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Article Series on Learning Impact

The Need for New Paradigms in Education

Education needs to undergo a radical paradigm shift in order to produce a super class of creative workers prepared to lead the new millennium economy, says an international proponent of the movement.

“What our society needs are creative entrepreneurs with a diversity of talents,” said Yong Zhao, presidential chair and associate dean for global education in the College of Education at the University of Oregon. “Our schools, no matter where they are located, are still aiming to produce employees with prescribed knowledge and skills that we think might help them look for jobs when those jobs may no longer exist. That approach worked for the agricultural and industrial ages that required similar people with similar skills. Our schools today are basically teaching what we call worthwhile knowledge like math, science, and language arts, at the same time ignoring what others may be pursuing.”

While many areas of the economy such as the stock market, real estate, and banking appear to be re-bounding from the most recent recession, many Americans remain unemployed and are unable to find jobs in their vocations.

“The U.S. faces what economists are calling the ‘disappearance of the middle class.’ The traditional middle class jobs – manufacturing, construction, even other kinds of routine jobs like banking and accounting – are being either replaced by machines or outsourced to other countries. Even for developed countries like the U.S., the future middle class has to be the creative class who re-create jobs or they will be absorbed into the service sector. Service jobs cannot be outsourced, but they also don’t pay much.”

Zhao, the author of several books on the subject, will present at Learning Impact 2013 to kick-off a panel discussion on: “Two Educational Paradigms: What Defines and How to Create a World Class Education.”

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“One of the things I outline in my latest book, and I will talk about at Learning Impact, is that we need to shift the paradigm by accepting the fact that in the 21st century, every talent could be valuable,” he said. “Look at the media, the creative types that exist today. Restaurateurs, everything from art galleries to boutiques, wineries to micro-breweries. I think we’ve arrived at an age where many human talents can be useful or valuable. And if you follow that, then education should not be imposing

upon everybody to develop the same kinds of skills or knowledge, but rather to enhance and develop each person’s strength and passion.

“Also, the fact that the world has entered the new economy, mainly a globalized, hyper-specialized economy, is reason people should outsource and collaborate with others as a way of life,” he added. “We’re not producing scholars like in ancient times where they know everything, a walking Wikipedia. The teacher has gone from being the great possessor of knowledge to serving as the organizer, the motivator, the inspirer, or the environment construction person. Their role has evolved into serving as the provider of opportunities.”

Zhao believes the advancements in technology are not only enabling the transformation in learning, but mandating it. “Today, I think that every student can literally construct their own global learning institute for themselves. Through technology, if you are good, and you are an entrepreneur, you can create your own global academy, because you can learn from anywhere you like, from anybody you like. The challenge is: why would anyone be interested in doing that? I think that’s the teacher’s job, to inspire.”

A native of China’s Sichuan Province and educated in that country and the U.S., Zhao says although technology has cleared the way for more international education, governments are not pushing in that direction. They are, instead, advocating for more homogenization. “In the U.S., for example, we have the drive for common core standards. I think a lot of people who are pushing for those things, they don’t recognize the fact that once you try to highlight one or two or three subjects, no matter what they are, you are, in essence de-valuing others. By including, we’re excluding.”

And why should countries like America and China collaborate on educating its students?

“Because national borders no longer define an individual’s future destiny,” he replied. “It’s an illusion to believe that Chinese students are going to end up being Chinese citizens working for China. And the same can be said for Americans.

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There’s a new global class of people moving around and it doesn’t matter to them where they go. We call them the super class. National borders will become even more blurred in the future.”

Zhao said it’s a combination of drivers, including students, parents, and ever-evolving technology, that is pressuring education to reform and move to the new entrepreneurial model. “I think education right now is very much a self-protected institution. It’s not designed to help individuals become better persons or whatever, but merely to comply.”

About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global is a nonprofit organization that advances technology that can affordably scale and improve educational participation and attainment. IMS members are leading suppliers, institutions and government organizations that are enabling the future of education by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors Learning Impact: A global awards program and conference to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality. For more information visit www.imsglobal.org or contact info@imglobal.org.

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