

Generation Open.

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I recently spent a highly engaging few hours with two groups of aspiring entrepreneurs whose ages ranged from 23-29. Meeting at the HUBs-San Francisco and Berkeley, hot new gathering places that provide networking, education and some start up resources for social enterprises, we came together to talk about their ideas about higher education---graduate education in business in particular. My colleagues and I wanted to know why they had not gone on to graduate school after their BAs. As representatives of graduate schools ourselves we were interested in what kind of program would attract them, if any. What follows is my take away from the conversations, with a few reflections of my own added in. Names and details of specific businesses have been altered considerably to disguise particular identities, protect their business ideas, improve readability and to convey in abbreviated form the essence of the two hour conversation.

This remarkable group was ethnically diverse and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Most had graduated with BAs , some from elite liberal arts colleges, one from a British “Uni” and a couple from state universities, but had not proceeded to graduate school. (except one, who had completed a “green MBA”) Nor had they taken jobs in the kind of large corporations or organizations that would have snapped them up just a decade ago. Instead, they had gone out into the world to create their own enterprises. The one thing they had in common was a burning desire to change the world and make a living doing it. Rebecca’s company (24) was aimed at ethical food production. She has already persuaded some California producers that this should be part of their “brand”. Kylie (27) has just returned from a stint in The Gambia working with HIV-AIDS prevention. She was talking to venture capitalists to create a cloud accessed data base to help other social innovators across the world. Josh (29) had just handed over to the United Nations an anti-poverty social enterprise he had started in South East Asia that built housing for poor people. He had returned to the US to start another business and was looking around for somewhere his skills, “could help out.” Bo (24) works as a marketing consultant to local arts groups doing theatre with youthful offenders, and Danny is working with colleagues in Doctors Without Borders to develop a phone App for aid workers to access and share information via satellite enabled smart phones in the crucial hours after a disaster. As an undergraduate he had worked on a pilot project during the Haiti earthquake. Adam had already sold one startup company and is now part of a collective creating online educational content for “green” business programs and Amy’s small consulting company develops bio-ethics and mediation programs for medical schools. Emily had recently completed a research study for a large foundation on Gen Y’s attitudes, values and aspirations. Other interests in the group included alternative currencies, human rights advocacy and the “Long Now”—thinking with a ten thousand year horizon. This group is not a representative sample of their generation, but according to Emily her survey data supports many of the attitudes expressed over the two hour conversation. My colleagues and I very much appreciated their giving us this illuminating glimpse into their thinking.

View of the future.

These young people have a somewhat ambivalent view of their future. On the one hand they look with deep anxiety and apprehension at the immense challenge their generation faces. They have grown up hearing dire warnings about what is in store if we don't address the looming issues barreling down on them—climate change, environmental degradation, over population, war, disease and the ever expanding number of apocalyptic horses. There were no “deniers” in this group. On the other hand they are energized by the challenges and see in them almost unlimited opportunity, hope, creativity and expanding space for their imagination and innovation. They are clearly called to make a difference but they have little faith in “big” anything—government, business, or NGOs— so do not expect anyone but themselves to provide a better future for them. This is a “light a candle not curse the darkness” group They believe the future is up to them.

Relevance is Key

Obvious at once was that despite the fact that they all had all succeeded as undergraduates they had opted out of continuing education towards an MBA or Ph. D. because they questioned the relevance. “I loved being a student”, said Bo, “but I was in a bubble, separated from the real world problems that face people every day.” “I am not sure I need another degree full of courses that though perhaps relevant at one time, no longer fit the different business context,” was Danny's concern. They believed they needed a different kind of education for a different kind of world and even more uncertain future, and did not see it in the schools they had looked at.

ROI/Debt: It was also clear that after their experiences in the field they doubted that the cost and time for an MBA or other advanced degree would deliver enough return on investment. They had all borrowed money to get their undergraduate degrees. One described her tuition debt as her “education mortgage.” “We are already buried in debt. I can't afford to take on more.” Adam explained that his choice of social enterprise rather than the usual non-profit NGO world was partly economic. “We can't work in low paid jobs in non-profit organizations and pay back loans, so we need to combine our desire to fix the world with the capacity to make real money.” Adam had sold his business and was using his capital to pay off loans and invest in his next venture.

