

# Commencement Speech – Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT)

5/14/2011

*John Seely Brown*

Good morning. This is a very special day for all of us – especially for those of you graduating today, and also for your parents who are, unquestionably, very proud of your achievements.

It is also a special day for me, since IIT - especially your world class school of design - had a great deal to do with my career at Xerox Corporation where I would often come in contact with your extraordinary school and some of its most famous leaders such as Jay Doblin.

From the President and Provost introductions just given to me, you might be wondering how a hard core geek from Silicon Valley became so interested in the soft stuff - people, and how we work, play, learn and create things, together. And how I came to realize that it is not just academic brilliance that creates the pathways of success, but also or social and emotional intelligence. This form of intelligence is what enables us to read what is happening around us – that is, our surrounding context – so as to make quick, good judgments, enabling us to act and to act shrewdly.

For me, I learned this in a counter-intuitive way and it substantially transformed my life. When I entered Brown University I was always looking for odd jobs to make some money. Perhaps, because I was really good and fast at math, I was offered the opportunity to become the youngest licensed bookie in New York State. Since I loved numbers and adventure I immediately said yes – sure, why not I thought, and off I went.

Well, being good at numbers did not really prepare me for what I, all too quickly, encountered. On the track you have to close all bets before the bell rings and the gates fly open. Just before the bell is about to ring, the betting windows are jammed, folks screaming at you trying to place their bets on a hot pick.

You have to take their money and calculate quickly – very quickly – and sometimes involving substantial amounts of money. You can't mess up because any mistakes you make you personally pay for. On top of that you also can't take too much time because you must handle everyone's bet or you are apt to lose your job.

Yeah, it was kind of a *lose-lose* situation

So what do you do? Well, for me – I started inventing all kinds of shortcuts for counting the money - some were more thorough than others but they also took more time.

In the end, the actual short cut I would decide on each time, depended on my assessment of each person standing in front

of me with respect to how likely he or she was to short change me. Or, on how much that person had been watching me to see what tricks I had been using to count/calculate and so on.

No, not high math!! but high drama and high stakes if I judged wrong...

As the summer wore on I became less and less of a mathematician and more and more of a judge of character and an inventor of short cuts. There was no one to teach me but I certainly had many chances to test my judgment and improve my heuristics for counting money, making change, understanding odds and sizing up people.

The experiences that summer left me a changed person!

Yes, I continued on in theoretical mathematics but my fascination in people grew and grew and I realized that one's ability to read context and read people *in context* really mattered - maybe even more than mastering partial differential equations.

But I bet this is not so surprising to you for you have already discovered the power of your own *collective social intelligence*. Joining study groups or perhaps even creating your own study groups to collaboratively explore lecture material and problem sets that you deal with every week enables you to accelerate and amplify your learning.

You have learned the value of the social capital that comes from helping each other as you struggle with different, partial understandings that each brings to the collective.

You have discovered that often the best way to learn something is to explain it to someone else and then to jointly work on applying that skill to solving a problem or creating a design, etc.

Furthermore, I bet that no professor ever showed you how to do that. You figured it out on your own *or*, more likely, you picked it up from others.

And you learned how to explore domains that you only partially understood and how to jointly create new knowledge and new understandings...

***Please don't forget this skill!***

In a world of constant change, knowing how to create new knowledge and how to enhance your own personal understanding along with others - working together will help you immensely whether you are headed to become an entrepreneur, a designer, a corporate chieftain or civil servant.

This skill – or should we call it a disposition - will help you more now than ever before.

And why is this??

You must sense that you are entering a world that is quite different from anything we have ever seen before.

Some of us call it 'The Big Shift', which refers to a world that is moving from a trajectory of punctuated evolutions in which steps of radical disruption are followed with long steady states, measured in decades to a world in which these steps of significant disruption seem to be happening nearly every year.

At the personal level this means that many of the skills you have learned here will become outmoded faster than ever. You will need to constantly bootstrap your skills into new skills on a nearly continual basis, perhaps through the learning networks or collaborative mechanisms you have invented for yourself here at IIT.

But you will also have to invent or help to create new kinds of organizations and leadership practices that shift from a Push mentality, or engagement style, to a Pull mentality: ***From Push to Pull***. The twentieth century models of business and of work practices don't hack it all that well any more. The command and control methods used to achieve scalable efficiency for the industrial era don't work well for a world of constant change where predictability has been lost to the wind, and innovation and imagination are now the coin of the realm.

We must now seek out efficiencies of a different kind, ones that come from participating in knowledge flows enhanced by the

***emerging technologies of social networks, mobile devices and cloud computing.***

These knowledge flows are not just between people in a given organization but more and more are between people and institutions comprising an entire ecosystem.

So here is the challenge, as you go forth today:

***Our current organizations don't think eco-systemically*** and most certainly most of the bosses you will initially work for won't begin to know the social, technical or work practices required to tap the latent potential of these knowledge flows.

YOU will need to invent them; you will need to prove that they produce real value; and then you will have to help us understand and appropriate them.

You will have to nurture what I will call a reverse mentorship – where you mentor us. But be patient with us.

The key to tomorrow will rest in a synergistic relationship between better mentoring, us to you, and reverse mentoring, you of us. You have something we can learn from you but you can still learn bunches of stuff from us. And you or, should I say - we - need to be aggressively learning from every situation we encounter, we need to invent new human and social capital mechanisms more in tune with a world of Pull, rather than the older world of Push.

We need to be imaginative and bold; we need to step back from situations, reframing them when necessary, rather than just accepting their terms. But all this must be done with a spirit of entrepreneurial engagement, with an open heart, and with a deep willingness to listen with humility – to listen across disciplines, across cultures and across different world views.

Your generation is not only at the leading edge of a densely interconnected digital world, but also of a world of constant disruption – one which is globally intricate.

Please embrace change as an adventure! And embrace the world with a deep sense of awe and a desire to have impact and perhaps even shape tomorrow as it unfolds. .

This is challenging, yes, but it will be more than exhilarating.

Good luck and thank you.

©2011, John Seely Brown. All Rights Reserved

<http://www.johnseelybrown.com>