



Baby Boomers workshop

3 March 2008

Full report

1. Overview

The session at Fairfield Halls in Croydon on 4 March 2008 was attended by 43 'baby boomers', ie those aged between 50 and 65 years. The goal of this workshop was consider some of the aspects that have been suggested for research, and to get an idea of the purpose and nature of education according to this age group.

To achieve this, they worked in six self-selecting groups with one facilitator at the following activities:

- Firstly, an icebreaker to identify what technologies they feel are important, their own technology usage, their education history and the most and least important things they learnt at school.
- Next, they did a paper version of the Power League around the priorities for education in the future.
- The third exercise concerned intergenerational learning. The groups had to decide if learning would happen best: (1) inside of work, (2) in an external single aged, or (3) external mixed aged, environment.
- In the fourth exercise they did a paper version of the Power League concerning how education should happen in the future.
- Finally, they were given modelling materials and asked to build their ideal, or worst, learning environment of 2025.

From these activities the key beliefs and concerns include:

- All ages should have the opportunity to access education.
- The most important things to learn are core skills which are not necessarily specific subjects, eg reading, arithmetic, how to collaborate.
- There should be a variety of educational environments, not just school or work based.
- Younger children should be taught separately but after 16 groups can be of mixed ages depending on the subject and participants.
- The learners should have choice, the older the learner the more the choice.
- Environments for learning should be attractive, open to all, support collaboration and have sporting facilities.
- There should be 'flesh and blood' teachers who care for their students.
- The curriculum should include skills (crafts, social, problem solving – and one suggestion of manners) as well as vocational, technology and core subjects, eg mathematics and English – education is not purely for employment.
- There is a concern over who pays for lifelong learning.
- Finally, although all the environments and discussions incorporated technology this was limited to what was available now (this may have been because many were not interested in technology, but is more likely due to the emphasis on the social and creative sides of education).

Of the five agreed research challenges, the participants' main concern related to Working and Employment. This was because of the realisation that current students would have a longer working life and more careers. Yet they felt that although vocational training was important equally important were social skills (eg listening, respect, manners) and core competencies (in addition to reading and basic arithmetic they mentioned writing formal letters, knowing Latin to derive names etc) which would relate to Citizenship, Identity and Communities. It can also be inferred there needs to be research on who would provide education (relating to the challenge concerning State/Third Sector/Private), especially after formal education was finished, and how this education would relate to work and personal development. Although it was agreed all learning is good there was discussion about what learning was necessary and what was preferable and who decided which the learner received.

In contrast to earlier workshops and the questionnaire there was little mention of how assessment should be conducted and assessment generally, however those that failed the 11+ felt they were a failure at that time and would not wish that on the young people of today.

The rest of this report describes the workshop, participants and outputs in greater detail.

2. Details of the workshop

2.1 Participant description

Baby boomers were viewed as stakeholders within the Beyond Current Horizons project as they experienced an education system in the 1950s that was substantially different to that of their parents or those educated during the war. This is similar to students of today who will also receive an education different to that of their parents, using new technology and aiming for jobs that did not exist previously. In addition, this group have acquired a perspective on formal education, lifelong learning, and are able to reflect on what knowledge, attitudes and skills they learnt that were of most benefit throughout their lives.

Forty three baby boomers participated: 8 men and 35 women. They worked in six self-selecting groups, A to F, working with the same moderator throughout. The majority were retired; however from discussions it appears five of the men and seven of the women are still in full-time employment, and three of the women work part-time. The jobs held or had been held by the group were varied. Fifteen of the group had worked as teachers or classroom assistants, 14 in administrative or secretarial roles, the other roles include nursing and social work (5), shop or sales (2), management (2), psychologists (2), and as a full-time house wife, decorator and in the environment. Four of the participants had moved to the UK from Africa or the Caribbean. Twenty of them had passed the 11+, but there appeared to be a feeling of failure by the six that went to secondary moderns (failed the 11+ exam) that they would not wish on anyone. Seven were educated in private schools, three at comprehensives, and seven were educated abroad or did not define the type of school attended.

Given the group size and that it was self-selecting (thus expressing an interest in education), the views cannot be taken as representative of baby boomers as a whole. However, it should be born in mind the purpose of the day was to gather opinions about education, and get a flavour of what is valued by this age group. Thus the comment by one lady: *"I think the population present here is biased. We are all going to be people who are articulate. We have not all benefited from/got the most out of the education system, but we all are articulate"* is true, but should not detract from the discussions.

Many participants were *"quite paranoid about technology"* and 12 explicitly mentioned a reluctance to use it or that they struggled when faced with it. Despite these concerns 31

have mobile phones (although often off and there only for emergencies), and 21 explicitly said they used e-mail, another 18 the internet, and ten Office applications. Six had music players and six had digital cameras. There was only one woman who had extensive experience of games, she has a presence in Second Life and uses it as an educational environment. No mention was made of social software or networking sites. Those that use mobile phones and e-mail often use them specifically to keep in touch with younger members of their family. One lady learnt how to e-mail because that was how she could communicate with her grandchildren. It seems that a key motivation to using technology is because of the access it provides to one's family. This will be less of a concern to future generations but may be a lure to incorporate technology into the lives of older people now.

