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Education

Systems Change in Social Innovation Education

Why social entrepreneurship and innovation education needs to incorporate systems change concepts, and where educators and institutions can begin.

By Daniela Papi-Thornton & Joshua Cubista | May 6, 2019

Brittany Butler, executive director of the Social Innovation + Change Initiative at Harvard Kennedy School, participated in a summit on systems change and innovation education at the Yale School of Management in September 2018. (Photo courtesy of Yale School of Management)

"Our system of education is trapped in an unspoken irony: The institution with the greatest potential impact on the future is arguably the one most shaped by taken for granted ideas from the past." —Peter Senge

Systems change—the idea that we can design interventions that fundamentally reshape social or environmental systems that perpetuate injustice or negative results—continues to gain interest across the social sector. Indeed, the term is popping up all over social innovation and social entrepreneurship convenings, publications, and dialogues. Yet many of the educational models we use to teach social entrepreneurship and innovation fail to teach students to think critically about or build activities that contribute to systems change. If we are going to reshape our social, ecological, economic, and cultural systems in response to the challenges and opportunities that face humanity in the 21st century, we need to reimagine and redesign how we live and work together—and how we learn.

Over the last few decades, universities, business schools, and community-based learning programs have embraced social entrepreneurship and innovation education. More and more programs offer training programs, accelerators, business plan competitions, and funding as a means of helping hopeful change agents translate their good intentions into impact. Social innovation education at its best—within both traditional educational institutions and the social sector more broadly—helps learners, leaders, and innovators translate their big ideas into innovations that benefit the economy, as well as society and the planet. At its worst, it incentivizes elite students to try their hand at hackathons or start-up competitions, where they work on problems they may not understand. It can also incentivize them to try to help groups of "others," such as "the poor," without considering the imbalanced power dynamics they may further through their work, or to launch initiatives that don't build on wider, collective, systems-change efforts.

The good news is that growing interest in systems change may be the catalyst social entrepreneurship and innovation education needs to reach its potential. Reorienting the field toward systems change goals requires that we shift both the content and the metrics of success of our educational offerings. Many social entrepreneurship programs currently focus on starting new ventures, which means students primarily receive training on individual organizational theory-of-change and business models. But prioritizing systems change requires more than that; it requires that both educators and students understand the wider systems in which target problems exist; gain awareness of other efforts working to solve those problems; and grasp basic systems dynamics to see how their efforts can contribute to a wider, systems-level theory of change. It means leaving behind questions like, "Who are your competitors?" and instead developing collaborative capacities. Helping students find a path to contribute to changing systems, which may or may not include new venture creation, certainly includes learning skills related to influencing policy change, behavior change, and collective impact efforts.

So where to start? Systems-oriented education begins by asking students to analyze their current understanding of an issue, including surfacing and addressing the underlying mental models (such as relationships to power and privilege) that learners, educators, and innovators hold. At the same time, we need to rethink the systems in which we teach, including who is sitting in and teaching in our classrooms.

In September 2018, we supported a convening at Yale School of Management to rethink innovation education with a systems-change lens, and to learn from and build on existing systems-change education offerings. Participating educators, funders, and practitioners started the two-day event by sharing their impressions of the terms "entrepreneurship and innovation" as compared to "complex social and ecological systems." Most participants associated the former with action-oriented, risk-taking, competitive, and business-driven ideas, and the latter with research-oriented, risk-averse, all-encompassing, and complex ones. The convening then began with the provocation that the term "systems change" was a call to combine the two perspectives, defining an approach that examines and embraces complex issues with an urgent and action-oriented change mindset.

Four Areas of Focus for Systems-Change Education

Prior to and during the event, participants shared their thoughts on the educational competencies and perspectives social entrepreneurs and innovators need to contribute to systems-change outcomes. They shared curricula, educational models, competency frameworks, and evaluation rubrics, as well as brainstormed competencies they believe are missing from traditional social innovation education. By comparing and distilling this information, we identified four areas of focus for educators who want to develop the perspectives and competencies students need to set and achieve systems-change goals:

1. **Inner work**: This includes the development of self-awareness and social/emotional intelligence, fostering empathy as an innovator. It requires that both students and educators engage in self-inquiry to understanding their position, privilege, and power, and can include practicing mindfulness or meditation or other forms of self-care.

2. Systems orientation: Innovators and entrepreneurs who seek systems-level impact need to shift their orientation from mainstream, short-term, individualistic success to long-term, strategic thinking and collective leadership. This includes developing an understanding of complex adaptive systems; working with diverse worldviews; and fundamentally committing to and prioritizing the health and vitality of human systems.

3. Systems tools and frameworks: These are foundational for developing curricula, working with stakeholders, identifying root causes of complex issues, and even challenging one's own assumptions or beliefs as a systems innovator—all of which are fundamental to the success of systems interventions.

