Session One

The Global Education Leaders’ Partnership has for over ten years met in locations around the world to examine in some depth a particular education system whilst convening for an opportunity to share ideas and reflect on the latest global thinking. GELP events have always taken the name of their host location: GELP Seoul, GELP New Delhi, GELP Rio de Janeiro, GELP Sydney etc. In the past year, when, like all international convenings GELP has had to take shelter online, we have named these gatherings simply “GELP X”.

The Spring 2021 GELP X event took place over two sessions from May 10th – 12th, with participants joining from 13 countries across multiple time zones. This brief report is intended to capture the main insights and resonances of the gathering.

At the start of the first session, GELP Co-Chair Valerie Hannon opened the event by reminding us of the first GELP convening in 2009. At that point, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, economic challenges were high on government agendas and jurisdictions rallied around the vision of Learning Societies, with lifelong opportunities to ‘Learn a Living’. In the subsequent decade, crises of migration, climate and democracy, as well as the rapid spread of social media and continued fragility of financial markets increased the demand for global exchange and the need to work alongside each other. The COVID crisis has only further clarified the extent of our global interdependence.

As fellow Co-Chair Michael Stevenson reinforced, the aim of GELP has always been to think about our challenges globally and locally. Our challenges as people and nations now are not just conceptually alike but quite literally shared challenges. It’s in that spirit that we continue to gather under the GELP banner and try concertedly to work out what these challenges mean for education.

Offering the first of two provocations for the GELP community, Kirsten Dunlop, CEO of Climate KIC, presented four limitations that we must transcend, collectively:

1. Incapacity to act, to create, to be generative and to make decisions in complexity. In all her work on trying to change organisations, value chains and innovation, the one constant problem is an ‘extraordinary critical dearth of the human capability to act in complexity’.

2. Human identity. The identity humans have constructed for themselves is of being different and superior to the world in which they live. We must shift human identity to understand ourselves as interdependent.

3. Poverty of imagination. As Tony Goldsby-Smith argues, we must return to the moment when we pulled apart Art and Science and chose only the road of logic. We need to draw Arts and Humanities firmly back in and deal in possibility.

4. Our relationship with Time. As Barbara Adam has written, we have constructed a world which values speed. Through our international accounting standards, our insurance, in everything, we have made time all about the economic value of time collapsing to zero.
So can education evolve? Kirsten is passionately optimistic when it comes to learning, but deeply sceptical when it comes to institutions. The kind of learning required to produce these shifts has to be contextual, but this is something we have institutionalised out of education. We need to bring layers of experience and knowledge together – ‘exponential shifts come from multi-dimensionality’ – but we have not taught ourselves to think in those ways, to think in terms of ‘Pluriverses’.

We cannot leave the necessary learning to machines: ‘no one is feeding, training, and coding AI with epistemological and philosophical foundations that would help us design a world for sustainability and regenerative capabilities’. Human learning will need to achieve these shifts, but to do so we have to create education that allows for more extended engagement over time with more layers of knowledge. We need to consider the way that our attention resists this, and ‘design for both sides of our brain’ – the considerate human and the lizard, that retreats when it feels its wellbeing threatened and become nihilistic. We have to stretch our ability to focus on what matters most as far as we can, and also prepare for what to do when it snaps back.

In the second provocation, Justin Reich, Director of MIT’s Teaching Systems Lab, reinforced the message that educational evolution will not happen by default. Drawing on his book, Failure to Disrupt, Justin h set out how waves of new technologies have repeatedly left the core organisation of schooling untouched. The hopes for more self-directed learning through technology do not come to fruition because ‘very few people are very good at self-directed independent learning, and most who are had an apprenticeship in the formal education system.’ Despite a year in which schools and universities rapidly shifted online, most of that was to replicate existing modes of education through learning management systems and video conferencing. In Justin’s view, we cannot expect more sweeping change than that. Educators do have new capacities for change from this year, but also they are tired and don’t want to do anymore changing for a while.

On the question of whether education evolve in time, his conclusion it that it doesn’t really matter whether we believe it can or not: the current educational infrastructure is here to stay, and we should focusing on tinkering with it as best we can. We should focus on more granular problems we observe in how to teach specific things, and improve on those. ‘Continuous improvement may not be fast enough, but it’s still the fastest road that we have.’ And if we want to do things differently, we need to engage our communities in wanting to do things differently.

In conversation with Anthony Mackay, Kirsten Dunlop reflected that we have to think about learning and innovation as part of the same process. Rather than thinking about transformation vs continuous improvement of education, we should structure our conversations around the purpose of learning and its capacity to help us transform ourselves. Kirsten concluded that education is about meaning, and the point of meaning is that it connects us and it carries numbers of us towards new possibilities: ‘this is why we have technologies like narrative and story, and it’s desperately what we need it to do now.’

