

Should Education for Innovation be Innovative?

Ronan Sleep

*School of Computing Sciences, University of East Anglia,
NORWICH, England*

It is by now common ground that in the twenty-first century success in life will no longer be guaranteed by acquiring a particular skill, and that education needs increasingly to stress 'learning to learn'. We need to move to a new view of education as a broad spectrum lifelong activity that is integrated into every aspect of life.

As Nobuyuki Idei, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Sony Corporation, Japan, and Co-Chair of East Asia Economic Summit said in 2001, "innovation and creativity will decide which individuals succeed" in today's knowledge based society. In such a society, it is people who endow things and services with value: so knowledge about people's value systems and an understanding of cultures and their interactions will become increasingly important as produce and service designers strive to create added value in a global marketplace. Having a good idea is not sufficient for global success: it needs to be mapped through cultural value systems to products which will be acceptable and attractive to end users across a wide range of cultures.

Further, a good idea must be timely, both in the sense that it is relevant to emerging demand, and also that it is not overtaken by developments in the pipeline. Many products and services have a short half life, and for technological products especially the half life seems to shorten with each technology cycle. For example, just as the recordable DVD takes over from the VHS technology, HDD video recorders come on the market. Soon we will not need to keep physical archives of video content in our houses at all – we will have access to the things we want stored somehow, somewhere, on the global internet. One does not need a detailed understanding to the technologies involved to have foreseen this as a likely future technology, nor to have foreseen that, combined with browser technology to make the repository navigable, the result would have considerable attractions to those of us who are fed up with looking through old piles of videotapes manually.

Understanding just how people react to new technologies is not usually as easy of course. One key, not in my view sufficiently stressed in many curricula, is an ability to model the behaviour of people both individually and in groups. We all have such ability, but it is rarely developed except in specialist courses on for example anthropology and psychology.

One might think that educationalists – who need to look ahead to provide what their students will need in the future – would have all this worked out in their curricula and that they would be using innovative methods in its delivery. But – as Bruce Alberts pointed out recently (2004 Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum) – educationalists are for some reason the last people to innovate: "schools, universities and other learning institutions are the last to adopt the benefits that globalization brings...Educational systems are one of the last hierarchical organizations."

In my talk will develop some of the points made above, and consider the benefits and dangers of innovation in education.