



Heart of the Matter

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The Times: Yes, They Are A-Changing

What is Postmodernism and What Skills will our Children Need in the New Era?*

Looking back over history, the transition from one era to another seems like it happened overnight, but in reality, each transition takes lifetimes, and the people who lived during those times of transitions couldn't fully understand what was happening. It is becoming clear, however, that we are living in such a time of transition. The Modern Era is behind us and a new era is ahead. In this Heart of the Matter, I'd like to examine closely both the Modern Era from which we've come as well as the values and skills our students will need in order to thrive in the Postmodern Era through which we are currently emerging.

In order to understand where we're going, we must first acknowledge where we've come from. The Modern Era, which has dominated so much of our local and global cultures, owes much of its philosophy to 18th Century Europe and the Enlightenment. True to its name, this intellectual movement brought the "enlightened" ability for humankind to see itself in a new way. We admired our new human abilities in the areas of medicine and engineering, and we terrified ourselves in our ability to destroy the very earth that supports us. The Enlightenment brought the Industrial Era and the conquests of capitalism that turned humans into "capital", and the earth into "resources." It ushered in the age of materialism, in which a scientific, material, and monetary value was placed on *everything*.

The promise of the Enlightenment was that science and materialism would bring comfort to human life. We would "colonize" nature – and by controlling it, life would be infinitely happier. With the culmination of the Enlightenment came the Modern Era – the long awaited promised time when life expectancies rose sharply into the 70's, and houses could be cleaned with the push of a button or the swipe of a credit card.

So why aren't we happier? Jurgen Habermas, a Jewish man who studied the emergence of the Holocaust in order to ensure that such horror would never occur again, put it this way, "Ironically, then, the very process of enlightenment which was... supposed to liberate man from nature and lead to human freedom and flourishing, rebounds upon him. Gradually, as industrialization and capitalism take hold in the 19th century, human beings are being subjected to ever more pervasive networks of administrative discipline and control, and to an increasingly powerful and untame-able economic system. Instead of liberating man from nature, the process of enlightenment imprisons man, *who is himself a part of nature*" (Finlayson, 2004, p. 7. Italics are mine). Indeed, in creating giant bureaucracies that were meant to control nature, we wound up controlling ourselves.



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It is the nature of power to hold onto the status quo, thereby guaranteeing its continued domination. The voices of the powerful have told us that the giant systems of our society are “too big to fail”, while massive tools of power have been used to prop them up. But they *are* failing. Our country *is* breaking down. We are transforming from a modern society structured around the efficiency of big government, big corporations, and big education to a postmodern society, where everything will be broken into smaller pieces.

This time of transition is scary, largely because we don't know what the transition will bring. At this moment, we see hate crime on the rise, and the general demise of what many people thought of as progress. We might be thrown into another dark ages before the next dawn. The postmodern imperative of everything breaking into smaller pieces may very well look like a return to a multiplicity of feudal kingdoms.

But as long as we survive this time of transition, the new era comes with some potentially good news for our children and hope for the future. This is especially true if we can manage to take the best ideals of the Enlightenment – namely the optimistic belief that humans are ultimately good and we have the potential to one day create a just and humane society – combined with the critical perspectives of the Postmodern Era, to create a more fluid and crystalized way of being (Brookfield, 2000).

The emerging Postmodern Era is highly contested. There is little agreement about what it is or even when it began. It may have begun more than a half-century ago, or it may be yet to come. As the table on the next page demonstrates, most of its features seem to be a direct dialectic opposite of the Modern Era.

The Three R's of the Postmodern Era & The Skills Required:

- Relativism:**
complex, creative, and critical thinking
empathy
- Relationships:**
social and emotional intelligence
collaborative living
spiritual development
- Reinvention:**
engaged imagination
adaptive leadership
questioning of systemic injustice
creation of new paradigms

Anyone familiar with Rainbow Community School probably recognizes these three postmodern values as integral to the curriculum and culture at Rainbow Community School. Relativism, relationships, and reinvention are a daily part of a Rainbow student's educational life. At the same time, we are careful not to fall into the traps that the Postmodern Era sets – namely a cynical attitude where there is no truth, and no reason to attempt to ascend to the greater heights of humanity. Instead, we hold what Ken Wilber (2001) calls an integral conscious-ness, where a holistic approach brings greater wholeness to the human experience. Let's take a closer look at the skills students must acquire in order to maximize their comfort and agility in moving through this Postmodern Era in which we find ourselves.

1. Relativism is the notion that there is no ultimate truth. “Science,” as we were taught in the modern era of education, is giving way to the idea that there is no single reality, and science is never going to find it. We now recognize that the observer changes the experiment, and it is utterly impossible to be objective. Because it is impossible to be objective, subjectivity and relativism will reign in the Postmodern Era. If everything is relative to its particular and unique circumstances, then you can only understand a person when you choose to truly walk in their shoes.

Students who have empathy and can see things from multiple perspectives will be better equipped in this world than children who grow up learning within a single belief structure and cannot tolerate other perspectives. This also means that systems that treat everyone the same will fail in favor of systems in which everyone is treated as unique. The current public school system is a case in point, as are most bureaucracies. The opportunity lies in the potential rise of systems that take people's individual feelings and needs into consideration.

The Modern Era has been shaped by the tyranny of the majority, while minority voices have been largely unheard and disregarded. In the Postmodern Era there is the potential for deeper appreciation of the color and diversity of all people – bringing marginalized voices into the center as power becomes decentralized.