In the icebreaker each group member was asked to think of a technology that they had most benefited from or had revolutionised their life. In addition to identifying it the person was asked to think about what they used it for, how long they had this technology, how they found about it, how easy it was to learn, and who used it, which would be discussed once guessed. The rest of the group had to identify it by asking questions in turn, but the person could only answer yes or no, the questions could include, for example, "Can you find this in your home?", "Can many people use it at the same time?", "Can you carry it about with you?".

The exercise gave an interesting insight into what the group believe of as technology. Despite the instructions that it should have be relevant to them and the examples of possible technologies, such as washing machines and mobile phones technologies chosen by the baby boomers included: running shoes, pre-wired plugs, a toaster and the wheel. What the discussions showed was some technologies inspired a great deal of affection or loathing, for example household appliances were generally admired and would not be exchanged yet some loved mobile phones, and some hated them. They were also concerned with technology and the reliability of information contained, for example, three chose the internet as being most useful, yet they were anxious about the accuracy of what was available and how it could deskill people: "*Our generation is used to doing some basic calculations in our heads, this is not the case with kids today, they entirely rely on IT, even for easy things*". Finally, it highlighted the lack of awareness of this age group about technology, eg two of Group F admitted to never hearing of a USB memory stick so could not guess it.

2.2 Reflections on most/least useful things learnt in formal education

2.2.1 Description

Each group member was asked to tell the others the most and least useful thing they had learnt in their formal education and why. As well as giving the others in the group an idea of their fellow participants the goal was to identify what sort of things were actually useful; was it subject knowledge, generic skills, or something personal to them like an inspirational teacher? Consequently the participants would have begun to reflect on education which would be useful for the remaining sessions, as well as providing explicit information concerning the purpose of education and identifying key areas that future education systems should contain.

2.2.2 Results

Table 1 shows the areas chosen by the baby boomers (note five people had multiple suggestions).

Most useful thing learnt		Least useful thing learnt	
To read (write, spell)	12	Sports (especially hockey)	12
How to learn	6	Aspects of science	5

Collaboration and communication skills	6	Maths (three generic, two specific - calculus and trigonometry)	5
Mathematics	5	Art	4
Languages	4	Latin	3
3 Rs	2	Geography and history	2
Shorthand/typing	2	RE	2
"Everything"	2	Needlework	2
Life skills (cooking etc)	2	Drama	1
Poetry/Literature	2	French	1
Inspired to learn by a teacher	1	Class system	1
Needlework	1	Corporal punishment	1
Latin	1	Focus on academic skills rather than social	1
Physiology	1	Could not think of a specific area	2
Non-school event (scouts, open day)	2	All learning is useful	5

Table 1: Most and least useful things learnt

2.2.3 Discussion and key findings

The most frequently mentioned important thing learnt in a formal learning environment is how to read. The reasons for this were not only the usefulness for everyday life but the joy that it brought people. Interestingly the next most useful things were also generic skills rather than a specific subject, and that is how to learn – although there was no definition of how this was achieved, and how to collaborate. Sports lessons were by far the least useful subject according to the baby boomers. Although interestingly five said that all learning was useful, regardless of what it actually was and two could not think of anything that had not been of use.

There were seven mentions of specific subjects (English (reading and writing), mathematics, languages, needlework, Latin, physiology, shorthand and typing) and seven more generic skills in the most useful list. Of these there were two skills that the participants directly related to their later employment (physiology and shorthand and typing). In the least useful list there were eleven subjects (sports, mathematics, needlework, Latin, French, drama, art, RE, geography and history and aspects of science) and three more general disliked subjects (corporal punishment, the class system and the focus on academic skills). None of these least useful areas were specifically related to their employment paths. This suggests that the baby boomers believe education is ideally about developing social and practical skills although specific work skills are useful for some people. The fact more list specific subjects as a dislike may suggest a belief that education should not consist of modular, and from the discussions, irrelevant subjects. Yet the fact that some subjects, needlework, languages (French) and specifically Latin, for example, are on the most and least useful lists suggests that education needs a degree of personalisation.

2.3 What should our priorities for education be in the future?

2.3.1 Description

This task was adapted from the online Power League (www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/powerleague). Unlike the web version the intent was to prompt discussion and debate over the roles that education should play in the future rather than provide statistical evidence on what aspects are important. For 40 minutes each group was given a subset of the Power League options. In turn they randomly picked two, discussed what they believed each meant, and after this were asked to vote upon which was more important. The purpose was to get the baby boomers to explore their own priorities and general priorities for education in the future.

