

# Hard Truths for Educators

A review of *Tuned Out – Engaging 21st Century Learners* by Karen Hume  
Pearson Canada, 2010. ISBN-10: 0138020132

The phrase “21st Century Learning” has become commonplace. True to its title, Karen Hume’s new book *Tuned Out: Engaging the 21st Century Learner* promises to be a valuable resource for educators looking to engage students in the art of learning for the 21st century.

Before Hume defines what it means for students to be engaged learners, she addresses different views on engagement. Staffrooms around the country have probably hosted this discussion many times. Some believe that “students have changed, but not for the better.” Others believe that “students have changed, but their teachers have not” (p. 3). Hume acknowledges truths in both of these perspectives and uses them to formulate her own definition of student engagement: “the relationship that students have to someone or something” (p. 5).

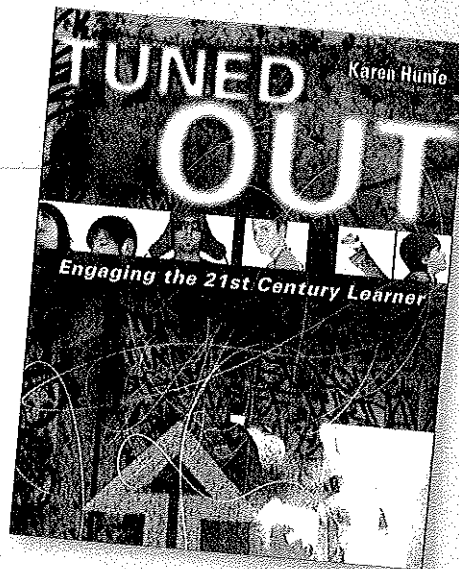
According to Hume, there are five aspects of schooling in which educators can engage learners: “Competence, Creativity, Community, Context, and Challenge” (p. xi). She outlines and discusses each of these in its own chapter, containing a description of the main theme, case studies, sample lessons, and strategies that educators and leaders can employ. These five content chapters are bookended on the front end by a chapter that discusses the concept of engagement and on the back end by one that offers practical tips for achieving engagement in schools.

My mental model of what it means to be “tuned out” led me to believe that this book would focus on supporting learners in becoming less engaged in technology and more engaged in learning. Indeed, Hume addresses the role that technology plays in disengaging students from their learning, but she will not let educators blame technology for that disengagement. Nor does

she suggest that we need to use technology to engage students. In fact, she is firm: “I do not believe that more technology in our schools...is the magic bullet that will solve the problem of our disengaged students” (p. 160). As educators, we are responsible for supporting learners in acquiring the skills it takes to be engaged citizens. Hume is clear in her stand that using websites, blogs, or other technologies in classrooms is not going to do that; creating engaging learning opportunities for students, such as inquiry projects, or collaborative learning opportunities, will.

Hume does not shy away from hard truths. While she maintains, throughout the book, her belief that “teaching is the most important profession in the world and its practitioners are among the most dedicated, thoughtful, and caring people on the planet” (p. 207), she doesn’t sugarcoat anything for educators: “If your students are disengaged you need to change what you are doing” (p. 208). This simple statement is not as easy as it sounds; reflecting on changing one’s practice is hard! Fortunately, Hume makes this task less daunting by providing readers with simple and specific strategies for a number of different situations. For example, if students are not working as a cohesive group or team, she suggests adding in a challenge element (à la *Survivor*) or shortening the time allocated to complete the activity.

Hume does a skillful job of synthesizing a variety of research data from well-known researchers and authors, and creating an easy-to-read, engaging and inspiring book for educators. I particularly enjoyed the sidebar references, quotes, comics, and diagrams, and the number of references to authors whose work I have already read and enjoyed. I am a fan of anyone who can refer to both Marzano and the Heath brothers in the same book!



While I would absolutely recommend this book to my colleagues, I did find myself frequently annoyed while reading it. Hume does almost too good a job of coupling the traditional method of educational reading with current trends in online media. *Tuned Out* is not only a book; it is also a website, blog, and extension of today’s social media. I don’t know about the majority of those who partake in educational reading, but I know that when I sit down to read a book, I am not sitting in front of a computer. While I was always engaged and interested in the content in the book, I was often irritated at the staggering number of references to the website for details, further examples, or information.

Technology nitpicking aside, *Tuned Out* is a gem for teachers and educational leaders. Its balance of hard truths, respected research, interesting stories, and online components (for those readers who aren’t as picky as I am when it comes to transitioning between a book and the computer) make it a valuable resource for educators looking for specific strategies for moving forward into 21st century learning. ●

**DANI GARNER** is the Vice-Principal of Lake Cowichan Secondary School, in British Columbia’s School District 79.