



Entering a Complex World

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Abstract

Young adults graduating from school will be entering a complex world, but what exactly is the complex world and what makes it so? The article suggests that this complexity arises partly from the exponential nature of knowledge human beings are creating. More importantly, we are able to construct fantastic realities but are unable to distinguish between what is real and what is constructed. The article also presupposes the larger idea that each individual is a microcosm of society, and society in turn is created in the matrix of relationship between individuals. Based on the author's experiences from over two decades of working at a school, Centre For Learning, the article explores the role of education in meeting the complex world, and how learning spaces can be designed to help young minds to be healing forces in this world rather than divisive ones.

Key words: awakening intelligence, compassion, complex world, crisis in consciousness, education, imagined realities, knowledge explosion, livelihoods, regeneration of society

Centre For Learning (CFL) is a small school outside Bangalore, whose educational vision has been inspired by the work of the late philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti. Krishnamurti was born in India, and many of his philosophical ideas overlap with both Vedanta and Buddhism, but his teachings and his educational philosophy were concerned with humankind as a whole. Inherent in the teachings is the encouragement to reject all forms of authority, thus discovering truth for oneself; aspects that have attracted me and my fellow teachers to work at CFL.

Krishnamurti felt that education has a fundamental role in transforming society, and pointed out that the use of traditional motivators such as fear, reward and punishment, comparison and competition is detrimental to learning, and can leave

deep psychological scars. Therefore, schools must create an atmosphere of caring, basing the relationship between students and teachers on mutual respect and affection rather than on fear and authority.

Given that the world, however, is run on completely different terms, a question that is often asked of us at CFL is: "How will students who graduate from here fit into the real world?" We often have trouble with the words fit and real! When they use the word real, perhaps people actually mean that the world is very complex, and poses enormous challenges to human beings. They wonder how a CFL education will help its students meet such a world. And we actually don't want them to "fit" into society as it currently functions! Neither do we want them to be misfits, doing what they hate all their lives and feeling alienated from their work.

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One of the purposes of education is to help children discover their passion, what they love doing, but this is a luxury only available to an elite few. In the face of various crises in the world today, it seems somewhat self-indulgent to be solely preoccupied with one's own fulfilment in a career. What the world needs are compassionate human beings who can bring about a radically different culture. This paper explores the nature of this complex world, and how education can respond.

Why is Our World Complex?

What makes our world complex? Is it any different from the world of our ancestors? Today we seem to possess a different "kind" of knowledge about human societies and the universe than our ancestors did. This knowledge has tremendous applications, and both the knowledge and its applications can be transmitted all over the globe very quickly. Even though only a small fraction of human beings have access to this knowledge and the technology and the lifestyle that it has yielded (in the areas of travel, communication, medicine, and entertainment), the effects of these are felt by all of us, and by the natural world as well. While this knowledge has allowed us to create technology that extends human capacity beyond anything our ancestors could imagine, it has also yielded the potential for mass destruction, and the power to control our climate, and impact the lives of almost all species on earth.

Education and the Complex World

At CFL, we are trying to understand how the complex world impacts the young, and how educational curricula can be designed and organised to meet this complexity intelligently. Our main hypothesis is that we cannot separate the daily lives of children from the education they receive. The interactions and experiences they have in school must enable them to respond to life with all its complexities. It might be worth noting here that while Krishnamurti had very clear ideas on education and what came in the way of true learning, he did not suggest a

template or framework for how these ideas should be translated. The curriculum at CFL has evolved through a process of observation, learning from experience, and a continuous process of dialogue.

The Explosion of Knowledge and Learning to Learn

One of the major shifts in society today is that young people with access to education have to go through a long period of training before they can earn a livelihood. Furthermore, in today's globalized and technology-driven world, many jobs demand constant retraining and renewal of skills. So it is far more important that we create a space where children learn how to think rather than what to think. They have to be flexible learners, with a mind that is alert and not rigid in its ways of functioning. Students must take ownership of their own learning and develop meta-cognitive skills. They must discover the joy of learning and not constantly resist it, if they are to be lifelong learners. At CFL the curriculum is designed to address these issues.

A visitor to CFL will find students engaged in a variety of activities, some of which are unusual for a school and some quite traditional. Before explaining how the daily life of children is organised to reflect our concerns in education, I would like to share reflections from an alumnus of her experience of learning at CFL.

What had an irreversible impact was not the abstract educational philosophy, but the quality of the relationships I enjoyed with the adults of the community and the spaces of trust that were called classrooms. While I know that the classroom is not the epicentre of the vision, I want to emphasise how crucial it was for someone like me. Simply put, as a fifteen year-old, I was able to redirect my restless energies because of pedagogic ingenuity. I received refuge from my adolescent churning in the classroom. The transition from being preoccupied with oneself to being concerned by other questions,

more compelling questions, is truly liberating. The classroom was an interesting, stimulating space only because I never once felt like I was being assessed by my teacher or my classmates. *Devika Narayan, Class of 2006.*

Learning in Daily Life

One of the major challenges that students will face when they enter the complex world is how society organises and rewards work associated with daily living, and how daily resources are made available and utilised.

