



Edutopian

VISION

Teaching, not politics, is the art of the possible.

Teachers are optimists for a living. We believe all students will learn. We believe ignorance is no match for education. We believe in our personal powers of persuasion and influence. The arc of the teacher's universe is long, but it bends toward progress. We believe, in short, in Edutopia.

And Edutopia believes in us.

Let politicians and pundits speak darkly of the need to weed out bad teachers. Let them hold tests and accountability over our heads like the Sword of Damocles. In Edutopia, teachers *rule*. We are confident and inspiring. Enlightened administrators are courageous and brave. Grateful parents swoon, while bright, cheerful students meet their academic manifest destinies as their awesome teachers reject the discredited orthodoxies of industrial-age schooling in favor of hands-on projects and authentic, real-world tasks. In the bright light of Edutopia's soul it is always six o'clock in the morning, and you cannot wait to jump out of bed and get to school.

More seductive than a fitness magazine on New Year's Day, Edutopia inspires me. Edutopia gets me. Edutopia sees the teacher I am capable of becoming—no, the teacher I *will* be—and it wants to help me. True, I haven't helped inner-city high-school students design and build a hybrid car that runs on fuel made from soybeans like that guy in Philadelphia. OK, I haven't nailed down donations to buy an old farm so my students can garden and read Thoreau in the bosom of nature like that teacher in Vermont. Hell, I haven't even found the time for that cool unit where my kids create digital avatars and use them to explore body issues. But I will. Yes, in fact, that's *exactly* what I'm going to do.

Right after the tests are over. It's possible.

Edutopia comes by its name honestly. Beyond aspirational, it is *teacher porn*. But here's the thing: it's serious. The George Lucas Educational Foundation, the 19-year-old organization that runs Edutopia, has given itself a mission to "spread the word about ideal, interactive learning environments

**George Lucas
reimagines
the American
classroom**

By ROBERT PONDSCIO

PAUL J. RICHARDS / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

“What Works” according to Edutopia

Edutopia's tagline is “What Works in Public Education.” So what works? Edutopia cites six “core concepts” but little proof to back its claims.

Comprehensive Assessment: “We know that the typical multiple-choice and short-answer tests aren't the only way, or necessarily the best way, to gauge a student's knowledge and abilities. Many states are incorporating performance-based assessments into their standardized tests or adding assessment vehicles such as student portfolios and presentations as additional measures of student understanding.”

Popular with teachers, portfolios and other forms of “authentic” assessment have proven difficult to implement broadly. A 1995 RAND report on a statewide program in Vermont concluded that portfolio assessment “has been largely unsuccessful so far in meeting its goal of providing high-quality data about student performance.”

Integrated Studies: “Creativity, adaptability, critical reasoning, and collaboration are highly valued skills. When it comes to fostering those skills in the classroom, integrated study is an extremely effective approach, helping students develop multifaceted expertise and grasp the important role interrelationships can play in the real world.”

Data are hard to come by. A search of “integrated studies” in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database yields 71 hits, only 4 of which are peer-reviewed studies.

Project Learning: “Because project learning is filled with active and engaged learning, it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they're studying. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning.”

“Project learning is great when it's done well, but it's very hard to pull off,” observes University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, the author of *Why Don't Students Like School?* “It's probably much worse than other methods when it's done poorly. It just turns into nothing.”