In the first of three responses from the education sector, Valerie Hannon built on the importance of narrative and purpose. As set out in Thrive: the Purpose of Schools in a Changing World, we need to define education’s purpose in in relation to not only the world outside us – society and the planet – but also the worlds inside us and between us. Recalling Tony Jackson’s words from GELP D.C., Valerie argued that we have to end the ‘dominance’ paradigm: where education is a tool for the dominance of people over planet, of one race over other, and of men over women.
It takes guts and it takes boldness to start a different public conversation, but we have to think about this as movement making. We have a critical mass of inspiring new practice – in pedagogy, assessment and curriculum – but we have to engage more with power and politics. Education is more than a minor policy field, and connects to more than just the economy. We have to ask whether we actually have a real strategy for moving forward and responding to the scale of challenge set out. And in doing so, are we being sufficiently self-critical? As educators we are often also highly educated, and we have to heed those like Michael Sandel who warn that we are playing into the politics of humiliation when we champion too narrow a vision of educational success or disregard those who are less formally educated.

Considering the changes we need to make, Michael Fullan injected an unexpected note of pessimism: ‘I don’t think we can do it in time.’ We can understand the necessary shifts in focus:

1. An obsession with academics to wellbeing and learning
2. Machine intelligence to social intelligence
3. Austerity to equality investments, supported by new monetary theory
4. And fragmentation to systemness

But the way there is unclear: ‘We have the agenda right, but we don’t have the pathways right’.

We may have to think differently. Referencing the late Dick Elmore, a much-missed friend of GELP, he wondered whether we have to give up on schools. Now sceptical about making the change to whole systems of institutions in time, Michael is thinking more about redeveloping the relationship between innovation and learning. Michael has since added that if this is to succeed there needs to be a focus on system process – on engagement in the evolution of innovations – in a dynamic, system-engaged change strategy.

For those working within formal education systems, we do not have this choice. Ulla Ilisson, Director of the Education and Youth Authority of Estonia, set out how they have been seriously tackling the challenge of system change. This has involved very careful planning to create more digital curriculum, interoperability, and predictive models, but also considerable investments in professional development at all levels and ultimately a shift in mindsets. The emergent educational ecosystem is a step towards more fully personalised learning pathways, but will rely on continued simultaneous development of technological and human capabilities.

The case of Estonia illustrates the power of working at multiple levels and viewing learning and innovation as two sides of the same coin. In the reflections form group breakouts, many shared Valerie Hannon’s view that ‘we cannot give us on schools’, but also Fullan’s argument that if we consider the indicators, ‘we’re on the cliff edge of humanity’. In the path forward, we have to recouple education and the needs of a green economy. Part of this recoupling can come, as Charles Fadel highlighted, through curriculum. We can also work on creating narratives that can carry purposes and meaning, on embedding educational models in particular place to enable experiential, plural learning, and on allowing learners more time to submerge fully into the complexity of what they have to grapple with.

These opportunities for long-term, embedded learning experiences are exactly what the city of Doncaster is working to create through their Talent and Innovation Ecosystem, and it’s this case that we turned to in our second session. GELP is proud to have helped to foster this work and we trust that its development will contribute back to the shared narrative of what a more purposeful, more meaningful education can look like.
Session Two

Session Two was opened by Valerie Hannon and Michael Stevenson who each reflected on the discussions that had emerged over the course of the previous day. The delegation had collectively articulated the scale and depth of challenge to transform education, and considered the degree to which the system is ‘up to it’.

This second session, then, would move the discussion to a more granular level; that is – intentional disruption of the education system in Doncaster, Yorkshire, England. The aim of this disruption is to establish a new lifelong learning model, called the Talent and Innovation Ecosystem.

As someone who grew up and went to school in Doncaster, Michael knows the place well. It’s a place the industrial era has left with plenty of challenges, following the closure of the coal mines, and the subsequent loss of jobs and incomes some 30 years ago. But in 2021 it stands on the brink of the new – the new economy, the new participative community, and a radical new approach to learning.

The Doncaster story is profoundly relevant to the UK – where many people feel left behind. But with many changes happening, not least the UK’s departure from the EU, there is a growing recognition that economic prosperity requires a transformation in education and learning.

Two videos, both made in and by Doncaster, told the story:

- As England’s largest Metropolitan Borough, and home to 311,000 people, Doncaster is a vital part of the Sheffield City Region economic area. However, as a post-industrial borough, it faces long-standing challenges: socio-economic deprivation, a low skills equilibrium, health inequalities, and low social mobility. Pre-pandemic, good progress was made towards meeting these challenges, with a significant growth to the economy, the reawakening and transformation of traditional areas of industrial strength (engineering, transport, health and care), and the emergence of new industries (green technology, creative and digital).

