Education Means Hope

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My father often tells me of his father: a dogged trader who, wishing the best for his five sons, had sent each of them to big cities to live with relatives in exchange for an education. When my father recalls these stories, he would talk about how his father had woken him at the crack of dawn, hurried him to wash himself, then walked him to the bus park at Orlu, where he whispered urgent instructions for my father to 'behave well' and 'read your books every day'. In my father's own words, his father's expression had been a mix of fear and hope- fear of an uncertain, yet pregnant future, and a hope that the same future would birth something wonderful: an educated child, a meaningful person. I see the same emotions lurking in my father's brown eyes when he looks at me; I feel the fear and hope dance in my visions about the future. When I close my eyes, I can hear father's hushed voice whispering: "go to school, learn, get a good job. You will surely be successful." I can hear his father's voice, too: "go to school, follow instructions, learn…" Yet, even as I try to abide by their advice, I cannot shake the fear that, somehow, education is failing me, and many years from now, I will remain- in earnest- an uneducated child.

If education had a synonym, it would be hope; hope moulds the foundation of education. Perhaps, the best way to understand this is through its history:

The current system of formal schooling is rumoured to have begun in 19th century Prussia following Napoleon's victory over the German forces: to prepare soldiers for the next inevitable battle, the German authorities trained them to be obedient, to follow instructions and be... well, soldiers. Another history explains that formal education was birthed by the need to prepare workers in formerly agrarian societies for the industrial revolution, to create servile employees who would follow instructions and work productively in factories. In 19th century America, formal education further evolved with Horace Mann's "No child left behind" initiative, while in China, it was conceived to prepare the young members of the ruling class for leadership.

Whichever history book you reference, education stems from hope: a hope to win a future battle; a hope to prepare for a new, unfamiliar world; a hope to create systems where all children would have access to free education; a hope to create the most powerful dynasties of the old world. Today, we still nurse the hope that our education systems will be adequate in preparing us for a future we do not yet comprehend, but we know is drawing closer to our doorsteps. Our hope is that education will arm humanity with relevance in whatever

version of the future we are delivered into. Yet, especially with recent trends, I fear we have more reasons to doubt than hope.

In a 2023 report released by the Mary Christie Institute, up to 40% of graduates feel their university education is inadequate in preparing them for "the emotional or behavioural impact" of real life and work[1]. Similarly, a 2021 Cengage survey reported that close to 50% of graduates do not apply for entry level positions because they feel unqualified, 40% admitted they rarely use the skills learned in college, 20% answered that they lack the required skills to be competitive in job applications, and 45% claim they have had no return on investments from attending college[2]. These may seem like raw, lifeless statistics, but they tell a story. They tell us that, more than at any other time in our history, humans are noticing an ever-widening gap between the 'cans' and 'cannots' of formal education; it warns that formal education is outdated, adapting more to the past than the future.

One puzzle in the education debate, is why education has remained unchanged in the reality of brisk societal change. In Prince Ea's 2016 piece, *I sued the school system*[3], he accuses that formal education is an "*ancient institution that has outlived his usage*". As evidence, Prince displays pictures demonstrating major technological changes: a cart in the 18th century compared to a car in the 21st century, a smartphone in the 21st century compared to the bulky telephone of the 1800s. He notes the substantial differences between the car and telephone in both eras, while there is no noticeable contrast between an 18th and 21st century classroom. This begs the question, if the realities which gave rise to formal education have evolved, why has education remained the same? If education is the outcome of our hope to solve problems in specific economic, societal, and technological conditions, shouldn't it- by principle- be adaptive to changing societal contexts and challenges?

My suspicion is, because education was successful in the past in preparing humanity for the present, we are holding on to the hope that, left unchanged, it may also be effective in preparing us for the future: an absurd expectation at best, and a dangerous one at worst. What our future requires is not our stubborn cling to past hope, but a reassessment of today's circumstances and a recalibration of hope to create another successful future.

[1] Mary Christie Institute. The Mental Health and wellbeing of young professionals (Boston: 2024) https://marychristieinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-of-Young-Professionals-Survey.pdf

[2] Cenage, Graduate Employability Report (Boston: 2021) https://blog.cengage.com/2021-graduate-employability-report-infographic/

[3] Prince Ea, "I sued the school system (2024)". YouTube video, 5:32, September 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqTTojTija8

New Boxes need New Tools

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Department of Economics. University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

We are seated in Theatre A, the large lecture hall reserved for final year students of the Department. There is a steady hum of voices: hushed whispers from students racing to complete the fifteen-page research report assigned by the lecturer three days before. I am seated in the front row with my copy of Damodar Gujarati's Basic Econometrics open on my lap, while I highlight line after line of confusing, yet important econometrics text. As I sit with my head bent, my anxious mind struggling to memorise the pen-marked pages before me, I feel a familiar guilt because I know that I am merely fishing for the best answers to the questions in the upcoming test, and after the test, I will not remember the great majority of these abstract words. To distract myself, I turn my attention to the ongoing conversation a few seats down where one classmate informs another about his brilliant new way of doing assignments: Chat GPT.

