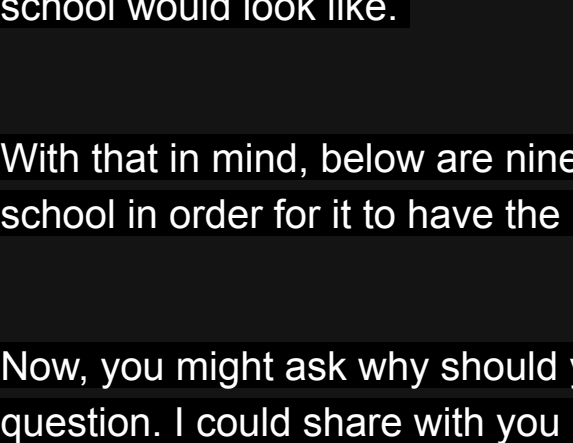


Houston, we have a problem.

The official blog of Figment Consulting's Chief Fig. Houston Tucker.

Monday, December 8, 2014

Virtual School Manifesto: Nine Essential Ingredients



In my blog *Imagine the Possibilities* I have written extensively about the need for re-imagining the virtual school model. In numerous posts I have shared how the current model is broken, the ways in which it is broken, and have sounded the

call for a fresh model.

In doing so I was challenged by a friend of mine who is a prolific blogger, author, and entrepreneur to share my vision of what a re-imagined virtual school would look like.

With that in mind, below are nine essential ingredients required in a virtual school in order for it to have the potential to fulfill its original promise.

Now, you might ask why should you believe what I have to say? Good question. I could share with you my 12+ years of experience working professionally in the field of virtual and blended learning, with the largest provider of online curriculum K12 Inc. and then through the consulting firm I founded, Figment.

I could also share with you my personal experience in virtual and alternative learning in that we have used virtual public schools, online private schools and home education for our four children. It all began when our oldest was entering Kindergarten and she is now a sophomore at a prestigious university in California.

So, combine the professional and personal experience, add to it the length of time involved in each, and I believe it offers me a unique perspective into this realm.

As to the merit of what I suggest below, my hope is that you will consider them based on their potential to re-imagine what, in my opinion, is a broken implementation of a revolutionary concept known as virtual public schools.

1. Place the teacher-student relationship in the center

The current model of virtual schools proudly places the student at the center, then encircles that student with technology, content, teacher support, intervention, test prep, and more. They message it out as putting students first, revolving around the student, or everything we do is about the student. They each have the student serving as the foundation upon which they are building everything else.

Unfortunately, the foundation is crumbling. And, instead of addressing the real issue, online providers and educators come together at their annual conference in order to showcase new technologies for their Learning Management Systems (LMS) in order to allow more timely teacher interventions. Or, they tout new gaming-type graphics and media that will engage students. Next, they adopt new terms such as competency-based or adaptive learning in order to demonstrate ongoing progress. And, finally, they share best practices among each other when no one is succeeding in such a way that should be followed.

And, when all else fails, they seek to implement variances of the model, moving today toward a blended learning approach instead of full virtual.

All the while they ignore the foundation. What if they were to change the core concept upon which they build? Instead of placing the student at the center, place the teacher-student relationship there and see what possibilities emerge.

A simple change such as that could do wonders for the way in which technology is utilized.

John D. Rockefeller understood this concept at the turn of the last century. No, not the virtual school concept, but rather he understood the real role railroads played in the building of America. Tom Scott and Cornelius Vanderbilt believed railroads were the foundation to build upon. Rockefeller saw it differently.

Rockefeller utilized the railroads in order to transport his product, oil, into the homes of Americans so they could have light. For him, the railroads were merely a conduit to move his product from Point A to Point B. So, when Scott and Vanderbilt, rivalries at the time, combined efforts in order to squeeze more money out of Rockefeller, it backfired on them. Instead of caving in, Rockefeller began to build the nation's first oil pipelines because he rightly understood the foundation of growth was in the oil, not in the transportation of it.

Fast forward to today and we have another oil v railroad situation. Too many online providers and educators view technology as the oil when in reality it is merely the railroad. And, just as the railroads gave way to the airplanes so too will current technology give way to future advancements -- mobile is outpacing personal computers, tablets are outpacing laptops, and so forth. Ten years ago there was no app industry.

