An Unexpected Education Evolution
From Uganda to the U.S. and Beyond

Innovations Case Narrative:
Watson and Educate!

Tune in to a debate today on global education and one will hear about the problems of access in the developing world, including 70 million children with no access to primary school and the revolution in higher education inspired by massive open-source online courses (MOOCs). Yet, I argue that an evolution is taking place in education that is not only about helping those 70 million children but about transforming the very purpose of education itself.

THE STORY

While in high school, I became involved in Amnesty International, through which I heard about a population of refugees living in Uganda who had come from the nearby warring countries of Sudan, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I wanted to learn more about these refugees and get a glimpse of what life was like in a much different part of the world. So, in the summer of 2002, at age 17, I traveled on my own to two refugee camps in western Uganda.

Many unexpected events occurring during my trip. Among the most memorable were distributing antimalarial medicine to several hundred sick refugees, and contributing to the removal of a corrupt commandant from the Kyangwali refugee camp who was beating, raping, and killing refugees. After returning home, I wrote a report about the conditions in the refugee camps and possible solutions to their problems, which has been used by several organizations.

The most unexpected aspect of my trip were the young people I met, including young men and women driven by a profound desire to solve the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which had forced them to flee to Uganda, where they were working to bring peace to their homeland. The vision and passion of these youth was a manifestation of their tremendous potential. I wanted to do what
I could to help them unleash that potential, for it seemed clear that if anyone were going to solve the challenges in the DRC, it was the current generation of young people, like Benson Wereje, Joseph Munyambanza, and Mutezi Tamari.

I asked these youth what I could do to help them, and they responded that what they needed most was an education, which would prepare them to solve the problems in their community and their homeland. From these insightful words, Educate! was born.

Over the next several years, colleagues and friends helped me raise money doing everything from climbing 14,000-foot peaks to hosting dodge ball tournaments. With the funds we raised, Educate! was able to give 22 young refugees scholarships at high-quality high schools in Uganda. In the 11 years since, those young people have gone on to develop a powerful movement for nonviolent social change in their homeland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is in the middle of one of the bloodiest conflicts facing the world since WWII. Their movement has been recognized by Bill Clinton, Ban Ki Moon, the World Economic Forum, and numerous others as a youth-led, grassroots movement that has tremendous potential to bridge divides and bring peace and prosperity to the DRC.

However, during those 11 years, Educate! learned that, while in school, these remarkable young people were being forced to memorize largely irrelevant facts, like the regions of Germany, simply because these points were part of Uganda’s national exam. Like many countries around the world, Uganda has an education system based heavily on memorization. We asked ourselves why some of the most remarkable young leaders in Uganda (and around the world) were being taken out of their communities to attend schools where their creativity is stifled and they are forced to memorize irrelevant facts. Take just one example: every high school student in Uganda memorizes the regions of Germany in preparation for the national exam. Such a rote memorization-based system only prepares the next generation to maintain the status quo. Why wasn’t their education providing an opportunity to practice and strengthen their leadership skills and preparing them to solve the conflict that has plagued their homeland?

Five years after granting our first scholarship, and following many revealing conversations with the scholarship students and key stakeholders at all levels of the education system, we realized that giving scholarships was not enough and that we needed to find a way to transform the education system itself into one that will develop a new generation of leaders and entrepreneurs to solve the toughest social, economic, and environmental challenges facing the world. We at Educate! saw that the very purpose of education must be reimagined.

Educate! thus began developing young leaders and entrepreneurs in Uganda by providing long-term mentorship and two years of world-class leadership and entrepreneurship training to help high school students start enterprises that aim to address poverty, disease, violence, and environmental degradation. This includes an alumni program that provides ongoing mentorship, training, and access to capital to help our students continue to have an impact after they graduate. The model is what we call exponential empowerment—a long-term investment in youth so
they can have a positive impact on others throughout their lives. Educate! currently works with 8,000 diverse young leaders and entrepreneurs across Uganda, and we believe these youth have the potential to become the next Nelson Mandela, Wangari Maathai, or Mahatma Gandhi. The 1,300 graduates of Educate! programs have started 632 high-impact projects, organizations, and enterprises that employ dozens of people, earn thousands of dollars annually, have planted thousands of trees, and have secured the livelihoods of many.

PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES AND SOME LESSONS LEARNED

In July 2010, Educate! was working with 776 scholars, approximately half young men and half young women, from two cohorts. At that point, 102 (13 percent) had started an enterprise or initiative to solve a problem in the community. Of those 102, 67 percent were men and 33 percent were women. We were taken aback by this gender disparity in outcomes, even though the gender balance was equal. Over the next year, Educate! made it a priority to address this disparity in outcomes between boys and girls. To do so, we implemented several programmatic changes, including gender-specific training for our mentors; innovative structures in which mentors encourage girls and boys to team up separately to start enterprises, thus giving girls an enabling environment in which they could take leadership and practice entrepreneurship; and continuing to hire 50 percent or more female mentors; currently, approximately 62 percent of our mentors are female.

Female mentors provide a strong model of female leadership for girl scholars in a country where the majority of political and business leaders are male. They also provide a strong example of female leadership for boy scholars, who do not have many women to look up to. Our female mentors not only have directly empowered young women, they also have helped to build understanding and respect for female leadership among young men.

By August, 2011, Educate! was working with 1,383 scholars who had started a total of 415 enterprises and initiatives to solve a social or environmental problem. Of that group, 47 percent were boys and 49 percent were girls, thus showing that in less than a year the outcomes had equalized and almost the same number of girls and boys had started an initiative. By measuring such outcomes, we have been able to learn what works and what doesn’t, and thus to make several important programmatic changes, like the one described above.

Educate! has faced other challenges, including those associated with raising funds for a cause not largely recognized by the international community, which is focused largely on building more schools and putting students in them, rather than on changing the outcomes of the education system itself. We also faced the challenges of growing from a team of part-time students to a team of nearly 60 full-time staff, largely led by East Africans. And, perhaps most importantly, we faced the challenge of collaborating with the Ugandan government and the United Nations to change the country’s education system.
Educate! can be thought of as an “action tank”—an organization that uses programmatic evidence to improve and demonstrate its effectiveness in order to encourage other organizations, institutions, and governments to adopt the model. Educate! considers it central to its mission to advocate with governments and large institutions to incorporate key aspects of its model into national education systems.

From 2010 to 2012, Educate! presented the Ugandan government and the UN International Labor Organization (ILO) with evidence of our program’s effectiveness and invited key stakeholders from both organizations to participate in and observe the program first hand. Educate!’s strategy was based on the concept of evidence-based advocacy, using actual results—in this case, jobs created—to demonstrate the program’s effectiveness and advocate for its adoption. The key evidence used during the process was the number of jobs created by the Educate! scholars through their initiatives and enterprises. In a country with such a young population and an economy that is not creating jobs fast enough to keep up with the growing workforce, job creation is crucial to the long-term economic development of the country. The government has said repeatedly that the education system must produce job creators, not job seekers. Therefore, from the government’s perspective, the significant number of jobs our scholars created was a compelling piece of evidence.

Educate! also brought key government officials out to meet our scholars, participate in Educate! classrooms, and see the program in action. The head of entrepreneurship curriculum for the National Curriculum Development Center spent two days visiting and served as a judge in Educate!’s national social entrepreneurship competition, where he saw the potential of the student-run social entrepreneurship clubs that are created in all of our partner schools.

Through this process of evidence-based advocacy, we built a partnership with the government of Uganda and the ILO that resulted in Educate!’s leadership and entrepreneurship curriculum being integrated into the national education system. Today the curriculum reaches approximately 25,000 high school students annually across Uganda—almost 25 percent of the country’s high school students of that age. Uganda is the first country in the world to incorporate into their national education system a curriculum that guides students through the process of creating a project to solve a problem they have identified in their community. The national curriculum now has a component that gives students the opportunity to start a business club in which they can practice the concepts taught in the curriculum and thereby make real change in their communities. As a result, a significant percentage of the next generation will have a very different educational experience that we believe will result in long-term, sustainable change in Uganda in the years to come.

In addition to the curriculum reform, Educate! worked with the Ugandan government to change the national entrepreneurship exam. We added a section in which students can demonstrate the progress they have made in creating a project,
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enterprise, or organization to solve a problem in their communities as part of the curriculum. This change is significant because the exam determines all the incentives and outcomes of the education system. School revenue is determined by the number of students in a school, and in an open education market like Uganda’s, parents choose where to send their children to school based primarily on average exam scores. Therefore, the exam determines each aspect of a student’s education more than anything else, from teaching methodologies, to how teachers are incentivized, to how students choose to spend their time after school and on vacations. Therefore, changing the exam will have a powerful ripple effect that could significantly alter the experience students have in school, and the outcomes of the education system.