I listen as he explains how it only took him an hour to complete the research; all he had to do was "feed" the software with relevant information, using prompts to guide its answers. I hear the pride in his voice, how happy he is that he has "outsmarted" rote education, lecturers, and the rest of us. While he speaks, my mind flashes over to my weekend- spent in the school's library, searching for answers to amorphous research questions in the old pages of cobwebbed books, and, where those failed, the deepest corners of the internet- then it races to the future, an effort to understand what career- if any- awaits me. As I listen to him enumerate all the ways AI will take human jobs and how technology is the future, I feel my chest constrict, warm fear crawling up my limbs. When I return my attention to the pages on my lap, I wonder how many minutes it would take AI to understand the text, then replace me.

Technology has accelerated the speed of progress in the world, but we are not quite sure what we are hurtling towards.

There are two facts of 21st century life: the world is advancing in the wake of major technological and AI revolution; and the rate of advancement is more rapid than at any other time in human history. The first fact is generally well known, while the second is one

we tend to gloss over- understandably, too. As humans, we find change exciting: the potential of innovation, new techniques, or ideas can make millions- if not all people- perk up and observe closely. Change causes us to react, either positively or negatively, and so we are expectedly engrossed with the question of '*what next?*', even as we fail to grasp '*how fast?*' and '*at what cost?*'.

In a 2003 interview with Chris Meyer, Ray Kurzweil explained the idea of the accelerating rate of change[4]. To demonstrate that an increasingly shorter duration is required for the mass adoption of new technologies, Kurzweil illustrated this decline overtime for the United States.

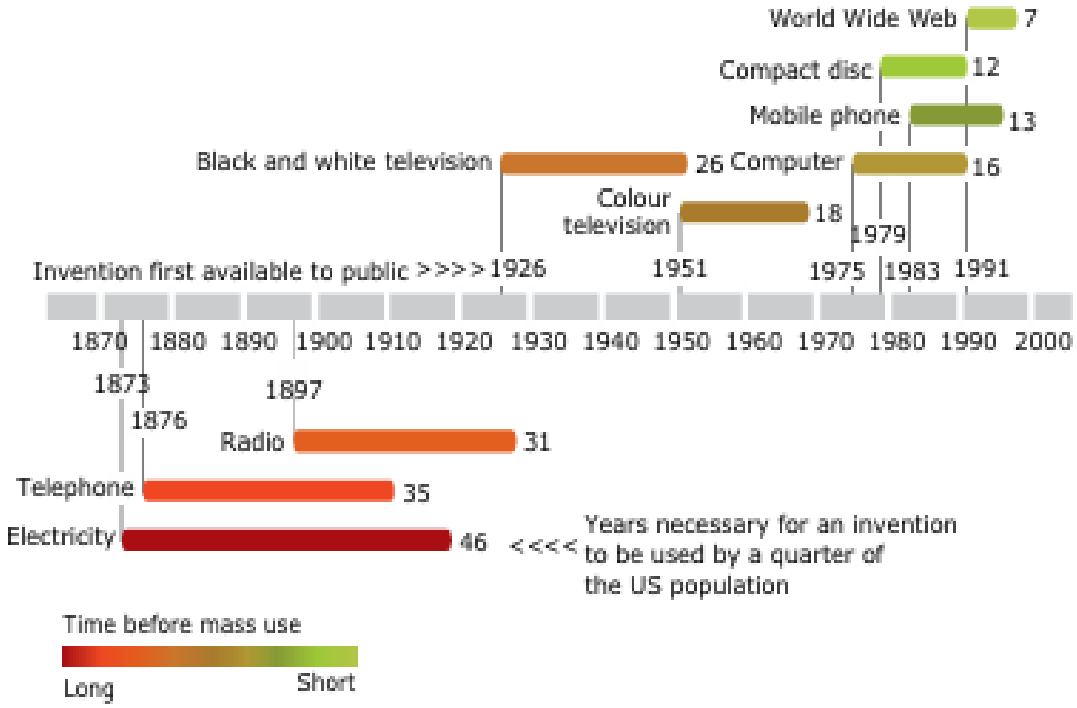


Fig 1: Ray Kurzweil (2005)[5]