The problem remains in that everyone is focused on building a better railroad, or inventing the airplane in order to replace it. When, in reality, they should be focused on the real oil, in this case, the teacher-student relationship.

In the world of virtual schools it is still the teacher-student interaction that carries with it the potential to inspire learning. The current model relegates teachers to the same level as the technology and asks them to serve as interventionists or mere supporters/cheerleaders. This not only diminishes their role but it also severely inhibits their ability to impact the learning by the student.

Imagine instead a virtual school model that is built upon the foundation of the relationship between the teacher and the student. Imagine a virtual school that understands the vitality of this interaction and builds everything to encircle it instead of merely the student. This is not to diminish the role of technology, it is merely to ask it to serve the proper focus and foundation.

Teachers inspire learning. Teachers, equipped with powerful technology have the potential to powerfully inspire learning. Technology should serve as the conduit to transport the relationship between the teacher and the student. Technology is not the oil, the relationship is.

I purposely state it as teacher first then student when speaking of the relationship. The teacher goes first in this relationship because they are the ones that can bring out the personal best within each student. They are the originators of the relationship. They are the ones that drive the breadth and depth of the relationship. The teachers are the ones that engage the students therefore they are first in importance, even when it comes to the student.

So, let's establish our virtual school upon the foundation of the teacher-student relationship. Then, let's see what emerges as we begin to build.

2. Invest in teachers

All good schools have professional development for their teachers. It is a necessary part of the equation. However, I suggest we must take it, not a step further, but take it in a different direction when it comes to virtual school teachers.

The direction we must go is into the realm of customer service. We have established that the teacher-student relationship is the foundation and we are placing the majority of the responsibility upon the teachers to inspire learning. Therefore, we must equip them with the skills to inspire. Content training, technology training, and cognitive learning training -- yes, of course those are needed.

However, imagine the school where the teachers (and administration) have been trained in the art of customer service. In reality, that is exactly what the students are in these schools -- customers. We treat them merely as students and they leave at an astonishing rate. If we begin to treat them as customers, even guests, then we have the potential to retain a much higher rate of them each year.

Show me a virtual school that takes this to the edge, sends their team to the Disney Institute to learn customer service skills from the mouse, and I will show you a virtual school that is on the path to building something remarkable.

We expect our teachers to inspire the students yet we fail to give them what they need in order to accomplish the mission. Let's spend as much time and money investing in teachers as we do in the latest LMS and we might just make the impact we desire.

3. Launch with success in mind

Too many virtual schools gain approval and open their doors without the necessary number of teachers and lack of training. In one of my articles, I compared this to a Starbucks opening on the corner near you within a week after announcing it would do so. They shuffle the employees and managers through a quick training course that covers only a percentage of what they need to know. As opening day approaches they quickly realize they do not have enough employees to manage the shifts yet they decide to move forward anyway, asking each employee to simply do more.

Opening day occurs and chaos ensues. Then, they spend the rest of their time trying to restore lost confidence and rebuild relationships with disgruntled customers. Common sense would tell you it would not work yet virtual schools mimic this process almost every year.

Why? Many launch with the opening day in mind, recruiting as many students as possible and simply believing they can adapt and improve along the way.

Instead, virtual schools should launch with the future in mind. Is it better to start with thousands of students and trying to play catch up, or is it better to start with a reasonable amount of students, serve them well, then add on each year? Which one will bring success, long-term success?

One might say it is all in how you define success. If success is defined as trying to attract as many students as possible by opening day, then we have a decade of history showing that way is not working. However, if success is defined as student achievement, retention, and engagement, then we must explore new models of virtual schools rather than tweak what exists.

4. Grow with purpose

I had lunch recently with an educational entrepreneur and we were discussing much of what I am writing about here. As we talked about the potential tension that exists between mission and margin she shared the following with me, "Without margin there can be no mission." Point for her. There is absolute truth to this quote but I believe it misses the overall point. This is not about margin v mission. Instead, it is about the focus of attention.

