

Tony Chrenka : Lifelong Learning

by Rebecca R Peel
for Amur Initiatives Media and Research

Originally Published November 28, 2014

Z.

A crosswind has blown, once again, in the forecast for an educational future among our youngest generations. As the use of social technology increasingly informs our interpersonal behaviors, certain outmoded aspects of the institution's role in personal development begin to cause discomfort. Terms such as 'late capitalism' and 'generation Z' leave us, perhaps more than ever, with a flavor of expiration in our mouths. It therefore seems appropriate to waste no time building a skills repertoire that will be of maximum use during periods of drastic environmental, political, economic and social change. We wonder: can the integrity and applicability of institutions keep up with the rapidity of this change? It is a question incidentally concurrent with broad trend shifts among young people – shifts that supposedly distinguish their ideals with those of their parents.

“Our wealth...is determined not only by our own skills and talents, but by our ability to access the ideas of those around us; there's a lot to be gained by increasing the odds that smart people might bump against each other,” offer *Atlantic* editors Derek Thompson and Jordan Weissman in their discussion about Millennials'¹ investment habits. “In an ideas economy, up-to-date knowledge could be a more nimble and valuable asset than a house.”² In their article *The Cheapest Generation*, Thompson and Weissman attempt to distill the mentality that currently incline Millennials to invest more and more in immaterial assets and personal communication catalysts, such as higher education and smartphones, rather than long-term material investments, such as cars or houses. “Education is the ‘obvious outlet for the money Millennials can spend’ ... if young people invest less in physical things like houses, they'll have more to invest in themselves.”³

With this type of emphasis on educational investment, the viability of the

¹ Colloquial term for individuals of late generation y and early generation z.

² Derek Thompson and Jordan Weissman, “The Cheapest Generation,” *The Atlantic*, 22 August 2012 <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/the-cheapest-generation/309060/> (accessed October 2014).

³ Ibid.

structural standards is due for evaluation. Outside of the institution, one is left to their own devices and as such, amongst an active community of news feeds and social commentary between peers. In this world outside of the institution, it may come to pass that the greatest and fastest learning is done digitally, and globally. To what degree will the institution wish to, or be able to, conform to these modalities?

As a first step towards understanding these inclinations, we might try to envision certain positive aspects of an education that is centered upon the recipient; an education that goes hand-in-hand with the raw interests of the individuals and the specific technologies that will mobilize them. We might also try to envision an education that extends beyond the parenthetical two- or four-year degree system and instead becomes a lifelong process.

And to sidestep despondent premonitions of social degradation among ‘NetGen’⁴ youth, especially those mapped out early into the shift towards digital media, we ought to credit the awareness and intelligence among individuals of this cohort. The nihilistic ultimatums posed in Turkle-isms⁵ since the early-aughts suggest an impotent and corrosive relationship between humans and technology as the general norm. Youtube channel host CGP Grey reaffirms the disconcert in its recent short *Humans Need Not Apply*, which has garnered nearly 3 million views in 2 months.⁶ In it, Grey eloquently depicts the future of automation, in which there will simply be no need for a human work force because robots and programs will have proven far more cost-efficient. One problem, it seems, with claiming prescience in this relationship is that it is assumed to be one-sided; as though technology exudes force on the innocent and unwitting, unchecked and rampant. This seems a troubling remnant of colonial thought, oriented towards *all* interfacers whose interactions with technology remain mostly front-end.⁷ It

⁴Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (McGraw/Hill, 2009).

⁵To her credit, Sherry Turkle was an early proponent of the exciting potentials of digital connectivity, but has since become more skeptical – Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011).

⁶CGP Grey, “Humans Need Not Apply,” *CGP Grey*, 13 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Pq-S557XQU&list=UU2C_jShtL725hvbm1arSV9w (accessed October 2014).

⁷I wish to point out that I don’t consider Turkle’s writing colonialist, or that she subscribes to such ideology. Her work represents a more general spirit of resistance and criticality in the face of a hypothesized dystopia, versus optimism and compassion, that is endemic to facets of western philosophy – especially those concerning unrealized

renders online connectivity into a violent social abstraction, turning us all into a displaced marginalized group in which technology has somehow *anticipated* to separate and restrain us.

