DESIGN – CULTURAL LITERACY



This post is in a series of commentaries on a class running at Stanford, Winter Quarter 2010 – "Transformative Design" ENGR 231 – [Link]

This evening – a group of friends and colleagues discussing education and schooling with Tony Wagner. Our warm and welcoming hosts were Joan Lonergan and John Merrow at Castilleja School.

Topics: skills needed for life today – creativity, problem solving – the challenge of overcoming disciplinary divisions – entrepreneurial skills and business in a globalist 21st century – are US schools and the academy failing to prepare students?

Tony has made a strong case for schooling to shift from teaching to tests to teaching skills – have a look at his great books [The Global Achievement Gap] and [Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools].

Tony Wagner's Seven Surivival Skills for Careers,

College, and Citizenship in the 21st Century

1. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

2. Collaboration Across Networks and Leading by Influence

3. Agility and Adaptability

4. Initiative and Entrepreneurship

5. Effective Oral and Written Communication

6. Accessing and Analyzing Information

7. Curiosity and Imagination

We talked about innovation. Entrepreneurial skills look to be an instinctive human trait, reckoned Paul (Holland).

My response – creativity may well indeed be a human trait. Another way of putting this is that it's not creativity that we need to explain in human history, but why there isn't more. Of necessity, people remake their worlds constantly in every smallest act. We are born into a world that makes us what we are – tangible environments, intangible values – yet we also constantly (re)make that world through living it.

So what hinders innovation and change?

Sometimes it's schooling.

Design thinking encompasses many of Tony's skills. As Bernie (Roth) says – "design is living" [Link]

I shared a concern of mine expressed a few times recently in this blog – [Link] – that design, as one field that emphasizes innovation and creativity, can be too focused on *behavior*, on what people do and how they perform. And Tony's list of crucial life skills is quite abstract: it similarly makes little reference to culture, human values, history and the *qualities of human life.*

Human centered design, for that is what design thinking is, should be critically asking – just what is the human? Living is more than what people do.

Tim (Brown), of design consultancy IDEO, asked what difference such questioning would make to design practice. He posed a great question – aren't designers just the stone masons of the modern world?

Absolutely! There's a double edge to this observation. On the one hand masons may indeed get on with the job, apply their skills to stone and build, leaving questions of life and cosmos to philosophers, theologians, academics. On the other hand, the masons responsible for the cathedrals of mediaeval Europe embodied human vision and divine utopia in their work in stone. Richard Sennett has captured the deeply human character of work in his book The Craftsman – hand, heart and mind combined.

Isn't every act of making an argument, better or worse, for a world immanent or transcendent, an argument for "the good life"?

To understand creativity, problem solving, innovation, collaboration, I argue we should look as much to culture. Culture – processes of making and building worlds, the core of human creativity.

To our list of crucial human skills should be added

cultural literacy

Of course, this then begs the question of just what cultural literacy is! Linda (Yates), instantly connected it with the way language carries culture, identity and experience (see the image below).

And how can human-centered design encompass such expanded and often contentious notions of what it means to be human?



Our work in Stanford Strategy Studio aims to bring Humanities insight into what it is to be human to bear on matters of common pressing concern, such as environmental change, education, globalism.