



Organization Spotlight: Cultivating Changemakers: Social Innovation at the Heart of Education

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ORGANIZATION SPOTLIGHT

CULTIVATING CHANGEMAKERS: SOCIAL INNOVATION AT THE HEART OF EDUCATION

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Social innovation. Over the past decade or so, these words have become a buzz phrase, bridging the conventional definition of technological innovation with the realization that we all can, and should, work to raise the level of well-being in society. In fact, many would agree that we have a moral imperative to band together and tackle the complex social and environmental challenges of our generation.

A Brief History: From Innovation to Social Innovation

What, precisely, *is* social innovation? Historically, “innovation” has been considered almost purely a matter of technology. Societies have experienced abrupt, impactful shifts occasioned by major technological advances. The industrial revolution brought us improvements in energy generation, textile manufacturing, iron production, and many other industries. We shifted from handmade, personal-use production to a wide-scale use of machinery and factories. Also, in the early 20th century, innovations in the automobile and aviation industries completely revolutionized transportation. Travel between cities and even countries, which had been slow and onerous, became commonplace in the space of just a few decades.

It quickly became clear, however, that technological innovation not only correlates directly with social improvement, in many cases it also proves to have a negative effect on societal well-being. With the industrial

revolution, boundless new technologies fueled an important climb in standard of living for the masses. The working class gained increased wages and access to products, while chronic hunger sharply decreased. At the same time, this shift also brought adverse effects. The change from small-scale farm labor to factory-based industry increased productivity, but exacerbated economic disparity and environmental pollution. Factory workers were living in squalor, subject to disease and unfit living conditions. Over the years, the need to address growing challenges has become increasingly apparent.

This brings us to social innovation, which looks beyond technological innovation and takes these social and environmental problems into account. It answers the question, “How do we make important leaps forward, but in ways that bring significant positive impact to society?” Social innovations change social practices with new, scalable approaches that have a substantial positive impact on people and the environments in which they live.

The Real Challenge: Teaching Social Innovation

At the UN-mandated University for Peace’s Centre for Executive Education, we have addressed the challenge of social innovation and taken it one step further. In recognizing what social innovation is and how important it is in today’s world, the question remains, “How do you *teach* social innovation?” How do you not only teach children, but also prepare educators—the teachers, professionals, parents, and other adults who

guide children—to instill the values, skills, and knowledge necessary to impel social innovation today and far into the future? This has been our mission at the Centre for Executive Education.

In today's fast-changing world, social innovation is particularly key in the field of education. The education system needs a healthy dose of social innovation to address problems of access and disparity in the quality and quantity of services provided, and to create new approaches in the classroom. An unprecedented amount of information is at the fingertips of every child with access to the internet, and it is profoundly changing the face of education. Instead of concentrating on conveying facts and dates, young people must be taught the intangible skills and processes they need to address the problems of the day. This shift requires significant social innovation.

Scholars, business people, and the world at large are starting to note this need. Thomas Friedman, political columnist for the *New York Times* and author of several books, including *The World Is Flat*, has considered the question of what is going to be critical in the 21st century. In his words, "No matter what your profession . . . you better be good at the touchy-feely stuff, because anything that can be digitized can be outsourced to either the smartest or the cheapest producer" (Friedman, 2005, p. 14). Bestselling author Daniel Pink (2005) would agree. In his book, *A Whole New Mind*, he says,

The last few decades have belonged to a certain kind of person with a certain kind of mind—computer programmers who could crank code, lawyers who could craft contracts, MBAs who could crunch numbers. The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind—creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. (p. 1)

The future belongs to social innovators!

Soft Skills vs. Hard Skills: Or Do We Need Them All?

A social innovator intentionally nurtures those skills that cannot be outsourced, that are intrinsically human, and that these authors would call essential in today's world. Social innovators embrace the core values espoused by the United Nations in its belief that we are one human family living in a highly interdependent and fragile world. The big issues facing us in the 21st century—from climate change to poverty alleviation—require a new kind of thinking.

And social innovators, through their journey of pursuing a positive impact on society, are simultaneously ensuring meaning in their own lives. It is a journey toward positive impact—both outward and inward.