If we are to somehow grasp that technological influence, on the contrary, moves both ways – between emerging technology and emerging culture – and is hardly isolated from or resistant to its own causality, we must consider several things. What differentiates a merely complicit relationship from a relationship of active influence and acknowledgement? In other words, to what degree is an individual participating in social media, for instance, without adding to its structure? Does it matter if the individual is able to quantify their level of engagement, or if it even occurs to them to try?

One vantage point onto the social politics of technology and, more specifically, online social media, is via the discourse surrounding education. It seems as though the despondency should not be aimed at the technology that we're evolving alongside but rather the lack of institutional concern and upkeep with technology in curricular structure. In *Drawing Out & Leading Forth*, Julie Ault and Martin Beck attempt to locate the individual in the spectra of educational models – from a hierarchical, master-to-apprentice, 'banking method whereby information is deposited into students'⁸ to a much more convivial⁹ and communal style of learning, in which 'inherent qualities of an individual are expressed, encouraged and developed.'¹⁰ They ultimately ask for a structure that encourages neither one nor the other method to be implemented indefinitely and across the board, but rather intense critical focus on the frameworks¹¹ that surround an individual's practice or area of interest. The Internet seems to support this model exceptionally. If students are aware at every juncture of their educational route the potential pitfalls they might encounter, and past revelations on the subject, and even parallel inquiries across fields of study, they might

technological implications. Further in this article, I will empathize and commiserate with this spirit of resistance as it applies to other strains of unrealized social hypotheses.

⁸ Julie Ault and Martin Beck, "Drawing Out & Leading Forth," *Expanded Art School (Learning Together)* (2012):1.

⁹ In the words of Ivan Illich.

¹⁰ Ault and Beck, 1

¹¹ 'These include the ideologies, histories and current conditions of aesthetic, cultural, social, political and economic frameworks. Correlating individuals' artistic desires with these larger contexts in a dynamic enterprise might provide, generally speaking, the means for developing critical consciousness and articulating a form of cultural agency that goes beyond professionalisation.' Ibid, 6.

naturally assume a more realistic and insistent line of focus upon convocation. David Edwards released a timely article in *Wired* that expresses the urgent need to combat and eradicate the ill-maintained educational procedures that simply do not apply to a rapidly changing planet. He exposes the dangerous simplicity of reinforcing a linear, step-by-step, this-then-that, mode of institution hopping, in which accolades are handed out like lurid candy to encourage pursuit of the 'next level' of education before finally arriving, manifest destiny, in the promised land of the work force. 'We go to school and then we go to work.'¹²

Inevitably, and unfortunately, we cannot topically forage for new educational strategies without the omni-awareness that higher learning institutions, both public and private, are so often late-capitalist succumbs. The systemic ideology of buying your way into a marketable profession, with the promise of a career that will make good with and eventual return on your staggering debt is, by varying shades of gray and angles of repose, a lot of smoke and mirrors. This ideology, I would argue, percolates from the top down (with exceptions, of course)¹³ from the Masters or PhD programs at an institution, to undergrad, with the remaining trickles dripping into secondary schools by way of college counseling offices. If secondary school is the monotonous tunnel of homogenous information, then college is certainly the light at the tunnel's end for innumerable students. It is known from an early age that in order to *make it* in the *Real World* you will have to purchase an education, as you might purchase a parcel of land. And your parcel will be next to, but separate from, the neighboring parcel of the very same size and shape. In public high schools especially, curriculum is at worst dry, statistical and standardized; at best, experimental and 'hands-on' but still spotty and unfocused. Clearly, there is an invisible (albeit crushingly palpable) double bind between appealing to the twisted and rigorous standards provided by government and providing preparation and hope for students upon achievement of their diploma. By comparison, higher learning institutions offer educations that are much more personalized and experience affording. What seems absent is the link between students' technological activities that, at some level, indicates individual enthusiasm, and the broad expectations that are provided by the schools they attend. This is not to say that institutions aren't changing their focus or revising their structure, but more often than not the changes still include anachronistic protocol and lack a sound platform for

¹² David Edwards, "American Schools Are Training Kids For A World That Doesn't Exist," *Wired*, 17 October 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2014/10/on-learning-by-doing/> (accessed 20 October 2014).