It is a sad fact that in our society jobs such as growing food, disposing of garbage, and taking care of human excreta are still enmeshed within categories of class, caste, and gender. How do we sensitize young people to this fact? At CFL students from a very early age do many of the things that are needed to make daily life possible, side by side with their teachers. We start each day cleaning all the common spaces, and working in the kitchen to help prepare meals.

Working on the land plays a significant part in students' lives at CFL. This includes growing vegetables, mulching, weeding, tree-planting, and removing invasive species. While we are far from self-sufficient, in growing some of our own food, eating mostly seasonal vegetables, and being conscious of what we eat, we naturally encounter many questions to do with food, its growth and consumption, as also health and well-being. Related to this, students must learn to use their bodies well, develop a good posture, exercise regularly, and discover the joys of a strong and flexible body. At CFL, apart from traditional team sports and fitness, we do cycling, swimming, trekking, rock climbing, and scrambling through scrubland to help children have sensitive bodies.

Living in a rural area makes us acutely aware of how we take resources like water and electricity for granted. We depend on deep bore-wells for our water,

and have found various ways of saving water, such as pit toilets which don't need flushing and rainwater harvesting systems. We segregate and recycle our waste, and compost organic wet waste for garden use. Students have been involved in creating a system to treat the grey water from our kitchen. The fact that our students commute to school (even though this has been minimized) does give us a significant carbon footprint, but we are aware of these contradictions and are constantly looking at reducing our impact. In all these ways, we hope students will from an early age learn in a concrete way that it is natural that we take complete responsibility for our environments. The reflections of an alumnus on her experience of community life at CFL capture our approach.

Some of these notions of education and learning are reworked in CFL in such a way as to significantly subvert the way school as an institution is normally perceived: an establishment that is meant to inculcate obedience towards older people, towards the rules of an institution, the state, allegiance towards a nation, religion. But when you are asked to question in order to learn, you create a space where you are likely to rethink the rationale associated with various practices, beliefs and systems.in CFL the responsibility towards the place and people is introduced through one's active participation within the community beginning with community work (the time set aside for cleaning the campus everyday by the students and teachers), rota (involvement in kitchen chores) and the frequent discussions that take place within small groups of the class, or larger ones comprising the entire senior school. The learning that took place in these spaces was valued as much as that within the classroom. Thus I feel that a large part of the learning that takes place in CFL occurs through one's participation in the community. *Chaithra Sreeshaila, Class of 2009.*

The Bigger Picture

Perhaps for the first time in human history, a new generation has to be concerned about the future of the earth and all life that inhabits it. The future is being threatened on two fronts: the ongoing environmental crisis (both climate change and rapid biodiversity loss), and the massive build-up of weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt that a sensitive young person will inherit a global anxiety, a feeling of helplessness, even a sense of despair and cynicism about what the future holds.

On the economic front, the young person will encounter many contradictions. Why does a small fraction of the population own more wealth than the rest of humanity? Why, in a world that produces so much, are there still many who go to sleep hungry? Even though there's plainly so much work to be done, why are so many unemployed, and why is there so little job security? Is there really equal opportunity for all? Even in the so-called meritocratic societies, social capital and the class and caste you belong to seems to matter enormously. There are job hierarchies, certain kinds of work are valued over others, and many of the traditional divisions of caste, class, and gender continue to dominate work spaces.

Young people will have to confront the question: Why are we governed so poorly? Even in democratic systems, a small coterie of entities, consisting mainly of politicians and corporations, seem to decide how all of us live. Why do we have so little say in major decisions that impact our life, and what is a young person to do in the face of such helplessness?

The entertainment industry has taken on a completely different role in our lives, thanks to modern technology. Earlier, entertainment was something that happened as part of one's religious or social life. There were enough gaps between two such events to make it special, and often one had to work relatively hard to access it. Today the easy access and possibility of being entertained

from the time one wakes up to the time one falls asleep is posing new challenges to how we learn and relate. As educators we realise that young people are receiving a parallel education by the media industry. There are multiple demands on their attention and obviously the one that provides the greatest amount of pleasure will win hands down. The forces behind the media industry are using billions of dollars and every possible means available to them to (subliminally and overtly) manipulate how we feel and think.

When one is dealing with such large forces and strong vested interests, what kind of education will see that students do not end up being brutalized or brutalizing each other and the earth we inhabit; even become a healing force rather than a divisive one in the world?

