

Issue topic: International perspectives on social education

PAPER

Paper

International education in the era of COVID-19: Making learning visible

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International education has always been about building connections and free exploration. It is about learning from others and learning about ourselves. And, in the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden disconnecting of global engagements has made the absence of our growth through international education and internationalization efforts particularly visible.

In 2011, Cristóbal Cobo and I published the book *Aprendizaje invisible* (Cobo & Moravec, 2011). The work on “invisible learning” analyzed the impact of technological advances and changes in formal, non-formal, and informal education – and the meta-spaces in between. The product was a journey that offered an overview of options for the future development of education relevant for this century. A lot has changed since then, and, especially during the global health pandemic, we need an operating theory for invisible learning more than ever.

First, society needs knowmadic workers who work with context, not rigid structure. One key reality is that the jobs schools typically prepare us for – work as factory workers, bureaucrats, or soldiers – are disappearing. They are being replaced with knowledge- and innovation-based work which requires people to function contextually, working almost anytime, anywhere, and with nearly anybody. These emerging workers are *knowmads* (see Moravec, 2013), and they apply their individual knowledge across different “gigs” or contingent engagements to create new value. They can also create new value within organizations by working beyond their formal job descriptions, creating additional value by contextualizing their personal knowledge to create solutions. By the year 2020, we projected 45% of the workforce in the U.S. would be knowmadic (all indications suggest our projection was accurate). This is a huge shift considering that only 6% of the population in the U.S. was self-employed, contingent, or some sort of contract worker in 1989 (Moravec, 2013).

As unique individuals, knowmads possess personal knowledge with developed explicit (i.e., “book knowledge”) and tacit (i.e., soft skills) elements. They are comfortable with change and ambiguity, applying their personal knowledge contextually to solve new problems. Knowmads can flow through cultures, organizationally and socially.

The challenge for learning programs of all levels (primary through tertiary) is now to enable individuals to thrive in a world that needs more imaginative, creative, innovative, and interculturally-competent talent, not generic workers that can fill seats at an office or factory. The pathway to meeting this requirement is through the development of schooling environments and professional learning settings that foster invisible learning.

Second, many beliefs and practices in mainstream education are antiquated and have no grounding in reality. We would be hard pressed to find a study that argues that students learn best from 7:45am to 2:37pm, yet we model our schools and universities around absurd hours and times that better mirror industrial practices that are fading into extinction. We further separate them by age into grades, assuming students learn best when they are separated from each other. This, as Maria Montessori (1995) observed, “breaks the bonds of social life” (p. 206).

We too often assume that the motivation to learn must be extrinsic. That is, we have grown to believe that students will not learn anything unless they’re told what to learn. This cannot be any further from reality as it can be argued that students’ main activity is learning whether it is in a school format or elsewhere. Even more troubling, the most meaningful ways young people learn – *play, curiosity,*

and exploration – are discounted in formal learning, unless if directed in a top-down, structured activity. How can we dare say we are enabling students' curiosity if we are telling them what to be curious about? How can we justify labeling activities as exploration if we already know the destination? And, why are we so afraid to allow children and students of all ages to play freely?

Finally, we simply cannot measure a person's knowledge. Tests only measure how well a student completes the test. Soft skills and non-cognitive skills can be difficult or impossible to measure. Yet, we have become obsessed with measurement in schools and universities. So much so that we've convinced ourselves that we can measure what a person knows. This is not true. As we wrote in *Manifesto 15*:

When we talk about knowledge and innovation, we frequently commingle or confuse the concepts with data and information instead. Too often, we fool ourselves into thinking that we give kids knowledge, when we are just testing them for what information they can repeat. To be clear: *Data* are bits and pieces here and there, from which we combine into *information*. *Knowledge* is about taking information and creating meaning at a personal level.

We *innovate* when we take action with what we know to create new value. Understanding this difference exposes one of the greatest problems facing school management and teaching: While we are good at managing information, we simply cannot manage the knowledge in students' heads without degrading it back to information (Moravec, 2015).