¹³ see: anti-dominance strategies of Paulo Friere and bell hooks e.g., and see also: Terrence E. Deal and Robert R. Nolan, *Alternative Schools: ideologies, realities, and guidelines*, (Nelson-Hall, 1978).

students to manage a syllabus that is completely unique to them, and free of the pressures of an unfairly oppressive economy.¹⁴

I'd like to provide a personal anecdote for the purpose of this argument. Just out of secondary school I was, like so many, a lost sheep in the wilderness of American institutions, guided only by a personal drive towards a specific kind of study and the urgent pressure to 'find a school that I liked.'¹⁵ I had been encouraged – even required – to apply to as many institutions as possible in high school, many of which I was accepted to but to which I hastily deferred my enrollment. Many of them were public universities. I ultimately decided (just as hastily, I might add) to accept enrollment to a private art institution in Portland, Oregon – Pacific Northwest College of Art. Tuition was high, particularly in comparison to state universities, but offered was reasonably priced student housing and a low-key admissions process, which appealed to me at the time, as did the geographic location. And, all things considered, it was one of the more affordable art schools in the country.

Since my undergraduate commencement just over a year ago, tuition at the school has spiked, massive faculty turnover has ensued, and there now exists a year of required dormitory living at ArtHouse – the pricey new freshman living quarters.¹⁶¹⁷ This upcoming semester, spring of 2015, the facilities will be transferring to a grandiose new campus, located on the cusp of the high-income, upper-middle class Pearl District neighborhood and Oldtown/Chinatown. What exists between the easternmost reach of the Pearl District and the Willamette River is currently and historically riddled with displacement and homelessness, and retains some of the last standing architectural identifiers of Portland's quirky, sordid history. Already, and preceding its inauguration by months, the area

¹⁴ Nicholas Kristof briefly describes the slow landslide of United States education, which now clearly prefers and privileges the economically elite. Nicholas Kristof, "The American Dream is Leaving America." *The New York Times*, 25 October 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/26/opinion/sunday/nicholas-kristof-the-american-dream-is-leaving-america.html?_r=0 (accessed 25 October 2014).

¹⁵ I took a year between high school and undergrad to pursue basic pre-requisites at various community colleges to save money and buy time; my parents cringed to think that I might lose motivation this way and fail to pursue a degree in higher education, and these were often their words of encouragement – offering me some financial assistance in exchange for keeping a focused path.

¹⁶ ArtHouse just recently made the list for the most expensive college dorms in the United States, checking in at \$12,814 for the required year of stay. Peter Jacobs, "The Most Expensive Dorm Rooms in Every State," *Business Insider*, 20 October 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-expensive-college-dorms-map-2014-10> (accessed 20 October 2014).

¹⁷ what's with the name??! *palms forehead*

between the new campus building and ArtHouse has transformed from dark and desolate to blossoming and socially pretentious; street corners that were formerly occupied by sleeping individuals and the entirety of their modest but hard-earned physical belongings is now occupied by coffee-drinking individuals and their data-stuffed Macbooks.¹⁸

This major shift in the institution is coincidentally concurrent with other major and rapid upheavals throughout the area. Aside from becoming San Francisco's tech-hub home-away-from-home, and quickly forming a high-income infrastructure, Portland has long been the subject of severe and rapid overhaul. The AirBnB headquarters just moved into town, and Nike's brand throb is just as strong as it ever was. They (Nike) seem to be the Emerald City of trend research and marketing, somehow continuing to make haute jet setters and inter-urban aspiring athletes alike melt into wet-mouthed Pavlovian demographic-research test subjects. Even those who consider themselves above it all still want to work for them, or for Weiden & Kennedy, or would at the very least accept a paid internship at either of the two if it landed in their laps. The surge of so many people entering the city with keen eyes for design and disdain for anything that, from a certain perspective, lacks a certain *something-something* renders preexisting signifiers absolutely, and without hesitation, reformable. Especially if that signifier – be it a building, or a group of inhabitants, or an under-aestheticized establishment, or even a mentality – is sitting on prime real estate for a neoliberal visionary to capitalize upon. It almost goes without saying that the fresh transplant's design vision for these things, people and places hardly ever aligns with what they actually represent, which is an unretouched portrait of local life as it existed before *Portlandia*, for example, set out to make insufferable jokes about it. The television program on IFC seems lighthearted and innocuous enough, but it has called attention to aspects of life in Portland that cannot hold a candle to the wealth-driven demands of posh demographics in New York, Chicago, Paris, Los Angeles, and even closer to home, San Francisco. Its natural quirks have been scrutinized and made novel. Seedy strip clubs and local punk bars that used to converse across entire neighborhoods now crouch, begrudgingly, between hollowed out and impeccably composed boutiques that push an invasive, insensitive, and manufactured projection of Pacific Northwest

