Finding a Way to Participate

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The invitation to write and contribute to this journal opens up an important unspoken social opportunity for me to learn from, and with, a community of my peers. This we might view from the perspectives of linking social capital, Madras peer-led teaching methodology (Bell 1808; see references for link to full primary text), self-improvement, the ability to tap into a decision market, or the opportunity to engage with an incentivised environment which leads to the production of an artefact that can be valued in societal and educational terms. This echoes with the spirit of the Ragged project which revolves around the notion that 'everyone is a unique and distinct body of knowledge which can be valued – everybody is a Ragged University' (ragged-online 2013).

The concept of Ragged University has taken form, emerged, and been evolving around, the natural behaviour of knowledge-gifting, which creates intellectual and collaborative potentials and possibilities which human beings have been engaging in since 'the benefits of networks' proved to lend human beings greater advantage in our habitat.

The Ragged project was set up to foster and propagate free knowledge exchange, open communities, and intercommunication between inclusive communities (wherever they may be). The name of the project was taken from the Ragged Schools movement of the Victorian era, which dramatically improved the lives of people from all walks of life; and from the history of free education all over the world. There is a particular focus on the work of community educators in the UK who demonstrated the benefits of universal education and social support so successfully in the 19th century that the 1870 Forster Education Act was passed absorbing the Ragged Schools infrastructure into government remit. It arguably took only 40 years to be valued.

Learning from this heritage and taking inspiration from successful practice, the project aims to update the idea of the Ragged Schools movement, adapting it to using available infrastructure (projectors, accessible computers, open source software) and common technology (low tech, internet, public libraries) situated in informal spaces (pubs, cafes, libraries) and task-led activities (talks, workshops, articles). Contextualised with modern education, the spaces that the project opens up are proposed as an annexe to formal institutions, rather than as an alternative. Important questions arise when we ask how we measure the way that informal practice supports formal institutions.

Putting on simple events, often in pubs which already have projectors and screens, a typical format is that of: two people give a talk, some food is provided, and some music is played. People are not pursued for information relevant to bureaucratic measurement, the space is regarded as sacred – personal to the individuals there sharing company and trusting the goodwill of people.

A website has been created to publish content and social media is harnessed to organise real time events. There is an events system to pilot highlighting all free activities that anyone can participate in. The overall aim is to enrich culture with voluntary networks (inclusive social capital), and derive benefit from an enlightened, interconnected society. These informal spaces are not monitored with outcomes and measurements; they are not tracked for demographics or 'target groups'. Anyone can take part; anyone can learn; anyone can share within the parameters of loving the subject. Everyone co-owns these spaces; therefore unilateral data collection becomes obvious as an exclusive practice which is antithetical to the aims.

The Ragged project in its activity provides a warm, non-prescriptive space for people both out-with, and within, academia to share their work with a community of peers. The concept is not dissimilar to that of the ancient agora – meeting in the market place to discuss and compare matters with others. With a sense of person-centred planning, learning by doing, social terrain, goodwill, safe learning through failure, and open access knowledge resources, lots of constructive possibilities can be seized upon as they emerge.

These are all elements which I see as a part of the complex, co-constructed activity we loosely call learning. I feel the debate that surrounds what is right and wrong in education needs to move away from binary thinking towards a more inclusive and encompassing reality which we all collectively experience. Each perspective needs to be valued as making a contribution to the core of a society, and diverse learning opportunities/environments must be fostered in a climate which is heavily invested in a rhetoric of providing for 'the brightest and best'.

The rhetoric of 'the brightest and best' is being auto-fulfilled by the determinism of measurements and outcomes of culture. The head of the Russell Group suggested that 90% of funding should go to the top 10% of universities because of their track record (Hough and Moore 2009). Is this going to help enable people who lack the opportunity/environment to engage in learning and develop their skills? I think not; it only introduces an exclusive dynamic which ignores a greater decision market and impoverishes our collective future.

Here 'knowledge' is put forward as a 'communitive process' – that is, one which relies on a community. A core of educational philosophy is being written to consolidate this and contextualise it in a personal space which fosters various kinds of knowledge gifting and exchange. So, how do I measure what happens in this informal space without changing what happens in this space? What metrics would you bring to a party with friends and expect to be both engaged with and yield data which gives us some insight? Thus, I am not introducing these measures in their current form.

Bureaucracies and formalities are now hindering a great deal of valuable work. As a project outside of academia, I would like to find ways of getting articulate support through public engagement policy; where autodidactic individuals become valued; where academics are free to define their own curriculum and where compulsive paperwork does not interfere with the most basic of human activities, such as a grown adult talking in a public place. I want to find out how to bring education out of the institutions and lead

self-learners in. I would like to find funding and physical resources extended to wider communities without impossible, over-specialised application processes with rate limiting opportunity cycles. I would like to find sincere support for the work of small organisations and individuals, not just mega-concerns which can weather entropic decision making cycles. I would like to find outward-looking administrations looking to learn from, and teach amongst, informal circumstances for the sake of improving society, not fulfilling reductive criteria. I would like to see the vocational academics supported by their administrations to take their work out in the form they see fit.

Here I am voicing some common problems encountered by the community organisations and pedagogues which so vividly embody social capital and informal communities of practice. Here I am appealing for a middle ground to mediate both worlds as equally important.

Biography

Alex Dunedin is the Director of Ragged University. When Alex heard about 'ragged' schools, which brought free education to the United Kingdom in the 19th century, he decided to update the movement using available infrastructure and common technology.

Ragged University provides free talks and debates in informal spaces such as pubs, cafes and libraries, featuring speakers from all backgrounds and ages. It aims to complement, rather than replace, schools and universities, many of which have already pledged their support to the project. Alex is self-educated and places autodidactism at the forefront of his work along with personalised good working relationships. Four years into a deep study of 'inclusive social capital' and its benefits, he is keen to generate non-acculturated spaces and foster linking social capital more greatly in the provision of free education and civic opportunity.

References

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