

Where will the next Steve Jobs come from?

October 11 2011, by Professor Geoffrey Orsak

We Americans like to congratulate ourselves for producing great thinkers, business leaders, artists and brain-on-fire innovators. Last week, we lost one of our very best in Steve Jobs.

The eulogies have largely focused on the cool techno-social changes he spun out over the course of his life, but I am left with a gnawing question that goes straight to the heart of our [education system](#): Where will the next [Steve Jobs](#) come from?

Jobs' immense intellectual gifts were not nurtured through formal schooling. In fact, his "official" higher-education experience was, to say the least, disappointing to both Reed College and to Jobs. After six months, he withdrew from the college, but he had the insight to spend the next 18 months popping in and out of classes that developed his creativity. In his own off-center way, Jobs invented an education experience that would serve him well as he helped shape 3 1/2 decades of blazingly fast technological change.

His zigzag path to success is probably too complex a cocktail to ever be completely duplicated, but my belief is that Jobs was the first tech innovator who had unmistakable social intelligence — that special "it" factor that made him more than someone simply interested in advancing technology. I see Jobs more like Miles Davis than Thomas Edison — driven by his internal and, yes, somewhat arrogant view of the world, and serving it up in that jeans-and-black-turtleneck uniform: transcendent and enigmatic at the same time.

But as an engineering educator, I have to find a way to create more Steve Jobses — individuals with a vision bigger than their inventions. Jobs came out of a post-hippie Bay Area culture that began to feel the growing pressure of finding a career when the poetry readings and endless protests started to wane. A few miles south, a small, informal gathering of tech tinkerers was emerging as the crucible of the new Silicon Valley, and Jobs was poised to become the coolest kid in the class.

He wasn't a product of the '50s Cold War generation that started Hewlett-Packard and Intel, cemented in the notion of the orderly progress of technology and society. Jobs' innate sense of an emerging generation, not just new markets, made his ideas relevant and captivating to a rapidly growing community whose members never saw themselves as consumers of technology. His strength was in pursuing his vision when others were headed in different directions.

So how do we grow more people like Steve Jobs? The mad thinkers who can sense subtle shifts in people's attitudes and aspirations?

Jobs leaves us a template we can follow if we are willing to throw out the old rules of conventional education, where adding incremental knowledge becomes a mind-numbing, year-upon-year march toward a normative notion of intelligence.

Jobs was after something much more challenging: leading society to a place yet unimagined. This doesn't have to be happenstance — we can provide the structure that nurtures ideas and path-breaking technologies. At Southern Methodist University, we have established an “innovation gym” where young minds liberated from convention tackle the most challenging of problems under ridiculously short deadlines — but all in a spirit of serious play. It's a style Jobs would have embraced.

Next, we need to step onto that pedagogical “third rail” and embrace the idea that collecting vast amounts of knowledge is best left to the Internet, rather than human memory. Tap that resource, free the brain, and we’ll see lightning-fast movement toward the next big idea.

Let’s also face up to a concept educators struggle with in a tough economy: Lighting a fire under genius may not be a matter of “What will you earn?” but “Why should you care?” We need to connect the best research on our campuses to our undergraduate students — bring them into the adventure early. And that means breaking down some age-old assumptions about who gets to do research.

One day, and I hope soon, we will see many new Steve Jobses reshaping public education, or health care, or looking at solving deep problems in global poverty. The problems always change, but cool never goes out of style.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

Citation: Where will the next Steve Jobs come from? (2011, October 11) retrieved 21 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-steve-jobs.html>

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