2.3.2 Results and discussions

The participants found this task hard: *"Like being asked if you want to watch TV or have a glass of white wine"*. Initially the majority voted, but wanted it recorded that some of the comparisons were not fair as the challenges were so diverse. Because a vote was conducted this did not necessarily mean the one that lost was unimportant, eg one group gave Happiness five votes, and Fairness two votes, yet they did not want it assumed that protecting the rights of the minority was unimportant, it was just less important in this comparison.

The responses reflect what they felt important in section 0. English was unanimously felt to be a key priority for education, as was an academic grounding, which was taken to include the three Rs (reading, writing and 'rithmetic).

The perception of the individual group members influences the importance given to challenges. One group felt that interpersonal skills and being valued are not a priority for education, falling into the realms of skills learnt at home or within the family. In contrast another group felt that education should have strong links to the community.

In some cases it was felt that one challenge included the other. Group B felt if one has the "skills to question effectively" this will mean they become "good citizens". Similarly having "community values" would make students better employees ("labour market") as they would have shared values.

Some were felt to be similar so voting was difficult. An example of this was *challenges for individuals* against *positive childhood*. Is preparing students to meet the challenges of the 'real world' the purpose of education? Is it impractical for education to aim to provide a child with a positive childhood? Do the challenges lead to a positive childhood?

When asked to consider if a priority for education should be fun one argument was preparing *"young people for life and life isn't necessarily fun, and it is doing young people a disservice to imply it is through 'fun' education"*. Another group agreed with the statement *"Creating a vibrant labour market for employers" – "School leavers needed basic skills for employers – education needed to be functional"*. Though this does not mean that all education should be vocational; in fact, there was an argument against it being *"very specific and vocational towards a particular job"*.

The challenge concerning accreditation for individuals was considered by two different groups. They viewed it as either a tick box exercise or felt it was impossible to accredit – thus both felt that assessment was necessary, but it was stressed it was important to have meaningful standards of achievement that allow people to integrate in society.

Finally, one of the longest and most heated discussions was around the role of education as childcare. The attitude of one group was that parents should bring up their own family and it is bad for children to be looked after by those outside the family – however they respect it is the parent's choice. What they found harder to accept is that those who want to spend quality time with their children when they are young are penalised for it in the workplace. This led to the suggestion there should be more flexibility in the workplace, but that people should accept they cannot have it all. Despite all this though, every member of the group ranked the other card relating to collaboration skills as more important.

2.3.3 Key findings

There appears to be a consensus that developing social skills is a fundamental goal of the education system. Priorities that focused on questioning, research skills, independence of thought, critical thinking all scored highly - strengthening the claim for research into knowledge creation and communication. However, when academic

grounding was compared to interpersonal skills the latter was not voted for at all – on the basis that these would be learnt within the family. The lack of discussion about dysfunctional families was probably more to do with a lack of time than a belief that all families developed interpersonal skills though ought to be considered within the communities research.

Another goal was the fact that education ought to be enjoyable. They argued there was a link between behaviour and success with enjoyment – this needed to be reflected in content and teaching styles but not to ignore the core skills.

2.4 Intergenerational learning

2.4.1 Description

This exercise was designed to illicit feedback predominantly on the age but also the location of education environments. It may also be of interest to those looking at generations and lifecourse and knowledge creation and communication.

The previous workshops had indicated students were not keen on working in mixed age groups; although they focused exclusively on secondary education. Teachers, on the other hand, had suggested that everyone should be a learner in their ideal environment. Consequently we were interested in what others thought about mixed age learning. Is it something they would like? Should it be specific to employment or more generic? The small numbers mean that no conclusion can be drawn, but it does provide an insight into what mature students would like and why.

To introduce the exercise the group were told that over half the population in Western Europe will be over 50 in 2030. Also on average the expected number of *different* paid jobs done by the age of 38 is between 10 and 14 AND the top 10 in demand jobs did not exist in 2004. This implies that in 2025 many older people will still be working due to fewer younger people and they will be in jobs that did not exist when they were initially in education. One solution would be to provide relevant education for those people who are currently in, or looking for, employment in 2025 and beyond. The question posed to the groups was how should this be done? The options given were having education in the workplace or having an external education centre. If the latter they had to decide whether or not it would be appropriate to have mixed aged groups or those of similar age. Would they like to be in the same group as 18 year-olds?

In order to identify the ideal setup each group the baby boomers were asked to divide into three subgroups. They were given 12 minutes to discuss one of the following three scenarios and then present an argument for their scenario. The facilitator could give the possible prompts listed if the conversations were flagging, although the groups were asked to think about what they liked (or not) in their given scenario and what happened when they switched jobs in the past and whether that was sufficient.

Scenario 1: Education should occur within the workspace (Possible arguments – it is employers' and employees' responsibility not government, will be appropriate to work required, shared background with colleagues, easy to fit in with rest of work/life activities, follows existing practice, fits in with multiple jobs).