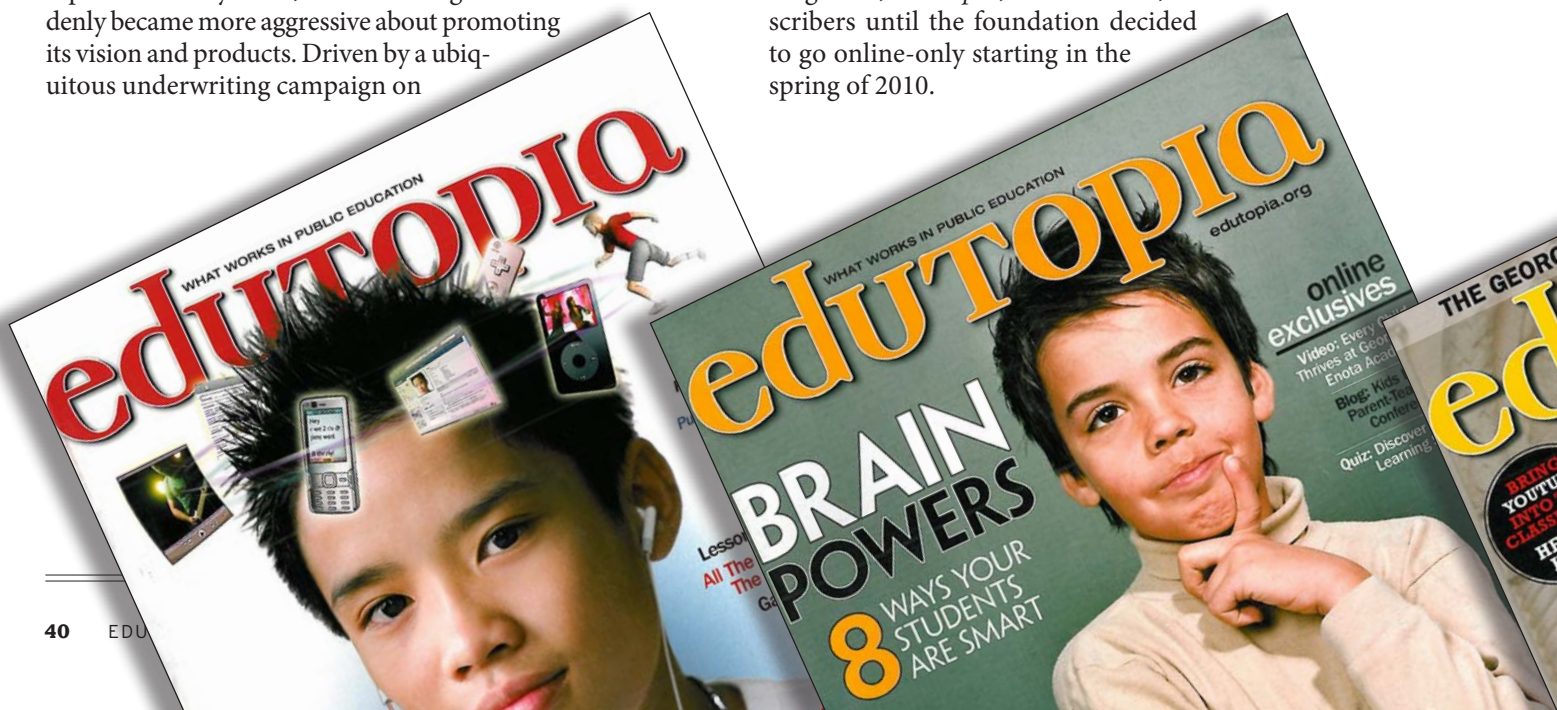
Social and Emotional Learning: “Research shows that promoting social and emotional skills leads to reduced violence and aggression among children, higher academic achievement, and an improved ability to function in schools and in the workplace.... Before children can be expected to unite to achieve academic goals, they must be taught how to work together, and so it provides them with strategies and tools for cooperative learning.”

The idea that noncognitive skills can matter as much as IQ for career and life success is most closely associated with psychologist and author Daniel Goleman. Critics say these skills are poorly defined and hard to measure, and that claims about “emotional intelligence” are overblown.

and enable others to adapt these successes locally.” Its name notwithstanding, Edutopia does not see itself as peddling pie-eyed idealism.

Many people in education were only dimly aware of Edutopia until early 2009, when the organization suddenly became more aggressive about promoting its vision and products. Driven by a ubiquitous underwriting campaign on

National Public Radio (NPR), Edutopia claims 10,000 paid members and a total monthly audience of over 300,000 educators for its web site and videos, a 70 percent jump in the past year. Its six-year-old bimonthly magazine, *Edutopia*, reached 100,000 subscribers until the foundation decided to go online-only starting in the spring of 2010.



Teacher Development: *"The best teacher-preparation programs emphasize subject-matter mastery and provide many opportunities for student teachers to spend time in real classrooms under the supervision of an experienced mentor. Just as professionals in medicine, architecture, and law have opportunities to learn through examining case studies, learning best practices, and participating in internships, exemplary teacher-preparation programs allow teacher candidates the time to apply their learning of theory in the context of teaching in a real classroom."*

Teacher training programs that focus on subject mastery are still the exception, and Edutopia's vision of teacher development is one of its stronger pillars. Ironically, it seems to be among the least emphasized of its six core principles.

Technology Integration: *"Effective tech integration must happen across the curriculum in ways that research shows deepen and enhance the learning process. In particular, it must support four key components of learning: active engagement, participation in groups, frequent interaction and feedback, and connection to real-world experts. Effective technology integration is achieved when the use of technology is routine and transparent and when technology supports curricular goals."*

Technology certainly can help "make teaching and learning more meaningful and fun," but more effective? Edutopia doesn't say what research it's alluding to here.

