

# Rethinking Education

Paula Downey

downey youell associates

If society is to make the necessary cultural shift, the principles of living systems have to become the backdrop against which education is conceived and designed. This is not about 'greening' schools and universities. It's about re-imagining the direction and *purpose* of education so that it becomes part of the solution, not part of the problem.

This essay was first published in the 2007/2008 edition of The Education Yearbook.

While drafting this article I took a break from the desk to stroll through nearby St Stephen's Green, here in the heart of Dublin, and curiously found myself walking through a metaphor for the issue I'd been exploring. 'The Green' was host to an impressive photographic exhibition mounted by the WWF to highlight the plight of endangered species. Dozens of stunning prints on ten-foot high stands dotted along the main pathway took me on a visual journey through jungle, ocean, desert and arctic tundra, each image depicting a creature in immediate danger from a formidable array of human-driven hazards - overexploitation, deforestation, habitat destruction, chemical pollution, climate change and so on. A sparse narrative on each, underlined the massive biological extinction we are currently spearheading.

Collapsing Earth history into a single year, one footnote captured vividly the scale of what is happening:

*"If the Earth had formed on January 1<sup>st</sup>, life would have appeared on February 26<sup>th</sup>,*

*dinosaurs would have arrived in December 10<sup>th</sup> to vanish sixteen days later, and Man would only have shown up late on December 31<sup>st</sup>. A few minutes later - and in less than a minute - this one creature would have drastically altered the fragile balance between land, seas and atmosphere."*

For many readers this won't be news. Just months ago, 1500 scientists comprising the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published its fourth report in twenty years. Hot on the heels of the UK's Stern report, it took its place in the growing pile of evidence from many disciplines, that confirms we are on a collision course with nature, that abrupt climate change is a real probability, and we have two decades, three at most, to take the kind of radical steps needed to stabilise and ultimately reverse the fateful trends.

That evening in the park, I felt myself poised between two parallel realities: on one hand, evidence of massive species extinction unprecedented in scale and speed, presenting a challenge to life on this planet such as humans have never before experienced. And all around me, business-as-usual. The evening

exodus from the city, people with briefcases and shopping bags walking through the park to their buses and trains quite unaware of the huge photo-boards. A few glanced casually from a distance without slowing, and just a handful stopped for a cursory look, and moved on again.

Despite the obvious appeal from nature that we wake up, and fast, there's no discernible urgency in the public domain to address these issues, and little informed appreciation of their roots. Inside the institutions and organisations that shape the world we live in - including the institution of education - there's barely a flicker. Something inside us is dead.

This is the paradox that is the 21<sup>st</sup> century: unprecedented progress alongside unprecedented decline. The two phenomena not only co-exist, but are intimately linked. One causes the other. The question that should concern all of us is *Why?* Why are we knowingly destroying the ecological base for Life?

It seems to me the crisis is symptomatic of a deeper crisis of consciousness, a cultural blindspot in the way we humans perceive the world and our relationship with it. How we see and think shapes what we do, and what we do decides the future, for all of life on Earth. Indeed, human consciousness now shapes all of evolution. Natural processes that once took millennia, have been replaced by human choices which, amplified by the global reach of our institutions and the power of our technologies, have impacts that are immediate and comprehensive. But if human consciousness doesn't evolve to see the world and our relationship with it in a completely different way, so that we make wiser choices, it's unlikely we will be able to avoid inevitable tipping points.

### **Life inside the machine**

We don't notice the way we think, but the outcome can be seen everywhere. Human thought emerges as a cultural pattern, a 'common sense' that influences our approach to everything from politics to economics, from

transport to housing, from medicine to farming, from food production to media production, and it profoundly affects our notions of organisation, management and government.

Western civilisation is the product of Newtonian science and the assumptions of a three-hundred-year-old belief system that persists to this day, even though scientific understanding has long since moved on. The basic tenet of this mechanical approach to the world is that almost everything is predictable, knowable and manageable, that a complex reality can be understood by breaking it up into its constituent parts, and that by figuring out the rules by which something works we can fix it and return it to working order, just as a mechanic tweaks a machine to enhance its performance.

Our educational model perfectly reflects the mechanical mind. The academy builds walls around identifiable chunks of 'knowledge' - history, geography, engineering, sociology, politics, art, language, economics, science - and in the process creates specialists for a world that isn't walled-off. Can you truly understand geography without understanding politics? Can you have history without art? Can you be a good engineer while ignoring human nature? Can you be a competent economist or financier without understanding ecology?

