

Indigenous, Modern and Post-Modern:  
Disrespect, Dominance or Learning Together

Michael Britton, Ed.D.

Should business schools educate for yesterday's world, or for a future that has not yet arrived? The world we inherited from the twentieth century was a world of autonomous countries, businesses, individuals and classes out for themselves. What lies ahead is a world all seven billion of us regard as just, worthy and heart-warming. We know how to educate business students for the first, but not the second.

Today's world consists of a global superclass, two hundred plus countries, and thirty thousand indigenous/ethnic/first nation societies viewed as small, tradition-bound, "living on the margins," powerless, vulnerable and "backward." The super-class that steers the world in accord with its own interests is seen as *the* group to be in, but remains muddled about the future it wants to create, being at once fiercely competitive and given to thoughts of gross global happiness.

Yesterday's world called for skills in competing for wealth and power. Different skills are required to produce a world where all societies grow more resilient, we as a species make a world we all love, and gross global happiness actually develops: skills in deciding on a collective future together, with concern for each other, pulling together for a shared existence all societies find worthy, just and heart-warming. Modernity doesn't have those skills to teach, but there are others in the human community who do.

Looked down on as quaint rather than skillful or wise in the ways of humanness, many first nations have traditions that focus on how diverse individuals

sustain a shared life. There is wide diversity among these peoples and, like all cultures, they have their limitations and flaws. Because we focus on those weaknesses, we find it difficult to turn to these peoples for guidance. But we're in need of idea systems that build community rather than erode it if we're to morph from neoliberal modernity into a global age all peoples treasure. Hence the question: can indigenous peoples teach us something about how to make our world better? Can they teach us how to teach business students a mindset capable of accomplishing that goal?

## I

Business schools offer an opportunity to learn to run any business successfully, the key being a relentless focus on maximizing the right numbers: return on investment, gross and net profit, stock price. The subtext: Everyone, and every aspect of life, is a potential business deal waiting to be created. This is how winners operate. Because they can see a potential for money where others can't, they are ahead of the curve and frequently create the curve. Winners shape a future that reflects their interests and values because they are its authors. To merit the esteem of colleagues, employers and peers, students should become that kind of person.

The lives of others, and the work of cultural institutions, are their own responsibility; what matters is whether there is money to be made. This requires downshifting empathy, compassion and responsibility for the life trajectories of others, and disregarding the integrity of other institutions (political, educational, cultural) except as potential profit centers. Successful people innovate ways of

making money, including gaming a universe of abstract investment instruments rather than making the real world better through work, the intensity of the competition offering adrenalin-rushes, excitement-filled bubbles, and crashes to be adroitly side-stepped.

Focusing exclusively on wealth-generation can require a stomach for brutality. Klein (2007, p. 82) quotes Robert Martens of the US embassy in Jakarta during Suharto's seizure of power, regarding the army's involvement:

They probably killed a lot of people, and I probably have a lot of blood on my hands, but that's not all bad. There's a time when you have to strike hard at a decisive moment.

Neoliberalism has been interlocked with military "actions," police-state terrors, undercutting democratic process, gutting governments' capacities to be of service to their societies, hollowing out middle classes, vastly exacerbating inequality, creating a bubbled-existence for the wealthy and leaving those at the lower end of societies in dire straits. (Klein, 2007) Teaching the young to tune out others' experience does not create a life everyone loves.

By contrast, Sylix tradition teaches *tuning into* each other, getting to know each others' experience and concerns in-depth, and integrating each others' concerns and insights into a larger understanding and decisions that will work for everyone. That mindset *can* produce a global life we all cherish.

We have an understanding in our community that no person is superior to another... There's not one person within the community that isn't necessary, in our understanding of it.

If there is a problem or a crisis.. the idea isn't to make decisions, the idea is to hear all of the different aspects, all of the different views..

You're not here to debate or to enforce your own agenda.. You're here to listen, and to hear the most diverse and opposite view to yours, and to understand where it's coming from and why it's there, and how that opinion is important in terms of how we find a solution..

You are responsible for.. finding a way to incorporate the other's.. difference, and embrace that in terms of what we collectively come up with as a solution..