At CFL we attempt this through specific courses (for example, environmental management, history, general studies), the library programme, discussions informal and formal, and by exposing young people to issues on the ground through various out-of-school trips and an annual excursion (see Jagadeeshan, 2009 for details). We are lucky that our campus is very close to the Savandurga and Bantarkuppe reserve forests. We attempt to build, through direct observation and contact, an intimacy and affection for nature, because we feel strongly that human beings will only protect the things they care about.

To give the reader a flavour of what we do, our Senior School General Studies (GS) course for students aged 18 is briefly described. The course typically runs for 12 weeks and I describe a module we did in the period June 2017 - Sep 2017 titled "Entering a complex world". The course covered three main aspects: work, economics, and the relationship between the individual and society. Under the broad area of work, we looked at the sociology of work, work as identity, ethical issues in the workspace, caste and its role in how work is organised (for example the Pourakarmika workforce (civic workers who are involved in garbage collection and

disposal) and their role in garbage disposal in the megacity of Bangalore), and how the livelihoods of marginalized communities such as transgenders is affected when their role in society changes. In economics we asked: Is it possible to earn independent of a system that perpetuates extensive social and environmental damage? In the relationship between the individual and the world, we asked: What does it mean to do what you love, what does it mean to be a life-long learner and where does well-being

come from? We invited resource people to engage with the students, held in-depth discussions, read and watched relevant material, interviewed people pursuing professions such as the domestic helper who we take for granted, and interacted with alumni who have pursued unconventional careers and wrote summaries of the various sessions (See Box 1 for the questionnaire we used to spark off the course, and Box 2 for a letter the students wrote to a resource person).

BOX 1

Senior School General Studies Course
 Module title: Entering a complex world
Questions to think about at the start of the module

1. What kind of work do you think you would like to do? (in terms of: working with ideas, people, visual or performing arts, working with hands, technology, environment, etc.).
2. To pursue that kind of work, what do you think you need to do in the next few years?
3. For the life style you plan to have, how much do you think you should earn? (assuming today's prices and you are earning now).
4. How important do you think enjoying what you do is part of your decision-making towards finding a job? Explain briefly.
5. What kind of ethical issues you think your work might involve? By ethical issues, we mean – being part of or supporting a corrupt system, causing damage to people or environment, promoting violence.
6. Can you try and draw a map that links your job to the global economic system? What we mean simply is where does the money you will earn actually come from? A simple example is a farmer earns his income from directly selling to customers. Of course, the customers earn from other sources to pay the farmer. Can you create a similar map of where the money will come from for your job? Speculate wildly if necessary.

BOX 2

Senior School General Studies Course
 Module title: Entering a complex world
Students' letter to a resource person

Dear Ms A,

Thank you so much for giving us the presentation on ethics and work.

...

We've been discussing the reality of entering a professional workspace and we had a few questions and reflections.

We explored as a class whether there was any such thing as an ideal workplace where everyone's needs are met. We wondered whether a workplace can be completely free of conflict especially when different entities in the workplace have different aspirations. For example, an employer might only aim to maximize profit (which is his/her job essentially) while his/her employees' humanitarian needs are ignored.

One worry we have is that the exposure we've had through this GS course and other activities such as excursions might clash with the line of work we're interested in. Rather than wanting to do unethical work, we're concerned about the lack of ethical workplaces in certain fields which might leave us ambivalent towards our work.

Specifically to do with consumption, there seems to be a trend towards ethical products being more expensive. This introduces a dimension of availability and accessibility which means that only a certain class of people will be able to afford it. So while making the product ethical, it also makes it expensive and less affordable for the majority.

BOX 2 (continued)

Another aspect is privilege and how it helps us take our future jobs for granted. One thing that strikes us is how easily we can be employed simply because of our social capital. We recognize that it gives us an unfair advantage but we are helpless. We don't know how to make it an equal playing field.

Our perspective on the government has become more critical specifically because of schemes such as MNREGA which highlight rural-urban disparities. But again, we are helpless because it's a large issue with many complexities.

But, we do feel that, while it might not be currently possible to create a workplace where all variables are satisfied, we can create a best fit. Also, we hope that with (slowly) changing ideas and laws about caste and gender in the workplace, a fully ethical workplace would be possible.

Thanking you once again,
Students at CFL

The real challenge is: Can education impact society as a whole?

The Individual as a Microcosm of Society

One of our central tenets is that society is created by the network of relations among human beings. Society and the individual mirror each other. Therefore, no fundamental change can be hoped for unless individuals themselves fundamentally change. We need to explore what it is about human beings that allow us to create such societies. Writer Yuval Noah Harari has suggested that the problem may lie in the fact that we live a dual life:

Ever since the Cognitive Revolution, Sapiens have been living in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; on the other hand, the imagined reality became even more powerful, so that today the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of the imagined entities such as the United States and Google (Harari, 2011, p. 36)

Our thoughts have created several imagined realities which are held together by us. Yet, these imagined realities have real consequences; for example, a person can be put in jail for breaking a law (created by us), and spend the rest of his life in a horrible space completely created by human thinking. While our thinking has this fantastic ability to model things and

conceive all kinds of realities, it does not seem to have the inherent capacity to distinguish the imagined from the actual. Nations are as real to us as are a tree or a bird.

