

## A bit about the work that John Abbott does--and how he influences thinking and working together

**Background: Our guest speaker for the Fall 2013 School Councils' Conference has been doing some work with school districts and the BC Ministry of Education over the last few years. Here's a short piece about the influences he is having on people he has meetings and discussions with....**

“When someone asked me what role I thought John Abbott would play during his three week visit to British Columbia, I said that I thought he would be a catalyst. I have heard others agree with that characterization, but it was never a perfect fit with how we actually saw John. Close, but not quite right. Now that he has been here for nearly two of those weeks three weeks, and after seeing one of his presentations at the BC School Superintendents' Association Conference in Vancouver, I am beginning to understand his role better. John was quoting one of his favourite world-changers, Vaclav Havel. The quote was, **“Education is the ability to perceive the hidden connections between disparate phenomena.”** All of a sudden I realized that that is what John does: he helps people see the connections between ideas and fields of study that are not normally seen as fitting together – the harmony that exists among otherwise isolated musical notes. He is a harmonizer, and that is what empowers him to be a catalyst.

Over the past two weeks, I have seen John draw on evolutionary biology, brain research, military history, educational history, anthropology, sociology, and economics to illustrate important points about our education system. Despite the complexity associated with such unity of knowledge, people get it. John has a magical way of twisting these ideas together in a gentle narrative that makes it all so accessible, without removing any of the rigour that is the foundation of his message.

**He has spoken now with parents, university professors, high school and university students, Montessori educators, principals, teachers, education assistants, and school trustees.** He has been on our evening news, and he has shared the stage with the BC Minister of Education, George Abbott (his long lost cousin?), before 450 people. His messages, synthesizing and memorable, have been tweeted and retweeted. After every presentation he makes, he is surrounded by mobs of people who have more questions for him, or who just want to share their ideas and recount their own experiences.

While he has been in BC, John has seen his schedule change considerably as his message gains momentum. This is partially due to incredible timing: BC is right now contemplating its own future in terms of educational policy. We are exploring in earnest how our system could be transformed to better meet the needs of our children and adolescents, and how we could help our children and adolescents better meet the needs of our world today. We may very well have the perfect storm of grassroots support, political will, and bold leadership to take us to a whole new place.

I know we are all looking forward to seeing what the next week brings. Things continue to gain momentum, and John finds himself being swept along in a current that is largely of his own creation. I feel privileged to be a part of what is happening in BC right now, and I owe much of that feeling to John. I believe that we will look back on this three-week visit as an important time in the history of BC

Education, and, therefore, in the history of BC as a world-leading jurisdiction. Our thanks go to John the synthesizer, the storyteller, the catalyst, the connector, the harmonizer.”

By: *Jeff Hopkins is Superintendent of the Gulf Islands School District, British Columbia. (February 2012)*

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