Its unabashed idealism and cheerful optimism make it impossible to dislike Edutopia, which bills itself somewhat grandly as "What Works in Public Education." What's harder to define is Edutopia's on-the-ground impact on America's classrooms and the efficacy of its unique, ultraprogressive ideas. Lucas's money has purchased an impressive collection of reported articles, videos, and web pages gathered on-site at

schools across the country that practice at least bits of what Edutopia preaches. Still, foundation officials are hard-pressed to identify any school that has adopted its strategies as a whole. Thus a better Edutopia tagline might be, "What We Think Would Probably Work in Public Education If Schools Would Stop Being So Old-Fashioned and Just Try It. Plus George Lucas Thinks It's a Good Idea."

That might not make a compelling NPR underwriting credit. But it would be more accurate.

What Works in Public Education?

For Edutopia, "What Works in Public Education" boils down to six "core principles": comprehensive assessment, integrated studies, project-based learning, social and emotional learning, teacher development, and technology integration (see sidebar). Project learning and technology get the biggest push, but even these two favorites serve a bigger picture. "The six core principles can be summarized in six words," says Dr. Milton Chen, senior fellow and executive director emeritus of the George Lucas Educational Foundation. "School life should resemble real life.' That's what we'd really like to see happening in schools."

Edutopia does not consult with schools or districts. It makes no grants. It offers no professional development or teacher training. Essentially, it's a nonprofit media company. "Working for a filmmaker, we make films," says Chen. "And we surround those films with other kinds of information that can support learning about how these innovative classrooms came to be." The foundation has an annual budget of \$6 million and a full-time staff of 18 editors, videographers, and web producers who work out of sleek and modern offices at Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, a 4,700-acre retreat in the Marin County hills near Nicasio, California.

Edutopia's web site has more than 10,000 pages of content, plus videos, podcasts, and webinars that seek to redefine what is



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possible—even practical—in U.S. schools: Inner-city schools that stress empathy, collaboration, and personal responsibility. Green schools whose smaller carbon footprints reduce absenteeism and improve test scores. Schools where kids work alongside trained chefs to create school lunches made from scratch with fresh ingredients grown in once-abandoned local greenhouses. If these sound like the kinds of schools where you'd like to teach, that's exactly the point. "The reaction we'd like people to have is to say, 'I'd like that for my students,'" says Chen. "Whether I'm a superintendent or a parent, I want that kind of education for my kids.' And then we have to answer the question, how do you do it?"

Let George Do It

George Lucas is an unlikely education philanthropist. The creator of the blockbuster *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* film franchises, Lucas's \$3 billion net worth places him in the top quartile of the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans, along with Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and members of the Walton family, all of whom are more closely associated with funding education initiatives than Lucas, who by all accounts was a bored, indifferent student growing up amid the farms and factories of Modesto, California.

"There wasn't much as a kid that inspired me in what I did as an adult," he said in a 1999 interview. As a teenager, Lucas spent most of his time under the hood of a car dreaming about automobile racing. He liked photography and briefly entertained the idea of going to art school, an idea shot down by his father, a stationery store owner, who once remarked, "George never listened to me. He was his mother's pet. George was hard to understand. He was always dreaming things up."

A near-fatal car crash days before his high-school graduation had a profound effect on Lucas. "The idea of trying to make something out of my life wasn't really a priority," he said in a 2007 interview with the Academy of Achievement. "But the accident allowed me to apply myself at school." After dabbling in film at Modesto Junior College, Lucas won admission to the University of Southern California's prestigious film school in 1967. USC Film School, said Lucas, "really ignited a passion in me, and it took off from there."

And how. *American Graffiti* (1973) was Lucas's second film and his first hit. That was followed by *Star Wars* (1977),

which became the third-highest-grossing film series in history behind James Bond and Harry Potter. Waiving his director's fee in favor of the licensing rights to the *Star Wars* characters earned Lucas hundreds of millions of dollars from toys, games, and action figures. His Lucasfilm studio, along with Skywalker Sound and Industrial Light & Magic digital-film effects companies made it nearly impossible to go to the multiplex without seeing Lucas's thumbprint. At 47, the age at which Barack Obama won the White House, George Lucas took home the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award for lifetime achievement in the film industry.