¹⁸ It is hardly difficult to visualize the conspicuous discrepancies between the socioeconomic value of one such belonging – a Macbook and its assumed contents, its marketed retail value, and its presumed potential for product generation – and the set of belongings that travel with a person who is living on the streets (pardon the colloquialism) – cash redemption collections, convenience store food items, paperback books, used clothing, etc. – and predict *a priori* the radial implications of these discrepancies on both the social atmosphere and the physical landscape of the city.

style onto people whose only touristic aspirations are to walk, shop, sample wine and coffee, and eat eccentric variations of local cuisine. Unequivocally, to consume is paramount. A cute, homespun wool sweater has been pulled over the eyes of an increasing number of *Portlandia* and *Grimm* aficionados who just happen to be looking into relocation, perhaps because they too are being driven out of their rent-hiked cities. Lucky for them, a gleaming foodie Disneyworld now pleasantly awaits.

And obviously, this is not the first of these transformations in this city, nor is it confined to this city's specific history.

I'd like to make one more observation to finish this tangential diversion. Since the peculiar Art Institute exposé in 2011,¹⁹ PNCA can welcome with open arms the people who were misled by AI's fraudulent motivations and promise them a legitimate education in the Illustration, Communication Design, and Animated Arts departments. And, since these are the factions of the school that actually *have* a flourishing job market post-commencement, this economic stabilizer seems to be strategically worked into this favorable rebranding opportunity for PNCA.²⁰ Additionally, referring back to the dormitory situation, the combined conditions appear to put the nail in the coffin for the trajectory of the school's priorities in its reformation.

Across town from PNCA, on Reed College's idyllic campus, sits *their* new LEED-Certified performing arts building in which Amur and Chrenka held impromptu focus groups with students passing through his installation. (We will return to this subject momentarily.) One of two fairly prestigious liberal arts institutions in the Portland metro area,²¹ this school has used funds to create a space that sensibly caters to optimal conditions for self-motivated study and an active approach to professional practice. Former President Colin S. Diver has commented in the past about his interest in giving students the resources to 'participate in a collective enterprise' and 'to incorporate the creative arts into [the college's]

¹⁹ Tamar Lewin, "For-Profit College Group Sued as U.S. Lays Out Wide Fraud," *The New York Times*, 8 August 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/09/education/09forprofit.html?_r=0 (accessed October 2014).

²⁰ Also worked into the rebranding are awful truisms that echo the colonial history of the region. 'Pioneering creativity' was recently inducted as the institutional catch phrase – to be printed on pamphlets, banners, and periodicals.

²¹ The other is Lewis and Clark, which also requires on-campus living for the first two years of attendance. Chrenka received his undergraduate degree from Lewis and Clark College in 2014.

definition of the canon.’²² Reed is relatively well known as a dynamic hub for arts and academic research, providing innovative and diverse approaches to a rigorous education. However, rigorous and innovative though it may be, the school is likewise cost-prohibitive and class marginalizing.²³ Completion of the performing arts building took ‘[t]he extraordinary generosity of Reed College alumni, parents, and friends’ to commit ‘a total of \$11.6 million to the project.’²⁴

