

The Future Of Education Was Invented In 1906



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Wired has an excellent-yet-frustrating story on what they call “A Radical New Teaching Method” that is transforming education. Of course, as the article itself says, there is nothing “new” about this teaching method: **let kids figure things out on their own, and they’ll not only learn better, but be more passionate.**

The frustrating part of the story is precisely this: they try to connect age-old insights about education to, somehow, a story about techno-utopianism and the internet and technology transforming schools. The great part is the story of José Urbina López Primary School, a very underprivileged school in Mexico where an enterprising professor helped his pupils be among the best in the country by utilizing student-directed methods. This story is inspiring and even, at times, moving.

But here’s the thing: there is nothing new about it.

The piece makes a big deal out of Professor Sugata Mitra, who is famous for the “hole in the wall” experiment: leaving a computer out in an Indian slum for kids to try out, and discovering that the kids figured out how to use it and taught themselves things. I’m sure Mitra is working on cool things, but there is nothing new about the fact that kids will instruct themselves.

In fact, the future of education was invented in 1906. That’s the year Maria Montessori, who was the first female medical doctor in Italy, opened her revolutionary school. People who talk about Montessori education often talk about some of the specifics—no grades, child-size objects, students choose their own activities, the same set of materials in every classroom, etc. but that’s missing the point. **Montessori education was so groundbreaking because it was the first (and, to my knowledge), scientific education method.** By which I mean the following: every other education method is based on an abstract model of the child and then derives education methods from that. Maria Montessori, a doctor and a researcher, went the other way around: she experimented with methods and, based on the results, built up a theory of the child, which she then tested and refined through experiment.

The reason why everything is the way it is in a proper Montessori classroom is simple: it has been shown through repeated experiment to work, in countless classrooms, across cultures, etc.

It’s precisely this culture of experimentation, of scientific evaluation that is so sorely missing in our centralized, bureaucratized education system, rather than any one specific method or habit.

Meanwhile, it’s because of this scientific character of Montessori education that it produces such excellent results, results that are validated again and again. Dr Angeline Lillard’s work has shown how the most recent science backs up Dr Montessori’s findings—as well they should since they were drawn from experiment.

The future of education is here. It’s got nothing to do with laptops. It was invented well over a century ago. What are we waiting for?