Scenario 2: There should be formal education but not mixed age (Possible arguments – need retraining for multiple jobs but easier for teacher and students if all of similar background and experience, recognisable qualifications for a wide range of jobs, can relate to non-work related learning as well, sufficient people to run courses).

Scenario 3: There should be mixed age formal education (Possible arguments – would be more stimulating if mixed age, sharing of differing skill sets, training for younger in how to interact with older colleagues in workplace, recognisable qualifications

for a wide range of jobs, can relate to non-work related learning as well, sufficient people to run courses).

Finally as a group they had to agree what formal educational system they felt appropriate – 1, 2 or 3 or a combination.

2.4.2 Results and discussions

This task provoked discussion as it was felt to be biased. Both the positives and negatives of mixed-age learning were presented through the last two scenarios, while only the positives of work-based learning were heard. Also did mixed-age learning mean 4-80 year-olds, or mixed within current school boundaries? Furthermore, the non-mixed age was the easiest card, as it fitted in with current educational models.

It was interesting that the groups (B, D and E) distinguished between education and training – which were not felt to be the same thing – the former was seen as learning to learn and gaining transferable skills, the latter learning specific skills. Training, not education, was more probable in the workplace. This led to why you were learning within the workplace – was it for employment or was it for self-improvement? Thus the context of the scenario was questioned and the ability to compare it with the remaining scenarios where the learning may have a different purpose.

The most common arguments for having training within the workspace was that you would not have to make time as you would be there, it would give students contact with real employers, it would be relevant as it is job and skills specific, and it would be easier to learn as there would be opportunities to practice what has been taught. The structure of the training would need to be specified. One suggestion was that it should be a combination of learning within the workplace (which supports practical learning), and learning in a traditional/formal classroom setting (which supports theoretical learning).

However, having training within the workplace may be good for that job but there is concern due to the amount that people change jobs, and therefore, the fact that the skills people learn may quickly become redundant. Or that employers will restrict movement between jobs given the commitment they have made to the individuals education. Also what are the options for the unemployed? There were also concerns that smaller or less wealthy employers would not be able to provide as good training and would therefore not attract employees. They also related it back to the scenarios of private corporations providing education, which could control and manipulate content. Finally, what about learning for fun? Would employers really support learning for leisure activities and areas outside the direct focus of the business?

The second scenario, formal education with a single aged group, is similar to the current schooling system and in some cases evening school classes. Thus it would be easy to implement and would make good use of existing facilities. Young children would benefit from learning with people of their own age group as they are at roughly the same stages of development. Also, planning lessons for students with a similar background is easier than trying to create a structure for differing ages and previous experience. In some this difference is greater than other, for example, ensuring similar abilities for sporting activities.

An agreed negative of such a system is the possible lack of flexibility. For example, there may be an expectation that certain learning happens only at one age, thus a child struggling in education may have to move on when they are not ready.

There are aspects in the single aged scenario that could be seen as positive and negative. A group of mixed age students could have lots of different experiences/skills/ attitudes which could benefit or be of detriment to discussions. Similarly, there are issues around treating a grandparent and teenager equally, and how they would interact

with each other would be avoided in this situation. Although one woman would welcome her sons joining a class she attended, not only would she gain certain insights from them, they would benefit from exposure to positive male role models which they had been lacking.

The final scenario, formal education for a mixed age group generated a great deal of discussion that overlapped the second scenario. The fact it supported equal opportunities was lauded. There was an assumption that the learner would have a choice of when and what to study. For older people this would mean access in the day which would often be preferential to evening classes. Evening courses are not always convenient and there was a feeling that they should have access to the better school equipment. For example, one lady wanted to do science, a subject she had been denied at school, and felt that schools had all the equipment and she would be perfectly happy to join the current students.

The greater numbers would enable a wider degree of subjects to be offered using a wider variety of learning styles. It would be easier for teachers as their students would have had appropriate experience and desire to learn rather than it being mandatory. In addition interaction is important - and interaction with a variety of different people through this type of mixing is good for breaking down stereotypes within society. It may also motivate students by having to keep up with people of different ages and backgrounds and give them experience of the differing ages they could meet in the workplace. It would also show younger students that learning is a lifelong process and would give adults a better understanding of young people.

On the negative side older people may have different learning and styles to younger people and need different opportunities geared towards their differing time and energy constraints. They may also have different expectations, use a different language and have different concentration spans. Also it is potentially extremely embarrassing for someone to be shown up by someone much younger than themselves or older students may inhibit the younger ones. There was also an argument that skills developed through a mixed learning environment should be met in a functioning family setting anyway.

There were also concerns about funding this larger group having education and there was a proviso that the students had to be at least 11. This had not been mentioned in the original scenario.