We try to find ways to help the minority articulate what they are saying, because minorities usually are saying something really different from everybody else. They are the ones who are experiencing something that really differs from others' experience in the community. Whenever there's an issue or a problem, it's that voice that's most needed and it's the understanding of that voice that's most necessary towards resolution of the conflict..

[A leader] must have an immense ability to feel what the community is saying, an immense ability to listen to things that have been said, and to know the things that are happening and to put it all together and say it back to the people.. so everyone understands and says "Yeah, that's it!"

It's being able to verbalize and communicate what everybody feels and knows and understands and remembers, and being able to put that together to create a movement forward.

(Armstrong in Vaughan, 2007)

Traditions that focus on listening to everyone and arriving at a plan that works for everyone can teach students how to build a global life that everyone finds meaningful. It's not about the words, it's about everyone's life-trajectory becoming known and counting. Neoliberal business needs mentoring in those traditions.

Teaching students how to be members of a larger society and a larger world of peoples and countries is different from teaching a narrow focus on making money, dominating any decision-making process, or regarding other voices as obstacles to be gotten around. Teaching that sees the young only as potential achievers is not the same as seeing a whole person facing the challenges of loving

and tending the world, nor the same as seeing the world in its many facets, all of which must be tended.

## II

The narrow focus on money teaches students to dissociate from their own empathy and concern, rendering them less than the whole of who they are by nature.

Christopher Lasch (1979, p. 5):

To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of .. belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future...

There has been a simultaneous collapse of a feel for the larger world of the present, contemporaries that the Sylix tradition writ large would orient us to, a world of countries and peoples and classes, exceedingly diverse, each with their own trajectories, concerns, difficulties, hopes and ways of being resourceful, with whom we must find ways to make global life better. We have such an impaired sense of participating responsibly in historical life as adults that we do not grasp how deeply we injure the young when we teach them to ignore their own innate resonance for life on this level and their own impetus to care.

## III

We also do not prepare them to think clearly and critically about the tangles resulting from inheriting a money-only focus while striving toward a good-of-all future. The modern corporate planner is taught to strengthen a company's future position in a market by increasing the dependence of purchasers on the company – though that undercuts the purchasers' ability to live independently. Disempowering

people in this way is considered smart. By genetically engineering seeds to be productive but self-destroying after a season, Monsanto locks farmers into needing to return to the company year after year for seeds. The independent ability to farm is degraded in a deliberate effort to lock in market share for decades to come, rendering farmers more dependent and less capable while advertising the opposite. Students are taught that this is a good kind of thing to do.

Bechtel bought the right to water in Bolivia and insisted on selling water at prices the poor could not afford, pushing through legislation that made it a criminal infringement on those water rights for anyone to collect and use rainwater. This degradation of life was consistent with being taught to be innovative and aggressive on behalf of profits. People reward each other for this and call it corporate culture. This is learned behavior.

So is business – and business education -- to be about growing money skillfully or about getting to know each other across the divisions of the planet so we grow the independent capabilities of all members of the human community and so grow our collective capacity for resilience?

While the latter sounds good as a vision, trying to act on it can lead to missteps. The Microsoft, Google, Etc generation of entrepreneurs came with an attitude about who should be responsible for the planning and decision-making that determines the fate of humankind as a whole: Those with the vision, entrepreneurial success and attendant mega-wealth are entitled to make decisions, on their own, about how we innovate our way into a new historical era. Google, driven by a vision for a better global life through democratization of data, was

tripped up by this attitude in its Google Book Search project. [Carr, 2010, pp 161-166] Having decided to digitize all books and make them available on line in all languages, for free to everyone on the planet, Google began doing just that on its own – and included currently copyrighted works. They ended up in court and were forced to tend to the royalties of authors whose financial lives they had initially overlooked. To be part of the human community is to think things through *together*, arrive at a sense of what is the right path together, and so embark on a path all members of the community can live with. Google’s misstep was born of a forward-looking vision of free-access coupled with an outdated model of unilateral-action.

Free access is certainly in the air. The Next Industrial Revolution (Bedford and Morhaim, 2002) cites a company that paid for research into which of the eight thousand dyes used in its fabrics were biodegradable and good for the Earth rather than toxic. After re-organizing their own production around the thirty-eight that proved safe, they invited the competition in and gave them the information for free, on the principle that information that helps others do better makes a better future for everyone. Is this the future? How do you give away valuable information without recompense when it’s money that enables us to live in the economic world of our times? The future will confront today’s business students with that question, and more.

