



REFLECTIONS FROM THE EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM WORKSHOP

Ramallah, Palestine



FRUGAL INNOVATION CONCEPT

The Harvard Business review defines frugal innovation as a way of “seeing resource constraints not as a liability but as an opportunity.” When we are faced with obstacles in education, say, the system is rigid, or we don’t have access to resources, do we just passively accept this? Or does it spark a creative impulse in us to work around it?

This concept was about challenging ourselves as educators, as well as our colleagues, to step out of our comfort zones, to try new things in teaching, even if it’s messy and imperfect. In fact when we do so, we are modeling this for our students: it’s ok to try new things, you don’t have to be perfect at everything all the time. We also need to be forgiving of ourselves, if we take a risk and try

something new and it fails. It’s easy to talk about innovation in education as a ...applying it in the classroom is challenging, because there is a whole class full of students, and the human element is unpredictable.

Mervi Jansson, the workshop facilitator, asked each participant to share their own personal best teaching practices using two different techniques:

Speed dating

Participants are paired up and spend 2 minutes sharing their best practice with each other. After the beep, they switch to new partners. This way they are able to learn about each other’s techniques in a short period of time.

Gallery walk

After the speed dating exercise, the participants hung all of the papers containing their best practices on a wall as a display. They walked through and read them, and if they liked a best practice, they signed their name on it.

Through this exercise, the participants saw that there are many wonderful best teaching practices already in use in Palestine. These are living examples of frugal innovation. Speed dating and gallery walk are also models of ways that information can be shared in an exciting and interactive way, they exemplify the concept of frugal innovation in action.



TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCIES

During the second part of the first day, the participants discussed the needed **competencies** in education today. Here are some of their thoughts:

- We need more skills-based learning in Palestinian schools.
- Our students need to learn how to look after themselves and manage daily activities safely at a young age.
- Our students need to acquire cultural competence, i.e. broaden their horizons, learn about the world, and interact with people from other cultures.
- We need to find ways for our students to be more comfortable in expressing themselves and in interacting with others.
- We need to encourage multiliteracy: with the proliferation of new communication technologies, and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity, we need a new "literacy" where our students are able to read and assimilate meaning different mediums (internet, multimedia, digital media), not just books.
- We need to embrace technology in the classroom, not prohibit it or punish its use. Smart devices can be an incredible teaching tool.

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VISIT TO DUAL STUDIES PROGRAM AT AL QUDS UNIVERSITY

In the context of our discussion and analysis of different education ecosystems, the participants visited the innovative Dual Studies program at Al-Quds University to hear directly from students, University members and consultants about what makes this program unique. Students enrolled in this program alternate between 3 months at University and 3 months in a company, thus gaining practical skills in their field of study. Upon arriving at Al Quds University, the participants were welcomed by Professor Imad Abu Kishek, University President, who

introduced us to the DS program. Professor Salaheddin Odeh, Dean of Dual Studies, then gave us a more detailed presentation of the DS program which is essentially a rich ecosystem comprised of professors, students, the University, a German consulting firm providing technical support, and a network of over 130 private sector companies actively working to provide students with qualifications to meet evolving market needs. In the course of the discussion with a number of the stakeholders involved in this ecosystem, Dr. Isam Ishaq stressed the point

that working with different key players is complex. This is in fact the point of an ecosystem. Working alone is certainly easier, but working in an ecosystem and building the linkages that create an impact on a bigger scale – although more challenging – is a much richer process with greater impact and more comprehensive results. The DS program is still in its early phases (this is its second year), so the participants found it especially interesting to look at how it is being shaped through dialogue between all stakeholders about how to best meet the

needs of students and equip them with 21st century skills.

During the presentation, a number of students shared their experience of the DS program, including Mohannad Sahwein, a 2nd year electrical engineering student, currently training at Electro, who said, "At the company, the practical applications of electrical engineering really bring to life all the theoretical knowledge we learn at University. I've also gained skills in leadership, management and sales, which are a crucial addition to my skill set."