Again some areas were viewed as both positive and negative. Older students can be faster at grasping new concepts due to experience, or take longer, especially in terms of ICT, where they have less experience and affinity with the technology. Mixed ages may be successful through the ability of various ages to tutor each other, or may not if there are no interactions between class members. Another point was that the confidence of the young people would be boosted to think that they were learning the same things as students who were much older than them - although older students may feel that they are learning skills inappropriate to their age. And the success of a mixed age class is entirely dependent on the subjects and the style of teaching.

Groups A and B preferred Scenario 3 although felt that there was a place for the other options. Group C concluded that private and state run education alongside training in the workplace would provide for most needs. Group D did come to a conclusion as they felt the options were insufficient. Group E did not come to a conclusion but had an interesting discussion, they pointed out that the scenarios were not complete. They did not take into account distance learning, apprenticeships, opportunities for those with disabilities or being immigrants. They also felt that mixed age education would benefit the younger rather than elder participants. Group F refused to choose one as one member was convinced by choosing one scenario above the other when none were perfect would be "*providing inaccurate statistical data for the DCSF*".

2.4.3 Key findings

The baby boomers felt that everyone should have the right to choose how and where they get their education. The environments should suit the different lifestyles and commitments of the different learners and hence not be restricted to one place, time or format. It should also be noted that education is not solely about employment and education and training differ which may be a concern for looking at education with respect to work and employment.

With respect to who provides education it would be interesting to test the scenarios with the desire of one baby boomer without children or grandchildren who wanted to access the science education she was deprived of at school. Looking at where will the state/market/third sector fit in outside of education for young people, is it likely the older you get the more likely education will have to be private?

All the groups argued in some circumstances mixed age learning would be beneficial. However, the task raised issues about other learning scenarios not explicitly mentioned. The most important issue is for there to be ways of learning that suit the different lifestyles and commitments of the different learners. Evening classes, limiting to those in employment, not having facilities for those with disabilities, providing training for immigrants, all need to be investigated.

To conclude, another question that should be addressed is what is the **purpose** of the education within these three scenarios? From that starting point a more detailed description of advantages and issues of concern could have been formulated.

2.5 How would you like education to happen in the future?

2.5.1 Description

Like the task described in Section 0 this task was adapted from the online Power League (www.beyondcurrenthorizons.org.uk/powerleague). The intent was to prompt discussion about how education should happen rather than provide statistical evidence. Each group was given a subset of the options. In turn they randomly picked two, discussed what they believed each meant, and finally were asked to vote upon which was more important. The purpose was to get the baby boomers to explore their own priorities and to reflect on how education should happen.

As before, they found this hard as believed both were important and voting would not reflect this. Group F did not vote at all and others abstained from certain "bizarre" choices. In total there were 8 abstentions out of 24 votes.

The activity lasted approximately thirty minutes.

2.5.2 Results and discussions

The prompts unsurprisingly returned a range of opinions of various strengths. Areas in which there was a strong consensus included who should provide education which came up twice. The baby boomers who discussed this were against a return to the grammar school system which decreased social mobility, but they were also against private education and education paid for by private companies. The latter was because they had vested interests so education could be biased and that workplaces would benefit more by students bringing in differing perspectives from different schooling backgrounds. Schools should not be geared to the lowest common denominators and be consistent; *"State provided education is alright so long as the government doesn't change and confuse people"*. The strength of feeling suggests it is an area that may require investigation although the pessimists felt that both state and private would exist and lead to exclusive

groups. What was interesting was the idea from Group C that state education should be open to all ages.

A recurring theme was the need for social interactions, be it the continuation of play time or having real teachers. The idea of virtual teaching, for example, would allow the dissemination of good practice, "*Brilliant pioneering teachers can be spread across different classes, across the country, or even the world*", yet it was felt this would deny the chance of interacting with a real person. Similarly, having all online teaching would lose the interactive, reactive element between teachers and pupils and may encourage cheating. Technology appeared to be viewed as a support, enabling students to work at their own speed, but should not be the only means of educating students, and they certainly did not want students to spend more time watching screens.

One area that was discussed in various contexts was the curriculum. There were differing opinions as to its rigidity. Two groups felt it was necessary for schools to develop own themes and have an element of freedom with what they teach. Another group discussing a similar area felt that it ought to be consistent throughout the country in order to ensure everyone knew the same things. This group also felt that the GCSE syllabus ought to be the same. What these discussions highlight is there is a need to investigate possible curriculums. Is it enough to agree shared basic skills (relating it back to the reflections on the most and least useful things learnt things such as reading, writing, basic arithmetic, collaboration), some generic skills, or should it be more prescriptive and everyone covers "*1066 to now*"?

The same prompt could result in totally different discussions. The freedom from failure for example - was this "*the main problem with education – students need to see the link between effort and success*" or is it "*important to build an education system where everything you can achieve is valued and where total failure is impossible*"? It should be borne in mind the prompts are open to multiple interpretations, and are there to stimulate discussion. What was interesting in this case was that the interpretations led to a different number voting for it.