Almost 25,000 students are currently going through the new national curriculum and taking the exam—almost 25 percent of all high school students in Uganda—thus there is great potential to significantly shift the way a generation is educated. With the implementation of Universal Secondary Education in Uganda, almost 100 percent of the country’s youth will be in high school in 10 years. As the number of secondary school students increases dramatically, so will the number going through the new curriculum, which will amplify the generational impact of Educate!’s efforts to create systemic change.

“Copylefting”

In order to maximize its impact, Educate! openly shares all aspects of its model with any organization interested in using and adapting it. We call this our “copylefting” program, a concept learned from the Grameen Bank. In order to spread the model of microfinance as far and wide as possible, bank founder Muhammad Yunus developed a concept that is the opposite of copyrighting, or copylefting. This is a method of intentionally and freely sharing a model program with anyone interested in using it.

Educate! has documented its social entrepreneurship curriculum, mentor training program, and advocacy guide, which will help organizations advocate for incorporating social entrepreneurship education into larger institutions or national systems. There currently are more than 80 organizations in 10 countries, from DRC to Mexico, using components of the Educate! model. Some organizations use one of our lesson plans, others translate the curriculum and adapt the mentor training program to their context, and some replicate the model completely. Versions of the curriculum have been translated thus far into Swahili, French, and Spanish. The copylefting concept enables Educate! to measure how and where the model is being implemented, and also to learn from each organization using it. Thus it serves as a laboratory that encourages both innovation and adaptation of the model to different cultures and contexts.

Propagating Principles

The 80 organizations Educate! has shared its model with are largely concentrated in the Global South, yet little has been happening on a systemic level to transform
education systems in the developed world. As someone who grew up and went to school in the U.S., I believed the Educate! model is just as applicable—and needed—in the United States.

The potential to adapt the Educate! model to the U.S. context was clear, but implementing it in the U.S. without adapting it first risked imposing on the U.S. a model that was tailored for Uganda. Therefore, rather than scaling, we began thinking about how to propagate the principles underlying the Educate! model. Whereas scale implies repetition and replication, propagation implies that something grows naturally, like an ecosystem, informed and influenced by the surroundings and soil in which it takes root. We believed that with something as complex and individual as education, propagation, not scale, should be the paradigm for growth. Therefore, to propagate the Educate! model, we gave ourselves the freedom and flexibility to design the program and to adapt each aspect of the Educate! model to the U.S. context.

WATSON

Over the past 35 years, the cost of higher education in the U.S. has increased twelvefold, and student debt is now greater than credit card debt. Students are increasingly demanding an educational experience that is not only affordable but also provides real-world skills. We argue that the university should be a place for students to develop and grow ideas that will shape the future; receive mentorship from the world’s foremost leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators, and thinkers; and where the investment students make in their education is not only affordable but will also pay off for the rest of their lives. Why? So they can learn to design and accelerate ideas for solving the toughest challenges facing the world, from entrepreneurial ventures to research projects and everything in between. Therefore, in 2012 I created a sister organization to adapt and improve on the Educate! model, and to rethink higher education in the U.S. The manifestation of this effort is Watson.

Watson is working to realize our new vision for higher education—a vision built on the belief that we can design a better model of higher education that doesn’t abandon students on the day they graduate, leaving them with tens of thousands of dollars in debt, little direction, few relevant skills, and only a lamb-skin degree to show for it.

Watson’s first campus was built in Boulder, Colorado, a city full of entrepreneurs surrounded by nature who are full of passion. We currently are building additional campuses in San Francisco, Kampala, Uganda, and other key cities around the world. Our goal is to create a network of campuses in cities across the globe so that Watson scholars can study in the cities most relevant to their ideas, and those cities in turn will inform their education.

Today, as sister organizations, Educate! and Watson are creating a consortium of likeminded organizations around the world that are endeavoring to be part of a greater movement to transform education. This movement is being backed by
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leading funders, including Ashoka and Echoing Green. Educate! in Uganda and Watson in the U.S. planted the seeds of what is now a growing global movement to reimagine the very purpose of education. As a result of this unexpected evolution, the educational experience of students around the globe is beginning to look very different, and it is equipping thousands of students to realize their dreams while helping to solve the biggest challenges of the 21st century.