OJT: The consensus in this group was that the situations and opportunities on the ground are too diverse for any single graduate program to prepare them for. “Better to go out and get the experience and learn on the job,” said Kyle, as she explained that while she was a Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer in the Gambia she was supposed to be collecting data for a health project. Instead, she found herself mediating disputes, organizing an evacuation effort after a natural disaster, substitute teaching as a replacement for an English teacher who had come down sick, and helping design an emergency delivery system for life sustaining drugs after another international HIV-AIDS NGO pulled out. She asked, “What graduate school would help me get all these skills before I graduated.” She also went on to explain that she had looked at MBA programs but they all seemed too “standardized” for her. “Doing social

enterprise in the developing world needs agility, engineering and nursing skills as much as financial expertise and strategic planning.”

Technology: This was a tech saturated group and were astonishingly adept at thinking up technological solutions for many kinds of problems. Most felt that the entrepreneurial sector was light years ahead of the Higher Education sector in its use of technology. One commented, “universities are heavily bureaucratic. They are just not nimble enough.” Bo agreed, and added, “They use technology to standardize and control. That’s O.K. but it could do so much more. We here at the HUB use technology to innovate and find new opportunities. That’s where the future is.” Everyone had a smart phone—iPhones. All had *Mobile-me*, cloud accounts and saved everything to the cloud. They could (and did) create a Google group in minutes to continue their conversation. A couple of them were planning a gathering the following weekend and they had already “viraled” an announcement to their HUB network. All stayed in touch through Facebook and Twitter, though there was some disagreement about whether they were drowning in the overload and becoming too scattered. Two participants of the group had created smart phone Apps already and the others were comfortable with digital information solutions. They deftly accessed information relevant to their interests on the spot. Danny, for instance, found articles (good ones) and blogs (not always good ones) as our meeting went on, adding color and additional content to anything anyone was talking about. Someone mentioned “alternative currencies,” another asked, “What’s that?” and within seconds Danny had an article by currency theorist Bernard Leitaer on his lap top. For them and their generation, technology is easy and they see endless possibilities for practical solutions to difficult problems coming from a partnership between technologists and entrepreneurs like themselves. Kyle had linked up with an advanced data base designer who had previously worked on space technology to develop search algorithms for social enterprises. “I know about search as a consumer, but Ivo knows about the engineering, so we are a great team. “

Open Source everything: This is Generation Open. “Transparency” is their watchword. They are religious about Open Source everything, and connectivity is their holy grail of innovation. Through Facebook, Tweets, websites and Blogs --and anything else that comes along-- they stay up on what is happening in their shared learning spaces. They are big fans of the “sharing society” and point to web resources such as shareable.net as examples. They embrace “swarm” mentality where the flow of their interests, contacts and resources flickers across their social networks day by day and sometimes hour by hour. Their conversation tended to swarm too. No dissertation talk here. There was some rapid fire back and forth on the economics of sharing, scrip systems, social justice and broken world economic systems, before veering off into quality assurance in MBA programs and curriculum design. The HUB itself where we were meeting, itself a social enterprise, is a global network of nests of creative young people who share their talents, ideas and energies to help each other get started and create change through social enterprise. Now on four continents with twelve HUBs full of “diverse people doing amazing things,” the www.hub.net/about.html offers start up resources and seed money for new projects on the condition that HUB members will be offered first crack at any employment that comes from it. One recommended the www.Transparency.com conference in Washington D.C. where over twelve thousand young folk –high school and college age--

collaborated on seminars, experiential training and art sessions about everything from open government, open arts and science and technology. All were fans of that other open space phenomenon, the Burning Man festival aligning with the values and philosophy, creative experience and spirituality they share articles, forward TED links, consult with each other pro bono or barter for expertise. They share whatever opportunities come along. One group, The Idea Hive, www.theideahive.com is a group of graduates of Bay Area green MBA programs collaborating on the development of intellectual assets, praxis innovation and green business opportunities. They collaborate on international events like the recent SOCAP (Social Capital for those out of the loop) conference in San Francisco. The 2010 conference was a gigantic success, bringing thought leaders and entrepreneurs together to change the world. The conference moves to Amsterdam and Malmo next to carry the message of social capitalism wherever there is interest. Gen-Open expects its education to be “open source” too. They are big fans of Anya Kamenatz, book, [*DIYU: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*](#). [Kamenatz will give a plenary talk at the upcoming WASC Academic Resource Conference]. They are also fans of the open courseware movement such as Open Yale, MIT open courseware and www.webcast.berkeley. Both Kyle and Bo had used Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.com, downloads as undergraduates to improve their math scores. It is important to add that this very well educated group acknowledged the importance of the connections and networks they had developed as undergraduates. They were also cognizant of the realities of the talent marketplace where networks, contacts and mentors are assets that are as important as credentials and wondered out loud about how this worked in a DIY system. Which brings us to their thoughts on the role of teachers.

