

*The Anytime Anywhere Learning Foundation is a cross Australian-American organisation which has a passion for ensuring young people have access to being able to learn anywhere and at any time. This recent article from their website highlights an innovative New York school that has challenged its assumptions. Worth a read!*

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## Re-Thinking Every Assumption

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If you wanted to rethink every assumption about conventional high school--with multi-media technology at the center, combined with an intense conviction about adolescents' desire to do meaningful and important work--what would it look like? "This is the [NYC iSchool](#), and we're working on something completely new," says Executive Director Alisa Berger.

Back in 2008, the former chancellor of the NYC Schools wanted to create innovative high school models as a way of re-visioning the conventional high school model: the one that was so wasteful and dysfunctional, and so poorly adapted to preparing students for the next piece of their lives. A long-time reformer, [former Chancellor Joel Klein](#) dreamed of a high school where "live teachers were assets to kids," but one in which kids could "basically work on their own," using a variety of web-based platforms to augment their learning experiences, freeing them up to move out into the world, to engage with each other, and to build learning experiences that had social meaning and real intellectual challenge. It became [Alisa Berger](#) and her co-founder [Mary Moss](#)' job--along with an intensely talented and opinionated staff--to create and build this vision. Welcome to the NYC iSchool, now in its fourth year of operation in the SoHo section of New York City and currently one of the most in-demand and highly-desired high schools in the all-choice New York City high school system. (1500 applications for 100 spots this past year.)

Built around intensive, nine-week course [modules](#) focused on developing students' understanding of big ideas and global concepts, and then strategically using online course learning and other web-based experiences as foundational content, students at the iSchool this past year worked with the designers of the National September 11th Memorial and Museum to get a more global perspective on the ways teens think about the events leading up to 9-11, interviewing kids in Pakistan and Australia about terrorism and victimization; designed a website to develop environmental awareness on the pros and cons of fracking called, [thinkbeforeyoufrack](#); and created cultural ethnographic films about [being sixteen](#) all around the world, probing concepts like [dating](#), what being in a relationship means, [what you eat](#) says about you culturally and socially.

The underlying vision is that the activity we call "learning" is walking away from the institution we call "school." Schools must transform themselves with new models of instruction that reach out into the world; must fashion new understandings of what powerful learning relationships look like between adults and students, and students and the world; and most importantly, must hone and develop skills that help students **know when they know**. "Knowing when you know something is the 21st century skill," I [tweeted](#) NYC iSchool director Alisa Berger saying as she spoke to me about the development of the school's instructional model, and the challenges to teachers around new visions of rigor and high-level intellectual work.

And Director Berger added, anticipating the question that everyone asks about her school, "It's not about the technology, it's about rethinking how learning happens."

What does it mean to be a student at the NYC iSchool, from students' point of view? As Kyjah Coryat, a NYC iSchool senior [reflected](#), "Every iSchooler is asked...what does the 'i' stand for [in iSchool]? We've been asked this time and time again...it could stand for 'imagination' or 'inspire' or 'innovate.'" Junior Drita Bedzeti thinks of the iSchool, "as an iPod except it's a school." Or Celina Flores, another junior concludes, "The I stands for me, since the iSchool is a new school, the students have the ability to voice their opinions of what they want or need."

As part of a book I am writing on [learning entrepreneurship](#), I recently visited the NYC iSchool, and have been interviewing hundreds of educational innovators and big-thinking institution smashers and transformers. What are some of the central, provisional "lessons" of my research so far? What observations stand out about schools that are really reframing what it means to be a teacher and student?

**1. Educational enterprises (I'm not gonna say "schools") that embrace technological innovation-- not as an add on but as a new vision about how learning occurs in the world--hire teachers and instructors for whom the use of technology is at the center of their own learning lives.** You cannot "innovate" around something you do not know and use yourself, and you will fear and diminish students' experimentalness if you are not also experimenting and learning online yourself. What that means is that you cannot hire instructors who are "committed" to "integrating" technology into instruction, but who don't have a daily learning practice that involves myriad social media platforms, a whole range of devices and connectivities, lots of interest in learning about new platforms and means of expression, and an intense inclination to be a learner around technology.

As an example I recently met a passionate, dynamic young instructor at the [Spring Street International School](#)--a school on a remote island off the coast of Seattle--who was intensely animated about describing the [Instructure Canvas](#) platform he was using during the summer to put articles on genocide together for his middle schoolers. We had a great discussion about students' responsibility for curating materials, as he "walked completely away from textbooks" and a textbook-orientation towards knowledge. This instructor was so eager and excited about the ways in which this platform, at this moment, allowed him to create a collaborative and flexible learning environment to engage his students that he couldn't get enough time with it! Even as his wife went into labor with their first baby!

You got to live it and feel it, to be good at it. It's got to be a part of how you learn to help someone else learn this way. As [Will Richardson](#) says, teaching is modeling, and you can't model something that essentially feels strange and unfamiliar to you.