My belief is if you put your energy and time into your mission, you can create margins that will allow you to continue to exist, and even prosper. However, if all of your decisions are margin-based, then your mission will simply get lost early on and forgotten over time.

The mission, or vision, should be one that inspires employees, and customers. Speak from the WHY perspective as Simon Sinek reminds us in his book *Start With Why*. Give us something to rally around and we will work harder to increase the margins. Tell us it is all about the money and we will find shortcuts to make more of it -- most of the time at the expense of the student.

For-profit providers can be successful in virtual education if they grow with purpose.

1. Think long term
2. Understand the lifetime value of the customer
3. Exponential results are better than exponential growth

5. Build a remarkable learning experience

Author, blogger and entrepreneur Seth Godin describes remarkable as *worth talking about*. In other words, the service you are rendering is so remarkable that your customers cannot help but share the experience with others who might benefit from the same service.

Virtual schools spend too much time thinking about scalability instead of developing a learning experience that meets this *worth talking about* threshold.

The iteration of remarkable might look different at each school, however the overall goal should be remarkable. Instead, virtual schools spend their time simply trying to find new students to replace the ones who have left. They inherently believe marketing will be the answer, the solution to their attrition woes.

Marketing cannot overcome a poor experience. And remember, *experience* encompasses far more than academics.

6. Make retention a culture not a program

Retention begins the first time a student says yes to enrolling. It is the day-in and day-out interactions that occur between the teacher and student, the administration and student, and the interaction with the family.

If the effort is merely a program to attempt to re-enroll students each year in the spring, then it will fail. Retention must be tied into the ethos of the school. It must permeate each and every interaction, or touch point, that occurs.

In essence, it must be what the school is, not what the school does.

7. Be a human connection school

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Imperative, WhatsApp -- each one built upon the concept of human connections. Teenagers are spending hours each day on one or more of these. Why? Because they want to connect.

Why is it then when students enroll in virtual schools do we believe they will be fine working at home by themselves most of the time? But, many will say, what about the field trips and the live webinars, and the other efforts of social get togethers that the schools do?

Each is necessary, yet we are missing out on the real issue at hand. I say this because in my 11+ years with K12, one of the main reasons students left was due to lack of social interaction. And yet, they all had the opportunity to go on field trips, and sit in on the live webinars. So, what is the real issue?

There are levels of connection that need to occur at virtual schools and most only focus on the surface level ones - field trips, etc. They are missing the core needs and wants. It's not about socialization, it's about connectionalization. Socialization is like the school dance where everyone gets together, stands around and watches a few have a good time. Connectionalization is the friendships that emerge in the hallways and at lunch where communities and tribes are formed.

Connectionalization also occurs when schools make the connection to mentors and opportunities.

8. Focus on aspirationgraphics

K12 recently released a survey of families indicating they had enrolled in virtual schooling because they were being bullied at their current schools. The inference here is that students being bullied will make good candidates for virtual schools. So, K12 will turn their attention to finding more students just like these, and their messaging will reflect words that create a narrative in which virtual schools are safe. And yet, they continue to struggle with high attrition rates at their schools. Why?

They struggle because they are recruiting with the wrong *_graphics*. Their attention is on *demographics and backgrounds*. Instead, they should be focused on what I call *aspirationgraphics*.

A student's background will not make them a good candidate for virtual school success. Sure, it might be an indicator as to whether or not they will enroll, but it is not one to measure potential success. So, let's turn our attention to aspirationgraphics. Let's move away from determining if they have been bullied, homeschooled, or gifted and turn our attention to their educational work ethic.

Is the student willing to put in the hard work it takes each and every day in order to be successful in virtual learning? Is the student resilient? Is the student able to manage their time effectively? Will they complete their work? On time? Does the student have a dream they are aspiring to achieve? Do they have a passion for learning? Does the student take responsibility for their own growth? For their failures?

Aspirationgraphics crosses all backgrounds and goes after the true measurement of potential success. A student first in her class, gifted by all accounts, will not automatically be successful in a virtual school. She may be motivated by besting all of her classmates, in person.

