

16 *Quality and Relevance in Higher Education: Nurturing Integral Habits of Mind*

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1 Abstract

By recognising learning as the most natural and creative of all human endeavours, my contribution to this discussion makes a call for a radical new story of learning and schooling. I am of the opinion that our current processes and structures of schooling have restrained our access to all of who we are by creating false proxies for deep learning. We are immersed in learning environments and schooling systems disconnected from our deepest learning needs. These environments stifle natural learning and great thinking; they diminish curiosity and constrain our natural capacities to explore, create, imagine, and make genuine contributions to our communities and our world while we are young. My discussion therefore draws attention to this absence of a holistic context of purpose, meaning, and connection in our current system of higher education. Central to my discussion will be a call to reconnect learning to life. It is a call to heal the intellectual, emotional and spiritual fragmentation caused by denying the legitimacy of all we are in learning. Life is about freedom, interdependence, creativity, novelty, relationships, exploration, and discovery – and so is learning.

2 Introduction

Why is it that most elitists hardly envisage any connection between what they learnt in school and the reality they face in their careers or day-to-day life? Why are our streets full of job hunting highly educated individuals who cannot use their knowledge to make a meaningful difference in their own lives? Marshall (2006) observes, “the nature and quality of our minds are powerfully shaped by the nature and quality of the learning environments which we are immersed, activated, and nurtured.” How we are asked to learn, therefore, matters profoundly because mind shaping is world shaping. In the absence of a holistic context of purpose, meaning, and connection, our current processes and structures of schooling have restrained our access to all of who we are by creating false proxies for deep learning. Finishing a course and a textbook has to mean achievement. Listening to a lecture has come to mean understanding. Getting a high score on a standardised test has come to mean proficiency. Credentials have come to mean competence.

We are immersed in learning environments and schooling systems disconnected from our deepest learning needs. These environments stifle natural learning and great thinking; they diminish curiosity and constrain our natural capacities to explore, create, imagine, and make genuine contributions to our communities and our world while we are young. The nature of schooling as we know it has become the unquestioned answer to educating our children. I believe it is not. It is time to reconnect our abundant potentials and reengage in the joy of learning. Our current context and conditions of schooling are completely at odds with the creative principles of life and learning and who we naturally are as learners.

3 Nurturing the Mind

My explorations have led me to understand that engaging all our ways of knowing is what makes us fully human and that we can no longer separate our interior mind from our exterior mind. This calls for a radical new story of learning and schooling. A call to reconnect learning to life. It is a call

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This discussion calls for the nurturing of the self-directed learning that is relevant to the learner and for increased student participation in planning and evaluation of their own learning. Learners learn better when they get empowered to take charge of the learning process. I invite you to engage in this fundamental discourse. When we are invited to joyfully engage in and meaningful experience our learning and our world as a living network of relationships to which we belong and for which we have responsibility, the quality and wisdom of our minds will astonish us and the creative power of our dreams will shape the world. Mind shaping is world shaping. Our habits of mind and patterns of thinking are shaped and developed through experience and practice. This echoes Marshall's (2006) opinion that "how we engage our minds in learning profoundly shapes the patterns of our thinking and our thinking shapes the world."

My new story of learning is rooted in the American Psychological Association (APA) definition which states, "learning is a natural process of pursuing personally meaningful goals, and it is active, volitional, and internally-mediated; it is a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through the learner's unique perceptions, thoughts and feelings." Central to the discussion is a call to reconnect learning to life. It is a call to heal the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fragmentation caused by denying the legitimacy of all we are in learning. As Vella (2008) puts it "life is about freedom, interdependence, creativity, novelty, relationships, exploration, and discovery – and so is learning."

