What is “learning of good quality?” That is the question that educators and students alike face everyday. Yet the answers change with every generation, as youth in each cohort grow up in a different and constantly changing world. Research has shown that while today’s youth may be struggling for autonomy and identity as did their predecessors, they are coming of age amid reconfigured contexts for communication, friendship and self-expression sparked by the pervasive rise of new media.¹ This paper proposes three principles (“3 Ps”) which can contribute to quality learning among the youth of today, namely “Play”, “Practical Experience” and “Purpose”.

The first principle “Play” is a fundamental ingredient of learning which need not be limited only to early childhood. Often devalued in our culture, play and learning are in fact inextricably intertwined.² Playful learning can nurture collaboration (teamwork, social competence), content (e.g., reading, math, science, history), communication (oral and written), creative innovation, and confidence (taking risks and learning from

These are vital skill sets for emotional, social and intellectual development of our youths.

For the East Asians among us, how many of us have learnt about Chinese and Japanese history and culture through the playing of computer games such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Dynasty Warriors and Nobunaga’s Ambition? And for those who grew up playing Counterstrike or DOTA in cyber cafes, how many have learnt about teamwork or coped with repeated failures through such games? Yet none of us played these games to learn history or teamwork; they were played purely for the sake of enjoyment. Nowadays, youths are growing up in a digital era in which it is almost second-nature to spend one’s free time playing games either on the iPhone, Facebook or other digital mediums. In other words, digital play is becoming ubiquitous and if educators are able to harness its vast potential by integrating educational goals into play, learning can be made more enjoyable and effective for youths of the digital generation.

The second principle is “Practical Experience”. Studies show that hands-on experiences increase student performance and motivation. According to Jean Piaget, children develop best when they have interaction with the material they are learning. An inquiry-based learning method provides opportunities for students to explore and test their learning through direct interaction with authentic situations.

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3 Ibid.
The virtues of practical hands-on experiences are not new. However, they are worth emphasizing in an education environment that continues to place undue emphasis on theoretical knowledge. Furthermore as alluded to earlier, youths of the digital generation are growing up in a world in which a large part of their lives take place in virtual reality. Direct interaction with the phenomena in question may provide an antidote to passive couch-potato learning behaviours which are ingrained by the mediated reality and information overload of the modern age. For instance, project-based learning inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they’re studying by allowing them to see how academic work can connect to real-life issues and by being an effective way to integrate technology (youths’ native mode of learning) into the curriculum.\

The third principle is “Purpose”, which is directly correlated to the motivation for learning. Youths in the 21st century are no longer content to be told to obey and learn merely because their parents or society deem it to be good. They want to know the purpose and be convinced of the reasons for what they are doing. At its apex, youths today want to be inspired to pursue the path they choose. Education thus becomes more fulfilling and effective when participants believe in the rationale for learning and are willing to put in the sacrifices to commit for the long haul.

Idealism does not exist in a vacuum; idealistic learners need the appropriate resources and space to pursue their interests. The good news is that the advent of

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globalization has brought about an unprecedented access to educational and vocational opportunities as well as a constant stream of new ideas. Youths today no longer need to be restricted to choices available in their locality but are more likely to be able to pursue their dreams globally. As one’s interactive environment expands to encompass the entire world in the online generation, learning also needs to embrace a new paradigm of global paths and global consciousness.

The three principles or “3 Ps” of learning suggest new ways of thinking about education. How can we develop new ways of teaching formal education and how can we leverage on existing technology to match educational goals? And rather than primarily relying on traditional classroom and textbook centred learning, how can we implement practical learning to achieve a well-balanced education that encompasses both the theoretical and experiential aspects? Finally, what would it mean to think of education as a process of preparing youths socially, emotionally and intellectually for participation in public life instead of viewing education in terms of jobs and careers? It is hoped that this paper would provide fresh perspectives to inform discussions on the future of learning.

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