The Machine and Modern Education

"Whatever happened to the inner mind, quiet reflection and deep self-awareness?" asks futurist Marcus Anthony as he looks at the impact that technology is making on modern education.

by Marcus Anthony

{mosgoogle}As a teacher in Hong Kong, I recently attended my school's annual picnic, held in a bushland area. Later in the day, I saw a line of boys sitting on a short concrete wall, heads down and brows furrowed, as they worked their Game Boys in furious style. They seemed oblivious to their presence in nature. Humankind's relationship with nature has always been intricately entwined with inner realms of the mind - the romantic, the spiritual and the mystical.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantics mused about the relationship between humanity and nature, the human and divine. They also reflected on the mystical east and its deep meditative and spiritual traditions, which they believed transcended the shallowness of western society.

The quest of the Romantic seems to be all but dead in the modern world. Yet the greatest irony is that this is most notable in East Asia. I have taught in Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong. My conclusion is that modern Chinese education has destroyed all links
with the deeper human psyche.

Students no longer have an inner world. Their days are spent focusing upon textbooks, listening glazed-eyed to microphone-wielding teachers, or peering at Powerpoint presentations and computers. In their leisure they amuse themselves with shopping and
playing computer games. Whatever happened to the inner mind, quiet reflection and deep self-awareness?

Materialistic images saturate the modern knowledge economy and Asian culture. Life in mainland China has become a scramble for money, and its education system a devouring of foot-high piles of text books in order to pass "the exam".

During the Qing dynasty, candidates for the civil service exam were herded into tiny examination cubicle. Not much has changed, and it seems that the only students ever let out of "the box" are those who fail the system.

The "reward" for success was and still is the systematic extermination of an inner life, and erasure of any deep connection with the human spirit.

Every year East Asia becomes more prosperous financially. But has something vital been lost in the process? The old biblical query is apt: "what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Ironically, a prime motivation to reinstate inner worlds into modern education may be economic.

Daniel Pink in A Whole New Mind argues that the future of developed nations will belong to "R-directed" thinkers - right-brainers. Work will require high-concept, high-touch senses - namely design, synthesis of information into narrative, finding integration and the big picture, empathy, play and deeper meaning. Hi-tech will not be enough.

If Pink is correct, the capacity for creativity, empathy and a deeper spiritual connection with self and others will be vital. This is because much of the mundane mechanical work of yesteryear is increasingly being done by machines and cheap labour in emerging
economies.

The strength of developed economies lies in their capacity for innovation, creativity, seeing outside the box, empathy and intuition. Those in most demand and most able to prosper in this age will be creators, empathisers, pattern-recognisers and meaning-
makers.

People in developed economies have mostly moved beyond survival needs. Many are seeking deeper meaning and self-realisation. People want more than the ability to clock into the office and wander shopping malls on the weekends to fill the coffers of the consumer society.

We owe it to future generations to ensure that all the essential needs of human beings are met through our education system, not merely the needs of those in power to retain affluence and control the system.

For Hong Kong, the danger is that if our graduates graduate with a "Confucian" mentality of subservience, compliance and shallow regurgitation of perceived wisdom, it will quickly be superseded by the Asian giants.

The days of teachers standing in front of classes with microphones as students passively copy notes must stop. The Powerpoint presentation is not progress either, merely an extension of this. Somebody has to take the initiative here and see that this system
will eventually create mediocrity.

At the recent 17th Communist Party Congress, President Hu Jintao's concept of the "harmonious society" took a back seat to "scientific development" . But eventually "scientific development" will not be enough. The future cannot merely be about more money and more machines for everyone, with cyborgs to turn the cogs.

When I embarked on my doctoral studies I sought a supervisor who could help me master the subject matters which inspired me most deeply. I chose somebody I considered a man of wisdom. I did not seek the most "prestigious" university. I chose what inspired
passion within me.

The word "inspiration" emerges from ancient Greek and Latin roots, and is related to the concepts of "breath" and "spirit". Sadly, I do not see too many students in Hong Kong breathing too deeply. Instead I see restriction and fear.

To be inspired, to be passionate, we need to reawaken inner worlds.

When Charles Darwin was an old man he lamented that he could no longer enjoy poetry. He complained that he had become something akin to a machine for recording and classifying data. Let us hope that the future of education and humanity takes a more balanced path.

Could Hong Kong be a leader in this respect? First, we will need to let some young (and mature) people out of their boxes.

Marcus Anthony, PhD, is an educator and futurist who lives and works in Hong Kong. His web site is www.mindfutures.com .