

# The Irony:

What I Ordered *vs* What I Got

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The legendary Peter Drucker himself once said, “*Change is the norm; all one can do is be ahead of it*”,<sup>1</sup> and this powerful statement describes change as an inevitable part of our lives and existence. However, not only is it the norm, but it is also highly necessary for growth and development, as it allows us to define and measure progress. Today, we often compare events, occurrences, or circumstances to a given reference point in history in order to determine if (and by how much) things have improved or worsened, which shows that change helps us appreciate how far we’ve come as a species, and it also helps us analyze our past and present realities so we can decide the best way to move forward.

However, another thing to note about change is that it creates more change, which is exactly why it is such a core part of our existence. What I mean is, any degree of change, no matter how insignificant, leads to other changes, which lead to other changes, and that keeps happening, thereby creating a complex system of interactions between changes at different levels. Take a child, for example:

When the child is born, the baby needs breast milk. As the child gets older and grows teeth (a change), the child starts to take solid food (another change); this helps the child go from crawling to walking to running... even talking (another change), which then increases body metabolism (another change), and the young child begins to consume more wholesome foods (another change). It won’t take long before this child develops enough to start attending school and making friends (another change), and trust me, I could go on and on about the infinite series of changes that could come from this experience. My point is, change is often caused by change, and to buttress further, here’s another example:

We have over centuries and millennia, witnessed diverse civilizations, each with its unique peculiarities, and as these civilizations evolved, it influenced the need for the system of education being practiced to evolve in order to meet the demands of civilization.

For example, **the prehistoric era** was characterized by informal education, rooted in oral traditions and the power of observation; then came the rise of **ancient civilizations**, and formal education began to develop to handle the emerging complexities of society; in **the medieval period**, religious institutions began to

function as citadels of learning with a focus on classics, religious texts, philosophy, and the arts; **the renaissance and enlightenment era** was characterized by a quest for discovery, and thus, education in those times had a strong focus on science and reason, which also led to the novel creation of the scientific method; **the industrial revolution** revealed significant social and economic changes, which necessitated that education strongly focus on new workforce skills and practical learning, and this influenced the establishment of standard schools for proper training; in **the 20th and early 21st century**, civilization and technology advanced massively and as a result, education was expanded to include secondary and tertiary education (with a broader curriculum), as well as the introduction of digital learning in classrooms.<sup>2</sup>

Do you see the trend? One change led to another, which led to another, and another; Peter Drucker explained it this way:

*“Change is inevitable. Change is constant. The only thing that is certain is that things will be different tomorrow”.*<sup>3</sup>

I bet that the one thing which hasn't changed yet is the timelessness of Peter Drucker's words, and it is in the spirit of recognizing change, that I approach the theme under discussion today. This year's theme focuses on 'The Next Education', which signifies a change (because the word 'next' implies the existence of a 'previous'), and as we have previously established, the changes in education were influenced by the changing demands of society. Because one influences the other, it means that before we can have 'The Next Education', there must first be a 'Next Civilization' which would influence the need for the 'Next Education'. The theme uses the term *“A crazy world”* to describe this 'Next Civilization', and we must understand its peculiarities, in order to determine what the 'Next Education' requires. To do that, we must ask ourselves, *“where is the world at right now and where is the world gradually heading?”*

First, let's talk about where the world is right now. Alvin Toffler in 1970 predicted an “information explosion” that could overwhelm individuals, and this has finally materialized with the high dependence on social media and the massive spread of misinformation.<sup>4</sup> Economist Jeffrey D. Sachs argued in 2015 that high-scale poverty,

inequality and climate change are major peculiarities of these present times.<sup>5</sup> The World Economic Forum stated in 2020 that the rapid advancement of AI is a unique peculiarity that has raised major concerns about the future of the global workforce,<sup>6</sup> and even the World Health Organization revealed in 2022 that an estimate of 1 in 7 people worldwide experience a mental health condition yearly, signifying an all-time high in the prevalence of mental health crises.<sup>7</sup>

