



Our complex world

In recent decades, the world has changed dramatically; our knowledge of ourselves and our universe has increased, infrastructures have become globalized and technological developments have revolutionized the way we communicate with each other.

One consequence of these changes that has passed relatively unnoticed is that we each have an increasingly complex world to deal with in our daily lives, which can affect us in a number of ways – some of which may be detrimental to our well-being, and which we may not even have fully acknowledged.

This article will explore this increased complexity and consider the ways in which it could affect us as individuals. It will argue that we each need a new range of skills to deal with this complexity, and will discuss why we don't currently have them.

The complexity of the modern world

The range and content of information has increased

Human knowledge is increasing at a fast rate – for example, in 1965, Gordon Moore, co-founder of the technology company Intel, predicted that the number of transistors that could be fitted onto a computer chip would double every two years. Trends since his prediction have shown 'Moore's Law' to be reasonably accurate, and it illustrates the speed at which certain areas of knowledge are developing.ⁱ There is an increasingly detailed and rich resource of information about the world available to us.

Alongside this, the widespread use of computers and developments in communications such as the internet and satellite technology have opened up and centralized our access to a huge array of information that we may have never seen before. For example, we can find out what is happening in any country in the world, however remote, via the internet or digital television. Or, we can see through the Hubble space telescope from our own home. Much of this information is updated almost instantaneously – we have a running commentary on what is happening on the planet (and beyond).

The range and number of sources of this information has also expanded beyond recognition – estimates suggest that the internet contains 15-30 billion web pages,ⁱⁱ and hundreds of satellite television channels now exist.

This increase in information creates some new issues for us. First, we run the obvious risk of information overload – there is so much information available that we are overwhelmed by it. This in itself can make us confused and anxious.

It can also be difficult to locate useful information, partly because sources such as the internet can give equal weight to any viewpoint or information provider, whether reliable or not, and the onus is on the searcher to know exactly what they are seeking and the most reliable sources for it. The

increased number of sources in other media (e.g. the range of television channels) can present a similar problem. We might not know the most reliable sources for what we are seeking, and in this situation might find ourselves using less credible sources. Useful information can also be hard to locate because one has to spend time negotiating layers of 'chatter' or 'filler' before one can reach it.

The increase in available information can also make it harder to identify which elements will be useful to us in our everyday lives. The wider availability of information with little differentiation of value between sources or types means that there is now less of an accepted 'range of knowledge' that is deemed to be useful for each of us to gain in life. People gravitate towards the 'niche' things that interest them, from celebrity culture to Cuban politics, regardless of whether these are as useful in their lives as other forms of knowledge (e.g. a broad knowledge of world history or how our food is produced). Whilst in some ways this is a positive thing, perhaps the decline of a 'standard' of useful knowledge to get us through life is a problem - and a grounding of 'perspective' on some key issues would be useful for each of us, alongside the freedom and skills to explore the topics that interest us.

The range and content of communication has increased

Not only has the amount of information and range of sources increased, but so has the amount of communication being actively fired at us.

The range and content has increased for a number of reasons. Overall, we could simply argue that more communications are being sent to us through each source and also that more sources of communication have opened up. For example, between 1995 and 2005 the overall volume of direct mail increased by 77 per cent.ⁱⁱⁱ Reasons behind these increases include the increasing availability and variety of technology to send and receive communications, plus the growth in commercial opportunities to exploit these channels.

Some of this information is from interest groups including environmental organisations, religious groups, political parties, government health departments and commercial organisations. Many such organisations will claim to be 'wanting the best for us', as interest groups tend to!

We are therefore subject to more influences than we have been before, whether they are urging us to recycle more, give to charity, stop smoking or buy more chocolate. These, often conflicting, demands can cause us problems – how do we know which are sensible demands to follow? How can we balance competing demands? Indeed, how do we know if we should be following any of them at all? This increased range of demands can make us feel uncertain, guilty, stressed and envious. And we are given little guidance or support throughout our lives on how to handle such an array of messages and influences.