Beyond the internet, we can also attest to the validity of Kurzweil's theory: barely 5 days after its launch in November 2022, Chat GPT recorded 1 million new users, growing to 100 million users by January 2023[6]. Although this is remarkable, we can expect speedier absorption in the coming years as the world becomes increasingly connected, digital and volatile. Still, more than the speed of technological change and adoption, it is pertinent to

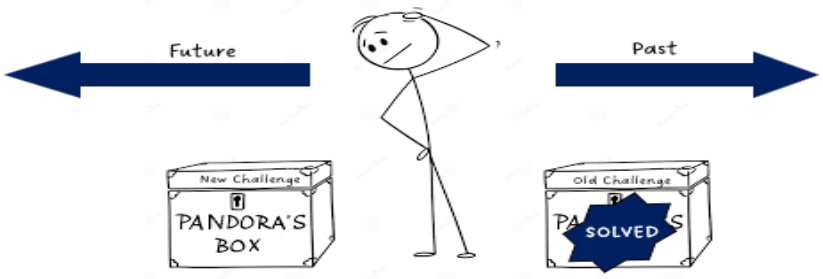
[4] Kurzweil, Ray, Interview by Chris Meyer, "Understanding the Accelerating Rate of Change", The Kurzweil Library, May 26, 2023 [https://www.thekurzweillibrary.com/understanding-the-accelerating-rate-of-change]

[5] Kurzweil, Ray, The Law of Accelerating Returns, (The Kurzweil Library: 2001): Quoted in The European Environment Agency, State and Outlook 2010: Assessment of Global Megatrends, (Copenhagen: 2010) SOER 2010 — assessment of global megatrends — European Environment Agency (europa.eu)

[6] Duarte, Fabio. "Number of Chat GPT Users (May 2024)," Exploding Economics, April 30, 2024, https://explodingtopics.com/blog/chatgpt-users

understand its consequences for our existence and what this change requires of us. To explain this, I employ the theory of boxes.

The Theory of Boxes[7]



Picture a world where advancement is defined by a unique box of problems. Every few generations, the world presents a new box containing unique problems we must solve. In creating our solutions, we must build and improve on our old tools and adapt them specifically to the new problems/ boxes. In this simple world, the boxes represent the context- the state of society, which determines the kinds of tools we can adopt in cracking each challenge. Additionally, with each box, humans must 'rethink the toolbox', not only to understand the best tools for the new box, but to also equip themselves with the right tools for the next box.

Although the analogy is oversimplified, it is not dissimilar to how the world works: society is constantly evolving, creating new challenges we must solve to attain progress, and new tools to solve them. Peter Drucker was, himself, an observer of societal progression and the tools/ factors of production peculiar to each stage. In Post Capitalist society, Drucker, aware of the early, nuanced shift of society from capitalism to post-capitalism, proffered a new tool: knowledge. He was convinced that it was the primary resource required to navigate the new society. Many years later, we have seen Drucker's ideas materialize and we are, again, on the cusp of yet another societal evolution. Our question thus becomes, *what tools do we require now?*

Our New Tools

In keeping with Drucker's assessment[8], I maintain that knowledge- education- will remain a useful tool, partly because we are still nestled within a post capitalist society, but also because knowledge is never redundant. Still, we must begin to reevaluate the 'what' of

[7] I like to think I propounded the theory of boxes. However, I am certain that the idea was generated from a mix of ideas.
[8] Drucker, Peter. *Post Capitalist Society* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 18.

knowledge. We must determine what aspects of knowledge will remain competitive in the future and hone those areas for the next generation. The second tool we require- and this gives us clues on the 'what' of knowledge- is technology. The world is becoming increasingly automated. Artificial Intelligence and technology have become the benchmark to determine relevance in tomorrow's markets: activities and jobs that can be performed faster and more efficiently than AI, will be automated. Thus, our relevance in future will be directly proportional to the value we add in ways that AI and technology cannot- this should be education's focus today.

Rethinking Education

Since we cannot successfully predict the future, and there is no AI-enabled crystal ball to tell us the answers, what are the odds we can recreate an education that prepares humanity? How can we even begin to understand what aspects of education must be kept or eliminated? The truth is we don't know, and we can't. However, this is not a call to sit with folded arms and watch the world take flight; on the contrary, it is an invitation to think in the here and now, and, as Drucker challenged, take advantage of what changes have already occurred, using them as a map to chart a path forward[9]. In our attempt to redefine education, we must focus on the *what*, *how* and *who:* **What can education offer, what should we eliminate? How can we reintroduce learning for the future? Who are the relevant stakeholders to lead this change?**

What?