The baby boomers discussions often focused on practical limitations rather than importance. Should students have access to teachers 24 hours a day? Some felt yes, however they worried about the strain on teachers and advocated a separate support group. While another group thought that students, especially those that need extra help, may not have sufficient discipline and self motivation to make use of such a resource. When it came to how to learn baby boomers would like students to have a choice in methods but they were not sure how this was possible. Group C believed personalised learning was a "*utopian idea*". One member in Group A talking about choice in subjects felt that this would be a "*bad idea*". Other practical concerns that ought to be addressed included how to prevent cheating when working online and when creating portfolios.

Some areas did not appear to merit discussion. For example, Group C was not keen to talk about sustainable schools. They felt it was related solely to the "*political flavour of the moment*" and that it would therefore be replaced by a new political issue by 2025. Moreover there were technology concerns. There was a fear that incorrect information could be published or it could be altered using these Web 2.0 technologies. Again this may relate back to an understanding of technology and the need to validate what is published with reliable resources as in the case of Wikipedia. However, it does suggest that the curriculum ought to cover generic skills like assessing information.

What is important to the baby boomers is identifying the purpose of education. Those asked to discuss whether when education happened it should be fun agreed that was important - but it was not the main reason for education. Neither was international learning, which was considered important for language learning and understanding politics and society but not important overall. However, Group D did not agree that on the job learning was more important than a variety of learning methods and somebody

in Group A explicitly felt that education should have a direct bearing on what was required for work. Having a shared understanding of the purpose of education, other than it is a right for all ages and should be enjoyable may influence the type of learning environments that will be created. What did come out from both groups was that education should definitely be geared towards all ages. It was felt to be a right that everybody had – though thought was needed concerning how it could be resourced.

Finally, on a more practical note group A would change some of the Power League prompts. Rather than saying “Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikipedia allow learners to learn from each other **rather than** professional teachers” they would have “Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikipedia allow learners to learn from each other **as well as** professional teachers”. Group E agreed. The teacher was still required as a moderator and is key to ensuring that the students discern what is valuable.

2.5.3 Key findings

The cards succeeded in the goal of making people think and prompted interesting reflections about how education should happen and questions may be addressed by research into the role of the state. Abstaining from voting was not necessarily detrimental; rather it illustrated the complexity of the task. The background of the participants clearly influences the discussion – the refusal to return to a grammar school system, and certainly reflected their practical nature when responding to the prompts.

Technology is seen as supporting not key, for example all references to Web 2.0, virtual teaching, online teaching had few votes and was seen as secondary to real interactions. What was more important was the right to education and identifying its purpose.

2.6 Modelling learning environments

2.6.1 Description

The participants watched the six minute Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015) video created by the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) (see www.ida.gov.sg/About%20Us/20070903145526.aspx). It is a vision for Singapore in 2015 demonstrating the type of technologies that could be available. The groups were then given a pack containing plasticine, coloured paper, pens, glitter, post-its and had around 40 minutes to create their ideal or worst learning environment of 2025. To assist them the facilitators were provided with the following prompts to ensure the group thought about the environment as a whole:

- What subjects are the students learning? (It may be that it is purely for leisure rather than work)
- Who/what is teaching? (Is it technology, peers, younger folk...)
- Who is learning alongside the 50-65 year-olds? (Mixed age groups, individuals, same location, different locations)
- How is the day structured? Is the learning all day, all week, all year?
- Who is responsible for deciding what to do?
- How will you be learning? (Practical tasks, watching videos, direct streaming into brain, traditional lecturing...)
- How do you know what has been learnt?
- What sort of technology (if any) is in the environment?
- Why would you want/not want to learn in a place like this?

After which they were paired with another group who had made the opposite environment (so there was an ideal and worst learning environment in each pair) and asked to present their vision.

The purpose of this exercise was to identify what they wanted from the education system and thus deduce relevant areas for research to make this happen.

2.6.2 Summary of ideal learning environments

Group A



Figure 1: Group A ideal learning environment

The group designed an area rather like a current community centre or sports centre that would be available to all at any time (although they were concerned over the cost of this). The learning was done in zones: there was a science area, a place to learn languages, somewhere to acquire technology skills, a craft area and a chill-out zone. There was a stage for giving talks and possibly lecturing but that seemed to be more on the invited guest speaker model rather than a formal class. Additionally they felt that teaching could be done on a bartering of skills, so you taught what you were good at in exchange for other sessions. The group were clear there was to be minimal testing and formal evaluation. The centre would be easily accessible and set in lovely grounds.

The group felt that subjects being learnt should be something they were interested in rather than purely necessary to gain work. Although not explicitly discussed there seemed to be a focus on practical tasks. It was felt that there was a swing back to real life after the virtual worlds enjoyed by teenagers and 20+ people. In this environment the individual chooses what to do although the sessions could be with others of any age. Feasibly they felt there couldn't always be a knitting, singing or aerobics tutor there for one to one classes whenever you felt like it but the times would vary so that it wasn't all evening classes.