Riane Eisler (2007) asks us to think about the labor involved in growing the distinctly human capabilities within the young –empathy, honesty, the concern for and tending of reality, how to go about life happily, how to recognize one’s own capabilities and ways of contributing, and so on. Growing this in children, teens,

young adults and beyond is the work of mothers, fathers, elders, educators, health care workers, all of them committed to nurturing the capabilities, the insightfulness, the resilience and the generosity of the human resource base undergirding our collective future. Why should investors, executives, managers, their attorneys and brokers be highly compensated for making money while those who nurture humankind's growing wise, resilient and productive, one person at a time, are left unpaid or underpaid? Shall we invest in growing empathy, integrity and generosity throughout the human world, or in growing mega-fortunes for a minority? Shouldn't mothers be paid for mothering? And how would that work? We haven't yet invented the answer, but students need to know this is the question.

#### IV

Many indigenous people's sense of generational mentoring offers a corrective to teaching that dissociates life from heart. In those traditions, every individual is seen as on his/her own life journey, which means maturing in humanness in the face of one's own temperament, with the limitations and temptations it presents. The events of this world provide the occasion for being engaged in the work of maturing. This is the work of humanness and it is larger than the work of business.

Born ready to be in love with life in our own way and to wrestle with life in our own way, our brains grow more and more capable of reflecting on how our ways of loving and wrestling are turning out. We have to observe how we grow happiness or obstruct it, individually, in family life, in societal life, in global life, because we are not born knowing how life works. The labors of observing and

reflecting on experience, within ourselves and in conversation with each other, offers the chance to develop some measure of wisdom about living.

But we need not start from scratch. Those born before us have engaged the same task and hopefully have found out what makes for more maturity, better ability to love and be loved, better ability to create happy lives, and better ability to tend life effectively together. They have learned what the journey of life sounds and feels like at various stages of life, so they can offer guidance. This is one of the essential relationship responsibilities between the generations.

Educators have a responsibility to pass on skills, but that is their second task. The first task is perceiving each student and the work they're doing (or not doing) in maturing as a member of the human community. By focusing on their becoming wealth-extractors instead, business education orients the young to not paying attention to their life task and to not showing real respect for the life journeys of the many people their decisions will impact. The right relationship to the human world is support of those we deal with in their life tasks, first and foremost, and the working out of business secondarily. Business never trumps the work of human life; the work of life trumps and subsumes business. That is the way of wisdom. It is also the way of resilience and sustainability.

## V

Nature is a vast web of systems nested within systems, life-cycles interlocking with life-cycles, all alive and reacting to changing circumstances. Industrialization built the modern world by extracting what it could use from nature without regard for the chain reactions being triggered, degrading the environment

on which our lives depend. This differs from traditional ways of life that view nature as complex and larger than us, the source of our life and therefore sacred. Better to get to know nature in its complexity before taking action rather than taking action “because we can” and stumbling into unwanted disasters of our own doing. Should investment be focused on bioengineering, nano-technology and AI because they might generate lots of money, or on redesigning the industrial system so that life is fostered and material well-being takes a sustainable form? What of the right of the entire human community to make decisions about how we organize our material future? Generating money is a different project from answering those questions the way traditional peoples might. On which path should schools send students? What kind of human beings should schools tell students to be?

### Conclusion

If we are going to go forward in making global life something we all cherish, we need the superclass to contribute to the global community’s achievement of that goal. But the modern template has gaping holes when it comes to making global life good for everyone; many indigenous traditions have wisdom we lack. This is not a matter of reading up on what indigenous peoples believe and being able to recite the words. We need to actually turn to those who are wiser in ways we are not wise, to be mentored by them in our business and economic journeys, so that we contribute rightly to our shared future. We can teach what we know when others want to learn from us. But we must also learn where we ourselves are not wise and accept our own need to be mentored. All of us -- countries, indigenous peoples and the superclass – need each other on the journey of discovering how to make global life

better for all of us. None of us are so smart that we know the best way for everyone. If we are to go forward well, we must go forward together as genuine, mutually-respecting co-learners.

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