

The agile learner in a VUCA world

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The pace of change in the world is an oft-mentioned idea, and actually has been a topic whose presence in conversation and media has gained frequency and predominance for a number of years. A decade ago, we marvelled at the 2008 version of the video *Shift Happens*.

In 2018, we are finally beginning to feel in our *day to day* existence what the post-Cold War US Army War College called the **VUCA** framework. The Army College created a structure for responses to what they termed **Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity (VUCA)** situations (Kosh, 2017).

Today we find that the shift that happens is something we can feel in our lives.

Consider the future we are educating children for.

In his video provocation *Digital transformation: are you ready for exponential change?* Futurist Gerd Leonhard takes us into a description of the kind of VUCA world we live in, in which *disruption is the norm*.

Margaret Wheatley (2007) talks about why it's been so challenging for people to grasp how to problem-solve in a VUCA world. "We've reached the end of a paradigm. Many of our fundamental beliefs and practices no longer serve us or the greater world" (p. 2).

Wheatley is talking about the models we've used to problem-solve in the time, place and space before VUCA became a normal feature of daily human life.

The paradigm of the machine is, ironically, what we held on to for so long. The factory model of education, for instance, is a macro version of a machine. Input, process, predictable output. If parts fail, replace them. Build a better machine, but make sure it does the same thing.

That's what Kodak thought until they went bust after digital cameras became the choice of the pre-selfie generations.

So our paradigm of a predictable, linear process called school gave us certainty about jobs and futures. And this paradigm is no longer what guides our schools.

We are awakening to the VUCA world, and we are asking ourselves if the children in our schools will be ready.

The machines aren't who we want to be, and they are no longer models for our systems. Machines may learn, but there are decisions that are not reduced easily to algorithms.

The most valuable assets we now have are what make us human. One of these traits is what the World Economic Forum calls learnability, the will and capacity to learn. Burke (2017) at Columbia University calls this ability learning agility, and he presents us with nine facets of behaviour that combine into learning agility: flexibility, speed, experimenting, collaborating, information gathering, feedback seeking, and reflecting.



Learning agility (Burke, 2017) with adaptations. See a closeup at [this link](#).

In our approaches to learning framework, creating learning agility is our primary goal. We want to develop people who are willing and able to face volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity with the kind of self-directedness and agency that we glimpse when students undertake the PYP Exhibition, the Personal Project, an Internal Assessment, CAS project, Extended Essay.

Our VUCA world does not present problems that have predictable solutions. Process is now interrupted in the middle of its run. What we need in the VUCA world are reliable dispositions in the face of rapid change, previously unseen problems, interconnected issues that present complexity single minds cannot

define without a network of thinkers collaborating on them, and the ecotone of ambiguity as we travel toward understanding.

This is so stressful, and messy

The learning process usually is. Learning that sticks rarely follows a predictable and clearly linear pattern.

Yes, it is tough to have to change the ways we work in our schools. It is tough not having the comfort of lessons that have been pre-planned for the myth of some average student.

And if we wait until we are comfortable with the idea that change has become exponential and we must learn a new way of thinking in it: should our children wait? And, how long will the children have to wait?

The shift is now. It is already in our hands. We have a conceptual framework, a framework which transcends time, space and place. We see a rise of an aggressive drive to understand a pedagogy which mimics the response to ambiguity: inquire, create and follow a process, fail and iterate, and grow, then do it again, do it better. We have a set of clearly described skills that we can teach explicitly.

And we are in a place — school — that can slow down the pace, give our children the safety to learn and try and fail and learn and try again.

The problems today might not be the problems when our current students are the ones that need to solve them. When those new problems present themselves, the dispositions we cultivate like resilience, flexible thinking, reflectiveness and the skills to approach learning combine into a resourcefulness that cannot be simplified into an 'if-then' statement.

The open-ended tasks that we design represent the VUCA. When the student poses a question for a personal project, the answer isn't readily apparent. The process might not work as the student planned it. Along the way, the repertoire of skills and opportunities to make unusual links between ideas represent the developing agility that the student rehearses in a cyclical way throughout the continuum, with each iteration of the open-ended project becoming more and more complex as the student progresses.



ATL skills and learner traits allow us to face a VUCA world. See a closeup at [this link](#).

We can't change the way the world approaches what seems like entropy even as we seem to approach the technology and science to understand it. What we *can* change — today — is the experience of school.

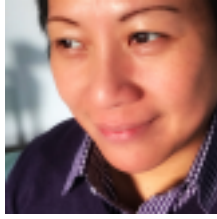
References and further reading:

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