The participants especially appreciated the DS program's ability to build an effective ecosystem by getting a large network of companies on board in such a short period of time. This makes the program quite attractive

to students; one student, Khaled Jaffan, shared, "I initially went to Germany to enroll in a similar program, but when the DS program started at Al-Quds University, I was overjoyed that I could return and study in my homeland."

The students said that when they are at the companies, they feel like regular employees. This is a very empowering experience for them. Aya Dadou, a 2nd year Business Management student, explained, "In the beginning I was very nervous about making any mistakes, but then I found that it's not a big deal, I just talk about it with my supervisors and they teach me the correct way to do it."

All in all, the participants were very inspired by the unique ecosystem created by the Dual Studies program at Al-Quds University, which

goes beyond traditional stakeholders to include a very vital element in education: real-life training and application of theoretical skills. The participants expressed their hope to see the program expand to include more students and more fields, and applauded the efforts of all those who are involved in making the first program of its kind in the Middle East such a success.





MAPPING THE EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM

OEP facilitator Mervi Jansson drew an analogy in which she compared the school, university, educational institution or organization ecosystem to a pond, the regional ecosystem to a lake, and finally the national education ecosystem to an ocean. The school, university, educational institution or organization is the main unit, the key building block. "We have to learn how to swim in the pond, she said, before we can venture into the lake or the ocean."

Over the course of the workshop, she continued to emphasize that all the program participants are the experts on the education ecosystem in Palestine, therefore they are best placed to map out the different elements that make up the ecosystem here.

School, university, educational institution or organization level

The first challenge was to think about the different elements that make up the participants' individual ecosystems. They were asked to create "mind maps" of our schools or institutions. In this way, they began to become conscious of all the different players that contribute to their ecosystems, including parents, students, teachers, government entities, clubs and NGOs.

Mervi emphasized how educational institutions work with different stakeholders, and that the challenge becomes in managing the relationships with all these elements. She encouraged the participants to look at education as an integral part of society, and to think about building bridges, partnerships and trust with other societal institutions. At the end, they shared their maps with each other using the "Find a person with the same number as you" technique. The facilitators distributed certain numbers at the beginning, and then the participants had to find the person whose number matched our own. This is a good exercise to assign pair work based on a random process, because often we tend to pair up with the same people (those we are familiar and comfortable with) if given the choice.

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Mervi Jansson

Regional level

The next exercise was about mapping the education ecosystem at a regional level. Initially, the idea was to divide the basic ecosystem into two regions, North and South of Palestine, since they are really geographically separate. Then the discussion led the participants to add Jerusalem, as it has a unique geo-political status, and therefore its ecosystem should be looked at separately. And finally, Ramallah is considered to be in the middle of the West Bank, neither North or South, so it was added as a distinct region. Participants then split into 4 groups, each in charge of mapping the ecosystem of a different region: North, South, Jerusalem and Ramallah. They saw that each region has a specific context.

National level

After mapping the school and regional education ecosystems, the participants were given the biggest challenge of all: to look at the bigger picture, the "ocean", and map the education ecosystem as they see it on a national level. The process they used to do this was quite interesting. They worked on attaching the different elements to the wall: each participant went up to the wall and attached one element. The next participant added another element, and so on. In the end, they found that even though they each worked independently, in the end they had collaborated towards a fairly comprehensive attempt at mapping the education ecosystem on a national level. Their map included MOEHE, the government and other ministries, Municipalities, the Education District Office, Public schools, Private schools and UNRWA schools, the Teacher training center, Universities, Donors and NGOs, as well as the political context in general.





I PROMISE EXERCISE

The three-day workshop concluded with the “I promise” exercise. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with the words “I promise” at the top. They had to commit to carrying out one new activity before the next workshop. The promises in general included applying what they’d learned in a practical way, and sharing their newly-acquired knowledge about the Finnish education system with their colleagues.

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