

Is education a right or a responsibility, or more important than that, asks **Hugh Greenway**

I bumped into Martyn Sloman, formerly of the CIPD, at the TJ Awards evening in June. We have had a number of interesting discussions over the years, which tend to draw fruit from our shared belief that education is a 'good thing' set against our common experience that, in reality, it is often badly executed. So I was happy to bump into him and bounce my latest thought at him.

Is the responsibility for learning being pushed to the individual and away from the employer or the state?

There have been lots of articles published over the last few months about the idea that companies that invest more in learning during a recession tend to emerge stronger than those who don't. Generally speaking, these articles have been published by those with a vested interest or written in the trade press and I think they have missed the central point. Companies that emerge from a recession are by definition healthier than those that don't.

It is like looking at evolution in reverse (which is quite common and is called the argument for 'intelligent design' in a lot of American and British schools). You don't evolve gills or wings so that you can survive a flood. The flood just happens to kill all those who hadn't randomly mutated the ability to breathe underwater or fly, thus favouring their future.

In any event, it is quite clear that employer spending on learning and development is being savaged (down by somewhere between 25 and 50 per cent, we just don't want to admit it) and government spending on workforce development will also have to fall significantly (probably cut by 7.5 to 15 per cent and they don't want to have to admit that). So what is going to fill the gap? Should we all metaphorically go home and practise holding our breath underwater in the bath?

Martyn reminded me that the UK government has just published a green paper on 'rights and responsibilities' and that it was attempting to reshape the psychological contract between citizens and society with a new bill of rights. Now I know this last sentence alone is enough to have provoked something

bordering on a catatonic state in most people. Yet I highly recommend you go and have a look¹. If any legislation emerges from this consultation process (and this is a fairly big if, given the current government's travails), it could have a bigger effect on the rest of your life than almost anything else. Please go and have a look, if only to go and start a petition on the Cabinet Office website telling them what a silly idea it all is.

Interestingly the document is a bit vague about education and whether it is a right or a responsibility. It seems to be saying that you have the right to educate your children and yourself privately and if you can't or won't, the government will do some of it for you.

One of the major issues surrounding investment in education is the good old Keynesian dilemma of public and private goods. Because, generally speaking, the return on investment on education is slow to appear, the government does all the long-term stuff (literacy, numeracy, reasoning etc) and employers do all the immediate stuff (using company systems, selling more etc). But this leaves a lot falling between two stools. Employers are often lambasted by teaching professionals for standing on the sidelines, criticising schools and universities for their failure to turn out 'employable' people while refusing to engage to help with a definition of 'employable'.

"A free man is he that in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do is not hindered to do what he hath the will to do."

Thomas Hobbes,
Leviathan (1651), Chapter XXI

But there is a risk that all this discussion will be rendered moot. To return to my analogy of evolution and the flood, the water is rising and let's assume that you don't have the ability to fly or breathe under water. Do you think it would be better to wait until your employer (if you still have one) or your government (if you still have one) provides you with an endurance swimming lesson or might it be better to get on with teaching yourself...?

If you have five minutes I'd love to hear your views on this – visit www.reedlearning.co.uk/ survey and complete a short questionnaire. The first ten completed will win a free one- or two-day training course from Reed Learning. ■



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References

- <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/docs/rights-responsibilities.pdf>