It is not just increased exposure to interest groups that can cause us problems, however, as the general increase in information we receive from the world can also present us with challenges. For example, the communication medium or information can be a nuisance in itself (for example, junk mail), it can reduce our sense of peace and we might not know how to prevent certain communications from reaching us. We might also be exposed to influences that are not actually from interest groups, but that indirectly promote certain messages – for example, particular TV channels will give us a particular view of the world, whether they are deliberately biased (e.g. reflecting the views of their owners), or simply reflecting the norms of society. Again, we are given little guidance on understanding these sources or how the information communicated by them could affect us, and this can result in our views being influenced (even if not deliberately), often without our realising it.

The complexity of the systems around us has increased

In recent years the supply chains, marketplaces and disposal chains for many of the goods and services we consume as individuals have ‘gone global’. This has led to the development of a massive and intricate web of complexity behind even the simplest services we use or products we buy. For example, the ingredients of a typical BLT sandwich will have travelled over 31,000 miles and been through a huge array of complex processes before the final, simple product reaches the shelves of a supermarket.^{iv}

In the localized economies of old, the effects of an individual’s actions were far less complex and extensive. The wheat needed to make the bread that they bought from the baker would probably have been grown in a nearby field and the waste they produced would have been disposed of locally. Individuals have been ‘plugged into’ the global economy for hundreds of years – the difference in the last fifty years has been that our level of global interdependence has grown to a point at which it affects most areas of our lives.

Not only are there now more complex processes behind our everyday lives, but also a greater number of parties are affected by them. For example, when the ingredients of a BLT sandwich are gathered from a range of places around the world, a greater number of people (such as producers and packers) and range of environments are affected by this process.

This increased complexity in the systems around us presents each of us with new challenges. For example, it is difficult to tell who or what we are affecting with each action we take, and in what way we are affecting them. If we want to understand the effects of each of our actions (for example, if we want to live ethically) we need a great deal more information about the processes behind our lives than we ever did. And this information is often not easily available.

It is clearly too much to expect people to research, and then evaluate, this amount of information for every action they take. We may therefore be left uncertain about the consequences of even our simplest actions, which might make us feel guilty or anxious if we’re trying to live in an ethical way. It may also heighten the sense that we are part of a system that is clearly wrong but is too large and complex for us to do anything about – a feeling that cannot be good for our well being.

The complex processes behind our actions now also mean that even a simple action can cut across a range of different moral values that we may hold. A particular action may be consistent with some of our values but not others. For example, a t-shirt you are purchasing may be made from sustainable cotton, but the workers picking the cotton may have been subjected to unfair working conditions. In this situation, should the environment ‘trump’ human welfare? Questions such as how we should prioritise our ethical concerns are difficult, and if we don’t know how to approach them they can be confusing and make us anxious if we are trying to live in a reasonably ethical way. But, as we will see later in this paper, no-one seems to be giving us guidance on how we should approach these questions.

There are more possibilities to choose from

The choices available to us in our lives have increased considerably over recent decades. The increase in information available to us can broaden our horizons and expand the possibilities for our lives. This might be as simple as learning about new recipes from cooking programmes on TV, new hobbies presented in a niche magazine, new travel destinations gained from the internet or new political issues to become involved in.

For some, the possibilities might extend even further - falling costs of air travel and developments in communications have given many people the option of living in a country other than their native residence, and in this respect the world has opened up to a proportion of the population.

Developments in communications have made it possible for some jobs to be based away from the office in almost any location.

Overall, many of us seem to have more choice available as to how to spend the time in our lives than we ever did. But are we adequately equipped to deal with these choices? There are so many possibilities out there that it can be difficult to know which options we should pursue. Rather than being a positive factor in their lives, for some people the array of choices can be almost paralysing. It can also mean that we put pressure on ourselves, feeling that we should be doing more to make the most of the opportunities out there, even if what we actually want is to live relatively simple, quiet lives. The difficulty we face in making these choices is increased by the pressure that modern society exerts on us to live our lives in a particular way - to strive in life and make the most of every chance we have.

We need some help in making these choices. We need to develop the thinking skills and have access to the information that will help us consider which options are genuinely the best for us.

