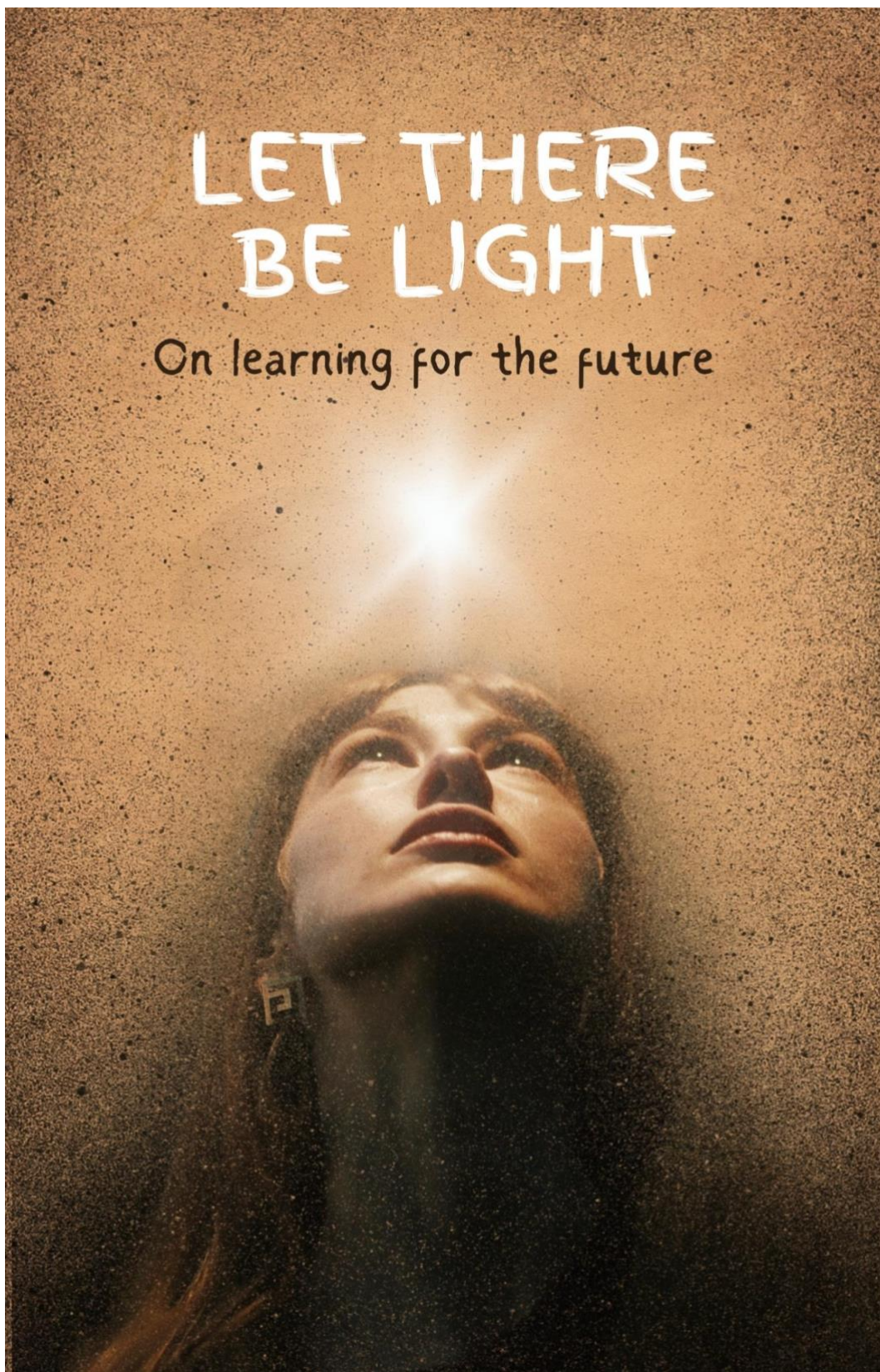


LET THERE BE LIGHT

On learning for the future



LET THERE BE LIGHT: ON LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE

Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.