**2. Schools that are breaking through the old industrial model are passionate about relationships.** Yes, I know, every school says it's about relationships, and most teachers say, "It's all about the kids." But Old School models of schooling are built around an assumption of adult control, the positional power of adults over children, and models of "custody" of children that often resemble minimum security prison rather than rich, collaborative learning environments. At the NYC iSchool, for instance, Alisa Berger is very, very clear that relationship comes before technology, and that technology is not a "distraction," from relationship but a way of creating it. She points to the myriad ways in which technology allows students to connect with other students, field experts, and other teachers around the world, as an example of their priorities. There is no need at the iSchool to ask people to "put down their devices," and be present, Berger says. Kids and adults want to be there, and want to be in relationship with each other. They hire for that, too.

I would even go so far as to say, schools that are successful using technology to create new models for learning, paradoxically, [put love at the center](#) of the learning model. Connectivity between humans is what matters, and technology is an augmentation, an extension of connectivity, a way to continue and build relationships around learning. Love is learning, and learning is love. Technology is only a means, and the means matter and shape us, as we know here at AALF.

3. **Successful "learning entrepreneurial" models take students interests very seriously.** It is remarkable the degree to which many teachers are uninterested, are simply not curious, about what students are interested in--a sad condition of adulthood and the dehumanizing institution of conventional school. At the NYC iSchool, and many other extraordinary educational institutions I am visiting and discovering, there is an assumption that everyone has a stake in their own learning, that learning is deeply pleasurable, if not always fun (doing hard things is not always fun, but worth it), that students are good at deciding for themselves what kinds of remediation they may need and how best to get it (in consultation with an advisor or other students). (At the iSchool, to prepare for the New York State Regents exam, students do all the memorization and content-cramming with teacher-created, web-based products so that instructional time does not have to be spent on this.)

At the NYC iSchool, and many other institutions AALF readers are a part of, there is a belief that if learning projects are constellated around things that matter to kids themselves, then with scaffolding and support (the NYC iSchool has a nine-week learning online course for all students), powerful and important engagement is going to happen. Whether it is probing the experience of dating around the world, or how a Pakistani student might regard 9-11 differently from a student in New York City, or why some New York City residents might be opposed to constructing a green roof on their building, students themselves are encouraged to become the modelers of their own learning, to construct their own learning plans and lives, through profound adult *interest in what is compelling to them*.

4. **Great learning environments are passionate about passion.** Many of the conventional school environments I'm in are distinctly flat, arid, uninteresting places, physically and intellectually. Bulletin boards that could date from my own elementary school line classroom walls, with publisher's slogans about trying harder or doing your best. Adults choose what goes on the walls, and the aesthetics of learning spaces seem almost deliberately ignored. However, as my young colleague teacher from the Spring Street School suggests, when the adults in a school are really fired up learners--passionate about their own quirky projects and deeply interested in their students' learning, a school tends to be high performing and highly effective. Learning more about how kids learn, learning about their own practices as teachers or administrators, learning about stuff that interests them, are consuming passions of the adults in these schools. That passionate learning culture transfers directly to kids, where students are encouraged to be quirky and strange, to contemplate complexity and the unknowable, to create You Derive Me Crazy around their calculus coursework, to be a part of Girls Write Now, or engage with the meaning of social justice, for themselves.

5. **School leaders model their own excitement about learning.** In meetings, in walkthroughs, on Twitter, in their own blogs, school leaders talk openly about what they are learning, how they make mistakes, and what excites them about their work. Through this modeling, learning is regarded as pleasurable--not a chore to be gotten through, a checklist to be completed, or something to be excused from for good behavior. The culture highly values expressions of learning: people are fired up about hearing what someone else is curious about, what they just read online, how they could put this together in a project! How that reminds them of something that they read about 3 years ago and let me go look it up online, no here come with me and let's look at it together.

What can we learn about these new "entrepreneurial" learning environments, where technology is central but not at the center? The medium that extends, defines, and mediates learning, but is not the thing? Collaboration is at the center, we are still learning how to do this, making "little bets" on changes in school culture which allow us to fail early and adapt, is part of establishing these transformative learning cultures.

In the future, as these environments demonstrate, there will be some kind of physical place where students go to do some learning activities, like film-making, and instrument playing and meeting with advisors and other students, and that place may or may not be called "school." Much of learning will happen during field work, or in collaborative projects, or in college courses or online, or in adventures in the world. In conjunction with this, we will take much more seriously the ways in which human development shapes the projects and challenges of each learning stage, and understand that adults are influenced just as powerfully as students by the act of being "teachers" around learning. We will

use technology to honor, extend and enhance our connectivity, yet understand that connectivity, and our caring, is fundamentally about each other. It's one-to-one and one for all.

"We are the future," says an NYC iSchool student. We're just figuring out how.

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