4. Practice and participatory methods: Rethinking existing models and modes of education includes diversifying the perspectives of the educators and participants in the classroom, as well as redefining where we draw classroom bounds. It includes the development of skills through field-based learning, which focuses on applied practice rather than theoretical understanding alone. It also tends toward building capacity for experimental processes and the flexibility to adapt to the emergent factors of ever-shifting systems, rather than relying on conventional approaches to long-term planning or forecasting, thus preparing learners to address interrelated complex challenges.

Some Things Social Innovation Educators Should Reconsider

To move from more mainstream social entrepreneurship and social innovation education toward systems-led offerings, there are some things educators need to stop, start, and reconsider. When redesigning programmatic and curricular offerings to embrace the above, for example, educators could:

Rethink accelerator and incubator programs. These programs usually ask participants to pitch a social venture idea as part of their application and then offer accepted students training to support their venture's growth. The problem with this practice is that it marries participants to their solution rather than to the challenge they seek to address.

One program that works differently is the Epp Peace Incubator at the University of Waterloo's Kindred Credit Union Centre for Peace Advancement; instead of focusing on organizational scale, it focuses on helping social entrepreneurs scale their impact through government. This is because, while many business programs treat government as an obstacle to navigate or a means of regulation, Paul Heidebrecht, director of the center, notes, "In peace building, government is never an afterthought." The Epp Peace Incubator provides training on the roles and rules of government, and then makes important governmental introductions in areas where they might influence policy change; promote products or services for government procurement; or introduce knowledge, best practices, and overlooked voices into government systems to change government practices and offerings.

Reconsidering the skills accelerator programs teach means expanding beyond organizational-growth training, and including policy design, community activism, and/or research so that entrepreneurs can adjust their interventions to address the underlying causes of issues and systems-level needs.

Support systems understanding before solution pitching. Many innovation and entrepreneurship programs pit participants against each other for funding or recognition. But if we are going to help people find approaches to contributing to systems-level change, we first need to incentivize and support their *understanding* of systems.

One program that does this is the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship's Map the System competition, now running at more than 30 global institutions. The competition invites participants to pitch their understanding of the systems holding the problem in place, their analysis of current solution efforts, and the gaps and possible future levers of change they see in the system.

Value "lived experience." Students who have personally experienced social issues such as homelessness, poverty, and recidivism are often missing from the classroom. Indeed, many programs engage with people who have this kind of "lived experience" only in focus groups designed to test out other students' solution ideas, rather than as potential leaders who can lead conversations about understanding or shifting related systems. But we can't rethink social innovation education without reconsidering who holds power in our institutions: who is teaching, whose perspectives are being taught or valued, and who is (or isn't) sitting in our classrooms. As Bajeet Sandhu, author of *The Value of Lived Experience*, noted, "We need a paradigm and power shift in social innovation thinking and

discourse. We can start by acknowledging, crediting, and involving leaders with lived experience in our work and creating knowledge equity in social innovation education." Sandhu's Knowledge Equity Initiative at Yale strives to do just that.

Support opportunities for "apprenticing with a problem" and experiential education. Related to the above, educators can create learning opportunities that get students out of the classroom, and into organizations and communities where they can engage with and learn from systems and their stakeholders. For example, in 2017, in partnership with the Bertha Foundation, the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business opened a branch of its campus in Philippi—one of South Africa's least well-served townships. In doing so, it aimed to create bidirectional learning and value with young people from Philippi and involve surrounding communities more deeply in the University's academic, dialogue, and incubator programs. It also meant that all graduate students could take at least one course on the Philippi Campus. The new branch helps solve a problem many elite institutions face: Classes typically include only elite students, who are disconnected from and don't understand how other members of the community live or what they value.

Create educational ecosystems. To achieve systems change, we must also shift mindsets from the individual to the collective. Educational offerings within and between universities and other adult education centers often compete with each other, trying to "win" students by differentiating their teaching approach. Instead, we need to model a collaborative mindset, reminding students that we can learn from and build on the efforts of others. One educational ecosystem that is furthering collective learning and systems impact is Ashoka U, which offers convenings, learning communities, and designation programs for educators and institutions committed to social impact education.

More and more youth leaders, and people of all ages, are calling for systems change in our communities and around the world. Our education models must evolve to both meet this growing interest, and prepare learners to apply appropriate strategies and methods for real-world, systems-level impact. Educators can start by incorporating the competencies and perspectives above into their offerings and building on the examples of educators already shifting how they work. However, redesigning innovation education must be a collaborative effort that extends beyond individual classrooms and institutions, and reshapes educational systems. Only then will we be able to address the global challenges and opportunities we currently face.

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The co-authors of this article recently partnered with Laura Winn and Anna Birney of Forum for the Future's School of Systems Change in writing a publicly available report titled "Systems Change Education in an Innovation Context," which summarizes and highlights systems change competencies and perspectives and other global examples of systems-oriented educational models.

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