

Teaching Your Way Around the World

Teachers and administrators share their experiences in international schools around the world

Pull vs. Push

Posted on [January 17, 2020](#) by [Paul Magnuson](#)

This is the second in a series of four posts based on ongoing conversations with Bill Tihen.

Bill doesn't hesitate to make a big claim now and again. I think it's because he's had a long history with schools, but is not working in one now. Perspective comes with distance, and so does the freedom to call things like you really see them.

So when Bill jotted his thoughts down after we got together last fall, he wrote:

“Learning needs to change, as much as possible, from an externally driven system pushed at students by the curriculum into an internally driven system in which work is pulled by students, based on their own needs and interests.”

As teachers, we are familiar with what Bill calls the push system, whether we've called it that ourselves or not. A curriculum is first pushed to us (perhaps by the State, or an adopted off-the-shelf curriculum, or the school's administration, or all three), then we push the subjects and the content of those subjects to our students. We also push course requirements, assignments, grading systems, and due dates. For that matter, we push our viewpoints, directly or indirectly. And all of us, teachers and students, get rated in one form or another on how well we helped push the prescribed curriculum.

This system is so ubiquitous we tend not to see it. It is the water we swim in, it's just how things are. So let's point out three major practices that would have to change to decrease how hard we are pushing and increase the chance for students to do more pulling.

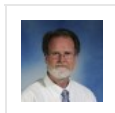
A standard set of subjects. If students were pulling learning in any significant way, it's doubtful that their interests would happen to fall neatly into the core canon. Sometimes yes. Always, never. So how do we as teachers prepare for all that variety? How do administrators create a schedule? Would students miss out on “must-learns” in our current curriculum?

Assessment. If students are all learning different things, how does the way we test and report their learning change? What currently accepted standard practices are now maladapted? What happens to transcripts? Is it okay (or preferable) if learning is full of variety, with considerably less overlap between students than in our current curriculum?

Teacher education. If curriculum and assessment in a pull system are quite different from our current practices, then how must teacher education pivot? What does instruction look like in a pull system? How do we retrain teachers steeped in a culture of push? How do we refashion pre-service training to emphasize pull?

Once thinking along these lines, I'm sure we'll discover many more practices to reconsider. I'm also sure the time spent thinking about them is worthwhile.

For a whole-school perspective on Bill's quote in this blog – and the degree to which we could set up school as a pull system – listen to Rob Houben of Agora, Netherlands, on the [Edufuturists #70 podcast](#).

**About Paul Magnuson**

Several years ago, Paul Magnuson founded a research center at the high school level in collaboration with colleagues at Leysin American School. The center supports professional learning through a variety of programs, including year-long action research projects by faculty who receive competitive resident scholarships. In addition, the center works with schools and universities around the world, hosting 10 to 15 visiting scholars annually, and consulting and presenting at schools and other organizations. Paul has created a number of tools and programs, including classroom observation schemes, language immersion summer camps, the middle school at LAS, and most recently, edge, a high school program which offers an alternative to traditional school through greatly increased student agency. His current interests are the documentation of edge, pulling agile into education, and self-regulation for both students and teachers.

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