—Socrates

PREQUEL

On 13th May, 2024, at about midday, I headed for a government-owned primary school in Ekiti state armed with a letter, a dash of uncertainty, and a good measure of enthusiasm. My mission was simple—to request that the head-teacher granted me permission to introduce the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to her pupils, in keeping with my assigned task as a Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) youth advocate. At the end of my spirited proposal, the head-teacher was eager to fix a date. However, she expressed some concerns: *Was I sure the pupils were mentally equipped to grasp matters of such import? Would it not be better for me to engage secondary school students? Although I pointed out that children were more capable than we gave them credit for, I left with doubts of my own: Why was she sceptical about the pupils capacity to understand? What was the purpose of school, if a teacher could not vouch for the abilities of pupils (aged between 8-10 years) to grasp social issues and think creatively about them? What if she was right and the children truly failed to understand me on the D-day?*

STATUS QUO: PERSON, PAPER, SCISSORS

We forget that if students leave school less curious than when they started, we have failed them

—George Couros

I was considered an above-average student in my pre-university days, so even though I performed reasonably well in many subjects, it was expected that I would incline to the sciences and perhaps become a medical doctor. I did become a medical doctor. My original intention, however, was to become a scientist and discover things. I was passionate about discovery and fascinated by the idea of winning a Nobel prize. As I advanced in my education, the only thing I discovered was that such an endeavour was often not viable in Nigeria, that our schools were places where people came to be filled with the thoughts and findings of “unquestionable” authority, not a place to question or formulate independent thought.

Medical school made this clear in various ways. I walked bright-eyed with other brilliant young persons into one of the most prestigious medical schools in the country, but by the time we were concluding second year, the light in many eyes had dimmed. Nothing prepared us for the strangeness and immensity of the coursework we would undertake. To pass, we spent hours trying to study recommended texts we barely understood even though there were simpler texts more suited to our level. What we read was quickly forgotten the next day. We performed pointless practicals to fill manuals. Unpalatable inquiries were often treated with scorn. We listened to long lectures about things that would have been better demonstrated using a simple video or some other learning technique. We were expected to memorize course materials or past questions and replicate them during exams. Little attention was paid to our individual learning styles. Exhausting the curriculum was the goal.

Close to exams, students switched to an avatar-like state we dubbed “*la cram, la pour,*” a superficial study technique whereby students tried to cram as much materials as possible in order to pour the content into answer scripts during exams. The goal was to *pass first, understand later*. Some passed, many—like me—failed but eventually overcame the tempest, others were overwhelmed by the tide and sought other paths. Our failures were addressed with a flippancy suggestive of “if you can’t stand the heat, leave the kitchen.” I saw brilliant people lose confidence in their abilities. I watched students wish they had followed their passions. I saw the mental health of colleagues teeter on a precipice. As Hutchins once quipped, our criteria for education turned out to be really just measures of faithfulness, docility, and memory, not true indications of intellectual power.¹

Although in some ways medical school got better for me after the pre-clinical phase as theories started to make sense in the light of clinical settings, this laborious pattern of learning is what obtains in most university departments. Persons go to school brimming with hope, questions, and possibilities, but when they emerge from the institution they are mentally exhausted, bereft of life skills or core skills in their specialties, and only have a paper to show for their time and efforts. They enter the

¹ Kevin Carey, *The End of College* (New York: Penguin Group, 2015), ePub, 108.

world thinking that since they have a paper, the world must be a pencil. Alas, they find that the world wields a pair of scissors. And when the certificate is shredded, what do they have left? There is nothing to memorize. There is no exam to pass. There is no defined structure. There is only life.

My diagram tries to illustrate how our current system of education churns educated individuals with little or no learning:

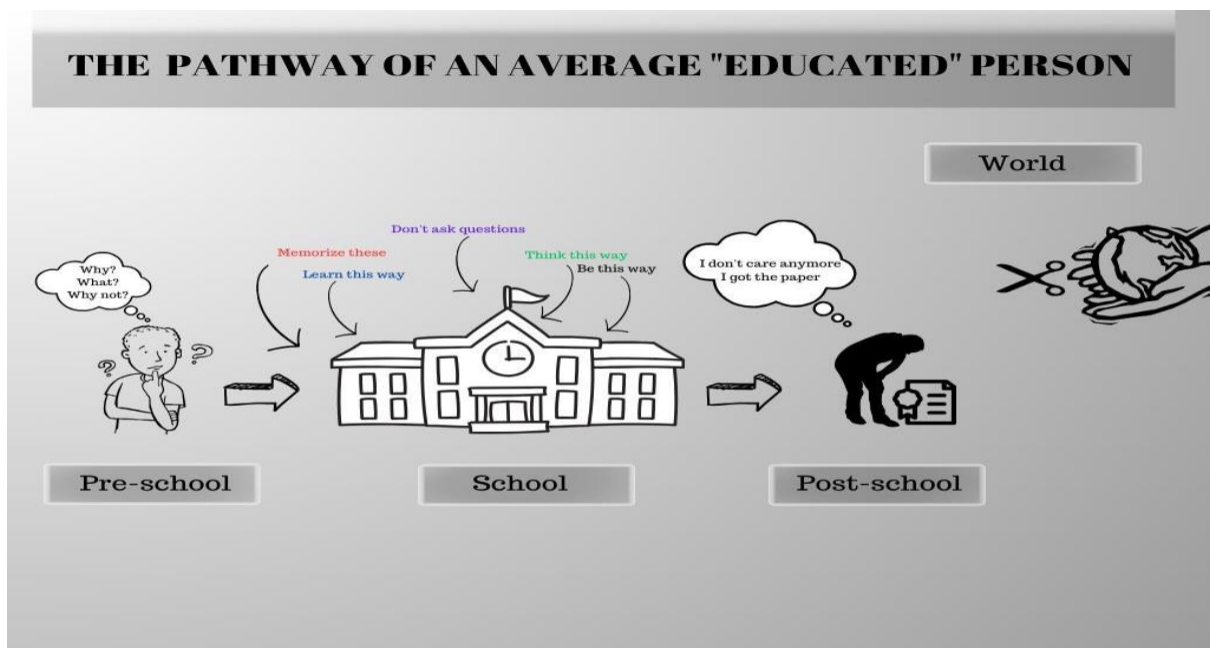


Fig 1: The pathway of an average educated person

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

'It is more important to ask the right question than to get the right answer.'

-Peter Drucker

While it is indubitable that in order to equip individuals with the capabilities to cope with the randomness of life, education as we know it must evolve, it is pertinent that we do not become so lost in seeking the right answers that we fail to ask the right questions. In their seminal book *Think like a freak*, Levitt and Dubner observe that if a given problem still exists, then it is likely that many have already tried to solve it but failed.² According to the duo, this failure often stems from the recalcitrance to redefine

² Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner, *Think like a freak*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2014), PDF, 7.

the problem. They note that many institutions are used to “making decisions based on some murky blend of gut instinct, moral compass, and whatever the previous decision maker did,”³ and thus expend resources and time trying to solve problems that might have been solved differently and holistically if the question was rehashed. In *Men, Ideas, & Politics*, Peter Drucker contended that the most serious mistakes are not being made due to wrong answers, but asking the wrong questions.”⁴

When I was the Director General of my university’s essayist group, my executives and I tried to develop ways to fan the dying embers of passion in members to life. I suggested that we could do this by engaging members in activities that advanced the growth of the organisation to imbue them with a sense of relevance, while contributing to their personal development as writers. We came up with mentorship schemes and teams that I drafted based on my perception of members’ talents and strengths. These ideas only blazed for a while. It was until I had a long conversation with one of my mentees that I discovered that I had been asking the wrong question. I was asking how to make people more engaged in the writing group instead of asking why they were not writing. It turned out that my mentee was more inclined to write fiction and found essay writing exhausting. She had joined the group hoping to become better at academic writing, but whatever passion she had as a fresh recruit was not enough to sustain her. She eventually exited the group.

What if instead of asking how traditional education models should evolve, we began by objectively redefining the purpose of education in light of global trends? What if we asked why students were not learning? What if we asked why some teachers were not effective? It is only by asking the right questions that we can carry out what Peter Drucker calls “systematic and purposeful abandonment”⁵ of obsolete processes, redesign the system, and effectively hack technology to aid learning.

³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Peter F. Drucker, *Men, Ideas, and Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 203.

⁵ Peter F. Drucker, *Management challenges for the 21st century* (New York: Harper Business, 1999), 4.