I must say I share the sentiment of this year's contest theme, because while doing this research, I couldn't help but conclude again and again, "*The world is indeed becoming CRAZY*". The crazier part is, when we try to analyze where the world is currently headed, the changes become increasingly dramatic, in a not-so-pleasant way. For context, the World Economic Forum argues that by 2025, up to 85 million jobs could be lost due to automation, while 97 million new jobs could emerge, which signifies that there will be a high demand for people with strong innovative qualities as the jobs of tomorrow will be very different from the jobs of today.<sup>8</sup> Also, Daniel Goleman argues that people will need, in addition to their technical skills, a solid grasp of major soft skills like emotional intelligence and communication skills, as well as the ability to collaborate, be empathetic, and establish strong inter-personal relationships, in order to thrive in the future.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most amazing opinion to me is that of Peter Drucker who as early as 1995, was able to foresee this dramatic change and went ahead to emphasize in his book 'Managing in a Time of Great Change', that there would be an unprecedented pace of change which would influence an urgent need for innovation and adaptation in order to evolve.<sup>10</sup>

Using the information above, we can see what 'The Next Civilization' looks like, and thus, we can safely conclude that for 'The Next Education' to effectively equip students to lead in this 'Crazy World', it must be able to adequately address the peculiarities of this 'Crazy World' and prepare students to effectively face them. If this is true, permit me to then rephrase the theme as a question: "*Is the current education properly equipping the new generation to lead in this 'Crazy World'?*" In my humble opinion, the answer is no. Why? Let's start with innovation.

The world is rapidly evolving and jobs are taking new shapes and forms, but sadly, students aren't being prepared to handle the jobs of today, not to mention the jobs of

tomorrow. The Conference Board reported in 2021 that 60% of global employers admitted that they struggle to find candidates with the necessary workforce skills, including soft skills like critical thinking and communication, which are essential for problem solving and innovation.<sup>11</sup> It gets worse if you're a kid like me living in Nigeria, because the number of dissatisfied employers is at 80%, and the educational sector pays minimal attention to practical learning and innovative thinking.<sup>12</sup>

What's worse, innovation is actively discouraged in Nigerian classrooms. I'll never forget the time my maths teacher gave us an impromptu test in class (I was in Junior Secondary School 2), and I couldn't remember the method he taught, so I used a different approach, solved the questions, and got all my answers right. However, instead of my teacher praising my ability to figure out a new approach to solve the problem, he deducted 5 marks from my test score as a form of punishment because in his words, "*you did not use my method!*" Subsequent experiences like these made me believe that thinking outside the box was a bad thing; plus, you couldn't really ask questions in class, otherwise you could end up being branded as a know-it-all who was trying to outshine his teachers. Why then are we surprised when most students who pass through this system end up being termed '*unemployable*' by employers, when in fact, they were never being prepared for the workforce to begin with?

As if that isn't enough, most schools neglect the peculiar needs of certain students, and instead compel all students to learn in the same way, which has made many of these students feel inadequate, when the reality is they could have done a lot better under different circumstances.

To illustrate, when I was in Senior Secondary School 1 & 2, I was performing terribly in Physics, and it got to the point where I really hated the subject, because for some reason, it was the only science course I struggled with. Fast-forward to my senior year, I changed schools, and later that same session, I was one of the only students in my State to get an A1 in Physics during the 2016 West African Examination Council (WAEC). At this time, I had no issues with Physics — the same Physics I was struggling with just a year ago. The difference? The teacher in my new school employed a different teaching approach for me which made me not only understand Physics, but also fall in love with the subject.

Sadly, I am one of the few who can boast of such a privilege, because many students have gotten to the point where they feel like failures, just because the school system is working overtime to fit square, triangular, rectangular, round, and trapezoidal pegs, all into a round hole. Peter Drucker described the implication of this perfectly when he said,

*“There is nothing quite so useless, as doing with great efficiency what does not need to be done at all.”<sup>13</sup>*

Now, something else worth talking about is the discrimination against certain fields of study, which I believe is a huge problem. A common saying, “*the smartest kids go to Science class*”, has influenced the belief that people in the Arts, Humanities, or Creative fields have little to offer, and most parents, as well as schools, compel kids like us to only choose ‘*prestigious*’ courses (like Medicine, Engineering, Law, and so on), which in their opinion will make us financially secure. Because of this, students are no longer encouraged to pursue their passion and gain knowledge to make impact; rather, these kids are compelled to do whatever will ensure the family gets money, even if it leads to unfulfillment. Also, this bias makes it really difficult for these schools to open their eyes to new possibilities for financial and career success (like the creator economy for instance), and such ventures are discouraged, just because they are unconventional.