In this environment despite knowing it was for 2025 they refer only to current technology (computers, DVDs, kitchen goods). There was no discussion of alternative technologies or teaching methods.

Group C

This environment was for anyone over 15 and 16 (it was agreed younger students have different needs). Students are taught by skilled and friendly lecturers, and visiting "professors" (professional, experienced or just interesting) who would come to the class each term and as they could be controversial they could encourage critical thinking. The students would choose what subject they studied – and there does not seem to be a restriction on subjects. Once a student has enrolled the class would decide the timetable that suits them at the start of every term. However lessons are structured to avoid a lack of motivation and they must trust the lecturer to teach what is appropriate rather than having a choice over content.

There would be practical and theoretical exams alongside lecturer assessment in order to provide a sense of achievement. The lessons themselves would contain debate, discussion and idea sharing; as well as relating the subject to the 'real world'. Technology was not specifically discussed, but would be appropriate and the students could choose what to use.



Figure 2: Group C ideal learning environment

Group E

This was a symbolic ideal environment. In it the teacher would be in the middle surrounded by rings representing different education and learning methods and resources. One ring has paper and a mini book in it; this symbolises that paper will continue to play a key role in education (although it is acknowledged that due to economical and technical developments this may be replaced by e-paper). One ring has an orange squiggly bit of plasticine with a mini saucepan; this symbolises 'hands on' practical learning, for example, art, cooking, gardening and general vocational skills like skills to be an electrician. One ring has a goal post in it; this symbolises maintaining varied health and physical education opportunities. One ring has a quill on it; this symbolises maintaining traditions in education, reading, writing and academia. A trigonometry equation is in one ring; this symbolises that there is still a place for 'higher learning'. Another has a spanner; symbolising traditional skills. One of the rings represents technologies, one of which is a computer with its different facets shown in a diagram. The pink post-it with lots of people on it represents the team of technical support and other students. There is a globe suspended above the education environment to illustrate how information is continually going back and forth between all education environments.



Figure 3: Group E ideal learning environment

The students are learning a wide variety of subjects (academic and practical) using a variety of resources, including a library as well as interactive technology. They have teachers in addition to resources and other learners and experts who may not be physically present though there is a focus on face to face interactions if the student wishes.

The metaphor for the environment was a community library. It would be accessible to all but the activities may be limited to particular ages. Collaboration would be encouraged. The centre would be open 24 hours a day and the learners could access the resources whenever they needed. Teachers may not always be present, but they could always access an expert.

To fund this environment there would be a pay as you go card, and to motivate them there would be deals, eg "learn for six hours get one free". There would be no exams but the number of hours learning done and the resources used would be recorded. The teacher is the central point of the education environment with technologies on the periphery.

Key features of an ideal learning environment

- Real staff who motivate the students
- Education which is open to all
- Students can choose what to study and have a wider range than that available in schools
- A variety of learning methods are supported
- Flexibility with attendance
- Attractive environment
- Sports facilities
- Appropriate technology (used only when useful)

2.6.3 Summary of worst learning environments

Group B

They created a classical classroom with 12 students behind traditional desks in front of a black board (it is green because there was no black paper) with a lot of scribbling on it. They are learning higher mathematics from an old specialist who is virtually blind (hence the dark glasses), probably deaf, and does not care for his pupils or like teaching. He is the only one that can speak, and he uses a screeching talk to write on the blackboard.



Figure 4: Group B worst learning environment

There are no practical activities and no breaks. The students who are the same age and gender cannot move, the general environment is cramped, cold and noisy, and some of the students have fallen asleep (see the "ZZ") while the others look unhappy.

Behind the classroom, separated from it by a black line, lies "an ideal learning environment", full of creativity and colours, and using technology. One student succeeded in escaping the horrible classroom by flying away (see the wings) and is very happy in this lively environment. This resonated with the group as they felt the worst thing would

be to know there were other possibilities out there but not have access.

There is no technology; assessment is done with formal and impersonal exams.

Group D



Figure 5: Group D worst learning environment

The students are learning in large groups, 40-50 people, of mixed ages – from the very young to very old, but are isolated in individual booths with a large screen presenting materials. This environment is noisy, untidy and has no natural light. The subjects are limited and the student has no choice, they are taught: arts and crafts, trigonometry, Latin, and hockey (though not sure how this can be done in an individual booth!). There are no teachers, although there are figures keeping order by using a whip. There were contrasting views as to how the day would be structured; the group did not decide if it is daily but at inconvenient times, or whether there was no consistency or structure – forcing the students to eat at their desk as they would skip breaks. The examination results would be flagged so the groups could see who was failing.

Group F

Most of the baby boomers expressed shock at the idea of being retrained at their age to start new careers, and so the whole idea of the environment was based around the idea of being retrained against their will for a new job, in a stifling environment.