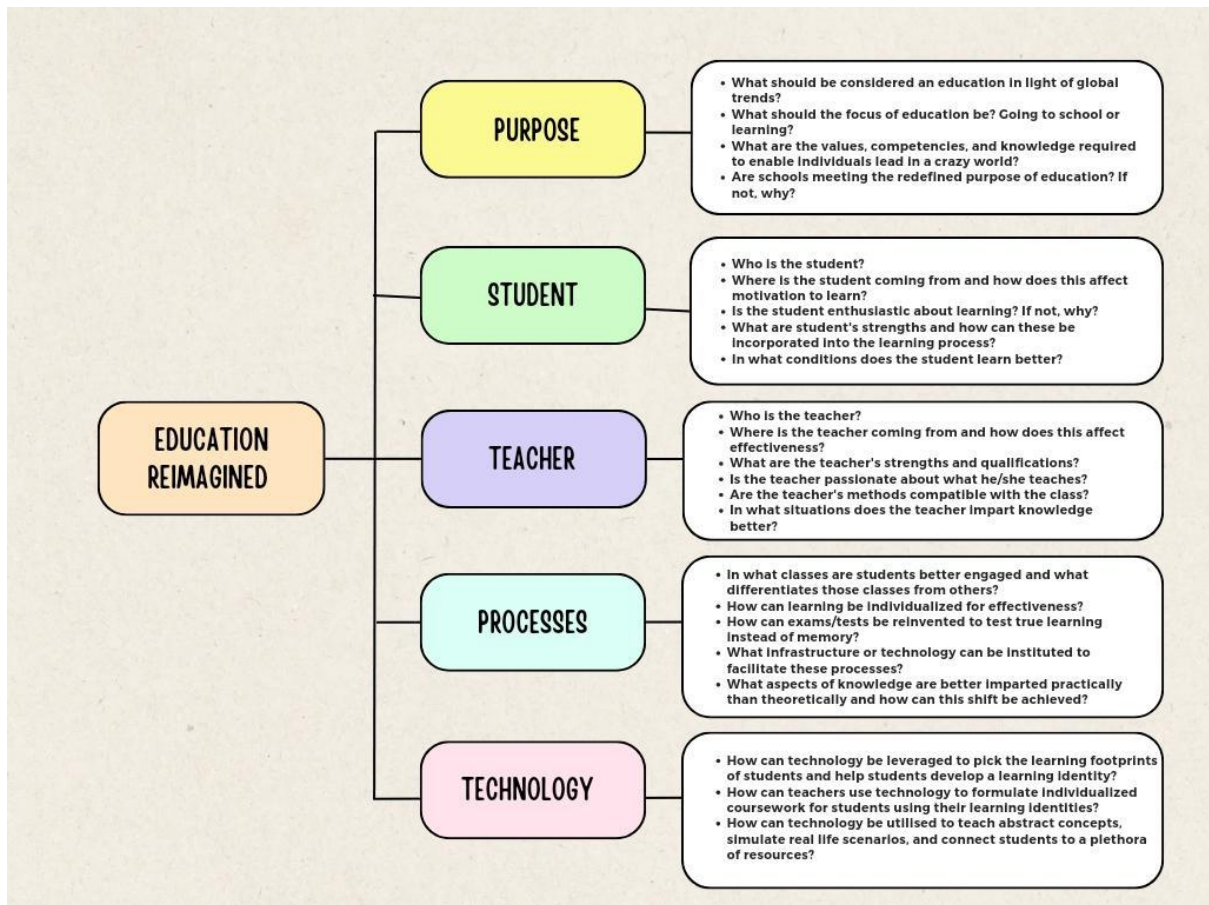


Fig 2: Reimagining education by asking the right questions

In my picture above, I delineate some questions that may be asked about the different components of the educational process today in order to rethink the way education is perceived, reset our priorities, and build a viable system that encourages learning. It is however paramount that questions are often reviewed and problems redefined to prevent the calamity of acting with yesterday's logic⁶ in these times of great change.

⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing in turbulent times* (New York: Routledge, 2011), PDF.

THE FUTURE EDUCATION

Any attempt to base today's actions and commitments on predictions of future events is futile.

—Peter Drucker

But redesigning education for the future may not be a defined venture.

Time and again, history has shown that anytime we think we are close to unravelling the future or defining the boundaries of possibility, life pulls the rug from under our feet. Titanic sank. The number four RBMK reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded. Sullenberger made an emergency landing on the Hudson river after the engines of his airplane were knocked out in an unprecedented bird strike. And COVID-19 became a pandemic.