Teachers: This was not an antiauthoritarian group as many of their baby boom parents had been in their youth. They respect expertise and wisdom and above all connections with the people this group referred to as “wise elders.” The HUB is working on a project that will do just that. They were eager to learn but they were very clear that they wanted a different kind of relationship with teachers than the *in loco parentis* power hierarchy they had tolerated but resented as undergraduates. These people were independent learners, who can track down content whenever they need it. They don’t need teachers for information. This is a generation that has more information available to it from more sources than any other in history. They see teachers as potential collaborators, as colleagues, not parent or boss substitutes. As Kyle said, “teachers are way up on my asset map—but only if they can help me get my enterprise off the ground.” These young people want to work in social enterprises because they are ready to be masters of their own futures and run their own show. They want to learn from experts but they want their own expertise to be acknowledged. They seek partnerships with teachers, not subordination. Josh said it simply, “I created a company that constructed over 500 houses for poor people in South East Asia and I mostly learned on my own what I needed to know to be successful.” He does need guidance, though. “At moments when things were unraveling the two or three Skype calls I had with my old tutor from college pointed me in the direction of knowledge and expertise that helped bring things around and move us forward.” What Josh wants is a partnership with an academic community that would challenge his assumptions, point out where he needs to learn more, help him integrate it into what he knows already. He also thinks scholars who know their discipline can help him separate the “millions of pages on

the web, from the hundreds that [he] can use to advance his mission.” “In the world of action, it is what you can do that gets you respect, not how many credit hours you accumulate,” Kyle said.

Networks: These young people would want to know before signing up for any degree program, “Where are your networks?” They see this as the crucial ingredient in whether a degree is worth their time. They see their world as “joined up everything” where boundary navigation is an everyday challenge.

Skills: This group knew what skills they want to develop and were all clear that before enrolling in any graduate program they would be looking for the technical skills that they would learn. They were all plugged into the consulting worlds of Accenture, McKinsey, Deloitte, Monitor and knew that most of these companies have developed proprietary approaches to planning, management, leadership, business strategy, asset management, “triple bottom line” accounting, design thinking, third horizon innovation, scenario planning, vision management. They want to learn all this without working for McKinsey or Monitor and they want to apply these state of the art methods in their small scale start ups. They wanted to learn organizational development and community organization skills, asset mapping, multiple stakeholder leadership, negotiating skills, cross-cultural dialogues, World Café convening, group facilitation skills, design thinking, visual recording. As one person said, “my classmates working for big companies will learn this at work. I want to learn what I need “just in time” as I go along building my enterprise.”

Soft Skills: These young people represent a mind shift. Though they are ambitious to succeed in business, for them success goes beyond their own self-interest. They are more participatory, collaborative, connected, autonomous, idealistic, impatient to see results, imaginative, creative, courageous, adaptable and self-aware than previous generations. They want freedom and play as well as hard work and profit. Their heroes are Steve Jobs, Paul Hawken, Tim Jones, and Sergey Brin not Jack Welch and Lee Iaccoca. This, of course makes them vulnerable—to blind spots in their emotional intelligence, to impulsivity, shallowness, distraction, disappointment, burn out and organizational naivete. They blithely take on messy intractable problems like persistent poverty and Midwest urban decay that require complex capacities that ordinarily come with experience and wisdom, They can be unrealistic about such issues as finance and the challenges of scaling up their dreams. The good news is that unlike my own baby boomer generation these young people know they will need more than “love”. All of them said they felt their education had missed a crucial element—their emotional and social development. Two of them talked regularly to a coach and they all wished they had mentors and counselors who would help them with the human skills needed for life in their super fast sometimes confusing worlds. In Josh’s words, “in the end, this is about the meaning of my life—why I am here, what can I contribute. This requires me to know myself, to be able to access what is deepest in me and to follow my path, even when it seems pretty murky. To that I need more than better skills I need the capacity to be fuller person.”

Take home In the debrief session with my colleagues after these conversations we all reported the same impressions. These young people were very impressive, full of energy, ambition, and noble vision. Our conversation suggests that Higher Education is going to have to make itself relevant to a whole new generation of learners in a different kind of way if it is not to left behind by any one of a number of emerging innovations in the educational ecosystem.