Untying learning and knowledge

Learning is a topic at the core of the whole Cottage Labs project but a subject that is hard to pin down, perhaps because it is variously bandied about as a right, a privilege, a product, and a gift.

It is clear that ‘learning’ takes place everywhere around us - from the youngest age, when it is seemingly gotten easily, right up to adulthood and old age, where it becomes commoditized or even impossible (at least for old dogs). Nearly always it’s seen as a good or beneficial to ‘learn’ more but how do we enable learning and what does that mean for the technology that we need?

A simple definition of the ability to learn is :

> *The ability to acquire or modify knowledge, behaviour or values*

At present, throughout nearly all western countries the education system is seen as a means of standardizing this process at the national level. Education and learning go hand in hand and in order to ‘learn’ people enrol at nationally approved educational institutions. The system follows a well worn path, built on an industrial-era model of education and has been exceedingly successful over the last two hundred years in

creating an educated middle class. We are all accustomed to the accepted wisdom that the education system should deliver the skills that the population needs to effectively compete in the modern work place.

In a very crude analysis, education goes something like:

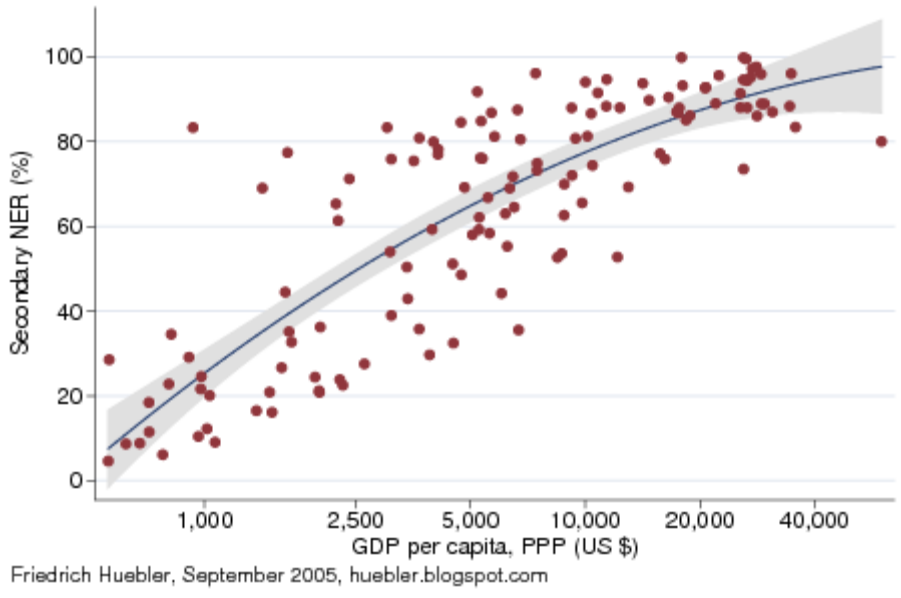
- **0 to ~5** From birth until around the age of five, children are educated at home or in nurseries with little formalized, national curriculum. At this age the focus is on interpersonal skills and very basic literary and mathematical skills.

- **~5 to ~18** From around five onward children enter the school environment where a national curriculum, and to some extent the teachers, shapes a routine based around a schedule of classes that mirrors the Monday to Friday working week. The routine and level of teaching varies widely from school to school but in the vast majority of cases it is based on a group based, programmed schedule.

- **~18 to ~22** Depending on the country children will finish obligatory schooling at some point before the age of 19. For many this signifies the end of formal learning and they enter the world of work. For those that continue in education they will have to enrol in a university or other further education institution to gain an undergraduate degree or diploma. The structure of learning is broadly similar at this stage but with a greater emphasis on individual investigation and with study less focussed on a Monday to Friday schedule.

- **~22 to ~26** For those few that continue beyond an undergraduate degree the choices are highly specialized and in nearly all cases further formalized learning does not extend beyond four years after completion of an undergraduate degree

Some form of education system, more or less following this shape, has been in place in Western countries for the last 100 years or more. It is generally assumed that the role of education, and the education system that provides it, is to instil knowledge. A curriculum is set that is tied to the needs for knowledge in certain key skills as determined by demand from the jobs market. In this way education is closely tied to employment and GDP. There is a well established link between GDP creation and education. [1]



Source: International Education Statistics Analysis by Friedrich Huebler

In the last 100 years there have however also been widespread upheavals in just about every sphere of human interaction. Two world wars, revolutions in Transport, Agriculture and Communications Technology to name but a few.

Whole social orders have risen and fallen but most of the institutes of learning in the western world pride themselves on being centuries old. In nearly all education systems there is an ingrained connection between learning as a process and ‘learning’ as a tradition or conservative outlook. Being 'learned' in some cases is clearly equated with the acquisition of knowledge.

In the last two decades remarkable changes have taken place that offer the potential for us to re-examine concepts of learning. One of the key changes from a technological point of view has been the ease of distribution of learning tools. With the rise of the internet and digital dissemination it is now possible to connect students to learning materials worldwide in an instant.

This has meant that the concept of restricted repositories of ‘learned knowledge’ is slowly disappearing. The library used to be a sanctified area, the preserve of a select few who had access to ‘the knowledge’ the ability to access this depended on an individuals role within the education hierarchy, how 'learned' they were.

We now see a shift in emphasis towards curation rather than storage, as access to knowledge becomes commonplace. Knowledge is no longer something that signifies an ability for learning - it can be got easily and instantaneously from a smartphone and wikipedia.

The concepts that only certain institutions or even individuals hold the keys to knowledge and that knowledge is equivalent to having learning are being replaced with the idea that knowledge is in fact a living breathing web. The idea that students must enrol on a course in order to gain knowledge has been replaced by the concept that learning happens through collaboration and sharing of information.

The ties between learning and knowledge are slowly being dissolved as knowledge increasingly becomes available like water.

The technology and infrastructure that we need to facilitate the next century of growth is only just being developed and while the first stage is undoubtedly in supplying tools to access information and knowledge the bigger challenge is to create the infrastructure that can create new ways of learning on top of this data.

References

1 http://huebler.blogspot.com/2005/09/national-wealth-and-school-enrollment.html