- The borough’s strategic partnership – Team Doncaster – recognises, however, that real prosperity also requires a substantial investment in people. Team Doncaster has therefore developed a new long-term Education and Skills Strategy, centred around five priorities that span the lifelong learning journey.

- Crucially, the strategy also recognises the need to significantly change the system itself. Building on the progress that has already been made to establish a University City centred around four key industry specialisms, and drawing on insights from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Team Doncaster has committed to developing a Talent and Innovation Ecosystem. The aim is to adopt a whole-systems approach to developing an education system that is deeply rooted in the place; demanded by the needs of key existing and emerging business sectors.

- At the core of the ecosystem stands a powerful double helix: talent development entwined with business innovation, through the power of problem-based learning. Orchestrated by the University City partnership, new and different lifelong learning opportunities, assessment, and accreditation will be arranged coherently across a range of learning settings, for people of all ages and backgrounds.

So, then to a panel discussion. GELP has always offered up space for considered critique and response in a collegiate but frank and positive way – and as Valerie assured, that would likewise be the spirit of the discussions to follow.

The first contribution came from Gregg Behr, Executive Director of The Grable Foundation and a co-chair of the Remake Learning Council. Through his work in
Pittsburgh, Gregg feels great resonance with Doncaster. There are similarities to Pittsburgh in at least three major respects. First, in terms of how it has had to radically embrace itself as a place, ending comparisons with others, and recognising it has its own identity and unique assets. Second, in terms of being sparked by innovations happening elsewhere. And third, in terms of blurring the distinction between formal and informal education.

What advice does he have for Doncaster, as they move forward? Gregg noted that with so many layers to this work, underpinning these should be a human-centred design approach, which tailors the learning offer and the messages around it to each community. A pointed example is that ‘teachers trust teachers, not councils’. Likewise, young people must be given platforms to share their voice, and engage their peers. In harnessing the community voice and engaging partners, storytelling is crucial. Pittsburgh has heavily invested in this storytelling: from media and professional story tellers, to storytelling workshops for administrators. There must be a variety of strategies for engagement. In Pittsburgh, Remake Learning days have allowed schools, museums and libraries to open up their spaces to engage parents in learning. All of this is critical in terms of really embedding the ecosystem in place – to change a phrase: ‘it’s storytelling, stupid’.

The second contribution came from Monica Nadal, who likewise found the Doncaster videos had echoed many of her own experiences in Catalonia. She thought the video had touched the right buttons, in terms of:

- local leadership
- the need to build trusting relationships – across big and small players
- take opportunities as they come to catalyse change

National agencies and policies are important, but the role of municipalities and local authorities have a much bigger role to play than is often acknowledged.

In Catalonia, these municipalities are more and more beginning to step up to the challenge, to show an awareness of the role they have to play in terms of bringing people together, making sense of the world, and giving hope.

One question that came to mind, however, in watching the video, was: What are the different challenges?

In Catalonia the challenges are:

- Growing inequalities that are making it harder to progress as a society
- The scale of transformation: changes in what people learn, how they learn, and the kinds of competencies that are being required of learners

We must consider these challenges in parallel – or else we risk developing a model that leaves people behind (particularly in the midst of a digital revolution, where middle class children are likely to benefit from this technology far more than their less affluent peers).

And we must recognise that it is not the sole responsibility of schools to address them. Indeed, nor is it an easy task to convince schools to change. In Monica’s experience it is far easier to bring a variety of local organisations together (businesses, community organisations, NGOs), united around a common challenge: How can we improve education?

The strategy has been to ‘dig holes everywhere’, to build the ecosystem around the schools, with a variety of initiatives – and then crucially, to tell schools that they are part of the ecosystem, and to invite them to join in and open up their doors, rather than to be directive.

Central to this is a mind-set to harness opportunities where you see them. In Catalonia, they are doing just this. From ‘putting their bets on micro-credentials’, developing a learning passport for children in primary and secondary school, engaging teachers to be those who prescribe learning activities outside the schools to parents, to establishing Remake Learning weeks.
So, in thinking about those holes and wedges Monica referenced, how does she think about teacher capacity, and what support can be given to teachers to encourage them to be innovators? Monica again finds common ground with Gregg: create networks, and facilitate storytelling across those networks.

Next to Pavel Luksha. What he sees is a comprehensive approach which focusses on more than just a learning ecosystem. There is a focus on a new way of governance, opportunities to revitalise the region, and to let education lead the resurgence of a new Doncaster. Doncaster’s transition involves other kinds of ecosystems: technological, healthcare, entrepreneurial.