We are also seeing that “facts” no longer reign supreme. This played out in the recent election. People are swayed by feelings, charisma, and gut reactions rather than facts and information. Students who will do well in this postmodern world will be skilled in the expressive arts, media studies, and critical thinking. Students who can hold paradox – that is, understand concepts of both/and will be equipped to deal with complexity.

| Modernism | Postmodernism |
|--|---|
| Newtonian | Quantum |
| Reality Exists | There is no objective truth, only subjectivity and relativism |
| Capitalism | Late-capitalism, with the potential of post-capitalism |
| Materialism | Post-materialism |
| Hierarchy and central authority | Webbed connectivity, flatter structure, localized power |
| Order | Loose structure and Complexity (and chaos during transition) |
| Economy of Scale resulting in extended bureaucracy | Function and personal relationships more salient in systems |
| Uniformity and simplicity | Variability, hybridity |

2. Relationships are the way of the future. Just as the modern era dehumanized people, the new era will connect people. The nuclear family was the quintessential ideal of the Modern Era – three to four people, on average, who were isolated from the rest of the world, but surrounded by all their material needs. According to the rise of psychology and other social sciences, the nuclear family has been a miserable failure in terms of our mental health. It turns out that humans are, anthropologically speaking, communal people.

So, just like all things modern, the nuclear family has been breaking down. It started fracturing into even smaller units, such as single parent families. But these smaller units will soon become hyper-connected larger units of extended relatives and surrogate families that share resources out of economic necessity and/or who share love and relationships out of the human need for connection.

Students who will be content in this atmosphere will be able to love and connect deeply with others. Likewise, those who will be successful in the new business world will be emotionally and socially highly skilled. Individualism will be on the decline, and those who watch out for others will find more happiness and success in life.

In a postmodern world, the amount of information is so vast and the flow of information so fast, that we must stop trying to control it and instead allow it to wash over us, choosing on occasion to jump into the current. Since it is impossible for any individual, organization, or government to control the information, the power of knowledge becomes shared. Students have to understand how to work through relationships, because no one individual or leader can know as much or think as well as the combined, synergistic intelligence of a group.

Students who will be successful in this environment will, from an early age, be taught to engage with their emotions and inner life. Their ability to self-reflect and to cultivate personal transformation will help them to understand how to manage conflict and how to take the perspectives of other people.

As we place more value on relationships, we will naturally start to devalue the stronghold of materialism. Living in a post-materialist world will mean that things which cannot be seen will be considered just as real as the physical world. Therefore, children who grow up with a reverence for the sacred will find a central place in the new era. Those who are ‘spiritually gifted’ will understand this new terrain, and spiritual development will be very important. After a long era of only that which can be materially measured mattering, the new era will appreciate that which can be felt and understood on an intuitive and spiritual level.

3. Reinvention is the opportunity that lies ahead. The dominance of relativity will mean that people and things will no longer be seen as stagnant. Each of us will be allowed, even expected, to reinvent our lives – to transform. Ideas, more so than things, will be treasured. Our children will have the opportunity to reinvent the world by bringing these ideas to life.

Students that thrive in this world will have received an education in which their imagination is engaged and enhanced. They will be given plenty of opportunities to take information and turn it into new ideas and new inventions.

Students will need to be highly adaptive in this environment. They will need to preemptively sense when circumstances are changing and learn how to respond by either leading themselves (and others) into a new situation or adapting to the changes around them.

Finally, reinvention means understanding how to work change through dynamic systems. Postmodernists recognize that human misery in a modern world is a result of the “alienation, stress and oppression of large bureaucratic systems that we have come to regard as ‘necessary evils’” (Stringer, 2007). We are so accustomed to the modern way of life that we don’t even question it. Students who will be successful in the new era will have the perspective and courage to question the current systems, to recognize that such oppression is not acceptable, and to create new, more organic and humane systems.

The Responsibility of the Postmodern School

As one can infer from the above, the American public school system is the quintessential modern bureaucracy-- hierarchically designed around an economy of scale. The longer it clings to its modern elements, the more chaotic and potentially devastating its transition into the new era could be. It would be healthier for the public school system to start embracing radical change and transition now instead of experiencing potential collapse when it is forced to acquiesce to changing times. This will not be the result of any particular public party or leader(s). The dissolution of these massive systems is inevitable and only a matter of time.

The idea of the current public school system breaking down is terrifying, and we have to do everything we can to ensure that its transition –

whether slow or devastatingly sudden -- doesn’t leave those on the margins, who are most vulnerable, as the primary victims.

Despite the efforts of well-meaning educators and leaders to hold onto the current public school system model, smaller ‘new era’ schools will continue to spring up until the latter subsumes the former. Therefore, it is imperative that new era schools, such as Rainbow Community School, do everything we can to include and support those who are most marginalized by the public school system.

Change is always difficult. While the texture, trauma, and timing of change will vary according to political and cultural circumstances, forces greater than anyone can understand or control—forces greater than any individual or government—are already underway. Unfortunately, chaos is common during times of transition, but so too is a period of harmony and tranquility once the chaos settles. We don’t know whether such a time will come in our lifetimes or beyond. What we do know is that change is coming. In fact, it is here. The postmodern world of relativism, relationships, and reinvention is upon us, and Rainbow is in a unique position to educate the next generation of critical thinking, justice-seeking, compassionate leaders. For the sake of our children, we hope for harmony.

*Note: I wrote much of this *Heart of the Matter* before the 2016 election. I put it aside and didn’t finish it because I thought my summary of postmodernism’s decentralizing and destabilizing nature sounded too dark, or perhaps like I was predicting Trump would win, when in fact I was just as surprised as most people. Now this article seems even more relevant than ever, so I fished it from the computer files and took the time to finish it. I hope it has provided some insight into these changing times. ~R

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