



Innovation

by John Gehl and Suzanne Douglas

The material presented above is excerpted from INNOVATION, a weekly electronic newsletter written by John Gehl gehl@NewsScan.com and Suzanne Douglas douglas@NewsScan.com. For information about Innovation, please send mail to either of us.

A major purpose of education has always been to pass along generational knowledge -- which in the past has been tantamount to passing along the "wisdom of the ancients." Yet it is increasingly clear that generational knowledge means something different nowadays, because generations are no longer twenty-year chronological placemarks of essentially predictable development and maturity; now, they exist as psychic blurs, with the Pepsi, Nike, Microsoft, Beatles, Punk Runk and all the other "generations" competing with and complementing each other -- every fifteen minutes or so.

What does this mean and what should educators do about it? Let's do a scan of what's going on. The first thing to realize is that ...

... Your World will Be 90% Different

Frank Ogden, who runs his trend-tracking business from a high-tech houseboat in Vancouver, says that 90% of everything we'll interact with by the start of the third millennium has not yet been developed, and that in the next century virtual reality will affect humanity more profoundly than the automobile did in this one. Meanwhile, the world's body of knowledge is doubling approximately every 18 months, with most of it coming from outside North America, so rather than attempting to know everything, the better strategy is to know how to access information efficiently. And rather than specializing in one area, the successful worker of the future should train for a flexible attitude and an open mind. (Forbes ASAP 4 Dec 95 p20)

But if the world is really going to be 90% different, maybe education ALSO needs to be 90% (that's ninety percent!) different -- if it's going to make any sense to anyone.

How could it change? One way would be to emphasize the linguistic and anthropological sensibilities required to survive in ever-changing business and social organizations, where it's important to know the buzzwords and adjust to the buzz, and where the solution is to always be ...

... Learning, Knowing, Teaching, Growing

It's always smart to keep an eye on the battle over management buzzwords. Reporter Anne Stuart relates that in a recent Houston symposium on knowledge management some participants argued that the term "knowledge management" was too restrictive a term, and the "chief knowledge officer" for a large insurance and financial company called the term "learning organization" obsolete. Instead of "learning organization" you should have an "intelligent organization" -- one in which learning and teaching have equal billing, in which competitive strength is built by using information technology to reduce the turnaround time between those two complementary activities. (CIO 15 Nov 95 p28)

So much for linguistics. But behind the buzzwords is the buzz itself -- the perpetual motion of human worker bees and human knowledge bees forming and reforming the organizational enterprise, and discovering that ...

... Teamwork is a Way of Life

A recent poll of 1,811 companies by Hewitt Associates shows two thirds now use formal teams to conduct work. At Compaq Computer, one fourth of the 16,000 employees are on teams to develop new products and bring them to the market. Meanwhile, employers are finding that nonproductive team members are becoming a problem when it comes to team compensation. Two Ohio State University researchers who've studied the dilemma recommend team-based merit pay systems that reward team members for meeting goals and for personal behavior that contributes to the team's success. (Wall Street Journal 28 Nov 95 A1)

Well, teams may be more than the sum of their individual parts, but you still need parts, don't you? -- and the individual parts had better be pretty good! Just how do you produce such individuals? Answer: You don't. You point them in a direction and wind them up and hope for the best because then it's up to them, because ...

... Career Planning is a Full-time Job

Human resource consultants are cautioning employees to think of themselves as free agents, always thinking about how to market talents and improve skills, rather than assuming the boss will take care of it. Employment is a partnership, and it's the employee's responsibility to hone skills and seek out opportunities for growth. And don't just assume that your 20-year-old diploma will still impress -- you have keep developing new skills to stay one step ahead of the changes that technology brings to the workplace. People who graduated from college last year can expect to have 10 to 12 jobs and four to six careers before it's all over. And two of those careers haven't been invented yet. (Tampa Tribune 20 Nov 95 B&F11)

The bottom line is that there is no choice but to accept (and maybe even welcome) constant, ineluctable change. Saying no is just not an option, because societal change, driven largely by technological change, will be absolutely relentless. Of course, that's not really new. Change has always been relentless. It's just never been this dizzyingly fast.

But though change has to be relentless, it doesn't have to be dizzying. After all, the speed of change today is actually a blessing, because it calls our attention to what is happening, and allows us to maneuver appropriately -- PROVIDING we pay close attention to what is happening, and reflect deeply on what it all really means.