

HSUHK President's Forum:

Society has changed -- What about people?

Webinar on 19 June 2020, 5:00 p.m.

Host: Prof Simon S M Ho, President of The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Guest: Prof Kai-ming Cheng, Professor Emeritus of The University of Hong Kong

At the HSUHK President's Forum on 19 June 2020, Prof Simon Ho invited Prof Kai-ming Cheng to have a discussion on the future of education and how it could possibly help people face a different world which has changed beyond our comprehension.

The Society has changed. What exactly have changed?

People nowadays hold different views about career. What a person studies may not be relevant to his/her future career. Freelance and slash work modes, intermittent workers, unemployed otaku, etc. are more common nowadays. Career is no longer a linear, progressive path to many people. A societal paradigm shift has happened:

- Economic production: meeting demands → creating desire
- Products/services: mass → customised
- Organisational structure: hierarchical → flat
- Employer-employee relationship: long term → short term/contractual
- Job loyalty: high → low

It was like the time when agricultural society evolved to industrial society, the pre-pandemic macro socio-economic changes were bringing man to a new era characterized by fragmentation. There are no necessary ties between:

- Education vs Income
- Salary vs Years of service
- Qualifications vs Promotion
- Experience vs Prospect
- Employment vs Social security

The 21st century society has become volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. It has significant impact on the changing nature of jobs and how people perceive career.

It is observed that individuals' mindset has undergone fundamental changes, demanding breakthrough, freedom, liberation and autonomy. In the 21st century, as individuals are becoming more isolated, they must also be strong-minded in order to survive.

Post-pandemic: An Entirely Different World

The pandemic has exacerbated the socio-economic changes with unemployment, income cut, weak purchasing power, capital shortage, obstructed supply chain and reduced production, etc. These changes, again, will bring an entirely different world where a post-materialistic generation grows. What these young people pursue are more about values, justice and environmental sustainability.

Technology: It has gone insane!

Technology has entered human lives and changed it in an insane manner. To what extent will artificial intelligence replace human at work? How much privacy do we still have in the world of big data? Is there truth in social media? With technological advancement storming the earth, man is experiencing a post-truth society showing the characteristics of a virtual society and echo chambers. People are filled with self-selected information and self-fulfilling stories are often generated. In an increasingly fragmented society where face-to-face communication is becoming rare, individuals are lonelier than any time in the past.

Education for a Different World

Are the skills as stipulated in the P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning (i.e. mastery of key subjects and 21st Century themes, life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, and information, media and technology skills) sufficient for the next generation to cater for this unpredictable, fast-changing world? Facing such overhauling changes in the society, the next generation must be strong and resilient. The society has changed; education should also be different so that the next generation will be equipped with the abilities and skills to survive, adapt, succeed, lead, and transform in this entirely different world.

Just consider all that happen around us – climate change, trade wars, financial crisis, poverty and unemployment, military rivalry, refugee crisis, fraud and corruption, public health crisis, social uprising, terrorism, cyber security threats, etc., and you can see a world that is going into chaos.

Therefore, educators need to ponder what the society needs and what people want. What kind of education is needed and how it can cater for man's future? Although we do not have definite answers to all these questions, it is important that we have a clear mission for education in this changing and fragmented world.

DIALOGUE

(C = Prof K M Cheng; H = Prof Simon Ho)

Are any of these societal changes unique to Hong Kong?

- C: Hong Kong is a unique place where East meets West. Hong Kong people are very international. They are flexible and adaptive to different cultures. Thus Hong Kong has the advantages of embracing values of both worlds at this challenging time but may be disadvantaged when facing the socialist economy of China.
- H: In Hong Kong, a lot of people are frustrated about how the local capitalist economy and the economic structure, which favour large property and financial groups, have led to injustice in wealth distribution in the society. Also, many young people place higher value on equality and social justice than economic gains. In a fragmented society, their pursuit of more freedom and equality are strengthened while hierarchy and authorities tend to be discarded.

Are there conflicts between young people's pursuit of wealth, career and achievements, enjoyment in daily life and their belief in values and ideals?

- C: It seems that the young people in Hong Kong could embrace both sides simultaneously. Using an old framework to explain young people's behavior may not be valid anymore. We may view the past year (2019) as an extreme period during which people's rage could not be tamed.
- H: Extreme emotions may subside afterward. However, it is also true that, without a fair and just society, young people could hardly gain advancement in wealth, career and in general a better living. The present world is vastly different from that in the old days.

What is your advice to adults in handling their relationship with young people? How should they strike a balance between accommodating and influencing their behaviors that you might not agree with?

- C: Social injustice is universal. For many prevalent demonstrations against injustice, it seems that there is neither a specific goal nor a leader. Such magnitude is also

beyond anyone's imagination; thus it is not easy for a single society to sort out the problem within a short period of time. We may recognize 2019 as an extreme period when rage overflowed. Yet we do not know when normality will return. In order not to exacerbate the situation, violence, vandalism and enmity must be curbed. It would be very difficult to resolve any problem if enmity continues to prevail.

H: Everyone in the society will take time to digest all that have happened. Only if we are willing to listen and try to understand the root causes, we can find a way out. After all, the core values of human rights, freedom and respect for diversity are still shared among groups with different stances in the community.

In the future, artificial intelligence may be able to replace human in many jobs and manipulate human behaviours in daily life. What can education do amidst these changes?