This environment both informed and ingested the criticality behind Chrenka’s work. Despite its generous and charitable public mission statement, the membrane that separates the dedicated investors of the institution’s performing arts building and the general public seems to still be tricky territory to navigate. During our five-hour intervention within the main Atrium of the building, which on the school website’s description promotes “a facility that would be academic, student-centered, welcoming to the community, and collaborative’ and ‘invites gatherings both impromptu and planned,”²⁵ we were approached and lightly interrogated by staff members several times as to whether we were Reed students, and to what justification could validate our disruption of the space. We were talking, audibly but not obnoxiously, as we encouraged curious visitors to interact with the prototypical objects in the exhibition. They asked us questions, and we answered; we asked them for feedback on the installation components and, theoretically, whether they thought the functional objects in the exhibition would be helpful (or at least useful) tools in a learning environment driven by social connectivity and intrepid critical focus. We then held a pseudo-seminar in which our volunteers discussed a topic of their choosing, situated among the modular mechanisms that Tony devised. They almost immediately assumed a circular formation, in which everyone was sitting at the same height from the ground. The objects faded into the environment and provided things like momentary relief from a fatiguing posture, or a place to set one’s device or beverage, or a thing to touch and fiddle with in aid of speech lucidity. The objects were not so central and imposing – like the traditional desk or chair – but something much more *accommodating*. Like acupuncture for the exhausting academic continuum.

²² Colin S. Diver, “Enhancing Performance Arts: A Q&A with President Diver,” *Reed Magazine*, 2007, http://www.reed.edu/reed_magazine/summer2007/columns/noc/diver_arts.html (accessed October 2014).

²³ Steve Jobs, for example, attended Reed College for a brief stint in 1972 before dropping out due to unaffordable tuition.

²⁴ “Performing Arts Building,” *Reed College*, http://www.reed.edu/performing_arts/funding.html (accessed October 2014).

²⁵ Ibid.

Tony's objects prototypically exude a spiritual learning experience that renders the current approach to learning maladapted. They represent the experience of maintaining a long-term investment in the betterment of the self, through continual, lifelong investigation. They exemplify the attitude of an education with an indefinite duration and they speak – almost plead – to the recipient to stay balanced and intellectually invigorated. They symbolically negate socioeconomic uncertainty by returning authority to the recipient and her peers.

All this said, our attempts at *real* and *viable* discursive prototypes still seem paltry, as there is not yet a widespread institutional structure that supports this type of engagement. Sir Kenneth Robinson has advocated for institutional “habitats”²⁶ that move away from the “interest of industrialism, and the image of it,” but also acknowledges that the current paradigm consistently “atomizes [individuals], judging them separately, [thereby] creating a disjunction between them and their natural learning environments.”²⁷ How might I explain in a proposal for new curricular environments that my best thinking is done when I'm at lunch with my friends, talking around a table, and that my strongest, most reliable lens into important global discourse is through my Facebook and Twitter feeds?

I'd like to conclude with a sentiment from Liam Gillick as he discussed *Spaces of Critical Exchange* with Fionn Meade for Mousse Magazine in 2012:

‘People still need a corporeal, politicized collectivity. And perhaps this is a counter to the individualized managerialism that Adam Curtis²⁸ points to, the perpetual training that characterizes much of contemporary professional life, the digital increase in self-managing your time and labor that puts you in a nonstop competition first and foremost with a projection of the self? This plays out to some degree in the art context via the prominence of symposia, where the tacit agreement can often seem to be that if you frame out and

²⁶ Sir Kenneth Robinson, “RSA Edge Lecture with Sir Ken Robinson - Changing Paradigms,” *The RSA*, <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/sir-ken-robinson> (accessed October 2014).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Gillick refers to an interview for e-flux between Adam Curtis and Hans Ulrich Obrist. Adam Curtis, “In Conversation with Adam Curtis, Part I,” *e-flux*, December 2011, <<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-adam-curtis-part-i/>> (accessed October 2014).

schedule time for critical discourse, you've already met the "discursive" expectation, a pre-apology as you've put it.'

