TOWARDS A CULTURE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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A place for learning, the third paper in the RSA’s Power to Create series is not framed in the conventional manner of a report on a key issue, in this case lifelong learning. Instead, Tony Breslin’s text is built around a memorandum from an outgoing and highly regarded director of education to a newly elected city mayor outlining a set of policy proposals.

We have chosen this format for three reasons:

1. Although we shall doubtless continue to produce reports in more established formats, we sense that there might be some report-fatigue out there, and since our mission—none more so than in this series—is focused on encouraging individuals and organisations to embrace what we call the ‘Power to Create’ and to have the confidence and capacity to be creative in all that they do, we feel that we ought to ‘walk the talk’ and bring some creativity to the style of our own reporting.

2. We want to emphasise and make real the importance of place and of locality in all of this. Certainly, since the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) and the incorporation of FE colleges in the early 1990s, and arguably since the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority over a decade earlier, most would accept that the role of local government in education has been in progressive decline, a decline that culminated in the white paper, Education Excellence Everywhere, published in spring 2016, with its proposal for a fully (or perhaps now largely) ‘academised’ school system. Of course, local authorities could simply depart the stage, either gracefully or in protest, or they could carve a new role: inspiring, leading and cajoling various local partners drawn from every sector and walk of life into autonomous, locally-grounded movements that place the importance of education and learning at the heart of citizenship, civic purpose and community identity. We rather like this option—one which challenges traditional rationales for educational endeavour and which we have given further exposure to in our recent and on-going activities in two related areas referenced in these pages: our work on Cities of Learning led by Anthony Painter, and our work on the future of further education, led by Mark Londesborough.
3. We want to give voice to those who work in education, especially those of creative and progressive intent. For this reason, we have chosen the vehicle of a memo and an accompanying policy paper, from a retiring director of education, Mike Barter, to a newly elected city mayor, Essi Spanier. Mike has “seen and done it all” and grown a little cynical in the process (sound familiar?) but he has also found himself improbably inspired by the education-focused campaign of the subsequently successful mayoral candidate, Essi, whose very existence owes much to what, not too long ago, we used to call “New Localism”.

As well as the memo and accompanying paper, Tony also provides a brief outline of Kensalfield, our notional city. Kensalfield is not entirely a work of fiction. Especially if you live in one of the UK’s smaller cities or larger towns, you will see points of recognition. In providing this detail on an imagined place and local authority, the aim is not to ‘embellish the story’; it is conversely, that our thinking is based on real places, the proposals on realistic circumstances, and the concerns on the needs and aspirations of real people.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to three themes that run through the analysis presented in A Place for Learning. First, if we are to build a culture of lifelong learning in our communities and our society that is genuinely ‘cradle to grave’, we have to change what we do in our schools. In particular, we need to think about how we engage families, and the communities from which these families emerge, in the life of the school: lifelong learning does not follow schooling—rather, it embraces and re-purposes schooling as a key juncture on every individual’s learning journey.

Second, what my RSA colleague Anthony Painter has framed as the “new digital learning age” in the first paper in this series, offers us opportunities to remodel and widen access to education in a host of ways, most of which we have yet to imagine, but we will only be able to imagine these possibilities if we are willing to unlearn much of what we know about learning first.

Third, one outcome of this ‘unlearning’ must be a wider rebalancing of the public discourse about educational purpose. Yes, learning will need to continue to prepare individuals for employment in whatever form it takes—and support individuals and families as they navigate the multiple career transitions of 21st century working life—but it must also enable individuals to strive and thrive in every aspect of their life beyond the workplace: as citizens, as local residents, and as family and community members.

And although Tony articulates this thinking through the imagined city of Kensalfield, we might pose the question to civic, business and community leaders, educationalists and policy influencers in the private, public and voluntary sectors.

Could your region, city or town embrace the spirit of Kensalfield, a city of learning in every sense of the term?

If, having read A Place for Learning, you’re even thinking that the answer could be “Yes”, come and talk to us. We’d love to work with you to make Kensalfield a reality in your community, town or city; we believe the outcome could be transformational for all concerned.

Welcome to Kensalfield: Read A Place for Learning online (via https://medium.com/a-place-for-learning)