

Connecting with...

David Boulton, Producer, Children of the Code

Q: What is the Children of the Code Project?

DB: The mission of the Children of the Code project is to catalyze and resource a transformation in how our society thinks about the “code” of our written language and the “challenges involved in learning to read it.” I think we’re living in the “Stone Age of Literacy.” Our lack of understanding of what is involved and what is at stake in acquiring literacy is wreaking havoc on the lives of our population, including children.

At its core, the Children of the Code is a social education project. Some of the aspects of the project include a three-hour Public Television documentary series, a ten-hour professional development DVD series, and a series of teacher and parent presentations and seminars. We’ll also make available about 150 hours of video-audio transcripts on our Web site that will be indexed so that everyone can join in the conversation from any direction — neuroscience, the history of the code, social pathology, juvenile justice, or just about any other angle they’re interested in.

Q: Why are you so keenly interested in pursuing the topic of how people learn?

DB: A long time ago I asked the question, “What aspect of our lives is not profoundly affected by how well we are learning? What aspect of our emotional or cognitive development isn’t either constrained or enabled by our learning?” I came to feel that learning is where the most practical and the most profound acts of being human intersect with one

another. And that “turning up the learning” was the most minimally presumptuous and maximally relevant thing we could do for anyone — or for all of us.

Q: Why is this something you personally have taken on?

DB: About 25 years ago, I went on a year-long learning binge. I became interested in all kinds of things I wasn’t interested in during school — anthropological studies, brain science, comparative mythology, history, etc. And what I discovered is that somehow I’d grown up thinking that somebody out there “knows.” What I found though is that on the edge of anything that is important today, any scientific or philosophical inquiry, there’s a raging debate! What’s most important is the learning, not the knowing.

I realized that I could learn anything that I was interested in if I had the right resources — and so could anybody else. That’s what opened the door for me. Over time, my focus became connected not only with academic learning, but also with emotional well-being and cognitive well-being — to the total functioning of myself or anybody.

Q: What kind of impact do you hope Children of the Code will have on literacy and families?

DB: Well, the first thing I hope is that it changes the mental lens through which parents and teachers see struggling learners. I want them

David Boulton, co-producer and creator of the Children of the Code, is a learning ecologist, activist and technologist. His articles on



learning have appeared in *The Brain-Mind Bulletin*, *In Context*, *The California School Board’s Journal*, and *The American Music Teacher*, among others. Articles about his work have been featured in journals and books including *The Journal of Developmental Education*, *Poisoned Apple: The Bell Curve Crisis and How Our Schools Create Mediocrity and Failure*, *Working Wisdom (Timeless Skills and Vanguard Strategies for Learning Organizations)*, and *Schools Out: Hyperlearning and the End of Education*. David’s K-12 educational orientation and vision have been presented or referenced at gatherings including: the World Futurist Society, The 21st Century Learning Initiative, at both the California and National Education Summits, the Ontario (Canada) School Board Association, and The Chinese Ministry of Education, and have won the Teacher Information Network Gold Award and the Innovative Teaching Concepts Award of Excellence.

David has founded five companies and been awarded four patents. He is a past member of the 21st Century Learning Initiative and the Dialogue Research Project at M.I.T.’s Organizational Learning Center. He has been an advisor to the Chair of the California Senate Education Committee and is a member of the U.S. D.O.E.’s Gateway Project.

See <http://www.implicit.org> for more information on David Boulton’s educational vision and writings. See <http://www.childrenofthecode.org> for the story behind his work on the Children of the Code project.

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to see someone who is struggling as somebody who is struggling with an artificially confusing technology (written language) and somebody who is in significant emotional and cognitive danger. What I hope is that people realize that if children and adults struggle too long with the process of acquiring literacy, it can seriously affect how they develop and grow and learn. Struggling to read causes many, many people to grow up feeling ashamed of their mind. And so, I want to get that across.

If you look at the entire history of history, there's no more significant invention than this code — the alphabet. We are all children of it in a way. And yet there is a massive part of our population that is struggling to become proficient in using this code. They are truly the Children of the Code and their lives are at risk because they are not getting through it. Even their potential has been scarred because of the confusions and difficulties they've encountered in learning to read and

because of the fact that, collectively as a society, we really don't understand learning to read well enough to help them with it.

Q: Does there seem to be a commonality among the experts you've interviewed—a shared understanding of literacy and learning?

DB: At the broadest level, yes, I would say there is. For the most part, most of the people we've talked to have a common sense of the importance of literacy both to each individual's life and to our society as a whole.

At the detail level, there are a lot of differences. But as a whole, I think that the hopeful thing that we see is a growing awareness that the cognitive confusions and challenges associated with learning to read have a direct connection to people's self-esteem.

There's also a pretty common understanding for most people that this is an artificial challenge—a challenge created by human beings that has no

parallel in the natural evolutionary processes that brought us here. If we step back with today's scientific perspective, we can see that this is brand new in terms of our species. This has just happened in a blink of an eye. And it's a different kind of challenge than what our brain has organized itself to deal with, and we as a society have not yet caught up with that kind of thinking.

Q: What is your vision for the future of learning?

DB: My sense is that how well children grow through the traumas, challenges and disadvantages they experience depends on how well they learn. A few generations from now, our planet, our nation, our society, culture, economy, our families will be the result of how well our children are learning. So my sense is that, just like the Copernican inversion — where we came to understand that the Earth revolves around the sun instead of the other way around — we need to have a flip of that magnitude about learning itself.

Learning isn't just the utility for acquiring knowledge, skills and experience. Learning is the process of how human beings become human beings. It affects everything. And so our mission as adults, as parents, as teachers is above all else to be stewarding the health of our children's learning. My vision is that this is matter of aligning our behaviors and actions to demonstrate the value case for making that happen. ■

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Mission Statement:
The Family Literacy Alliance, the national leadership voice for practitioners and supporters of family literacy, seeks to promote, strengthen and connect the family literacy community.

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