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I concur with Marshall's (2006) assertion that learning is a continual process of mind making that changes us forever. We are born learning beings. Our curiosity and insatiable drive to know and figure things out is innate. We could not stop trying to understand who we are, why we are here, and how we belong. From the moment of our first breath, we have learned. We have observed and smelled and tested and touched and laughed and cried. We have walked and talked and taken things apart and put them together. And in our irrepressible quest to know, experience, explore, discover, and play, we create our world. Although learning is the creative process of life, our current learning story conceives it as a mechanistic, prescribed, and easily measured commodity that can be incrementally and uniformly delivered to individuals.

Central to this discussion is Vella's (2008) notion that learning emerges from discovery, not directives; reflection, not rules; possibilities, not prescriptions, diversity, not dogma; creativity and curiosity, not conformity and certainty; and meanings, not mandates. The subject becomes fundamental to this discussion because when we engage students in deep and meaningful learning, the formulas may fade, but their understanding endures. Learning is the fundamental process of life and the deepest source of creativity engaging the human mind and spirit. Now let us discuss two stories of learning and schooling, our current story and emerging new story, and look closely at the learning rules that ground them.

4 Learning and Schooling

In our Kenyan system of higher education, learning is viewed as synonymous with schooling, and the result of formal instruction. Learning/schooling is seen as a predominantly externally directed and prescribed process of acquiring and using information. If we view learning as an externally driven and reductive process of incrementally acquiring more and more information, then input (delivered information) equals output (what is acquired and learned) (Eshiwani, 1993).

Reconnecting learning and schooling to life and to the way we naturally learn provides new understandings and new design principles that can ignite learner's goodness and genius and awaken them to a world of creative possibility. There is an enormous disconnect between the reductive story of schooling grounded in deficiency, prescription, uniformity, and acquisition and the integral story of learning grounded in abundance, meaning, holism, and engagement.

From Plato to Nyerere, people have questioned and suggested the national role of education. Yet there still exists many divergent views regarding what education ought to accomplish. Whereas some stress its aim as being the development of the whole man, some emphasise its relation to the community, some the training of character, and yet others the mastery of some skill or knowledge (Bogonko, 1992). True education ought to aim at uniting man with nature and with his fellow beings.

The late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere called education which teaches man how to be an efficient tool-maker and tool-user, which turns men and women into tools, which turns out marketable commodities and which makes men and women efficient instruments for the production of modern gadgets incomplete and counter productive. To him, the purpose of education is to turn out all-rounded knowledgeable and liberated people. Hence job expectation or mere career success is by no means all important and it should not, therefore obscure the essential aim of education; namely, the balanced development of the whole man. The true aim of education, in Paulo Freire's words (1973) is "the development of the whole human person as, in so doing, man becomes critically aware of his reality in a manner that leads him to take critical and effective action upon it."

It is possible to achieve such other skills as a sense of perspective, depth of judgement and a compassionate understanding of human motivation which Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia (1973) purports are not merely more important than training for jobs, but in their foundations lie an educational system which recognises the "truth that it is a person and not just a brain that is being trained."

As Bogonko (1993) puts it, "education for individual fulfilment equips man with knowledge, moral virtues, strength of judgment, power and the spiritual heritage of his nation. It should also stimulate and develop the individual's emotional, creative, adaptable, vital, initiative, analytic and intellectual capacities as well as character.

5 Dialogue Education

Vella (2008) describes teaching with dialogue education as involving "listening to higher education learners at every level, respecting them as subjects or decision makers of their own learning, and evoking their innate power. In the 21st century, content is as accessible to learners as the Enter key on their computer keyboard. Teaching that content is organising sets of content in a reasonable and well sequenced manner, shaping it into learning tasks that are accessible and challenging to learners so that their experience of learning is meaningful to them.

In conclusion, it is time to author a new story of deep and mindful learning and schooling and to design learning systems and environments that embody the natural creativity and joy of life itself. It is into this unexplored new terrain that we will venture together. My explorations have led me to understand that engaging all our ways of knowing is what makes us fully human and that we can no longer separate our interior mind from our exterior mind. This calls for a radical new story of learning and schooling.

6 References

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