Rather than dwell endlessly on potential catastrophe that could coincide with impending technological and socioeconomic forecasts, it seems less than hasty to begin offering course structures and institutional values that come clean with portent and can adapt innovatively to a new climate. Instead of telling people that their job market won't exist in five years, inviting them to collaborate, self-educate and cross-politicize seems a more appropriate demeanor to send them through the gates with. Even as cities continue to be converted and reconverted to different versions of stodgy bucket list playgrounds, and worst-case job market elimination proceeds, at the very least these youth will have the option to retain a sense of purpose and grounding within themselves and their chosen peer group. With the support of a learning environment that does not reject or undermine the power of social media connectivity, they can use their predisposition to technological savvy as an advantage to their futures rather than a strict inhibitor. They can perhaps find reprieve from the sinking ship of capital-driven educations, and devise solutions. And even if no transaction seems morally sanctioned, the Lifelong Learner will harbor a secure investment in the '*real variable*' of her education: *herself*.

* * *

Post Script: The introductory page of Lifelong Learning is modeled after the Nike Betterworld website experience, adopted also by ad-agency Sparks & Honey, which is cited for its statistical breakdown of the prodigious superiority of Generation Z.

Bibliography

- Weissman, Jordan, and Derek Thompson. "The Cheapest Generation." *The Atlantic*, August 2012.
- Ault, Julie, and Martin Beck. "Drawing Out & Leading Forth." *Expanded Art School (Learning Together)*, 2012: 61-71.
- Buren, Daniel, interview by Wouter Davidts. *Teaching without Teaching: An Interview With Daniel Buren* London/Amsterdam, (2010).
- Bromwich, David. "The Hi-Tech Mess of Higher Education." *The New York Review of Books*, August 2014.
- Curtis, Adam, interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist. *In Conversation with Adam Curtis, Part I* e-flux, (December 2011).
- Clements, Alexis. "Indicting Higher Education in the Arts and Beyond." *Hyperallergic*, 2014.
- Edwards, David. *American Schools Are Training Kids for a World That Doesn't Exist*. October 17, 2014. <http://www.wired.com/2014/10/on-learning-by-doing/> (accessed October 2014).
- Deal, Terrence E., and Robert R Nolan. *Alternative schools: ideologies, realities, guidelines*. Nelson-Hall, 1978.
- Diver, Colin S., interview by Mitchell Hartman. *Enhancing Performing Arts: A Q&A With President Diver* Portland, Oregon: Reed Magazine, (July 2007).
- Friere, Paulo. *Politics of Education*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985.
- Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. Cuernavaca: Center for Intercultural Documentation, 1970.
- Illich, Ivan. "Institutional Inversion." *Centro Intercultural de Documentaciòn* (CIDOC), 1972.
- . *Tools for Conviviality*. 1973.
- hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress*. Taylor & Francis, 1994.

Jahoda, Susan, Blair Murphy, Vicky Virgin, and Caroline Woolard. "Artists Report Back." *BFAMFAPhD*, 2014.

Kingston, Anne. "Get Ready for Generation Z." *Macleans.ca*. July 14, 2014. <http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/get-ready-for-generation-z/> (accessed August 2014).

Kristof, Nicholas. "The American Dream is Leaving America." *The New York Times*, 2014.

Meade, Fionn. "Spaces for Critical Exchange." *Mousse Magazine*, April 2012.

Miller, John. "The Pedagogical Model: To Make Shame More Shameful Still by Making it Public." *The Society of Control*. <http://www.societyofcontrol.com/akademie/miller.htm> (accessed October 2014).

Robinson, Sir Kenneth. *Culture, creativity, and the young: developing public policy*. Council of Europe, 1999.

Smith, Mark K. "Ivan Illich: deschooling, conviviality and lifelong learning." *infed.org*. 2011. <http://infed.org/mobi/ivan-illich-deschooling-conviviality-and-lifelong-learning/> (accessed October 2014).

Tanner, Adam. "This Woman Didn't Get Hired Because She Refused An Invasive Background Check." *Forbes*. October 8, 2014. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/adamtanner/2014/10/08/this-woman-didnt-get-hired-because-she-refused-an-invasive-job-background-check/> (accessed October 2014).

Tapscott, Don. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*. McGraw/Hill, 2009.

The New York Times. "The New College Campus." *The New York Times*, February 16, 2014.