These "soft skills," as they are sometimes referred to, are undeniably fundamental to social innovation, and they can be taught. By focusing on individual strengths and everyday leadership skills, by understanding one's own conflict style, by actively practicing empathy and listening skills, we can work to improve our soft skills. We must, however, strike a balance with the so-called "hard skills" that facilitate *doing*, in order to provide a comprehensive education in social innovation.

The Diploma in Social Innovation offered by the University for Peace's Centre for Executive Education requires participants to complete five online courses, which together form a mix of hard and soft skills. "Designing Your Life—Innovating From the Inside Out," for example, encourages participants to think about and truly understand their core strengths, seeking to optimize them and avoid barriers. "Skills for Effective Negotiations," on the other hand, actually requires participants to role play negotiation scenarios so as to help them gain the specific expertise needed to ensure a positive outcome in interpersonal transactions. The program encourages participants to look first within themselves for their passion, to see the area in which they would like to affect social innovation, and then provides them with the skills and tools they need to make it happen.

Educators Unite! Social Innovation Course in Costa Rica

As part of a small university based in Costa Rica, the UPEACE Centre for Executive Education relies quite heavily on online learning, but some tools are difficult to transmit online. While we believe fully in online education, the energy, connections, and actions that are possible when people meet each other face-to-face and share their stories cannot easily be replicated via online tools. The vision of passionate and socially conscious educators coming together and interacting deeply with others from different contexts guided the development of one of our most important courses. The one-week immersion experience we call "Education 2.0: Teaching in a Fast-Changing World" intentionally focuses on social innovation for the educational context—how to stimulate it directly in educators, and thereby allow them to pass on this learning to students and colleagues.

The challenge is how to embed social innovation deeply into the very model of such a course. In order for the experience to be truly transformative, a few things are essential:

- A balance between structured time and time to interact freely
- Space for participants to share their work and personal passions
- Field visits to organizations engaged in impactful educational work
- Diverse participants working at different levels in the field of education
- A learning community that can endure beyond the time period of the actual course.

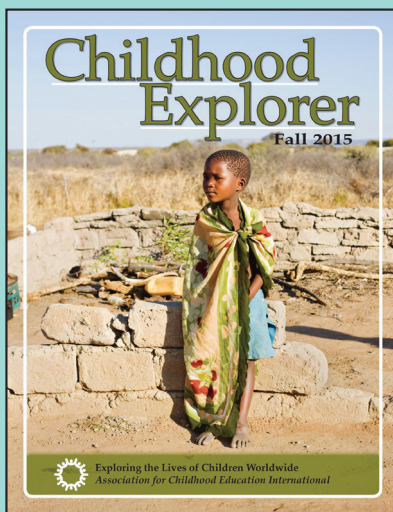
Together, these elements combine to weave the fundamental fabric of this course. Participants are asked to arrive with an educational intervention in mind to work on, ready to start the innovation process of defining and refining their own personal projects. We encourage everyone to dream big, and provide them with the practical skills to tackle the major questions about educating in the 21st century.

Through this on-site course and the online Diploma in Social Innovation, we hope to stimulate and spread the practice of social innovation. Each of us can and should aim to have a significant, positive impact through our work; as educators, we need to transmit this message to the next generation. Soft skills like empathy make us uniquely human and prepare us to think holistically about the big problems of the interconnected world in which we live. By coming together as a human community, we can envision a better future and make the concrete plans necessary to create and sustain positive change in the world. At the UPEACE Centre for Executive Education, we hope you will join us in this quest, first to learn and then to teach social innovation to all!

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- Pink, D. (2006). *A whole new mind: Why right-brainers will rule the future*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Learn more about the University for Peace Centre for Executive Education, please visit <http://centre.upeace.org>.



Childhood Explorer is an online publication that focuses specifically on the experience of childhood around the world. In its pages, you will find informative and inspirational stories about childhood and about projects and campaigns that provide quality education, care, and support to children and youth in diverse communities and circumstances.

We are seeking submissions for this publication.

Articles should be short (1-3 pages) and written in a narrative, non-academic style.

Please send submissions to abauer@acei.org

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