The world is changing at a terrifying speed. While I admit that technological, geopolitical, societal, ecological, and psychological changes have caused varying degrees of disruption, the greatest source of turbulence I see ahead is certainty. Certainty makes true learning almost impossible. Certainty gives rise to a false sense of security, which breeds complacency, which makes us react slowly to change, which ultimately causes disaster. The traditional model of education is based on the certainty that if one complies to a set of rules, one will always produce the right results. Au contraire, life is proof that one can do everything right and still fail. According to Wagner and Dintersmith, the students who thrive within today's education systems are achievement-driven, rule-oriented, compliant, linear, singular in focus, while the world of work today requires future leaders to be collaboration-driven, rule-defining, creative and innovative, lateral and polymathic in focus.⁷ Thus, to prepare individuals to take on the future, education must be redesigned to train people for the known and the unknown.

The known compares to one of the medical dictums that guide clinical practice, "common things occur commonly," while **The unknown** compares to its radical

⁷ Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, *Most likely to succeed: Preparing our kids for the innovation era* (New York: Scribner, 2015), ePub, 401.

cousin, “never say never.” *Common things occur commonly* takes premise from the observation that certain diseases follow certain patterns and that it would be irresponsible to dismiss those patterns when managing a patient. *Never say never*, however, comes from a place a humility; the understanding that in liaison with the caprices of nature, the human body can spring surprises. Though my medical education had its lapses, operating with this dual method of thinking has helped me approach life holistically in many situations.

- **The Known**

Peter Drucker used the phrase “the future that has already happened”⁸ to capture what I mean by the known. That is, things that have already happened which may determine the course of the future. Presently, the most significant disruption to the educational system is technology. In *End of College*, Carey expresses the belief that students of the future will attend the University of Everywhere, a borderless digital institution where anybody with internet connection in any part of the world will be able to access a wide range of once-scarce educational resources. He predicts that even elitist schools will lose their relevance in the grand scheme of things.⁹

Although no one can say for sure, how technology will revolutionize education in the future, our present knowledge demands that, in addition to basic numeracy and literacy skills, students, teachers, and schools develop competencies in the ethical use of technology and creatively adapt it to facilitate learning. Instead of being shunned, technology should be leveraged to aid effective teaching, individualize learning, and keep track of learning progress. To remain relevant, schools will need to lead the change by investing in using machine learning to devise personalized learning maps for students using their learning identities (Refer to figure 2). This map will be a guide to educational resources students may find beneficial based on their learning styles, progress, and passions, as well as a marker of progress. It will also become important that employers strategically shift from requiring university certificates for certain competencies to assessing the digital résumés (automatically generated from learning

⁸ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing for results* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964)

⁹ Kevin Carey, *The End of College* (New York: Penguin Group, 2015)

maps) and actual skills of potential employees.¹⁰ This will require collaboration of schools and employers.

- **The Unknown**

Being well-versed in the unknown requires what Piero Formica calls “creative ignorance.” According to Formica, “knowledge can be deceptive, whereas the astuteness of creative ignorance unlocks otherwise unthinkable paths of economic growth and social development.”¹¹ The ability to operate in the realm of creative ignorance is the one superpower future leaders need to possess in order to expertly navigate turbulence. That is, the ability to say “I don’t know” – and then follow up certainly with “but maybe I can find out.”¹² Developing the competence to be creatively ignorant requires the following skills/knowledge: self-awareness,¹³ critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration across networks and leading by example, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral, written, and multimedia communication, accessing and analyzing information, curiosity and imagination,¹⁴ crisis management.¹⁵ As Drucker said, unless the school successfully imparts these skills to the young learner it has failed in its crucial duties.¹⁶

Like I told the medical students I was invited to speak to about strategies for success in essay writing, success, required that one found one’s strengths and built on them to spur effectiveness and sustain enthusiasm. To manage the unknown, people must learn to manage themselves by objectively assessing their strengths and weaknesses, and being open to discovering new things about themselves. Assumptions about our capabilities can lead to chaos in the face of the unexpected. More so, the ability to

¹⁰ Kevin Carey, *The End of College* (New York: Penguin Group, 2015)

¹¹ Piero Formica, *The role of creative ignorance: portraits of pathfinders and path creators* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), PDF, 16, doi: 10.1057/9781137492470

¹² Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner, *Think like a freak*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2014), PDF, 34

¹³ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing oneself* (Massachusetts: Harvard Business School, 2008).

