

JoLLE@UGA

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Volume 9 Number 1

Spring 2013

Editor
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<http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>

Review of *The Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in Our Schools*.

Chen, M. (2010). *The Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in Our Schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 296 pp., ISBN 9781118157404, \$19.95 (paperback).

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Please cite this review as: Bellas, T & Myers, J. (2013). Review of the education nation: Six

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With all the rhetoric about school reform and innovation in the world of public education, it is refreshing to find a book that furthers the conversation. Milton Chen's *The Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in Our Schools* is such a book because it provides real life exemplars and suggestions for what directions meaningful reform can take, and how innovative schools can look. It is, in many ways, an answer to the important question, "What should education reform look like?" As the executive director of The George Lucas Foundation, Chen has a history working in children's television programming, including *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company* and *3-2-1 Contact*. This experience has given him a unique perspective on the affordances and constraints of technology in education. Accordingly, *The Education Nation* is an essential read for every educator or administrator who seeks an innovative edge.

Chen argues that the seeds of school reform lie at the edges of the American education system, where the richest forms of innovation are occurring. These six edges of innovation as described by Chen include: the thinking edge, the curriculum edge, the technology edge, the time/place edge, the co-teaching edge, and the youth edge. While all six are important, three stand out as meriting close examination: the thinking edge, the time/place edge, and the technology edge). These changes are critical because of their potential for innovation compared to current traditional practices and ways of thinking about schools.

The first edge of innovation described by Chen is "the thinking edge." According to the author, modernizing our thinking about education is fundamental to innovation. If we want to truly reform our school system, we need to "change our thinking about the education enterprise itself" (p. 11). This shift can be achieved with a thorough examination of the learning process; a reassessment of the roles of students, teachers, and parents; and exploration of opportunities brought about through technology. Chen advocates for a more child-centered approach to learning, similar to that described by the progressive educational philosopher, John Dewey. As Chen points out, we need to revise our thinking on how children learn effectively. This sentiment is echoed by digital literacy researcher Alvermann (2010), who indicates those in education "need to let go of some tired instructional practices that, while still valuable, have lost some of their power to motivate and engage students" (p. 118). As teachers and students strive for modernized classroom experiences, it is important that technological opportunities are maximized. This argument from Chen is not new. Educators and policymakers have contended that a move away from the traditional agrarian schedule needs to be made given the current digital age, but most schools still follow an antiquated model.

Those in education are being encouraged to integrate 21st Century Skills into the curriculum to help the United States compete. Staggering results from an in-depth workforce readiness study from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills generated this new curriculum, which is focused on preparing students for such a global economy and participation in the democratic process (The Conference Board, 2006). These newly identified "21st century skills" combine core subjects with information and communication skills; thinking and problem-solving skills; interpersonal and self-directional skills; and civic, financial, economic, and business literacy, all within an authentic global context (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.). As a result, 21st Century Skills will require that we think about education and its purposes in new ways.

Another edge of educational innovation is "the technology edge." Chen advocates strongly for getting a computer in the hands of every student, and praises the accomplishments of several successful one-to-one computer initiatives, highlighting the efforts by Governor King in

Maine. Levin and Schrum (2012) describe how many schools are employing technology as a “lever for school reform,” but it takes school leaders who understand that their students have different needs and are willing to make sacrifices to fulfill a new vision for student success. As Chen also describes, the promise of online learning opportunities to provide high-quality learning to all students is leveling the educational playing field. For example, online learning has made accessible a curriculum that was once unavailable to students in isolated areas around the world. Chen also points out that technology has brought about what he calls “the death of the lecture” (p. 118), which has made it possible to provide learning in more highly engaging ways. Therefore, traditional educational practices are being revamped to meet the needs of 21st Century students.

An additional curriculum edge described by Chen is “the time/place edge,” which rejects the antiquated view that learning occurs in discrete time periods and specific places. Chen argues that this approach paves the way for a new world where learning and school shift to open access twenty-four hours a day, 7 days a week. Education systems that cling to the twentieth-century factory model are losing relevance in the twenty-first century. Chen points out that many schools are redefining the school day beyond traditional boundaries: staying open later and on Saturdays to provide additional extended academic support for students, providing additional recreation opportunities, and enabling additional experiences with project-based learning. Literacy experts Gee and Hayes (2011) write about passionate affinity spaces as “new civic spaces composed from people all over a country or the world” (p. 89). By expanding the boundaries of time and place, students can engage with others outside the confines of school hours using digital communication not available to previous generations. Thus, places of learning are being redefined. Chen’s example from Vail, Arizona describes school buses that are equipped with Internet access to support student athletes and long distance commuters with long trips between school and home. *Education Nation* shows us how other schools are moving out into the larger community to take advantage of real-world opportunities for learning.

In *Education Nation*, Chen retells a story from an educator based in India, questioning the rampant testing practices in the United States, who says, “Here, when we want the elephant to grow, we feed the elephant. We don’t weigh the elephant” (p. 26). Chen’s many examples in *Education Nation* encourage us all to “feed the elephant” so our students and schools can succeed and thrive. They need “caring adults who can lead them to the right digital learning experiences” (p. 217). Further, Chen believes teachers are the most important factor in the education process.

In *The Death and the Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch cautioned educational policymakers against continuing on a path of reform that overemphasizes the de-professionalization of the teaching profession and standardized testing. Many critics argue that Ravitch points out problems in our education system, but does not offer solutions. Chen similarly offers few solutions or a clear method for achieving this progress and fixing all that is wrong with education today. Nevertheless, Chen’s book provides many ideas for educational innovation and reform.

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