This is perhaps my story, because growing up, I was always a creative person. However, all my life, I was made to believe that I could only be a Science student, while being creative or artistic was a waste of time, or at best, a hobby that was not to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, I believed this lie for most of my teenage years, and when I eventually gained admission to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, to study Petroleum Engineering, I honestly believed that was what I wanted. However, it took me just one year away from home to realize I had neglected my true self, my creative self, and I was living the life other people projected on me. Shortly after this revelation, I began to struggle in school, and the student who was once celebrated as a high-flying inspiration, became a colossal failure, until **BOOM... I had a serious mental breakdown.** My GPA was a disaster, I was heavily depressed and suicidal,

and this continued for over three years, so much that I strongly contemplated suicide on more than five occasions, all because I felt a strong lack of purpose and fulfillment.

This brings me to the issue of mental health, which is crucial because several studies show that millions of students are struggling with mental health challenges, and in Nigeria, a study showed that over 73% of tertiary students have experienced mental health challenges.<sup>14</sup> This is an extreme number, and this crisis is occurring in educational institutions, a place where students are meant to be helped to become leaders of tomorrow. Peter Drucker famously said, *“as a leader, the most important thing about communication is to hear what isn’t being said”*,<sup>15</sup> but sadly, the people training these students to become leaders aren’t doing a good job at paying attention, because if they were, they would see what these students go through and realize that it takes a stable and sound mind to make a good leader. In Nigeria, there are only about 350 psychiatrists who have to take care of over 200 million people,<sup>16</sup> and students bear the brunt of this, because they have to go through constant mental pressure, but with so little mental support. For me, it is quite ironic that the only time school encouraged me to be innovative was when I was battling depression, because I had no help, and I had to implement any solution possible, so I could survive.

An experience I’ll never forget was when one of my lecturers had a conversation with me about why I was struggling educationally, and she didn’t bother to let me explain myself; instead, she went ahead to tell me a story of a student she once knew who couldn’t pay his school fees, but still found a way to receive support, and after painting a picture of how he had it so hard, she looked at me and said, *“I’m very sure you’ve never had to go through that much; I’m sure your case has never been that bad”*. I was speechless, because for someone who knew nothing about my life; for someone who was supposed to be an example of a leader to me, she made three big mistakes. First, she downplayed my experience and made it seem like I was being dramatic; then, she didn’t employ any sense of empathy to show that she was sympathetic towards my experience; finally, she assessed me from a privileged perspective, and this prevented her from even trying to understand my story. It hurts me to stay this, but my memorable (and even happy) moments in school did not take place in the classroom; unfortunately, so many Nigerian students share in this ugly

experience. Apparently, Africa is suffering the consequence as well, because this crisis costing the continent 1.3 trillion dollars annually in lost productivity.

Therefore, if we want progress, we have to be honest with ourselves, and if we are, we'll realize that if we want to build a generation who can effectively and overcome the challenges of the future and become great Leaders, we must prioritize the restructuring of our educational system and prioritize core values. We must emphasize innovation, and encourage students to think outside the box, because that mentality will shape the future; plus, rather than teach students the answers, we should teach them to ask the right questions, for it is this drive that influenced Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein (as well as several other noteworthy figures) to delve deep into the realm of exploration, and redefine the world into what we currently know it to be today. We shouldn't stop there though, for our curricula need to be revamped so it can address future and present-day realities, not yesterday's demands, for as Peter Drucker rightly said *"the greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic."*<sup>17</sup>

I also believe we need to encourage students to follow their passion and learn for the joy of gaining knowledge to make impact, instead of making them feel pressured to get a job just so they can change the status of their families, because this mentality waters down the fundamental essence of spending years to study a discipline. Please understand that I am in no way saying providing for the family isn't a good enough reason to want to go to school (I truly believe it is); however, I believe students should be encouraged to prioritize impact and innovation, while chasing their passion, while understanding that creating value that solves world problems will always be appreciated via financial compensation. I believe no field or discipline in an educational institution should be looked down on (in fact, the practice should be frowned at) and instead, everyone should be made to see that they each have something valuable they're bringing to the table. There should be mutual respect towards the contributions from people on different sides of the spectrum.

If I would add one more, it would be the fact that we seriously need to do better with addressing mental health among our students, for good leaders must have a sound mind. Our educational institutions, while aiming to train future leaders, must also



show them how to be leaders, by embracing practices that promote empathy, sincere care, and sensitivity to their peculiar challenges. I know we have a long way to go, and to be honest, I regret that I didn't have the best experience in the classroom, but maybe if we do this, other kids will be able to say that indeed, school helped them to become the effective leaders of the future they were meant to be.

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