

Long Live Learning

Stan Hardman 17 November 2017

We all know the meaning of “The King is Dead, Long Live the King”, and, no, I do not mean Elvis Presley. The death of a Monarch ushers in the reign of the successor. The intention of “Long Live Learning” is to emphasise that learning never stops although our understanding of the process changes in line with the inevitable transitions happening in society. In the context we addressed this issue we were thinking of the rather recent emergence of thinking about four economic transitions or revolutions.

We all learn all the time. There is the deeply rooted biologically based and genetically coded autonomous learning system which constantly operates and over which we have limited control. Sometimes we say “we are what we eat”, others say we are what we do, while others chime in with we are who we are with – all emphasising the coded nature of learning. However, we also can think of learning as a cognitive process where we are able to exercise more control than we have realised in the past. Neuroscience and neuro-cognition is revealing the protein base of learning and knowledge retention, and how we can develop our learning potential. It is with this insight in mind that we emphasise the transition that is happening from the third to the fourth economic age.

In the first or agrarian age, learning was very much about learning your station in life and assimilating its values and boundaries, and responding to the skills opportunities associated with your identity. The mechanical age came with the reinterpretation of learning in the light of the social change brought about by the transition to a factory based existence and the broadening of opportunity for those who could engage with the opportunities associated with professional and technical advancement. Capital became a more fluid commodity but participation in the economy was conditional on the opportunities one was able to take.

The knowledge age economy led to a far greater emphasis on the vastness of the human potential in exploring and using knowledge to develop systems. However, we also began speaking about the digital divide – emphasising the ever growing gap between the opportunities open to those with access to the tools and techniques of the knowledge explosion, and the resources to exploit them, and those still stuck in the prior economic dispensations. The use of knowledge and computational skills fuelled the growth of the knowledge age lifestyle captured in the multi-national and rapid globalisation as time and space became capsized within a global village – for those able to participate in it.

The arrival of the fourth economic age implies a radical shift from the overwhelming mass-market economy with its inherent widening of the gap between the included and marginalised to a greater emphasis on entrepreneurial driven innovation within a globalised world. However, while customisation, speed of delivery, fluidity of finance and ubiquitous supply chains have become the norm for many the social, environmental and social cost are mounting extremely rapidly. An alternative worldview in the form of the well-being economy is challenging the very foundations

of the “growth economy” model, so favoured by the dominant economic institutions of our time.

Our key question for the day was to consider the implications of this tenuous and fragile, complex new world we inhabit for the learners of today. The premise of this question is that access, nature and quality of education opportunity has a significant role to play in learning.

- We all learn – all the time – although as we mature so does our learning become more stable, but the context and conditions under which we learn significantly influences our generative learning capacity.
- We all have different learning capabilities and strengths. We need space for the recognition and development of our strengths and the contribution they make to the greater good.
- Learning is a socialising process as we learn to make sense of the world we inhabit and test, and extend the boundaries of our own agency.
- We also learn because of, or in spite of, the relationships in which we are embedded. One cannot separate cognitive and emotional development. We know the great emphasis contemporary business places on emotional intelligence.
- Learning today requires an ability to engage with technology in a way that cognitive extension becomes an innate capability.
- While in many ways we are complete in our own learning our functionality in the world requires us to develop deep inter-dependencies. Some of these are close and intense – as in a work group, others are extensive and invisible – just think of where your food and clothing originates and how the supply chains integrate!
- Finally, we live in a finite world with incredible opportunity but very real boundaries, especially in relation to finite resources and innate complexity.

And so we return to the fundamental question: what do we have to do, what changes do we have to make to provide learning opportunities for people of all ages to thrive into the future. We address this question in a country which is a microcosm of the world. We have people embedded in the first, others in the second, others in the third, and some in the fourth economy with the learning challenges associated with transitioning. At the same time we have the push-back where the “so thought, ‘advanced’ economy” is being increasingly criticised for its sustainability challenges and its real as opposed to its assumed benefits to society. This appreciation of the systemic nature of the world in which we live, where intentionality rarely translates into expectation, challenges so much of our contemporary belief systems.

Who will lead this charge for change – in our pre-schools, schools, colleges and universities?