

Commencement Speech – University of Michigan 2005

John Seely Brown

4/30/05

Good morning. Today is a very special day for everyone here in this fabulous stadium – the home of the University of Michigan's great Wolverines. Of course, it is special for all of you graduating as you commence your new careers, armed with the tools of a first class education. But it is special for another reason. You are the first class of the 'Net Generation' or if you prefer – The Networked Generation.

You breathe bits of information as easily as my generation breathes air.

As members of the Net Generation, you are entering a world that needs you. But be aware that much of this world will find your ways of working, learning and socializing quite bizarre. You are digital natives. We – the grey beards, the baby boomers and the gen X-ers – are digital immigrants and our practices will need to evolve rapidly to keep up with yours. If there is any doubt about this, just consider the explosion of new information in our digital age.

Just in the year 2002, the new information generated that one year was at least a thousand times larger than the size of the entire print collection in the Library of Congress. It is hard to grasp the consequences of this much new information being generated each year, year after year. But never mind, you have invented your own strategies to surf and navigate through this immense sea of information:

- finding what you need,
- deciding what you want to trust
- and then creating whatever you want with it.
- when in doubt you might blog it and see what others think

JOHN SEELY BROWN

In a way, you already have become life-long-learners by leveraging the resources of the social mind and the web.

If it were just that you learn, work and play in ways that are different from ours – then, perhaps, that is no big deal.

But what is a big deal are your values. Most of you in the Net Generation are committed to community – to the creation of social capital as well as intellectual and financial capital. You are entrepreneurs in the old sense, but you are also entrepreneurs in the new sense – social entrepreneurs – committed to thinking out-of-the-box in order to find ways to solve pressing social problems.

You look for meaning not just in what you own or wear but in what you contribute back to society-at-large. You are engaged, first and foremost, in fostering what might be called the creative class. Not only do you want to create for yourself but you also want others to build on your creations. The more they build on your creations the greater your reputation becomes.

In a way you are functioning much like an artist – disciplined, focused, pushing boundaries, challenging assumptions and creating meaning for yourself and others. You are willing to engage with multiple viewpoints before synthesizing your own. The platforms you use are mostly digital:

- instant messaging keeps you in constant contact with your own intimate community
- blogging lets you experiment with exposing your ideas to others and getting their feedback nearly instantly
- by participating in the rapidly expanding worlds of open source, open content (such as Wikipedia) and remix you build on the work of others
- rich media helps you to express complex ideas and to find ways to combine emotion with content
- and, finally, the vast network that comprises our cyber-infrastructure – an infrastructure that the University of Michigan played a key role in creating – lets you access remote instruments and data bases all over

JOHN SEELY BROWN

the world.

These are the power tools of your generation. You can now do things that most of us could only dream about doing just a few years ago. You are the pioneers of the Net Generation.

I am glad you are armed with new tools and the social values of collaboration. We need you and your new ways of engaging with the world.

Yes, we have serious problems today:

- terrorism,
- global warming
- issues of health care and education
- and some of the unforeseen consequences of globalization.

Each of these represents a systemic challenge where no one discipline or profession any longer holds the complete answer. But this will not stop you for you are used to:

- crossing boundaries
- holding multiple conversations in mind simultaneously -and engaging in a kind of hypertext style of linking and thinking.

But please consider extending those capabilities by adding two more:

The first is the ability to listen with humility. This involves:

- active listening
- listening to silences
- listening as much to what is not being said as to what is being said

This skill underlies the art of collaboration and is increasingly important as we interact with partners all over the globe. But it also underlies the art of innovation, listening not only to your customers but also to the world at large.

This brings us to the second ability – the ability to see.

If you want to excel in innovation, especially in socially responsible innovation, then learn how to look around with unbiased eyes. This was a lesson that personally took

JOHN SEELY BROWN

me many years to learn. To remind myself of the importance of this skill I often return to a quote from John Ruskin back in 1856.

“The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion – all in one”.

Let me end by noting that my generation worked hard to create the cyber-infrastructure that now allows you to do amazing things. Please use it to amplify your own reach and to tap the powers of collaborative innovation.

Good luck and remember the importance of listening with humility and seeing clearly.

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