We lack the skills to deal with this complexity

The evidence so far in this paper suggests that the world around us has changed to a point where we now all need a new range of thinking skills, simply to be able to live happy and ethical lives. We might not have needed these skills to such an extent in the past just to help us 'get by' in life.

Some of the skills that we need include the ability to gain perspective on our lives and the world around us, to think critically and to consider complex ethical questions. At present, the institutions around us such as our education system do not equip us with enough of these skills, or present information to us in the way we need in order to develop perspective on our lives and the world. In fact, as we will see, many aspects of the modern world are actually helping to *prevent* us from gaining these things.

Why we lack these thinking skills

We are immersed in detail, with little chance to see the 'big picture'

In the modern world, most of us live our lives immersed in detail, without having the thinking skills or information to enable us to reflect and 'lift ourselves out' of this complexity, in order to see our lives and the world in broader perspective.

We lead busy lives in the modern world. We each have a large range of concerns and things to do in our everyday lives that can often lead us to 'keep our heads down' and 'just keep going', struggling to keep on the treadmill rather than getting off it regularly to stand back and see where we are going. We seem to lack time for reflection on any topic in our busy lives – even the topic of why we are so busy and whether we need to be.

The influences and complexity of the modern world can also make it difficult for us to develop perspective and see the 'big picture'. On a daily basis, we are immersed in so much detail, are surrounded by so many concepts and involved in so many complex systems (for example, those that produce and supply our food) that it is difficult to work out which sources of information will provide us with perspective rather than more unnecessary detail.

Another form of complexity that we are born into is human society itself, which has developed into a massive physical and conceptual structure over millennia of civilisation. The physical structure that human beings have built includes clothes, cities, buildings, roads and transport. Before the construction of this elaborate structure, we were living naked in the natural environment like any other creature. This physical framework is accompanied by a similar conceptual structure in which, over the years, human beings have built up a range of languages, beliefs, customs and concepts.

If we want to see ourselves and our situation in some degree of perspective we should acknowledge that we are capable of developing these complex structures but should also be aware that they *are* human-made and that major aspects of our identity as creatures are no different from how they were without these structures. Having this awareness makes us wiser people and less prone to arrogance and delusion in our day-to-day lives. But in the modern world, we seem to lack this important piece of perspective, and are not taught to develop it by the institutions around us, such as the education system.

The complexity of the modern world can not only make it difficult for us to develop this broad form of perspective about our status as creatures, but can also represent a barrier to developing perspective on a whole host of other, more day-to-day, areas – from our impact on other people and the environment, through to the sources of some of our cultural beliefs.

Currently, the main institutions within which ordinary people reflect and think about broader matters are religions. But everybody should have the chance to learn about and undertake this process of reflection and thinking – not simply those people who belong to religious movements. Additionally, people should have the chance to do this thinking and reflection free from the influence of particular ideologies such as religions. The state therefore needs to play a role in providing these opportunities and skills.

We live in an ‘anti-thinking’ culture

Our lack of reflection in day-to-day life is not simply due to a lack of opportunities to undertake this process – if we gave it a higher priority, it seems likely that we would be able to find time to do it. In the modern world there also appears to be a suspicion of intellectualism – an ‘anti-thinking’ culture, in which ‘getting on with things’ and ‘taking action’ are far more important and positive traits than thinking about things. The latter is seen as unnecessary and even lazy. This may be yet another trait that has emerged from industrialisation and the pursuit of economic growth over the last couple of centuries, as it reflects a feeling that people need to be productive members of the economic system, and that if you are not busily taking action then you are wasting time. It is difficult to step back and reflect or give time to thinking when most of the influences in our society are pushing us to keep our heads down, keep working and keep on the treadmill of modern life.

Life skills are not seen as useful knowledge

In a similar way to there being a preference for action over thinking, there also appears to be a preference for one particular type of knowledge over another.

Early on in his leadership, Tony Blair highlighted that the 3 priorities of his government would be “education, education, education”.^v But education for what? There is currently greater focus on educating people to become active, productive contributors to economic growth than helping them to develop other important life skills – including the thinking skills we have been discussing in this article.