It should be clear, at this point, that the current system of formal education is not doing humanity any favours. The future will be automated in ways we cannot yet fathom: AI and technology will replace lifestyles and jobs, completing mundane, everyday activities more efficiently than you and I can (I am confidently making this one prediction because it is happening right under our noses[10]). Hence, because AI will absorb the rigid, routine systems of current life- rote memorization, manual labour, and one-size-fits-all education systems- it is imperative that our education leans into the more human faculties: critical thinking and decision making; creative problem solving and people management; communication and collaboration. These are human capabilities that AI does not (yet) possess; the tools that will keep us relevant in the unknown future. Basically, our mindsets must shift from education solely as an agent of specialization and employability, to education as a human activity aimed at promoting problem solving and supporting human relevance.

Although I believe education must become more human-inclined, I do not support that our new education should immediately jettison specialized curriculums at our universities. In my opinion, specialization will play two distinct roles: it will group students into specific problem brackets they wish to solve, and it will provide them with insights on the aspects of specialized learning that must be improved for the next generation. A student of Economics, for instance, may be interested in small business led development in Africa,

[9] Drucker, Peter. *Managing for results* (Australia: Harper Collins, 1993), 4.

[10] Check out Ocado's grocery warehouses in Southeast London.

even as he uses his learning experience to reorganize and improve the curriculum for the next generation of Economics scholars.

The goal here, is to widen the experiences of students beyond individual disciplines or curricula, nurturing innovative creative thinkers by exposing learners to wide-ranging ideas across fields. This way, there are no brilliant engineers who lack the acumen to build cost effective projects, or artists without basic knowledge of money and personal finance. Rather, education will create well-rounded humans with a broad knowledge base and an ability to execute innovative solutions.

How?

Beyond what, we must also rethink how education should be structured. The way I like to think of it is, what must be done to ensure Prince Ea does not sue the school system again?

The first step is personalized learning- learning your own way. Albert Einstein- more popularly known as *the scientific genius*- once said, "if you judge a fish by its ability to climb, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." Many students are punished for their inability to learn in the predetermined ways the system demands. In a recent conversation with a coworker, he explained how he was labelled 'dumb' after failing in a pop test a lecturer assigned immediately after dictating some class notes. People learn in unique ways, at varying speeds and in different environments. For this reason, personalized learning is essential in the next education. Lucky for us, technology has been taught to leverage data and streamline solutions for users. If we can adapt an improved version of the YouTube or TikTok algorithm to the learning process, ensuring that everyone is matched to their distinctive learning methods, there will be more Einsteins than stupid fish!

The second step is to cultivate a lifelong learning culture. Much of what we pass for education today is schooling. In truth, education is more synonymous with learning than schooling, and it is a lifetime activity. Ironically, there is more information at our fingertips now than at any other time in the past, but there has never been a more grossly under-informed population. Ideally, our education must be structured as a journey, not a destination: it must teach us to learn to learn (new skills, technology, and patterns), then continue learning throughout our lives. This is how we stay relevant.

Who?

Rethinking education is a demanding task. It requires a collective response, involving governments, parents, teachers, and students. However my question is, what countries or continents can we expect to find these changemakers?

Africa: A Continent Left Behind.

I have noticed an irksome trend where African countries are subtly encouraged to take the back seat, while their developed counterparts tackle socio-economic issues. Even Drucker, in *The Post- Capitalist Society* declared, "*the answers to the challenges of post-capitalist society and post-capitalist polity will not be found in the third world*"[11]. Intuitively, I understand the idea behind Drucker's claim: third world continents should ideally focus resources and time on solving the more rampart problems of hunger, poverty, and deprivation. However, education is an integral part of Africa's future, and it is ill-advised for the continent to sit back and watch developed continents create the solutions it needs.

As a continent with the second highest population share, Africa must not crawl while society runs ahead. More than mass adoption of Chat GPT and Generative AI, African countries must respond with actionable policy solutions, implementing AI into the revised frameworks of education. Notably, countries like Rwanda, Egypt, South Africa, and Mauritius have taken bold policy positions aimed at upskilling their population and fostering development through research[12]. Yet, underlying this- still- is the problem of access. To begin to redefine education in the African context, access to internet, mobile devices, computers, and electricity for the masses must become policy priority. If we cannot achieve these, then Drucker may just be right and Africa will sit this revolution out, then get left behind- again.

Conclusion.

If technology means disruption, then education means hope. We must reevaluate our education to ensure that it is the best tool to lead us into the looming automated future. Change or continuity, relevance or inconsequence; what will we choose TODAY?

[11] Peter, *Post Capitalist Society,* 13

[12] Diplo. "Artificial Intelligence in Africa: National Strategies and Initiatives", (N.D), https://www.diplomacy.edu/resource/report-stronger-digital-voices-from-africa/ai-africa-national policies/