

Creativity in higher education

Few people can doubt the myriad benefits that recent advances in technology have brought to countless people around the world in terms of health, industry, communication, social networking and entertainment, to name but a few.

However, the efficiency and convenience that advanced electronic products such as smart phones, tablets and so forth offer are not enough. For society to solve the innumerable problems it faces, and help to create a better society to live in, we need something more: we need to be much more creative and self-reflective in the way we think, act and behave. In particular, in education, my own area of interest, we need to evaluate our roles, our missions and our curricula on a regular basis if we are to ensure that the technological revolution of the past two decades continues to spearhead positive change.

After over 30 years in tertiary education as a teacher, researcher and now administrator, I can see that now, more than ever, universities must provide ample opportunities for students to discover and innovate. Above all, we need to nurture originality wherever possible, and encourage our students to be creative.

For this to happen we need the right environment, and it would certainly help if we stop thinking that research and teaching are separate. We are accustomed to framing educators at universities as those who teach and can't do research, and those who do research and probably can't teach. But this division is not helpful. Teaching and research, if we take a more creative line, are equally important and should be integrated. Researchers need to bring their findings into the classroom, and teachers need to be aware of the latest trends, ideas, and debates circulating their fields of study.

We also need to remain creative in order to maintain a competitive edge. Higher education and industry are highly competitive entities, competing for the same resources, visibility and recognition. But if we are overwhelmed by others, we have no one to blame but ourselves. To move with the times, we need to examine our own areas of expertise, and ask important questions. For instance, in the past 15 years many disciplines have been merged or eliminated. This is a trend that is

on-going. Deciding what we should renew and what should be modified is crucial for anyone wishing to stay relevant.

Whatever projects we undertake in higher education institutions, we have to ensure that we are responding to societal needs. To do this, our programmes have to be broad-based, inter-disciplinary and high quality. To prepare students for a knowledge-based society, we need young people who are knowledgeable and accept that a single-discipline approach is not sufficient anymore. Some of the most critical areas of academic investigation and professional education lie in broader inter-disciplinary areas, such as energy and the environment, creative media and biomedical engineering, for example. By seeking broader avenues, we can identify where niche areas of development exist and learn how to develop them.

Perhaps one of the toughest questions that universities need to ask themselves is what good is a degree? A degree from a prestigious university should not be a free ticket to a well-paid job; similarly, someone without a degree should not be marginalised in the job market. Many avenues lead towards learning, and there are plenty of examples of successful people who dropped out of, or never went near, a higher education institution. A person of learning is not necessarily a person with a degree, and the reverse might be true, too, in some cases!

Hong Kong needs innovators and a higher education system that nurtures creativity through degrees that champion learning, not just a certificate at the end of a programme.

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