

Barry Richmond's Gifts to K-12 Education

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The first and most important gift that Barry gave us was his time. Here was a man of world-class stature who owned a business that required his interaction with leaders in government and industry around the world, yet he would answer questions from teachers and young students as if they were his most important clients. He attended both Sym*Fest in Portland, Oregon and DynamiQUEST in Massachusetts multiple times, interacting with students as they displayed their models. "He listened, appreciated the beauty of their work, asked probing questions, and suggested how their model might be improved," said Wayne Wakeland, one of the directors of Sym*Fest. He read student papers and made suggestions to the authors. Last spring, 2002, he gave a workshop for the 'young masters' session of Sym*Fest, where those students who were taking or had taken a systems modeling class were eager to hear whatever he had to tell them. The day after Sym*Fest he would volunteer to put on a workshop for the modeling teachers. He was so enthusiastic and inclusive. He guided and he listened. He was interested not only in helping us learn the correct modeling strategies to use, but how to broaden our application of modeling to more philosophical topics, like how students learn. As we listened to what he taught us, we also watched how he taught us. He was a consummate teacher. He was passionate about his mission. To Barry, a systems approach was a way of living. He would point out inconsistencies of 'would be' systems thinkers, who tried to view the interconnections and feedback in problems they were studying, yet who were oblivious to how they interacted with each other on a personal level. He wanted people to view all actions from a feedback perspective. His favorite example was of a person who reclines his airline seat without regard for what the person sitting behind him was doing.

He gave of his time and expertise in the effort to devise strategy for expanding the use of ST/SD in K-12 education over the next 25 years. He joined educators in networking conferences, Systems Thinking and Dynamic Modeling Conference for K-12 Education,

as well as a week long session in Essex, Massachusetts specifically for long term thinking. His perspective on teaching systems citizenship helped form the focus for our current thinking.

The second gift Barry gave us was the clarity of his thinking. His writing and his teaching were crystal clear. He could communicate to a very broad audience. He knew how to make “everything as simple as possible, but no simpler.” He wrote manuals that one could actually understand. For many of us in K-12 those manuals were our first textbooks. His manuals contained examples that applied systems thinking and system dynamics modeling to so many disciplines that a teacher was usually able to find an example that was appropriate to serve as a foundation for lessons in his or her classroom.

With that simple, clear thinking, he created an elegant piece of software, STELLA, without which students at the pre-college level would not have had access to the power of system dynamics modeling. . Its visual approach opened the world of systems thinking to both the students and the teachers at the K-12 level. He recognized the importance of having the leaders of the future conversant with system dynamics. With STELLA, students have described SD behavior from models they have created that have impressed adults in business and academia. He has given many students a chance to express their understanding of complex issues, to think more deeply about problems, to understand behavior that would have been beyond their scope without the beautiful, visual tool to help them. As he improved the software, he listened to teachers regarding features they wanted , further enhancing its usability to students and teachers.

He was consistently open-handed with STELLA, pricing it so schools could afford it. He gave many copies of his software to students at Sym*Fest and DynamiQUEST, encouraging them to continue their exploration and learning.

A last important contribution to K-12 education was his emphasis on construction of knowledge. He consistently pointed out that in order to gain understanding, there was an active role for the learner. He encouraged all of us to create working models and work on them consistently, even on a daily basis, to make them better and better. STELLA lends itself to exploration by students of all ages. He was constantly exhorting teachers to get out of the way and allow students to start constructing their own understanding. This is a message which bears constant repeating in today’s educational system.