Following on from the Three Horizons Model highlighted in the video, Pavel wanted to throw a spotlight on the key global transitions that are taking place. For example, a transition towards a sustainable and regenerative economy. The economic paradigm shift through the next decade, driven by digitalisation, might be characterised thus: human centred, creative, participatory, complex, smart, re-localised, sustainable, and regenerative. It is an economy that will require different things of the educational ecosystem. The focus on skills, and skills anticipation is therefore important – to serve the future local economy, as well as the current one. It is evident to Pavel that this is something recognised by Doncaster.

We have started to see the tide turning towards localisation and learning ecosystems can play a meaningful role in recognising and celebrating the culture of the place. Like Gregg and Monica, Pavel considers storytelling to be pivotal, not least in terms of the retention of talent. He advised that Doncaster should view this ecosystem as integrating both economic and cultural dimensions.

Culture is also central to inclusivity. Take adult learners as an example – there are a great many people currently working in careers and industries that may well soon become redundant, but who also may not feel connected with education. The issue of reskilling and development of new pathways is therefore a pressing one. Doncaster must create a culture of learning, to encourage people to switch career, and to enable ways out of these ‘dead end alleys’.

Three final further thoughts from Pavel:
– The learning ecosystem should be well integrated with and underpinned by governance and digital infrastructure. Digital models can enable pathways and flexibility in the system.
– The ecosystem is participatory. All players should have a voice, but some can play a more active role than others. Doncaster must give a voice to these players, as co-creators, and facilitators of dialogues and processes.
– Think more about those connection points between the layers of the ecosystem. Connect silos together. Bringing together different teams from different programmes domains and disciplines together to make sense of the whole ecosystem.

Finally, we turn to Bill Lucas, who was inspired by the work in Doncaster. We saw in the video that a portfolio of teaching and learning approaches are a central component of the TIE. Bill thinks we should put two theoretical themes up for scrutiny:
1. What we mean by real world learning
2. Shifting the paradigm from the classification of subjects (e.g. engineering), to ways of looking at the world (e.g. how engineers think)

On the first issue, Bill noted we often contrast ‘real world with ‘academic’ learning. This is an unhelpful and false dichotomy. Instead of framing the narrative in this binary way, we should shift the discussion to reference instead ‘knowledge, skills, attributes, or simply dispositions’. We have a pallet of pedagogies that is far too narrow. In the real world, this represents just a small sub-set of the methods we use to learn. Take engineering as an example.
Bill has been working with the Royal Institute of Engineering to reframe engineering as a way of looking at the world – a way that transcends the subject, the science, the technology etc. Doncaster might want to play with this model – recasting things in this way may help us to open doors. For example, it may help to address the gender imbalances.

There are developments across the world that might helpfully shift our thinking on from high stakes assessment (the work of New Metrics for Success in Melbourne and the Brookings Institute, for example). When we talk about assessment, we shouldn’t restrict ourselves to summative assessment; we should also think about formative development. We should rethink what we measure and how we measure. For example, innovations globally include:

- The Harvard Human Flourishing Group is producing some really thought that Doncaster might want to draw on (i.e. in terms of flourishing being one additional metric to track).
- The Mission Skills Assessment has shown that whilst we often dismiss multiple choice, it deserves consideration – it can be very illuminating.
- Bill, together with Michael Fullan, has been looking at developing an assessment for critical thinking.
- Real Ideas’ work on microcredentialling and digital badging.
- Games-based assessment is already in place in a number of places globally.
- Big Picture Learning is shifting the focus from what children can’t do to what they can.

Bill left us with some powerful final thoughts, before a quotation to reflect on:

- consider the ‘head, hand, and heart’
- narrative not number
- draw on these developments to really ‘shake government up’
- skills are the connective tissue between deep knowledge and the dispositions we want all young people to have

“To solely use standardised achievement tests is like casting a net into the sea – a net that is intentionally designed to let the most interesting fish get away. Then, to describe the ones that are caught strictly in terms of their weight and length is to radically reduce what we know about them. To further conclude that all the contents of the sea consist of fish like those in the net compounds the error further. We need more kinds of fish. We need to know more about those we catch. We need, in short, new nets.”

(William T Randolph, Commissioner of Education, Colorado)

Some key takeaways from Damian Allen in response:

- Community voice and storytelling – Doncaster needs to do more in terms of peer-led discussions
- Connectivity is built around trust – “nothing happens as fast as the speed of trust”
- The need to embed the learning ecosystem with wider ecosystems, and to take this forward in the new borough strategy
- The need to channel pride of place
- There is more to be done in terms of non-cognitive skill development and collaborative learning

GELP reconvenes in November 2021 with a hybrid event, based in part in Doncaster and in part virtually, to continue this story.