- C: In the past, education could become obsolete over time amidst socio-economic changes. In this fast-paced era, how can education be up-to-date or at least not pull us back? Students are still spending most of their time at schools. What does the school system offer? In the industrial era, young people obtained qualifications for entering the manpower market. Nowadays, qualifications meet only part of what are required for one's career. The school system, therefore, may need to include more elements that bring students into the society.
- C: Besides, IT developments are largely steered by personnel in the field. They might just develop IT products that would be popular without going into what the society really needs. For example, the development of IT in education in China had seemed to be impeccable; the experts used the language recognition technology to develop an oral exam drilling software which later became very popular. However, one might need to consider, apart from language accuracy, aspects such as the speaker's attitude, the contents of the dialogue, etc., and after all, whether the seeming endorsement of exam drilling is the right move.
- H: Under the pandemic situation, we observed that teachers had actively explore the use of IT software and devices in education. It is good that they have taken the lead to develop more possibilities of online teaching and learning from there onward. However, the application of AI could be worrying if it can dominate many human decisions and behaviours. Man will face the crisis of degeneration if they are shaped to use less brain functions. Undergraduates should identify their personal value systems and take control of their decision-making processes before the AI system learns and makes many choices for them.

RESPONSES FROM DISCUSSANTS

Four discussants were invited to respond to the earlier discussions.

Ms Irene Ng, Director, I • CARE Centre for Whole-person Development, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Adults should take the initiative to understand the dreams and the future that young people wish for. With all these fundamental changes in the society, young people will need to be adaptive and flexible in facing challenges and dealing with difficulties. Individuals may take their own pace to grow and recover, but we must trust and support them for the ideals and the virtuous values they believe in.

Mr Jonathan Lai, Principal, Lee Kau Yan Memorial School

A caring attitude is very important. We hope that adults and teachers would help to bring young people out of the cycle of rage and despair. They will need encouragement and guidance from teachers, as well as some restful time to ponder their situation and hold on to the virtuous values they believe in.

Prof. Chan Kwok Bun, Founder and Chairman, Chan Institute of Social Studies (CISS) Hong Kong

Although IT advancement may have negative impact, we should also think of the positive side and the new possibilities that have been created in the society. The young people of Hong Kong have developed their own virtual community and have formed their sub-culture in the process. They have also used IT platforms to connect to people from other parts of the world, creating a global community in pursuit of a utopia. In facing all these changes and challenges, they use their creativity to accomplish and pursue what they believe in. Looking into young people's sub-culture could be a good way to understand their world of thoughts.

Mr G.A Lee, Founder & Chairman, Inspire (HK) Youth Education Foundation

Young people sometimes find what they learned from schools somehow disconnected to their workplace and daily life. Many also favour an "instant" culture which fixes on fast-tracks and immediate outcomes. They focus more on short-term, daily matters with little attention to a macro outlook of life or the world. It would be helpful if education could include more "application" elements. On the other hand, authorities should also walk into young people's life to gain a real understanding of their needs so that conflicts could be resolved.

Both Prof Ho and Prof Cheng appreciated the different views of the discussants. They recognize that, whether for individuals or a society, there are different timelines. As long as we will walk and face challenges together, there will be hope. As for the concept of “community”, it is important that there are mutual trust and openness among the members. They trust that these are some of the ways to face challenges and resolve problems together.

Q&A

(C = Prof K M Cheng; H = Prof Simon Ho)

How do you comprehend the present political situation in Hong Kong? How education should position itself?

- C: Education is more than classroom learning. In such chaotic political situation, teachers are obliged to respond and give necessary guidance to students. However, there is no consensus on how teachers should handle relevant discussions and that no guidelines are available. There are different practices in different places, for example, teachers in Canada discuss political issues only when those issues have developed to a more mature stage. It would be unfair to students because taking sides over heated discussions seems to be unavoidable. The underlying principle is to protect students. On the other hand, students would also need to be aware of baselines so that they would not put their teachers in a difficult situation.
- H: Too many empty slogans without substantial and operational proposals may not be a constructive way to achieve what is wanted. Schools do uphold the principle of political neutrality, academic freedom, freedom of speech and other core values as shared among members in the society. Teachers can give guidance to students, inspire them to be open-minded, be a good listener and respect people holding different opinions, aiming to reach consensus and constructive solutions.
- C: Teachers do have certain authority over young students. They should assume a neutral position even though they have their own stances. At the university level, teachers have the freedom to express their views while most students are over 18 and should be able to make their own judgement. Yet, teachers and students should be aware of the consequences of their political actions which will subject to the rule of law.
- H: It will be difficult to resolve the problems in Hong Kong within a short period of time. Upholding humanistic values would help promote mutual trust and reduce enmity. If we look beyond politics, there are many things in Hong Kong that are worth our attention. We need wisdom to live in this chaotic time.

As an adult / educator, what are the effective ways to communicate with young people?

- C: To listen without prejudice. Communication is very important. It is not necessary to win over a person, but communication will give them the sense of being equal. It will be good if people can recognise differences without antagonism.
- H: As parents, it would be easier to give young people guidance by asking them questions. Young people should be empowered to find their answers without any preconceptions.

What is your vision for education especially at this challenging time?

- C: Education is for the future of the next generation. The core business of education is students' learning. It is also the science of learning. We hope that it will contribute to the wellbeing of society.
- C: We need to trust our young people and recognise that they have their timeline amidst all the chaos and changes. They are in the process of experiencing many different incidents and emotions. From our experience, If adults/teachers are willing to listen to the more radical kids, you will find that, after all, they are idealist, romanticist and liberalist. There are many factors that have built up their actions, but they are also having their world of ideals which exists beyond our imagination.
- H: Education is people-centred and caring work. We need to understand the changes in the society and equip young people with the abilities to cope with a fast and ever-changing world. It is important that educators hold on to humanistic values and continue to act with integrity during this challenging time.

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Compiled by

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