

Summer Seminar 2016

Conference theme: An Agent of Change

The idea that an educated public leads to a prosperous and stable society, and that therefore education is a desirable goal for a people, dates back at least to Confucius some 2500 years ago. The ancient Greeks promulgated the idea and it is maintained today; "education is an essential part of strong, open societies. It is the cornerstone of an informed citizenry, the basis for democracy and stability, and an essential element for the full respect of human rights and human security." (Lloyd Axworthy)

Education is conveniently also the agent to healthy societies and economic progress. With the advent of globalization and the growing interconnectedness of world economies, the attraction of this idea has grown tremendously. The more complex a society, the more there is to learn, and the more there is to learn across borders and cultures. The more advanced the economy, the more government attempts to create a more educated and mobile population, and to make its population more conversant with the cultures, languages and trade opportunities of other economies, in addition to supporting a more diverse and pluralistic demographic at home; the latter is necessitated by unidirectional global migrations and immigration policies as economically-successful Western nation states attempt to address the needs created by their own aging populations. The developed economies have the wherewithal to shape their populations and to guide them in what, how and where they learn. Education is an agent of change.

Education transmits culture, it spawns disruptive technologies and world altering achievements; it raises populations above the poverty line and extends the span and quality of their lives. It erodes ignorance and myth as well as borders. It also empowers dictators and engineers ever more lethal armaments. Unless education is imbued with values it does little to eradicate hatred, violence, inequity, intolerance, injustice.

There remains a notion that human history is the history of human betterment. It is an idea that humanity's progress, its incremental march forward to a shared better future, is influenced by wisdom, led by science and abetted by education. We cherish the idea of progress; we cite improvements such as the eradication of contagious diseases and the education of girls, the growth of democracy and economies, towards a place where everything will turn out all right. We believe in

the universality of civil society and the civic values which evolved from thousands years of tumult in Europe. We believe in the sanctity of those principles enshrined in our institutional charters of Equity, Equality and both the ambition and the reality of Diversity. But world events continue to cast doubt on this mythology, our attempts to read order into chaos. There is change and there is progress.

"Progress is not an illusion; it happens, but it is slow and invariably disappointing."

–George Orwell

Is the last century an aberration on humanity's great march forward? What of the symptoms and causes of the greatest migrations of refugees in world history happening today? What of global warming? What of the litany of new diseases and growing resistance to our cures? What of the real politic of sheltering leaders who gas their own populations, centuries of regional and World Wars, the sometimes learned but misguided hatred that bred the Holocaust and Rwanda, ISIS, Boko Haram and the Killing Fields, amongst so many other affronts to our civic values.

Perhaps we now speak of 'innovation' to avoid the question of whether shiny improvements to process and product are progress. The progress we have mythologized will come only with choice, great effort and resolute purpose. Progress demands education imbued with values. Change for the sake of change, change without values is mere baubles and novelty and it is not progress; it is without direction and without rudder.

Progress will come with struggle, compromise and setbacks. Ultimately it will come beyond our years in the melding of or selection between traditions, ideas, nations and populations that embody and enact ideas of value-laden change.

International Education is an agent of change, and we as educators are agents of change. Individuals can and do make a difference, the butterfly effect. What we offer and deliver must reflect hard-earned values. The footprints we leave in other countries are telling. The students we teach are individuals who influence outcomes beyond our imagining. The knowledge and positive change transmitted by our sector, and the impressions left or taken home, say much about us and about the world we envisage. Education is an agent of change. It may be the single most important act we can invest in and it should not be squandered.