

Book Reviews for Carers & Educators

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Natural Born Learners

Authored by Alex Beard

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This is not going to be your typical edubook review. This one is written by a human rights researcher, who over the past two decades has come to promote an understanding that Beard advocates well: education as the solution to almost every ordeal we face today.

The edubook is not typical either. Far from the usual academic or pedagogical bores with eschatological undertones of do this or else, *Natural Born Learners* presents a kind of around the world in 80 days travel diary of an educator noticing the vibes of the *edussance* we are experiencing, with a balanced understanding of diverse theoretical and practical leaps revolutionising the fortunes of our global family.

Unlike other avant garde edubooks focussing on technology as the messiah saving the soul of education, Alex Beard dispassionately examines, and offers a range of elements for the advancement of protagonists of learning: the individual, the institutions and the community.

Fully cognisant of the Oxford Martin Report, our innate need for purpose, and the 21st Century imperative to develop human capacities of creativity, compassion and cooperation, Beard travels the world to distil first-hand information and insight. He frames the results as learning, 'from talking to dying' for individuals. He offers specific recommendations to institutions—the competitive giants able to meet, at best, the demands of the Industrial Revolution—to seek 'collective leadership' with the foresight to harness the forces of our time and move beyond illusory limitations impacting our life today. Last but not least, Beard enriches our understanding of community as an integral protagonist in learning through connection, compassion and communication.

In this manner, Beard generously gives away the universal secret to success in learning: 'human plus machine plus better process'. He lays out the elements involved in the rising awareness that the coming generations face a lifetime of uncertainty enriched by an unprecedented journey of learning. Beard highlights the requirement to adopt a pioneering posture of learning about all things new. Inspired by George Saunders' motto to 'stay so open it hurts', Beard invites us to a lifetime of thinking critically, learning incessantly, investigating creatively and using technology only where it helps to build a future challenging, but so promising that none of us can fathom its grandeur at this point in time.

However, the book seems to downplay one of the most significant developments in learning, namely, the movement of the masses in unstable environments and its impact on education.

Having lived in the global north and south, and worked in hotspots where human rights violations, conflict and populations on the move are forcing millions to seek education in ways we've never thought possible, Beard seems to miss the boat aiming for our UK shores: the necessities of learning in a life on the move, be it as a result of natural or manmade disaster.

Natural Born Learners is full of fabulous tales about new ways of learning from Singapore to New York to Finland, with some diversions in rising giants like India. But it does miss other emergent trends that are exploring learning in unstable environments, like Columbian rural communities, Syrian refugee camps, Sri Lankan post-tsunami towns, or underground universities where persecuted minorities in MENA risk prison to access their right to education.

But don't let that get you down. Natural Born Learners is a fantastic manifesto advancing the central civilisation-building power despite the 'missing link' to the right to education challenging so many on the move in our world. Beard carefully delineates the benefits of one of the most important areas of education emerging in the shadow of the rising tech tide: the increasing need for character education.

In my experience, a requirement for a culture of dignity and development, and restoring stability in any setting, character education enables us to balance rights and responsibilities in pursuit of a good life, as the golden rule for every child, woman and man. Beard's insight into the fact that 'we were born not only to learn to think and to do, but also to feel' calls for new characteristics empowering our thoughts, words and actions in our daily affairs, that over a lifetime form and transform our character.

This book offers many moments to stop, reflect and redefine our golden rule, and train our character as 'essential to longer-term success' not through 'the solitary act of developing one's own faculties, but a shared effort of advancing our societies.' In this light, a fantastic book for anyone interested in living a good life in the midst of the revolution that is restructuring our understanding of everything including learning, Natural Born Learners is a source of information, inspiration and commitment to betterment of our own self and society.

So, forget about this book as one 'you must read if you're in education'. That is a limited understanding of its scope. This is a book written for anyone living on this planet. At a time in our history when we are increasingly immersed in all things unprecedented, we are in greater need of learning as a natural part of our lives. As Pharrell Williams highlights 'If you're not learning, you're wasting your time'.

Well done Alex Beard.

Wish Tarantino's writings could come remotely close to yours in advocating a natural born reality.