“We need to completely reimagine education”

Interview by Roy Morrison
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Are traditional approaches to education still relevant in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution? Fred Swaniker, co-founder of the African Leadership Academy and African Leadership University, doesn’t think so. Read on to learn more about the crucial role of learning in the 21st century and why education systems need to be redesigned to meet the challenges of a highly uncertain future.

Roy Morrison: With the pace of change accelerating in the 21st century, a key requirement to thrive is lifelong learning and the ability to acquire new skills quickly. How can “learning to learn” and the ability to be continually reinventing oneself be fostered in children from a young age?

Fred Swaniker: It starts with a recognition amongst all educators that the world is changing. To prepare people for the future, you need to design an education system that is forward-looking and not backward-looking.

In today’s world of artificial intelligence, robotics and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, you have to prepare people for uncertainty and promote agility and adaptability.

This requires a reorientation all the way from early childhood education to primary school to university education. It means encouraging flexibility rather than specialization. It requires training and retraining teachers, as well as redesigning education systems and curricula.

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We need to completely reimagine education. Instead of learning to memorize facts and figures, students need to “learn how to learn” and how to solve problems. And they should be allowed to learn independently. Changes are needed at every level. You have to infuse things like entrepreneurship into the curriculum because with the disruption that’s going on, many people are going to have to create their own jobs.

We may end up in a world in which people are more likely to be autonomous contractors than to have a secure job lasting for a lifetime. We need to completely reframe the system of education based on where the world is going, instead of continuing to do the same thing over and over again.
RM: In your talk Reimagining University, you talk about how most of today’s education model is broken, given the accelerating speed of change. How can schools and universities remain relevant in this landscape?

FS: I think it requires breaking down the barriers that exist between education and the real world. We should bring the working world into education a lot earlier and take education into the working world.

Education used to be a one-shot game, now it has to be a lifelong game. You don’t just get educated once. You need to go in-between learning and work. You have to bring professionals into the classroom to teach. You have to work on projects for real organizations from the beginning, and you have to go out into the environment, into communities. You have to understand the real problems that people are facing so you can shape your learning around those problems rather than just look at a textbook.

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Education has historically been what I call “Just in case education”, which gives you all kinds of facts and figures just in case it may become relevant to you. But today what we need is “just in time education,” which has three characteristics:

1. It never stops. It’s lifelong; you’re always learning.
2. It’s focused on learning how to learn and learning how to solve problems.
3. You learn in a variety of ways, not just in the classroom. You learn from projects, you learn from field study, you learn from interviewing experts, you learn from experiments and prototypes and in a variety of other ways.

Educational institutions need to adapt accordingly.

RM: Do you think that in the future it will still make sense to spend five to seven years earning a master’s degree or a PhD, given how quickly things are changing in the digital world?

FS: I think there will still be a need for deep specialization in certain fields. But in the course of specialization, you should pursue two objectives. First, you should acquire expertise in a certain area that you’re passionate about. But second, you should also learn how to learn – so if you find that the world has changed, or your passions have changed, the time you have spent hasn’t been wasted. And if it turns out that the area you have specialized in is still relevant to the world, –good for you.

You need to envision multiple scenarios, telling yourself, “If the world shifts like this, fine; if it doesn’t, what’s my plan B, my plan C, my plan D?” Education should set you up to be flexible rather than forcing you into a box.

RM: In response to this situation, you have established an innovative educational institution: the African Leadership University. What have been the biggest challenges, and how have you overcome them?
FS: The challenge has been three-fold:

Number one is regulation. If you want to be an accredited university, you have to comply with lots of regulations that are designed for a world of 50 to 100 years ago. If you want to allow students to declare a mission rather than a major, for example, that’s completely against the regulations. When you say “Let’s allow students to pick a problem to solve and curate their own learning experience, let’s give students more autonomy to drive their own learning, and let’s assess them on the basis of projects and portfolios, not just exams” – these are all things that go against the regulations.

Another big challenge is staff and other personnel. I have found that people are so used to what they themselves have gone through that their inclination is to try to replicate what they experienced at the universities they came from. We’re trying to overcome barriers and do something different. So we have to be very careful when hiring to make sure that the people we hire have the courage and the passion to break with convention, and that they don’t want to just replicate the status quo. That’s incredibly difficult to do. Some people have joined us saying they’re passionate about our disruptive model, but then want to do things the conventional way.

The third thing that has been challenging is financing – raising money, especially given the high level of poverty in Africa. People who need education cannot afford it. As such, cashflow from fees is very low. So you have to think differently about how to finance it and make it affordable.

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RM: You ask students to choose their life missions rather than a particular degree, and compared with most educational institutions, this is obviously quite unconventional. What decisions have led to this way of thinking, and how does it affect the way students learn and the way they’re being taught?

FS: It aligns with what we were talking about earlier: Today most people end up in careers that have nothing to do with what they studied in college or university.

Whenever I give talks to professionals who have been out of university for five to ten years, I ask how many of them are doing a job that precisely matches what they studied in college. I’ve never seen more than 10 percent of people put up their hand.

That really tells you something. So, if that’s the case, why do most universities force you to pick from a menu that they came up with?

The world’s big problems will not be solved by looking at only one discipline. They’re solved at the intersection of disciplines. What we believe is that instead of giving people a menu of academic disciplines, we should give them a menu of problems and challenges that the world is facing, and then have them pick one of them and curate their learning experience around solving those problems. The end goal is to impart methods of learning rather than pure content. Let’s teach them to solve problems rather than memorize facts and figures.
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So when we ask students to declare a mission and not a major, we’re saying: “Pick a problem you want to solve and build your learning around that.” It’s about giving a purpose to learning and not just learning for learning’s sake.

And it’s about creating problem solvers, because problem-solving will always be relevant even as the world changes. Even when a machine makes your job obsolete – if you’re a problem solver, you’ll still have relevance in the world.

Fred Swaniker is a Ghanaian serial entrepreneur. He is the founder and CEO of the African Leadership Group, a network of institutions dedicated to educating future generations of African leaders. In 2012, the World Economic Forum recognized him as a young global leader.

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