¹⁴ Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, *Most likely to succeed: Preparing out kids for the innovation era* (New York: Scribner, 2015), ePub, 114.

¹⁵ Chelsey Sullenberger, *Navigating crisis beyond the cockpit*, <https://www.sullysullenberger.com/navigating-crisis-beyond-the-cockpit/>

¹⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *Post-capitalist society* (New York: Routledge, 1993), PDF, 191.

collaborate effectively with others, adapt to change, and solve problems is also rooted in self-awareness.

In a world beset by indiscriminate splurge of information, it is imperative that tomorrow's leaders are adequately trained to think critically about what they read, watch, hear, and believe. Critical thinking can be driven by routinely adopting what Deborah Meier calls "Five habits of the mind:" **Evidence:** *How do we know what we know, and what's the evidence?* **Viewpoint:** *Could there be another point of view?* **Connections/Cause and Effect:** *Do you see any patterns? Has this happened before? What are the possible consequences?* **Conjecture:** *Could it have been otherwise?* **Relevance:** *Does it matter? Who cares?*¹⁷ Questioning fuels curiosity which inspires imagination.

One must also be prepared to manage whatever crisis may be lurking in the unknown. Sullenberger suggests that to be effective in doing this on a large scale, one must constantly assess how one manages crises in daily life by asking: *What signs did I notice? Did I react quickly enough? What did I do well? What could have been done better? How can I maintain a sense of calm during and after a crisis?*¹⁸

As against the traditional model of education, the future education must shift emphasis from conceptualising these practical skills to applying them in real scenarios. By executing projects of diverse interests in groups or singly, individuals can imbibe all the skills necessary to live confidently, cope in the workplace of the future, and rise above the tide of disruption without losing the light in their eyes. Such individuals will step into the darkness which cloaks the future and say, "let there be light." And there will be light.

¹⁷ Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, *Most likely to succeed: Preparing our kids for the innovation era* (New York: Scribner, 2015), ePub, 114.

¹⁸ Chelsey Sullenberger, *Navigating crisis beyond the cockpit*, <https://www.sullysullenberger.com/navigating-crisis-beyond-the-cockpit/>

SEQUEL

Some minutes before 8am on 22nd May, 2024, I arrived at the school as planned with a laptop and some fliers containing illustrations of all 17 SDGs. I was ushered into a classroom about an hour later and after a brief introduction by the head teacher, I was greeted by the pupils in that rote manner I was all too familiar with. I began my session by asking the pupils to identify some of the social issues we faced as a country. They eagerly engaged me. I then introduced the SDGs and asked the children how they felt they could contribute to the achievement of each goal. Though the first response I got was unexpected, I did not dismiss it. The child said he would pray, echoing the solution my countrymen gave to all problems. As we proceeded, I stimulated the children to think and proffer solutions to the issues I raised. I let them know that they were not too young to be problem-solvers. At the end of the session, I asked 17 children to volunteer to speak briefly about one SDG they fancied, and they did. They were able to explain concepts in ways that showed understanding. So I asked the teachers: *What if we had an SDGs club where these children were encouraged to think about problems, execute age-appropriate projects, create ideas, and communicate those ideas? What if we could help these children discover their strengths? What if?*

The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change.

—Carl Rogers

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carey, Kevin. 2015. *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere*. Recorded Books.
- Drucker, Peter. 1994. *Managing in Turbulent Times*. Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Drucker, Peter F. 2010. *Men, Ideas, and Politics*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Drucker, Peter F. 2011. *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*. New York, NY: HarperBusiness.
- Drucker, Peter F. 1993. *Post-Capitalist Society*. Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Drucker, Peter F. 1994. *Managing for Results*. Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Drucker, Peter F. 2008. *Managing Oneself*. Harvard Business School Press.

Formica, Piero. 2015. *The Role of Creative Ignorance: Portraits of Path Finders and Path Creators*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Pivot.

<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137492470>.

Levitt, Steven D., and Stephen J. Dubner. 2015. *Think like a Freak: How to Think Smarter about Almost Everything*. Harlow, England: Penguin Books.

“Navigating Crisis beyond the Cockpit.” 2021. Sully Sullenberger. January 15, 2021.

<https://www.sullysullenberger.com/navigating-crisis-beyond-the-cockpit/>.

Wagner, Tony, and Ted Dintersmith. 2016. *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era*. New York, NY: Scribner.