International education, at its core, recognizes knowledge cannot be managed. Through intangible experiences and dialogue, it seeks to transform individuals from within. Institutions that engage in internationalization practices undergo similar transformations of internal culture. The value of this individual-level knowledge creation cannot be replicated reliably from one person (or institution) to another nor can it be communicated easily.

Invisible learning was initially structured as a metatheory which recognizes that most of the learning we do is *invisible* – that is, it is through informal, non-formal, and serendipitous experiences rather than through formal instruction. We learn alone, or in a group, through individual and shared experiences. We learn more through experimentation, exploration, and through the consequences of enabling serendipity. Even though we cannot measure the knowledge in our heads, a growing body of literature, especially from the management sciences, suggests that the vast majority of our knowledge is developed through invisible or informal means.

Invisible learning is not a theory for learning, itself. It is an endpoint or state of learning that emerges when we remove structures that control or direct our experiences. Therefore:

The Theory for Invisible Learning is that we learn more, and do so invisibly, when we separate structures of control that restrict freedom and self-determination from learning experiences.

A *Theory for Invisible Learning* is focused on the development of *personal knowledge*: blends of tacit and explicit elements that embrace a portfolio of skills such as cooperation, empathy, and critical thinking as much as retaining facts. The implication is that there is no master template for enabling invisible learning, but rather we need to attend to the formation of an ecology of options for individuals to find their own ways. This suggests a growing need for bottom-up approaches to learning. By removing the rigidity of top-down control, and placing trust in learners, invisible learning can be made visible.

The purpose of controlling an educational experience is to make learning visible. We built our practices on the distrust of the learner – the false assumption that students will not learn unless they are told what to learn. In this sense, invisible learning is the end product of a theory which predicts that learning may blossom when we eliminate authoritarian control or direction of a learning experience by an "other" (i.e., instructor).

Removing structures of control opens possibilities. The end outcomes or goals of an experience are neither dictated nor determined from the start, but emerge as learning develops. Such experiences include free

play, self-organized learning communities, authentic problem-based learning, and experimentation to acquire new knowledge. These are natural ways for humans to learn in intercultural contexts.

Invisible learning can emerge in many ways, and often manifests through bits and pieces here and there. The examples of approaches to invisible learning provided here are not exhaustive and are meant to be illustrative only. Each of these approaches embrace participation, play, and exploration.

Free play and exploration

Free play is a natural human activity where invisible learning flourishes. Through play, students discover their interests and aptitudes. Play inspires curiosity to test boundaries and learn social rules and norms, together with the development of many soft skills. Unfortunately, mainstream approaches to education ignore or underplay its importance in learning. Psychologist Peter Gray defines *play* as:

“first and foremost, *self-chosen and self-directed*. Players choose freely whether or not to play, make and change the rules as they go along, and are always free to quit. Second, play is *intrinsically motivated*; that is, it is done for its own sake, not for external rewards such as trophies, improved résumés, or praise from parents or other adults. Third, play is *guided by mental rules* (which provide structure to the activity), but the rules always leave room for creativity. Fourth, play is *imaginative*; that is, it is seen by the players as in some sense not real, separate from the serious world. And last, play is *conducted in an alert, active, but relatively unstressed frame of mind*” ([American Journal of Play, 2013](#)).

Play is separate from sports and other organized activities in that it is explorative and satisfies an individual’s curiosity to try new ideas or simulate different possibilities in the world. Through play, a learner’s environment becomes his or her laboratory. This satisfaction of curiosity encourages the development of *auto-didacticism*, the practice of learning by one’s self. When we play in intercultural contexts, this also includes learning about one’s self.