In modern society, ‘useful’ knowledge seems to be that which will enable us to innovate, create, contribute to technological progress, develop businesses and make profit – in other words, knowledge that will help us flourish within the economic system. Whilst such areas of knowledge are not unimportant, they appear to be regarded more highly than other forms of knowledge, such as those in the humanities - philosophy, history, political theory etc. As argued earlier however, this imbalance seems foolish, as the latter topics are key elements of the life skills and thinking skills we need to live happy and compassionate lives.

Education policy seems to be driven by good intentions but is heavily compromised by a conflict in priorities between economic needs and the need to develop healthy, happy human beings. It is therefore clear that we need to rebalance our education priorities towards helping human beings to

develop the skills (such as the thinking skills outlined earlier) that they need to live happy and fulfilled lives in the modern world, rather than simply addressing economic needs.

Knowledge is promoted above thinking

There appears to be a tendency to feed people with detailed knowledge rather than to help them develop the skills they need to navigate their way around a topic and gain the knowledge they need themselves. In other words, to promote knowledge rather than thinking skills.

It is something of a mystery why detailed knowledge is promoted more than broad thinking skills (such as ‘the ability to gain an overview of a topic’) in society. One explanation might be that, as our knowledge of the world and universe builds up, we are forced to focus on a limited range of topics in depth if we are to actually gain a thorough and up-to-date knowledge of them. This appears to be what has happened in academia, where post-graduate research in many topics now tends to involve working on a highly specialized subject, in order to move knowledge forward a little on this area.

The ongoing advent of new knowledge does not seem to be a good enough reason to avoid adopting a generalist approach to knowledge in our everyday lives however. To get through life, most of us do not need to hold PhDs in one topic, and the same is certainly the case at school and college level.

Perhaps the benefits of particular ways of thinking (including developing broad thinking skills) have not been recognised due to the reason highlighted a little earlier - because we have not allocated sufficient priority to helping people develop the skills they need to live happy and fulfilled lives in the modern world, which include abstract thinking skills. There may also be a feeling that some of these skills are too complex for many people to grasp and therefore that they shouldn’t be taught to everyone. I suggest however that this claim lacks courage and vision, as people don’t necessarily require an increase in the complexity of the *content* of the topics they are required to learn, but just a change in the skills we teach them in order to handle this content. And once they possess these skills, the content that now seems complex to people may seem less so.

We don't see life skills as something to be developed throughout life

In the modern world, if people are lucky enough to have an education, they are only provided with a tiny sprinkling of all the knowledge available to them, and at a very early age. At the end of this schooling period, most people stop taking in this sort of knowledge in any serious way (if they ever did) and are then left to make their way in the world. Only a minority of people seem to continue to actively learn from this knowledge resource in any serious way.

There is a strong argument in favour of increasing our focus on adult and lifetime education. Once we have left education, most of us go into jobs and try to do these, as well as live the rest of our lives, with no reference back to the little we did learn at school, let alone attempting to gain more knowledge.

It is already recognised by policy makers that ongoing learning throughout life can bring us many benefits. But the identification of the need for thinking skills suggests that there are some ‘skills for life’ that we should be learning throughout life rather than simply as children. Would a mandatory period of adult education in life skills be such a bad idea? Might it not only improve society generally but also reduce depression, improve relationships, increase well-being and have other possible benefits?

Summary

We’re living in a world with different conditions from ever before – a world that has become more complex in various ways. We can often find ourselves ‘lost’ in this new world, with a high availability of information and various opportunities and problems tugging away at our sleeves, but without the

necessary mental tools at our disposal to deal with them. This may be causing us a variety of problems, from ongoing anxiety and malaise to an inability to lead the lives we really want.

One of the aims of Life² is to make people aware of these conditions and to give people ideas, information and advice to help them flourish in this complex world. Please explore our site to find out more – www.lifesquared.org.uk.

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i www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/

ii <http://www.pandia.com/sew/383-web-size.html>

iii Direct Mail Information Service – www.dmis.com

iv Hughes J and Thomas P, "BLT – The Big Lifestyle Trade Off", *The Ecologist* 2006,
http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=622

v Giddens, Anthony. "The Third Way: the renewal of social democracy", Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, p.109