

The art of unlearning and reimagining

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Covid-19 is forcing us to have many conversations we probably should have initiated a long time ago. One of which is whether our education systems need to change. Recently, author, futurist and strategy consultant Graeme Codrington spoke at the Future of Accounting Education, Learning and Professional Development hosted by the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) to unlock what the future holds for tertiary education, learning and professional development, in the aftermath of Covid-19



Graeme Codrington

Codrington is quick to point out that, while Covid-19 has had devastating effects on our economy and our healthcare systems, we can also look at it as something of a gift. “The pandemic has given us an invitation to deal with disruption,” he says. “Through this crisis, we have been forced to engage with adaptability, agility, flexibility and resilience, and many industries and companies are accelerating processes they should have been doing already, things that will be valuable into the 2020s.”

Imagine radical change

This positive way of thinking can just as easily be applied to the preparation and the ongoing development of Chartered Accountants [CAs(SA)]. To illustrate this, Codrington gives an analogy from the medical industry, as he believes it’s sometimes easier to see the value of disruptive change when it’s happening to somebody else.

“I’m going to tell you a story about the possible reimagining of doctors,” he says. “If you think about it, we don’t have a healthcare system, anywhere in the world. We have a sick-care system, where you only go to visit your doctor if you are unwell.”

Codrington wonders whether Covid-19 may begin to shift this way of thinking. “Right now, doctors are consulting over Zoom

and asking us to stay away,” he says. “When my doctor recently asked me not to come in, I started to think about the possibilities of virtual consultations and telemedicine, and it wasn’t long before I went a step further.”

As a futurist, Codrington imagined a situation where he would receive a text message or a phone call from his doctor, telling him he was going to get sick in five days’ time.

But how could a doctor possibly know that?

With access to your Fitbit, your doctor could monitor your heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature. Perhaps your Instagram feed could provide information about your daily meals, while your calendar could tell your doctor where you are going and who you are meeting.

“Six months ago you would have said I was crazy, but the idea of Track and Trace is not so absurd now,” says Codrington. “Of course we don’t want a Big Brother scenario, but Covid-19 is teaching us that there could be value in sharing health information, especially if it can be anonymised.”

With the right information, your doctor could give you proactive, pre-emptive healthcare information, and if you consider that the data would be fed into a supercomputer using an AI algorithm, then privacy probably wouldn’t even be too much of an issue.

Codrington believes that embracing big data and AI in this way could lead to a proper healthcare system that is proactive rather than reactive, predictive rather than retrospective and preventative rather than responsive.

Predict, prevent, personalise and participate

Returning to the Chartered Accountancy industry, Codrington challenges the notion of building a profession that is proactive, predictive, preventative, personalised and participatory.

“Take audits as an example,” he says. “Why are we signing off on whether a transaction carried out 12 months ago looks legitimate or not? Shouldn’t we be proactive and carry out real-time auditing using AI and big data?”

Codrington truly believes this is what audit of the future is going to have to deliver. “Cas(SA) need to be much more involved in strategic enablement of the business strategy, and not merely the recording of historical information.”

So, what does this have to do with the future of education?

According to Codrington, everything!

“This is the future and the faster we can deliver this, the better we’re going to be at putting the Chartered Accountancy profession back in the prominent place it’s supposed to be.”

Accountants of the future

A few years ago, Codrington and his team at strategic insights firm, TomorrowToday, conducted research on what will happen when machines can do a lot of our work for us. What they found is that right now, and for the foreseeable future, there are many things computers can’t do.

Computers quite simply aren’t adept at what-if scenario thinking, adaptive thinking, complex problem-solving, creativity and intuition. They don’t have emotional intelligence or empathy, diversity intelligence, curiosity or an ability for storytelling. And they certainly lack initiative and entrepreneurship.

Which is why we need to develop all these things in the accountants of the future, and in learners in general.

“We have to imagine what the accounting profession, and other professions, need to look like,” says Codrington. “In simple terms, we need to reimagine what education looks like.”

If you think about how quickly Covid-19 is forcing us into the online space, it’s obvious that education needs to change. “We need to think about how we develop a CA(SA) from the beginning of their education to qualification and then to professional development,” says Codrington. “We quite simply can’t keep doing it the way we’ve done it.”

For Codrington it’s not just about skill sets, although these are, of course, crucial. “We may even have to reimagine the assessment criteria required to get the credentials in the first place,” he says. According to Codrington, assessment must include the skills mentioned above, such as adaptive thinking and problem-solving. For him, they’re not a nice-to-have extra, but skills that genuinely need to be incorporated into any curriculum.

The art of unlearning

“To sum it up, it’s not good enough for us to just learn, we need to unlearn as well,” says Codrington. He believes that’s not just a Covid-19 statement, but rather, that the pandemic has shone a massive spotlight on an existing problem.

“This year is not going according to plan, and 2021 won’t either, but if you think about it, nor did last year or the year before,” he says. “We need to stop blaming Covid-19 and realise that we live in an era of disruption, where there is constant deep structural change to the world around us.”

He closes off by asking us to imagine we had to workshop how to improve a caterpillar. If the client were the caterpillar themselves, they would probably want to make improvements that would make them less likely to be eaten by a bird. They would want to be smaller, leaner, faster, less colourful. However, if the client were an artist, they may want the caterpillar to be fatter, bigger and more colourful.

“You can make myriad changes to a caterpillar,” says Codrington, “but the better caterpillar is actually a butterfly.”

This, according to the futurist, is why unlearning is so important, and why we need to take the opportunity presented by Covid-19 to completely reimagine our situations. “If we try to survive by simply improving and tweaking the systems we already have, we might end up with a better caterpillar, but miss the fact that we should have been looking for a butterfly.”

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