Similar to free play is *free exploration* within our own communities and beyond to learn from others. This is vital for international education. What happens, for example, when students explore a culture beyond their own? What do they discover? How does it change them? What skills, competencies, or insights might they develop? Many of the answers to these questions are difficult to quantify or measure, but we may relate these through the development of *soft skills* (i.e., intercultural competence, capabilities to handle ambiguity, empathy), which are critical outputs of invisible learning. This is learning beyond codifiable curricula, and places trust in students that they can develop their own skills.

Learning in the shadow of COVID-19

In the past few hundred years of industrialized education, nothing has been more transformative than the COVID-19 crisis. Within months, school closures impacted over 1.4 billion learners ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Many schools with the resources to do so have pivoted to a strategy of emergency remote teaching ([Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020](#)) in addition to continuing “traditional” online courses. Practically overnight, it seems educators everywhere are struggling to continue *what* they teach and *how* they teach in a consistent manner, utilizing network technologies as a catalyst.

And, it is during this time that the fallacies of mainstream, “visible” learning begin to emerge *en masse*. New technologies in education are too often used to reinforce old practices rather than enabling new practices and means of knowledge production. We use technologies to help perfect what we have already been doing. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, they magnified the problems inherent in our systems across the primary through tertiary spectrum.

What occurs in schools has suddenly become visible. Large class videoconferencing sessions become more of a management exercise than an instructional space. Class assignments that were thought to take days to complete are finished in a fraction of the time, mystifying parents as to what actually happens in schools.

Students find it easier to “tune out” of boring school activities. University lecturers find they have become the functional equivalent of blog posts. And so on.

The system and its learning (or lack thereof) have become visible. Trustful participation, play, and free exploration are still controlled for and made absent in these environments, not merely invisible.

Implications for international education in COVID-19 era

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis, and yet it rips the people of the world apart. Social distancing is practiced in communities and borders are closed – in some cases nearly hermetically. International students are finding themselves isolated and stranded, if not sent back to their homes. In a period driven by fear, the human yearning to explore and build connections has never felt so urgent.

International education, at its core, has always been about building connections and enabling free exploration. It is centered around the question, what can we learn about ourselves by learn from and among others? International education presents itself not as curricula or a good set of institutional practices, but as a journey that is centered on a transformative pathway toward an outcome that is co-constructed, not a predetermined product. International education is implicitly invisible.

The bottom line is that we cannot use new technologies to do the same old stuff and expect new results. The key challenge now is to make what was invisible – visible. As nearly the rest of the educational space made a retreat into virtual environments, so should international education and internationalization efforts by institutions. This needs to be done, not because there is a want to use new technologies, but because leaders must find ways to set a *purposive* vision for what they want to achieve and how.

Possible activities for digital internationalization and international education initiatives include:

- Virtual study abroad, utilizing technologies to provide deep, intercultural experiences for personal development where the end outcomes cannot be algorithmically directed.
- Transform digital learning environments from being driven from the top-down (instructor to student) to the learner-outward (see esp., the integration of the affordance of *partakeability* as it relates to *observability* and *solvability* by Ihanainen, 2019). Encourage and empower students to explore and learn beyond the virtual spaces of the virtual classroom and share back what they have discovered.
- Facilitating new and continuing faculty-to-faculty contact and knowledge exchange utilizing technologies such as videoconferencing and online chat.
- Attend to knowledge production across cultures so we may all become knowmads – this implies a focus on *soft skill* development in digital spaces, together with traditional information delivery.
- Attending to the formation of meaningful, one-to-one contacts with international students and scholars who may find themselves horribly isolated or expelled back to their home countries due to the pandemic.
- Creating an institutional *awareness* that as much as it learns about the world around us, it must also change. This also includes building an institutional *capacity* to make change.
- Attending to the process of internationalization and worrying less about the outcomes, while creating new methods to evaluate both that take into account individual-level knowledge production.

Never before have our educational institutions been in a state so dire. And, never before have we had a global opportunity to create new futures for education. Investments in innovative approaches to international education, centered on the principles of invisible learning, should become a top priority as our institutions emerge in a post-COVID-19 era.

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