students and I have engaged in progressively more and more sophisticated technology integration. What started off as blogging student essays quickly turned into a thirst for any new collaborative tool to get kids engaged in the process of learning and meaning making. So, during our latest bout of high stakes testing (known as the CSAP in Colorado), I set about framing what I was seeing in the classroom to make advocates out of anyone who came in contact with the concept.

The first step was to create a place to house such an undertaking. Because I could not do such work alone, I created [a wiki](#) to distribute the process a bit. [This wiki](#) became the breeding grounds for ripe ideas and the construction of our frame.

Throughout the process of researching what is working elsewhere, laying the framework for pedagogy, and describing the kind of tools that we wanted in our educational model, I found that there was one concept that I kept coming back to. It crept into my writing when I was summarizing research. It wandered into the podcasts I was doing on the project. It would even worm its way into conversations I was having about other parts of school life. This singular concept of Authenticity helped to focus the Academy of Discovery frame. It allowed the rest of our work to take shape.

Indeed, authenticity is very hard to argue against. I'm not sure that you could find an educator that would try for an inauthentic classroom or a parent who want more inauthentic content for his or her child. That is what made Authentic Learning so appealing (it also helped that it is what is best for kids). So, with the frame starting to take shape and the vision accurately encapsulated, I had to flesh out the elements of Authentic Learning.

I set about summarizing the knowledge base of the entire edublogosphere, my personal learning network, years of research on technology in the classroom, anecdotal evidence from my own experience, and everything I knew about student learning into a few key words that would describe exactly what Authentic Learning is in the 21st century. After an arduous struggle with semantics, I came up with the idea that Authentic learning is Contextual, Connected, Collaborative, Change-Directed, Conversational, and Continuous. To further solidify this frame, I created the metaphor of the Six Strings of Authentic Learning (found on the attached PDF).



Framing Change for Different Stakeholders:



Once the frame is well outlined and articulated, all conversation and debate about school will take place within the frame. This means that discussions will focus on positive ideas change rather than fear of change or complaints about lack of change. However, even when the frame is well written or spoken, it still requires further tailoring to specific audiences. It also requires consistent introduction until all stakeholders are advocates.

Framing Change for Teachers:

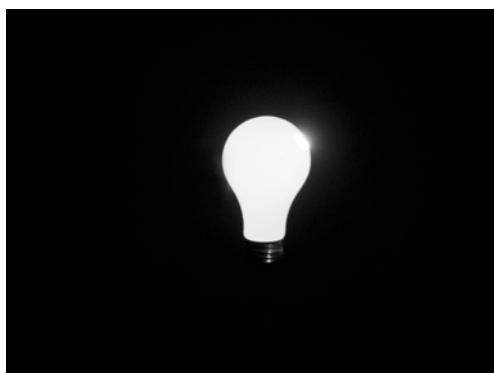
Teachers are notorious for wanting to concrete examples of how ideas will affect practice, of how something new will translate into something better or easier. (I do not exclude myself from this group.) So, within this frame, we need to talk about the tools that work. We need to discuss how this frame actually looks in the classroom. We need to bring the theory into the realm of practicality. The idea, then, is to form a support toolbox that uses the language of the frame to show teachers tangible examples of how useful change can be. (See 101 Resources and Tools for Authentic Learning.)

Framing Change for Students:

Students may see the benefit of change right away, but they will only continue to be advocates of change if it is well executed. They want to see proof every day that the new frame is not just a repackaging of the old one. The students will be the first ones to see through a facade of well-meaning but pointless paradigm shift from okay to okay-plus. So, this is where students need to be empowered to act within the frame. They should create products that show off just how different learning can be when it is authentic.

Framing Change for Parents:

Parents may be the most skeptical stakeholders because they may want school to look like it did when they were attending. The only thing that will convince parents that a new frame is worth buying into is their children. When children learn and want to learn even more, and when kids are begging to write more blog entries or work on a collaborative presentation, that is the moment that parents will buy-in.



Framing Change for Administrators:

Administrators, like parents, want to see results. They want to see the results in research and practice. When the frame is well constructed, nearly anything from the classroom can be used as support for the frame. Each project will show the merits of working collaboratively. Each piece of critical thinking posted for the world to see helps to identify that such an idea shift is worth having.

The other thing that both Parents and Administrators like to see is the big picture. A well drawn big picture surrounded by your iron-clad frame will get even the hardest-line doubter to use your words in thinking about school.



The Final Frame:

In the end, framing is not about convincing others that what you are doing is valuable or life-changing. It is not about working toward the 2.0 version of anything. Starting from Scratch and framing change are about constantly proving to yourself that what you are doing is what is best for students. It is about sustaining your own teaching, learning, and thinking so that no amount of educational pendulum swings can alter your progress.

If you have any questions about this presentation or any of the corresponding materials, please e-mail me at benwilkoff@gmail.com or comment on my blog at <http://yongesonne.edublogs.org>.