One of the biggest imagined realities we take for granted is the existence of a permanent separate individual self. We feel the self is real, because we experience life as happening to us. We feel we have free will and agency. Moreover the experience of self-hood is very body-centric. We have consistent, identifiable, and predictable patterns and so do others, so we feel there is someone real in there going through life.

Throughout human history, the idea of a permanent abiding self has been questioned by mystics and philosophers. Today psychologists and neurobiologists are suggesting that there is no "ghost in the machine", experiencing and controlling our lives. We don't have to only listen to these experts; when we subject ourselves to a few difficult questions, the certainty of a self is shaken. Where exactly is the self located? Is there one central agency in the brain controlling all functions?

The trouble with the illusion of the self is that it extends to much more than just our bodies. The self consists of all the things we have identified with: our likes and dislikes, race, gender, caste, and property. The basic biological instinct for self-protection has now grown to protect ideas, myths, beliefs, worldviews, and nations. Moreover our thinking is constantly dividing

me from the other. It is this deadly combination of divisiveness, self-protection at any cost, and the inability to distinguish the real from the imagined, that has created the crisis we face today.

One infers from reading thinkers like Bohm (Bohm & Edwards, 1991), Harari (Harari, 2011), and Krishnamurti (Krishnamurti, 1973, p 87-106) that the crisis is actually very old. Perhaps it began when thinking became a very important way in which we navigated both the real and the imagined world. The explosion of our numbers, the expansion of our abilities, and the rapidity with which we can travel and communicate has made the current crisis catastrophic. Even if we somehow manage to save the planet from catastrophe, unless we understand the roots of the crisis we escaped from, we will recreate the same scenario a few thousand years from now! Harari describes the human condition very poignantly:

We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one.... seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want? (Harari, 2011, pp. 465-466)

Does all this mean we are doomed to our current fate? On the contrary, we at CFL feel humans are capable of living a life free of conflict and in harmony with the universe. What could bring about the intelligence and compassion needed for this? Does education have a role to play? There is a famous statement by H. G. Wells: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." Given the scale of the problems we face, and the fact that unprecedented cooperation by all governments is needed to save the planet

from tremendous suffering, it may seem naive to think that education can impact the runaway forces at work. Is education too slow to stem the tide?

Education as a Response to the Crisis

Given that the future is unpredictable, what is our response in the present? Strangely, while we are preparing the students for the future, we need to work with them in the present.

Whatever the future, we still have these young people in our care. Can we nurture, as Krishnamurti says, intelligence, love, and compassion, rather than further divisive movements within them and us? Human beings throughout history have tried to address divisiveness, but they have all depended on the very same instruments that create divisiveness, that is, knowledge and thought. It is not difficult to see for ourselves that it is when we are inattentive that we seem to be caught in the network of thought. Inattention breeds imagined realities and allows for identification to take root. For Krishnamurti, attention, which is born out of "choiceless awareness" is the key to ending of divisiveness and awakening of compassion.

A mind that observes with knowledge is incapable of following swiftly the stream of thought. It is only by observing without the screen of knowledge that you begin to see the whole structure of your own thinking. And as you observe—which is not to condemn or accept, but simply to watch—you will find that thought comes to an end. Casually to observe an occasional thought leads nowhere. But if you observe the process of thinking and do not become an observer apart from the observed, if you see the whole movement of thought without accepting or condemning it, then that very observation puts an end immediately to thought—and therefore the mind is compassionate; it is in a state of constant mutation. (Krishnamurti, 1992, p.299-300)

When there is this alert watchfulness, which is awareness in which there is no choice, that moves into attention in which there is no center from which you attend.

So when there is complete attention, with your heart, with your mind, with everything you have - to attend. Then that intelligence begins to operate. (Krishnamurti, 1977)

When there is an end to sorrow there is love and compassion. And when there is compassion, not for this or that, but compassion, then that compassion has its own supreme quintessence, intelligence.

That is neither of time, neither does it belong to any theories, to any technologies, to nobody, that intelligence is not personal or universal, or the words round it. (Krishnamurti, 1986, p.139)

The complex world has to be met by a simple mind, a mind that is free of imagined realities, in the here and now.

About the author

Shashidhar Jagadeeshan received his PhD in mathematics from Syracuse University in 1994. He has been teaching in CFL since 1995 and is interested in working with young adults exploring what it means to have a meaningful education.

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