Clearly, boredom and daydreaming have been very, very good to George Lucas. But how did a gearhead kid with little interest in school end up making public education the object of his philanthropy? Chen describes listening to Lucas reflect on his childhood. "He said, 'I know there are many, many students out there like me who are disengaged from school, who are kind of bored, not doing well, who in fact have skills and talents and curiosities. If harnessed they could be really great students.'"

A bit of Hollywood mythmaking could be at work here. Lucas has given mixed messages about his own public education. "Frankly, I was not very engaged in my classes," Lucas said in an e-mail sent to me via Chen. "Occasionally, I had a teacher who would inspire me."

However, he sounded a much more generous note in accepting the Thalberg award at the Oscars in 1992, going out of his way to thank "a group of devoted individuals who, apart from my parents, have done the most to shape my life—my teachers. From kindergarten through college, their struggle—and it was a struggle—to help me grow and learn was not in vain. And it is greatly appreciated."

Edutopia's fixation with hands-on projects and technology is certainly consistent with Lucas's lifelong interest in cars and computers. The source of the foundation's other education touchstones, however, is not as easy to discern. An e-mail request for Lucas to identify his guiding lights in education went unanswered. Members of Edutopia's National Advisory Council, which include teachers, administrators, technology experts, and ed school professors, report little influence of or even contact with Lucas. Who has his ear on "What Works"? "I have heard him talk about Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence work," says Chen. "Also he has spoken of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences." Are Edutopia's core principles the fully formed vision of a creative genius and polymath, self-educated in pedagogy? "Those core principles were developed in close communication with Mr. Lucas," says Chen, who insists Lucas is "quite active" in Edutopia's work. "Those are things that George Lucas feels are the linchpins of what he'd like to see in a modern school."

Fair enough. But are those ideas—from wherever they sprang—any good? Are they “What Works in Public Education”?

Back to the Future

For all its earnestness, Edutopia can sometimes give the sense that it has a poor grasp of history. It is forward-looking to a fault. One senior Edutopia executive was genuinely surprised to learn that project-based learning is neither a new or revolutionary concept in education, but one that traces its roots to William Heard Kilpatrick’s 1918 essay “The Project Method.” No obscure figure, Kilpatrick was “the most influential teacher in the nation’s leading college of education,” spending nearly 30 years on the faculty of Columbia University’s Teachers College, notes education historian Diane Ravitch. In her 2000 book *Left Back*, Ravitch describes how progressive educators immediately hailed Kilpatrick’s work and its Edutopian call for “whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment,” as the quintessential statement of the child-centered school movement.

“Kilpatrick thought of the project as not just a method but a fundamental reinvention of education. The project was an activity undertaken by students that really interested them,” Ravitch observed. “Furthermore, it fulfilled Dewey’s demand that education should be ‘life itself’ and not merely a preparation for future living; what could be ‘a better preparation for later life than practice living it now?’”

In other words, Edutopia’s mantra—school life should resemble real life—has a century-old provenance. And while teachers are revered, “school” can be a dirty word in Edutopia. An article titled “Beats the Heck Out of School” describes a project that uses hip-hop to teach students critical thinking, technology, and business skills. “What do you think this is—*school*?” quips a student approvingly in another article about experimental outdoor education. Search “real life” on Edutopia’s web database and you turn up over 200 articles, videos, and blog posts. Search “hands-on” and find 400 more. Somewhere, William Heard Kilpatrick smiles quietly. Dewey, too.

“Project learning is an incredibly important tool. I think there’s ample evidence that it increases student engagement and the ability of kids to retain information,” says Ninive Clements Calegari, a member of Edutopia’s National Advisory Council and the founder of 826 Valencia, a San Francisco education nonprofit. “Every classroom should have old-fashioned multiple-choice tests and good old-fashioned lectures. But if you can engage the kids in a project that has the good tenets of project learning, the impact is more profound,” she says.

Cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham points out that most teachers believe in project-based learning and the methods promoted by Edutopia, yet classroom observation studies show that whole-class instruction and “seat work” account for more than 90 percent of the class time of American 5th

graders. If teachers agree that project-based learning equals good teaching, if it has 100 years of momentum and George Lucas’s millions pushing it, why is so little of it happening in our schools? Teachers “do not yet have widespread support from principals, districts, and states to learn how to implement it,” says Chen. Another possibility is that even those who believe in it do precious little project-based learning because it’s nearly impossible to do well. Willingham points out that teachers, like all human beings, have “cognitive limits.” We can only pay attention to a small number of the stimuli that are competing for our attention at any moment. Small groups

working independently to overcome unforeseen and unpredictable obstacles make effective planning a challenge. “This doesn’t mean that students should never do projects. It means that we should be clear-eyed about the challenges that projects present, and have a plan to meet them,” says Willingham. “Project learning is great when it’s done well, but it’s very hard to pull off,” he notes.

