



HOW ‘JOBS THAT DON’T EXIST YET’ SHAPE EDUCATIONAL ‘REINVENTION’

BY BENJAMIN DOXTATOR

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2016), education systems have failed to keep up with our “accelerating” world of “disruptive changes” and, in particular, the “widening skills gaps” in the labour market. The WEF uses the following factoid to frame their report: “By one popular estimate, 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that don’t yet exist.”

The WEF’s use lends the factoid legitimacy, propelling it into national and local discourses on education. In the *Globe and Mail*, Vanessa Federovich of Roche Canada draws on the factoid to argue that the education system must prepare flexible and adaptable, lifelong learners, ready for a job market characterised by the “survival of the most adaptable”. She suggests that “recruiters need to probe candidates about more individual experiences: their travel adventures, the books they’ve read and the times they’ve pushed themselves outside their comfort zone and tackled the unknown.”

While the neoliberal skills agenda’s emphasis on creativity and innovation may feel like the kind of fresh air that education needs in contrast to the neoconservative reformers who call for a ‘back to basics’ kind of education, both movements promote education as an investment in human capital. Even our vacationing habits are an investment in ourselves. The other side of the human capital coin is the 65% factoid which works as a bet on the structure of future labour markets.

But is it true that 65% of human capital (or to use the technical term, children) will work in jobs that don’t exist yet? Where does this factoid come from?

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The WEF cites *Shift Happens* (2007), which was originally made by Karl Fisch as a presentation to his staff, and then turned into its viral form by Scott McLeod. However, that video makes a substantially different claim:

The top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don’t exist yet, using technologies that haven’t

been invented, in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.

Unmoored from research and the basics of citing information, the factoid functions to stand in for neoliberal ideology, much as catchphrases like ‘back to basics’ and ‘no excuses’ rally neoconservatives. And while progressives have learned to be vigilant about what ‘back to basics’ signals, we also need to be aware of how words like ‘creativity’ and ‘flexibility’ mask precarity in Thomas Friedman’s ‘flat world’.

In recent history, Cathy Davidson made the ‘65%’ version of the factoid popular. Since her footnote directed people to a U.S. Department of Labor study, the factoid gained credibility, *despite the fact that it does not actually appear in the report*. Michael Berman and the BBC have provided a solid de-bunking of the idea that the factoid might be true.

Though I’m less interested in the idea of an ‘original source’ than in the shifting context in which people imagine the future of work, I traced several versions of the more general idea behind the 65% factoid idea back to the 50s. While the claim is often presented as a new and alarming fact or prediction about the future, Devereux C. Josephs said much the same in 1957 during a Conference on the American High School at the University of Chicago on October 28 — less than a month after the Soviets launched Sputnik:

We are too much inclined to think of careers and opportunities as if the

oncoming generations were growing up to fill the jobs that are now held by their seniors. This is not true. Our young people will fill many jobs that do not now exist. They will invent products that will need new skills. Old-fashioned mercantilism and the nineteenth-century theory in which one man's gain was another man's loss, are being replaced by a dynamism in which the new ideas of a lot of people become the gains for many, many more.

But, ironically, Josephs was envisioning a different kind of economic future; one where we *share* in increasing prosperity, much as John Maynard Keynes' (1930) did decades earlier. They imagined the future of work — and leisure — before the great divergence between the GDP and median hourly compensation, before neoliberal globalisation, before precarity came to define the lives of most workers, and before CEOs began to claim such an outsized share of compensation.

Today, 'skills' are the answer to nearly all the economic and education problems that have emerged in the intervening decades: why can't people find good work? How can we better educate our children? Why do CEOs make so much money?

To answer these and other burning questions, the WEF's "popular estimate" of 65% provides us with a statistic that is — according to Maxim Jean-Louis' 2017 report, *An Apprenticeship Skills Agenda – Executive Summary* ("requested by the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance") — "widely accepted". The report focuses on "exploring innovative ways of closing the skills gaps that exist in the province."

The 'skills gap' is a zombie idea that chases education, though it keeps being debunked, much like 65% factoid chases education ever farther into the future: a quantifiable uncertainty, a cliché designed to explain increasing precarity, an ultimatum from Capital. Killing these zombie ideas will only make room for more. The longer project is always one of vigilance and resistance. ●

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