These are not philosophical musings, but intensely practical and urgent questions for our time, because the shattered mirror of education and the fractured consciousness it spawns has leaked into every walk of life. In the *real* real world, everything is connected to everything else, and everything affects everything else, but the world of work has become increasingly disconnected from the real world, and a haven for 'experts' who understand fully their part of the 'machine' but don't appreciate or acknowledge the wider impacts of their choices and decisions. Under cover of 'professional practice' we are destroying life itself.

The education system creates engineers who can build roads but don't understand ecosystems. Chief executives who can grow

the bottom line but don't understand natural capital or how complex living systems work. Designers of products and buildings who don't understand nature's closed-loop, zero-waste design principles. Planners of the built environment who don't consider the role of nature in human wellbeing. Advertisers and marketeers who don't see the connection between their professional work and social wellbeing. Teachers who don't see beyond the need to provide fodder for the economy. And when confronted by visible social and ecological decline, highly educated professionals in the most technologically advanced generation that ever lived, frequently shrug and say "*It isn't my responsibility. It isn't part of our brief.*"

If this isn't a crisis of education, I don't know what is.

### **Changing thinking changes everything**

It is this old mechanistic thinking that is the cause of deepening global crises and the root of the institutional rigidity and personal powerlessness and apathy that prevents us responding in a meaningful way.

Novel solutions to problems are often found in the space between narrow specialties and institutions, yet just when we need skilful collaboration and creative generalists capable of working across professional and institutional boundaries, we're living in an age of specialists and experts who often cannot or will not look over their professional wall. The source of our problems is not external to us. *It is us* and our mechanical and approach to almost everything. We're literally standing in our own way.

Insights from living systems not only explain how we've managed to create our messes, but give us hope that despite the mess and the complexity of the task we face, life's simplicity can show us a better way. We have to realise that we're not cogs on some vast machine that operates in spite of us, but participants in a complex living system which works according to very different principles and which we shape

as we participate with it. In short, we must learn to see living systems at work, work the way life works, and change the way life changes.

### **Is education relevant?**

There are patterns that connect everything to everything else. Whether we want to reinvent our manufacturing, transport or food systems, design an organisation, a community or a school, create a cultural change programme, or engage in personal and organisational learning and development, life can teach us how to do it, if we open our minds to its innate wisdom.

This evolution of human consciousness holds the key to survival on planet Earth. Unlike other species, we have the ability to reflect on our past and present, to imagine the kind of future we might create, and to make conscious choices today that will determine the future for all of life. Education shapes society in a fundamental way, and cultivates the common worldview. In the light of our ecological crisis the challenge for educationalists today is captured by a simple question: Is what you do every day responsive, relevant and meaningful in the *real* real world?

Is it?

To make the necessary cultural shift, the principles of life and ecology have to become the backdrop against which education is conceived and designed. This is not about 'greening' schools and universities. It's about re-imagining the entire direction and *purpose* of education so that it may become part of the solution instead of part of the problem. Every institution, every faculty, every discipline and every profession needs to discover a new 'story' - a new purpose, identity and direction appropriate to a fast approaching different and challenging new world order.

It will require vision and courageous leadership to set our educational institutions on a new course. Authentic collaboration and new relationships between disciplines, institutions

and industries will be needed to create solutions we cannot generate alone. It will require both students and teachers to engage in a process of deep discovery and learning, because the future is a question, not an answer tucked in the back of a book.

Above all, it will require boldness and optimism equal to the task. Dee Hock, founder of VISA International and its innovative chaordic structure, puts it succinctly: *"It is no failure to fall short of realising all that we might dream - the failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realise."* ||| **dya**

## About the author

Paula Downey is a partner at **downey youell associates**.

She has a Distinction in *Communication Studies* and a Masters with Distinction in *Responsibility and Business Practice* from the University of Bath and has studied *Systems Thinking* at the Open University. Alongside her organisational development work she writes and speaks on the challenges and opportunities of system change.

She is a co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic: 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*. She helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

Discover more at **[www.dya.ie](http://www.dya.ie)**

### **downey youell associates**

is a service for leaders and change agents who want to take a living-systems approach to organisation, culture and change.

**CultureWork - for a world in transition** is our unique resource - a suite of concepts and practical processes designed to support the work of transition in organisations and in the community.

Find out more online at **[www.dya.ie](http://www.dya.ie)**

a: 123 Lower Baggot Street  
Dublin 2  
Ireland  
p: (353 1) 661 2636  
e: [mail@dya.ie](mailto:mail@dya.ie)  
w: [www.dya.ie](http://www.dya.ie)