And why schools automatically assume a student being bullied in their current school will flourish when given a safe environment in which to learn is beyond me. There are plenty of students, not being bullied, who still lag behind in their learning. Being bullied does not equal excelling in virtual schools. Yet, many virtual schools continue to recruit students like this.

9. Be a specialist, not a generalist

The final element that is essential to a successful virtual program is focusing on being a specialist, not a generalist. In other words, stop trying to be all things to all students. Just because a child resides in a state does not mean he/she will make for a successful virtual school student.

Focusing on aspirationgraphics will lead to becoming a specialist, however, a virtual school must be willing to say no to those students who would do better elsewhere. In fact, that is actually what a virtual school should do if they are putting students first -- find the best place for them to experience success. And, that place might be another school.

At a recent INACOL conference I met with a former colleague of mine and we were debating whether or not a public virtual school could set parameters on who could and could not enroll.

"We do not believe we can tell a child that they cannot enroll if they want to," he said. "It is not up to us to determine if this child would be successful or not in our schools. It is really up to the parent."

Good point you might say. However, I would argue that if messaged appropriately parents could do a better job of self-selecting (see the Marines as a nice example -- the few, the proud instead of anyone and everyone), imagine a school that conveys the hard work necessary for success within their virtual school through their marketing message.

Those parents who call anyway would then be greeted by an enrollment consultant who acts more as an advisor than a commissioned representative. And, the conversation is more about finding out if the virtual school is the best place for the student instead of trying to "close the sale."

Then, onboarding would continue to convey the work, dedication and resilience necessary, along with the ongoing parental involvement required for the student to reach their personal potential within the virtual school.

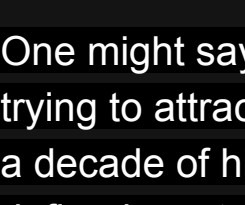
Would it lead to less students in the school if it were a specialist and not a generalist? Not necessarily. It could just as easily lead to more of the type of students who can actually thrive in a virtual learning environment.

The real question we must ask is "Is the current virtual school model working?"

If it is, then continue to be a generalist. If not, then it is time to re-imagine virtual learning, and start with these nine ingredients.

houston@figment-consulting.com

Posted by [Houston Tucker](#) at 8:05 AM



Labels: [alternative education](#), [blended learning](#), [edchat](#), [education](#), [education reform](#), [eLearning](#), [online learning](#), [virtual academy](#), [virtual school](#)

No comments:

Post a Comment

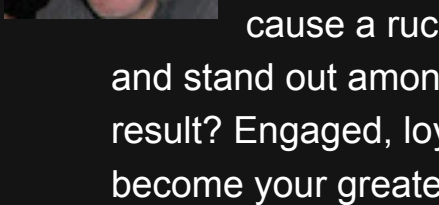
[Newer Post](#) [Home](#) [Older Post](#)

[View mobile version](#)

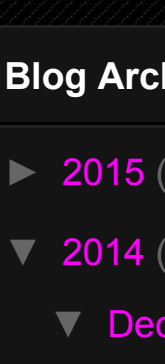
Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)

Follow by Email

Subscribe in a reader



About Me



Houston Tucker

Figment Consulting can help you cause a ruckus, go to the edge, and stand out among the crowd. The result? Engaged, loyal customers who become your greatest ambassadors, spreading your story.

[View my complete profile](#)

Blog Archive

- [2015](#) (22)
- ▼ [2014](#) (96)
- ▼ [December](#) (8)
 - [If I could only read three books next year they wo...](#)
 - [Thank you readers.](#)
 - [Oh, the places you'll go.](#)
 - [The KittiesMama society](#)
 - [SpecialGlobe.com - helping special needs kids expl...](#)
 - [Virtual School Manifesto: Nine Essential Ingredient...](#)
 - [The day the music died.](#)
 - [#BlackFriday,](#)
 - [#ShopSmallSaturday,](#)
 - [#CyberMonday](#)
- [November](#) (8)
- [October](#) (10)
- [September](#) (8)
- [August](#) (7)
- [July](#) (8)
- [June](#) (7)
- [May](#) (6)
- [April](#) (8)
- [March](#) (10)
- [February](#) (8)
- [January](#) (8)
- [2013](#) (16)