

Six Core Capabilities of Learning

Education is bedevilled by vicious false dichotomies, between: new, digital platforms for learning and old classroom based techniques; learning as instruction and learning as exploration; progressive and conservative; learning that develops transferable capabilities and learning that promotes deep knowledge of a subject; between learning for its own sake and learning that is shown in gaining qualifications.

Debates about education too quickly divide, simplistically, into these separate warring camps, when often the best approaches involve a blend of new and old, instruction and exploration. Deep capabilities cannot be acquired without also developing deep knowledge. Too often change in education is presented as a linear, one way process. Often the best approaches require a mix of the very old – Socratic debate, outward bounds, learning your times tables – and the very new – collaborative, creative and self-directed learning using new technologies.

This paper would develop an account of modern learning based of six core capabilities, which span the divides between new and old, progressive and conservative and which are applicable to the challenges of the developed world as much as the developing. These capabilities would provide a new way to think about the goals of learning in both formal and informal settings, from school through to university. It would provide a new framework for thinking about what young people should be learning to do when they are at school.

The aim would be to provide a different vantage point on often heated but distracting debates between old and new, progressive and conservative, liberal and traditional. The six capabilities establish a large, fertile and productive common ground for a more creative conversation around the goals of modern schools systems in an innovative economy.

The setting for these capabilities is the world that young people face, one characterised by: tightening resource constraints; rising aspirations; limitless new possibilities for collaborative organisation using digital technologies; endemic uncertainty and constant organisational turmoil.

This combination of factors mean that innovation and entrepreneurship need to be widely spread and practised capabilities, in all walks of life, public and private, in organisations large and small.

To meet the demands of this world, the six core capabilities that young people should learn while at school are:

Knowing – being able to search and research, test sources and account for how knowledge is acquired, evidenced and shared, in both explicit and tacit forms. It is not just a question of what you know, but how you know it and how many different ways to know you have access to, with the head, the hand and the heart. In a world in which knowledge and information are more freely available in

more forms it becomes more important for young people to be able to test knowledge and understand how its claims to validity are upheld.

Questioning – being able to open up interesting questions, to seek different vantage points and to see challenges from different vantage points; to know how to debate, criticise, challenge and support collaborative inquiry. Too much learning focuses mainly on how to answer questions set for you. Learning designed to promote a capacity for innovation should encourage young people to ask interesting questions to which there is no single or right answer, to find interesting questions that others have not asked before.

Communicating – being able confidently to articulate what you know and what you believe in, to present it in a way that will connect with and persuade others to back your cause or point of view in public. Too much of education becomes focussed on written exams as the main way young people show what they know. The ability to communicate and persuade in a wide variety of ways, often in teams and groups, will be vital. At its most basic they need to be able to pitch and sell, to move people.

Collaborating – acquiring the social and emotional skills to know how to work with others, to recognise and draw out their contribution as well as being able to make your own. School should be an education in creative self-governance. Most innovation stems from collaboration, often in teams but also in larger groups and communities. Learning the skills of group work should start early. It requires its own grammar and habits as it becomes ever more ambitious, challenging and demanding. In artistic and sporting schools young people learn the habits of team play and collaboration first in small groups, then in progressively larger teams and groups.

Making – school should be a place you go to make things, whether that is a play, a piece of music, a physical object, a business plan or a computer programme. School should be a productive place, even a place where young people from early on learn to earn a living and learn through productive, creative work. Too often making is confined to the margins of school life, to design and technology, or music and textiles. Making should be central to learning for innovation: young people should learn how to turn ideas into products, objects, cultural artefacts through a process of prototyping, trial and error.

Persisting – life in the innovative, entrepreneurial economy requires constant pivoting as people learn from and adjust their plans in the light of setbacks and failures. Diligent, obedient hard work is not enough for persistence. It requires both the character to thrive despite setbacks and to learn from criticism. Learning from feedback should be central a skill. That means assessment needs to be a continual, formative and generative process, involving self-assessment and peer-assessment as well as external and summative assessment by teachers and coaches.

These six capabilities are at the core of what a modern school system needs to provide young people with to ready for them for a world in which innovation

and entrepreneurship, collaborative creativity and improvisation, will be essential. These six capabilities are compatible with different curriculum content.

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