The students are 50-65 year olds who have been told that they need retraining. They are learning new skills that were not taught when they were in mainstream education in their youth. There are no human teachers. Learning is through computer screens found in individual booths in a stifling noisy environment which is overheated and without natural light. The students stay in front of their screen for the whole day (there are no pens, papers, books etc) and do not interact with their fellow students despite studying

exactly the same thing at the same time. The day is similar to a 9-5 job, with very short breaks. The course length is not specified, and there is an understanding that a student remains learning until they are sufficiently trained for their new job. This is decided by the central authority. Thus there may be a day when: "We need more checkout workers at B&Q". Which dictates what the student must learn – they have no choice and no account is taken of their own skills and interests. The computer logs all the data related to a student's progress with the DCSF who evaluate whether or not they are sufficiently trained to return to the working world. The emphasis is on efficiency. There are lots of restrictions, which is illustrated by the post it notes saying: "Do it my way!", "No!" and "Quiet!". Adult students who refuse to take part in the relearning of skills later on in their life are penalised through denial of a pension. This is represented by the figure at the bottom right of the photo who has been excluded.



Figure 6: Group F worst learning environment

Key features of the worst learning environment

- Working independently
- Compulsory
- No technology or too much technology
- No interactions with the teacher
- No control over what they are studying

2.6.4 Discussion and key findings

All the groups seemed to think the modelling exercise was age inappropriate initially, and the task unfeasible: "*The whole exercise is rubbish. How can we make the worst learning environment from pipe cleaners?*". Two groups continued in this vein although did create an environment, but once started the remainder really enjoyed the exercise and found it stimulated them into thinking what they would like, or not, in an education environment. Furthermore, it was commented that it gave the quieter members of the groups a chance to contribute without having to be verbally dominate.

The baby boomers are practical. They focus on the costs, the feasibility of an environment, the disadvantages – often to the detriment of the request for what they ideally want. There is also an assumption that what is available in 2025 will be what is available now. There are no new technologies mentioned, unless you count the possibility of e-paper by Group E, and wings to fly away from boring lessons as in Group B. They are also aware of the importance of health. Sports featured as the least useful thing learnt in school; yet in the ideal learning environments there are all sports facilities. This suggests that sports are important, yet the way it is taught is of even more importance.

There is an emphasis on *socio* rather than *technical* in the future visions. Ideally the students will be able to choose what to study using a variety of methods in an attractive environment with choice in when to attend. Technology is seen as restrictive or secondary.

The models highlight issues about who learning environments are geared for. In ideal learning environments there is a consensus it is for all ages from 15+. In the worst

learning environments although there could be mixed ages as all work individually and none of the materials is geared to accommodate different ages and experiences the age is immaterial. From this it is clear that ideally learning environments are collaborative and open to all ages. The worst thing was to know there were alternatives without being able to access them. This reflects the need to assess the role of education across all five areas.

Finally, the participants really seemed to welcome the opportunity not only to reflect on their experiences and hence determine what the education system should provide for young people, but how the education system should serve all ages.

3. Summary

The workshop succeeded in its goal of getting an idea of the purpose and nature of education from this age group and whether the challenge areas address their areas of concern. The group may not be representative of baby boomers across the country, but the range of opinions illustrates the wide background of participants.

In addition to the suggestions about the purpose and structure of the education system listed below this workshop has implications for future work with stakeholders, especially those not from an educational background. Firstly, the attitude and knowledge of the facilitators is key. Despite notes and a verbal briefing to each moderator there were discrepancies in outcomes. Some groups really enjoyed the day, all contributed and there was positive feedback. A minority of participants failed to grasp why exercises were being done and felt that they were irrelevant to the overall task and felt they had little opportunity to give their opinion. For example, one male participant did not enjoy the event and strongly influenced the rest of his group: he wanted to get "*on with the rest of the day*" rather than "*playing games*". In the future it would probably be better to work with a much smaller group over a longer period and with one moderator who really understands the project.

Secondly the key findings around the desired education environment in 2025 were:

- All ages should have the opportunity to access education.
- The most important things to learn are core skills not necessarily specific subjects, eg reading, arithmetic, how to collaborate.
- There should be a variety of educational environments, not just school or work based.
- Younger children should be taught separately but after 16 groups can be of mixed ages depending on the subject and participants.
- The learners should have choice, the older the learner the more the choice.
- The environments for learning should be attractive, open to all, support collaboration and have sporting facilities.
- There should be 'flesh and blood' teachers who care for their students.
- The curriculum should include skills (crafts, social, problem solving – and one suggestion of manners) as well as vocational, technology and core subjects, eg mathematics and English – education is **not** purely for employment.
- There is a concern over who pays for lifelong learning.
- All the environments and discussions incorporated technology – but this was limited to what was available now (*this may have been because many were not interested in technology, but is more likely due to the emphasis on the social and creative sides of education*).

The five challenges identified are reflected to a certain extent. Work and Employment is the most obvious, but the group also appears interested in the community, who should provide the education and in intergenerational groupings.

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