

# WHAT TOMORROW'S SCHOOLS CAN LEARN FROM LEGO TODAY

FASTCOMPANY 2/5/15

BY MARTIN LINDSTROM

Today's teachers tell me that students simply won't pay attention in class. I believe I discovered the reason while designing Lego's toy of the future.

Picture a nine-year-old Danish boy twirling a pencil between two fingers. A simple task, one I had been observing for more than ten years. But something different was happening now. Unlike boys a decade earlier, these boys struggled to twirl the pencil. Sometimes they even dropped it.

The year was 1994, and Lego had challenged me to explore why their holiday sales had just taken a beating. I started with that simple pencil-twirling experiment, discovering that these young boys were losing the dexterity of their older brothers. What was going on?

Something profound had entered the world of these boys. Computer games like Donkey Kong had been around for over a decade, and now the Internet had arrived. These kids were great with joy sticks and computer mice, but they couldn't handle a simple pencil.

In a world full of virtual attractions, was there a future for small plastic bricks? The obvious solution was for Lego to surrender, give up on plastic production, and go 100% virtual. But Lego had been committed to its flagship toy since 1949, and the company refused to give up without a fight.

TRY THIS EXPERIMENT. THINK BACK 10 OR 20 YEARS. WHAT WAS YOUR FAVORITE MOVIE? NOW, TRY WATCHING IT AGAIN.

After my simple but groundbreaking insight of 1994—how boys were losing their ability to spin a pencil—Lego began seeking the right balance between offline and online. Twenty years later, Lego is the biggest toy maker in the world, with movies, games, theme parks, and 56 billion small plastic pieces in toy boxes around the world.

One key to Lego's success? Sensory storytelling.

But what does a small plastic toy have to do with schools? A lot, actually. Schools have always had to compete for their students' attention, but kids aren't gazing out the window anymore. Now, they're gazing down at their smart phones. Across the world, teachers struggle to handle a never-ending stream of texts, likes, images, and instant messages, all arriving during class. Forget about multitasking. There's only one winner, and it's on the small screen.

But the real challenge isn't even social media's clamor for immediate attention. Call it the creation of the "instant gratification generation." Social media is training a generation with no patience for anything that doesn't come in the form of bite-sized nuggets.

Do you imagine you're immune? Try this experiment. Think back 10 or 20 years. What was your favorite movie? Now, try watching it again. If you're like most of us, your thumb will be riding the fast-forward button. You've lost your patience for the slow parts.

And yet, even in this virtual world we desire physical contact. After I've delivered a speech, people often ask me: Will everything be virtual in the future? I reply with a question: Why did you attend a conference today, rather than just watching me online? Consider the world of music. Canned music is available everywhere, but people attended 30% more live concerts last year. Is it because the sound quality is so perfect? Of course not. It is because there is something about live performance.

So, back to schools. The physical school, with a teacher in a classroom, brings fundamental values to the table. But how to deliver those values? My years with Lego have taught me the answer is almost always a combination of virtual and physical. What schools need, if they are to remain relevant and do their essential work, is education combined with great storytelling.

Let's apply that insight to tomorrow's schools.

- **First: Teachers have some of the greatest stories to tell. What could—or should—be more exciting than literature, science, math, or history? Teachers should be the world's greatest storytellers. I've visited many teacher-training colleges, but I've rarely encountered a session dedicated to storytelling. This needs to change.**
- **Second: Schools need to empower their teachers with different modes of storytelling, from lecture to hands-on exploration to virtual hyper-education. Then, the schools need to "synergize" physical presentation with virtual presentation.**
- **Third: Children live to play and compete. They always have, and they always will. Schools need to enliven their educational material with games, challenges, and competitions.**

Lego utilized all three components—storytelling, synergy, and fun—as it redefined its very foundation. Schools could learn a lot from Lego. Schools should rebuild their platform now, before the attention of the students has forever disappeared down a virtual rabbit hole.