Edutopia is on firmer ground in its technology advocacy, where there is broad agreement on the capacity of technology to transform education, even if there is little consensus on implementation. “When done well, technology can positively impact student learning outcomes. The challenge is that most school systems are not doing it well for a variety of reasons,” says Scott McLeod, an educational technology expert and associate professor at Iowa State University. “The failings have been more in the doing, not the knowing,” adds McLeod, who credits Edutopia with helping schools think through technology implementation and get it

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right. “They see excellent and exciting things happening in various isolated locations around the world, tell those stories, and then try to learn and extrapolate from those to schools at large,” he says.

Technology is central to the Edutopian vision, and Chen and his colleagues are unabashed enthusiasts. “Regardless of the politics of human resistance, technology continues to show often a better and less expensive way of doing things,” says Chen. “We feel that corner is being turned in education.”

To its credit, Edutopia seems not to adhere to a rigid orthodoxy in its coverage of schools. Its impressive “Schools That Work” series, in which Edutopia throws all of its multimedia resources into detailed coverage of an individual school, recently featured YES Prep, an urban charter-school network often mentioned in the same breath with KIPP, Achievement First, and other “no excuses” schools championed by advocates of test-driven education reform. The Houston-based schools have extended days, learning contracts signed by students and parents, school-issued cell phones for teachers, and classrooms bearing the names of colleges—the now-familiar features of what David Whitman dubbed “New Paternalism” schools in his 2008 book *Sweating the Small Stuff* (see “An Appeal to Authority,” *features*, Fall 2008). While Yes Prep’s fondness for project learning was highlighted, much of Edutopia’s coverage focused on how to re-create the school’s college-bound culture and tough-love discipline code.

“Story selection is driven first by our core values. For the most part we look for stories in these arenas. Second, we look for innovation and new approaches to reform so as not to become repetitive,” says Edutopia editorial director David Markus. “But in the end, it is about audience. Will the topic and our execution of our coverage plan quench their thirst for new insights and new solutions to improve the learning process?”

“Our core principles are very ambitious compared to where most schools are today,” Chen concedes. “So if a school is doing a great job on two or three of them, that’s a good candidate school for us. It’s very hard, for instance, to find a school that’s really doing the integrated studies piece well. That’s a complete change in the curriculum, certainly at the secondary level.”

Creating Edutopia in U.S. Schools

For all the True Believer energy and aggressive efforts to push an agenda, it remains difficult to discern the impact of Edutopia, either in winning converts to its vision for public education or changing the classroom practice of individual teachers. Most of its staff come from the media world and default to audience metrics as a proxy for influence. “People who use

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it feel connected to it and celebrated by it. It is absolutely successful for those individuals,” says Calejari, a former teacher. “When I was in the classroom I felt so isolated. It could have created a community for me of like-minded teachers,” she says.

Unlike fellow eduphilanthropists, Lucas has had little to say publicly about education reform. A private 501(c)(3), Edutopia does not lobby or explicitly advocate policy. “Our main role is to provide our media so that policymakers can be informed about and advocate for the policies behind the schools we cover,” says Chen.

Washington ed policy hands are skeptical whether Lucas’s “What Works” vision can gain the traction it needs to usher in an era of, well, Edutopia. “Gates, Walton, and Broad are driven by theories of action that emphasize structural reform” such as systems, incentives, and measures, says Andrew Rotherham, co-founder

of Education Sector and author of the *Eduwonk.com* blog. “Edutopia seems more in the camp that what we need are additions and incremental changes to the current system. They’re not nearly as disruptive.” That’s ironic, he quips, “because you have to think that Luke Skywalker would have been more with Gates, Walton, and Broad. He was all about upending an established order that didn’t work.”

Edutopia rejects the comparison. “We consider our core agenda, when implemented at scale, to be very disruptive,” says Chen, who hopes to create more demand for the ideas Edutopia promotes from teachers, principals, parents, businesses, and others. “We leave it to policy experts to create the policies needed to bring them to scale,” he says.

A former 5th-grade teacher, Robert Pondiscio writes about education at the Core Knowledge Blog.