Mapping the journey to learning in the 21st century: Spotting friends, foes and falsehoods

In a climate of uncertainty about which skills employees will need in the future, how can tertiary level institutes educate future graduates without being imprisoned by the present?

In his iconic TED Talk *Do schools kill creativity?* Ken Robinson (2007) described education from what he calls a 'bureaucratic aspect', explaining that it was initially set up to provide new spare cogs to sustain the system. With the new financial climate, and new professional fields being created as we speak, we may be inclined to agree with Robinson that the future of education seems uncertain. Robinson goes on to explain that education is meant to take us into the future but, since we do not know what type of needs the employees of the future will be asked to cater for, we cannot comprehensively outline the skills education needs to develop. Therefore, education is a tool that is meant to take us into a future so uncharted that all we can do is keep educating generations with the present in mind. Harari (2018) calls this ''making decisions for the future, based on present knowledge.''

Examining all levels of education, it may appear that not much has changed in the 21st century. Despite some changes in methods and syllabi, many educational systems still thrive on information cramming and memorisation. We insist on equipping learners with predetermined skills, but we do not work enough on honing their ability to make sense of the parts that make the whole so that they can create a cohesive narrative of the world around them (Harari, 2018).

One might wonder exactly how the tertiary level journey has changed. To illustrate this, we will use the analogy of a train journey. In the past, students got on the train (university department), which took them through different stations (stages in their studies) until they got to the terminal station where they disembarked (graduated) and potentially never looked back. If they had taken the Law train, they would now be lawyers and they would stay lawyers forever. This used to be our reality until the late 1990s. Now, Harari argues, soon after embarking on the train, the students realise they are meant to stay students forever, as there is no terminal station where to disembark. To get to the next station, students need more skills, since those accumulated so far are not enough (Harari, 2018). Additionally, as the train journey progresses, the travellers become increasingly aware of the need to drive the train themselves and plan the route through the landscape of education.

Digital natives

This analogy perhaps brings us closer to outlining the profile of the 21st century student. Often described as digital natives, Schaberg (2022) uses a different term: *Digital slaves,* as they end up being led, and defined by, technology. Janschitz and Penker (2022) argue that this generation exhibits *selective transference of digital literacy,* a phenomenon that may be apparent to educators in the contrast between their rapid progress in gaming and less enthusiastic use of technology for their education. These young people often have to embark on their tertiary learning away from home and, for many, this is the first time they will have to take care of themselves, get a part-time job, and engage with other aspects of 'adulthood'. They need to create a self-organised learning environment, in most cases without the foundation of prior knowledge. Finally, this generation finds it increasingly difficult to commit to lectures on modules they do not find intrinsically interesting.

When these students enter tertiary level institutions, they are expected to participate in their lectures by listening and doing as they are told, to memorise materials, to pass exams and achieve high scores, to compete with other students, and to finish their degree in their chosen field. Timms and Heimans (2018) compare this to the game TETRIS, where players can rapidly become overwhelmed if they do not deal with the approaching blocks fast enough. A change seems necessary. Students should be expected to attend lectures in a personalised and meaningful way that leaves room to speak, rather than listen, even if it is only to ask questions. That will make them stay actively engaged to critically examine and research their field.

They should also choose how they participate in lectures. Instead of memorising, students should be encouraged to learn experientially and critically. Through projects that permit this they could build diverse portfolios that showcase their learning and progress. They should be encouraged to collaborate, instead of competing. Since their train journey has no terminal stop, they should get used to the idea of life-long learning and invest time in developing the personal tools to do this. Following Timms' and Heimans' (2018) gaming analogy, 21st century students would be better served by a game such as Minecraft, which is open-ended and allows for the design of their own learning universe.

In this personalised learning universe, learners will need to forge alliances: they will need friends. The first 'friend' is the value found through different kinds of resources (human resources, libraries, technology). In human resources we list lecturers who will share their passion with their students and open previously unsuspected career paths as well as pathways to learning. Secondly, technology has to be seen as a major ally, provided students realise how deskilling it can become and opt to control it, rather than be led by it. Finally, students will find a great ally within their own mind as they develop a growth mindset.

University departments can aid this endeavour by progressively linking academia to the world of employment, either by encouraging more extensive internship programmes or by devising tools that help students understand how each module makes them more competitive. For this reason, CITY College has designed a set of badges which make up a 21st century employability profile. These badges represent skills the students have to develop. These icons are found in almost any activity students are asked to do, from syllabi, to assessment handouts to company visit posters. They clearly indicate that whatever is done at university has a clear aim connected with the real world.

Foes are factors that hinder or slow down learning, of which there are many with some posing as friends. Chief among these may be the students' inability to adjust, which could be due to their deep-rooted ideas about learning which are slow to change. Therefore, a greater connection is needed between the last classes of secondary school and university, so that future students can start developing greater flexibility and self regulation to avoid the propensity towards a *surface approach* to learning (Asikainen et al.,2022). This tendency could be related to the students' desire for a degree at all costs. Students need to realise that what matters now is how one graduates and what one has to show upon graduating.

In among the friends and foes, students will encounter many **falsehoods**, which include whatever makes empty promises. One such claim is that studying can be avoided or that knowledge can be truly constructed in the absence of an active mind consciously engaged. An example to illustrate this would be the current infatuation with AI.

It is clear that we are educating future graduates for a society and a working environment about which we know very little. From what we can see, we need to invest time, effort and financial means to make university education less top-down and more bottom-up (Timms and Heimans, 2018) so that it becomes more geared towards the future.

References

Asikainen, H., Nieminen, J.H., Häsä, J. and Katajavuori, N. (2022). University students' interest and burnout profiles and their relation to approaches to learning and achievement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 93. [Online]. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1041608021001424 [Accessed on 8th June 2023].

CITY College. (n.d.). *Graduate Attributes*. [Online]. Available at https://sites.google.com/york.citycollege.eu/city-college-staff-handbook/home/other-useful-documents?authuser=2 [Accessed on 18th June 2023].

Harari, Y.N. (2018). 21 lessons learnt for the 21st century. London: Vintage.

Janschitz, G. and Penker, M. (2022). How digital are 'digital natives' actually? Developing an instrument to measure the degree of digitalisation of university students–the DDS-Index. *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, 153(1). [Online]. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/07591063211061760 [Accessed on 8th June 2023]

Robinson, K. (2007). *Do schools kill creativity?* [Video]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY&t=182s [Accessed 22nd June 2023].

Schaberg, C. (2022). Today's college students aren't digital 'natives'. They are digital servants. *The TIMES higher education. Tuesday,* 18 January 2022. [Online]. Available at https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/todays-college-students-arent-digital-natives-they-are-digital-servants [Accessed on 8th June 2023].

Timms, H & Heimans, J. (2018). New Power: how it's changing the 21st century – and why you need to know. London: Macmillan.

Maria-Araxi Sachpazian is an EFL Teacher and a Lecturer in the Department of Humanities of CITY College, University of York Europe Campus. She is the Managing Director of *Input on Education*. Maria's interests lie in materials' evaluation and adaptation, digital teaching, and the construction of teacher identity. She is the Secretary to the Board of Trustees of IATEFL and the Chair of TESOL Macedonia-Thrace, Northern Greece. Email: msachpazian@york.citycollege.eu