Minds, Memes, and Muddles - Back to School!

Contributed by Peter Crabb
14 August 2011

As a technology watcher I am fascinated by a particular story that emerges from the archeological record. For over 1 million years, up until about 100,000 years ago, early humans in Africa, Asia, and Europe produced almost identical stone hand axes that barely deviated in design, either across time or space. There was no innovation. That unwavering reproduction of tool templates over the course of so many generations is evidence that the mind of early Homo was well-designed as a high-fidelity replicator of cultural forms.

Today we are also stuck in a technological stasis created by the same blindly replicating mind.

Despite all the hype about “progress,” the fact is that our technical culture has been pretty much the same for a century or more. We are stuck with a toolkit that includes cars, trains, planes, radios, tvs, telephones, electric lights, and the techniques of energy generation that supply them. These technologies have undergone elaborations, to be sure, but the basic ideas remain unchanged. So, too, the unsustainable course set by these technologies does not change, with predictable disastrous consequences for culture and the planet to follow.

The mind that replicates cultural forms like technology has neurological machinery that directs attention to what others are doing and then imitates and practices what has been seen or heard. This is called social or observational learning, and it is an evolutionary departure from minds that are hard-wired to reproduce culture, such as birds that are programmed to construct particular nest structures. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “memes” to refer to ideas that people learn, transmit, and replicate.

Modern humans are prodigious replicators of memes. Just look around. Nearly everyone is doing the same things and repeating the same lines. In the U.S., most everyone drives a car, watches tv, uses cell phones, and drinks water from PET bottles—all of which are practices that are destroying healthy culture and the planet. Getting married, having children, and buying houses are also memes that are replicated very reliably, despite the fact that not everyone is cut out to be successful (almost 6 out of 10 marriages end in divorce, rampant child abuse, skyrocketing home mortgage defaults). Memes are totalitarian and must be obeyed. The failure to replicate carries stiff penalties: “Don’t watch tv? What a dud!” “Not married? Must be gay!”

But we are not just replicators. The human brain has oodles of extra neurons that don’t necessarily have any evolutionarily programmed function except to stand by for action when needed. That extra brain tissue makes the wonder of innovation possible. We have the brain power to break out of blind replication and create something new and different. By innovation I don’t mean inventing wireless cell phones after years of land-line phones. A phone is a phone is a phone. Innovation is something altogether new, a sea change in paradigm, for example, the realization that instantaneous long-distance communication isn’t really worth the costs of electricity and non-ionizing radiation and the scarring of the land with poles and wires and towers, and that face-to-face interactions aren’t so bad, after all. I believe that every human child has the capacity to create in this way and to break out of the box.

Naturally, this potential for creativity is looked upon as a mortal threat by those who profit from blind replication of cultural forms: the telecommunications industry, auto manufacturers, energy industry, wedding planners. Since 1980, when the U.S. was hijacked by a fascist coup fronted by the Grecian Formulated© pimp Ronald Reagan, the power elite have sought to ensure that the cultivation of all creative impulses in the masses must end. Phase 1 of this conspiracy was to hook everyone on the reigning technologies. Cars must be used to travel anywhere because, by design, land development is insanely diffuse. Seductive electronic media must also be used, enabling attention and information to be thoroughly controlled. Everyone would do exactly as they were told because their replicator brains could not resist the hypnotic allure of must-have technotoys.

Phase 2 of the capture and destruction of the human potential for creativity is now under way. Bush the Younger was the

front for the neoconservative plot to destroy publicly funded education. The aim is to turn children into a market and education into a for-profit enterprise. The business plan for this attack on democratic education is encoded in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This law compels professional educators—who know better but are powerless to resist, despite the endlessly repeated false meme about “evil teachers’ unions”—to halt their efforts to encourage thoughtfulness and creativity and to focus instead on teaching students to parrot answers to fake “assessment tests” that ostensibly measure student “learning outcomes.” The surface objective is to “prove” that education “works.” The covert, actual objective is to prove that publicly-funded education does not work, which will be used as justification to privatize it. As we all know, business can do it better.

Teachers are now rewarded for coercing their students to replicate the most superficial memes that only prepare them for lives as mindless consumers. Schools and teachers are threatened with funding or pay cuts or closure or dismissal if their students fail to blindly replicate on assessment tests. As a psychologist and educator, I find this to be a very dangerous development. I am certain that “learning” cannot be measured by a mere test, no less a test whose sole purpose is to discredit educators and to undermine the democratic project of nurturing thoughtful citizens. To the contrary, my idea of evidence of learning comes from experiences like one I had recently, when a former student sent me a note thanking me for something I said in class years earlier that she can now see playing out in her own life. Teaching, the apocryphal saying goes, is like dropping a stone down a deep well. You never know when it will hit the water. But we can be sure that no test ever devised can capture this kind of deep movement in a student’s knowledge and understanding.

So necon-hijacked publicly-funded education reinforces students’ natural inclination to replicate memes, and young people who are fully capable of thinking for themselves and creating new cultural forms have been reduced to parrots of corporate-contrived junk. Their capacities for creativity atrophy and, indeed, come to be viewed as unacceptable parts of themselves. This training (for it is “training”) traps young people in a mindset that embraces the unsustainable consumption lifestyle that is leading us over a cliff. Then they go on to college.

Colleges and universities are also in the crosshairs of No Child Left Behind, never mind the fact that college students are hardly children. Just think of all those millions of college students as a “market” and you will get what’s going on. Like primary and secondary schools, higher-ed faculty and administrators are being coerced into wasting their time “proving” that their students are “learning” and, therefore, that higher education is “cost-effective.” There is now lots of busywork that has nothing to do with encouraging thoughtfulness and creativity and sound character and everything to do with destroying those things. Add to the mix corporate funding of research, professorships, and campus buildings, as well as a climate of constant threats of salary freezes or cuts, increased teaching loads, and cancelled programs, and it is easy to predict what kind of memes students will be exposed to. And students face more concrete demands on their minds and lives than just corporate bullshit. Victimized by the meme that everyone must go to college, most sign away their futures when they take out student loans. The typical loan indebtedness for graduating students at the university for which I work is $30,000. It will be difficult, at best, for those graduates to ever think outside the box as they scramble to repay those loans for the next 15 or 20 years.

The pressure on educators to go along down a spiral of decline is enormous. The ideal of schools and universities as special places where people can grow into self-sufficient critical thinkers has been subverted. The new model of education is the automobile assembly line—not a happy simile. And so it should not come as a surprise that USAns are all in a muddle, as Jan Lundberg recently observed. Our minds are being processed like Velveeta© fake cheese food. The best of our abilities are being squeezed out, leaving only our automatic replicator minds to suck up whatever designer memes the corporate masters serve us. The result is a cultural stasis that keeps us mired in ways of thinking and living that profit the few elites in the short term but that are surely dragging all of us over a dangerous precipice.

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Further reading:

Jan Lundberg,
How the U.S. Population Can Overcome It's World Class Confusion