It is the Library. What else.

Posted on 20/12/2012 by Wilma van Wezenbeek

I never came to post this one – I guess that the ending of a year might be a good momentum for almost anything, I must say that it is far from original (I know), but it is an attempt to talk about a thing (libraries) without explicitly mentioning the name (all the time). Another reason to write this was that I do not want to play a defensive role; I want to take another approach. Inspired by (I do watch the telly when working in a hotel room) The Richard Dimbleby Lecture (BBC, 28-02-2012), Ken Robinson’s TED talk on Changing the education paradigms, Steven Johnson’s Where good things come from and Thomas Friedman (2011. That used to be us.).

found this nice picture of TU Delft Library on Arvind Jayashankar’s weblog.

So finally I sat down to it. In a hotel room in a Birmingham, February 28th, almost 29th, 2012. I decided that I should now put down the framework and that this framework could be transformed into something wilder, or deeper, or more.

The whole idea is that we all are working to make the world a better place. Surely we as being people working in science. And good science needs good sustainable support.

What is it that science, the scientists, the students, the research&developers of our companies and anyone else involved in science need to make this world a better place? Let us assume that they work in a university or company or study at a place where the basic elements such as their lab facility, a stable state-of-the-art ict infrastructure, and things as their salary or for students their exams and classes are being facilitated. But what could make the difference?

Firstly they all need access to see what already has been done, to proceed where no-one has gone before, and to understand what could go wrong. To study as a new learner or to gain deeper insights in new fields or being a life-long learner. Access for others to their own production and products (articles, labdata, software, experimental settings, videos, images, blogs) if possible, so that they themselves and/or their institute or company are “recognized”. Viewing the latest weblectures from anywhere they decide to be because that is the place they can best carry out their research, thinking, talking or just offers the best studyplace.

And not just access would do, real science means the possibility to dig deeper, to understand more, to repeat your experiments, to link to possible bypasses and go on. That takes time, it takes patience, it takes talent and it costs some. It means thoroughness or richness, posing and opposing theories and getting fundamental discussions that might end nowhere, but sometimes mean it all. To read and learn from your suggested books, but finding that this is not enough, doing extra assignments, taking up special projects, being curious and being proud of it. Knowing that you can find your stuff in journals, via databases, and ebooks, but enriching your playground with other inspiration via TV, film, podcasts, music, websites or magazines.

And nobody can make the world a better place just on his own. You need others, you need criticism, you need serendipity, you need to meet your peers. Of course you can travel to your congresses, but you also need this meeting point nearby. It is a sort of access point, but a physical one. You can drink your coffee, tea, juice, go through some magazines, talk and meet with both the PhD or colleague you know from your department, but also the people you accidently bump into, the lecturer you at last can ask that one question, to attend “just-nice-to-know” or “hey-isn’t-that-sort-of-what-I-am-doing” events and watch the news, not on your stand-alone tablet, but sharing the experience with others. You might get some advice from experts, e.g.
about writing or publishing or how things work with intellectual property at that place. Any doubts you might have on ethical issues in your research or other practice can be shared with peers and debates are encouraged.

You also use this space to see your business relations and vice versa. And will it make the world a better place? The best ideas know their origin in places like these. Let’s call it acquaintance. A healthy economy is not just driven by greater efficiency, but also by people inventing more goods and services. And people need inspiration to come to innovation.

So we have had access, richness, and acquaintance as basics needs for science to prosper. Let’s add one final one to this, and this is progress. That is what science (and the people working on and in it) adds to the world, right?

And if we need to think of the good sustainable support to accommodate this, what is it we think about? Who might be able to provide access to the latest results, and can help you gain visibility? To make sure that the research can be done thoroughly? Facilitate a space to meet up with your study, business or research acquaintances? Hear and see what you have not heard before? Where everything breathes progress?

**It is the Library. What else. To make the world a better place.**

<The English words are perhaps a bit farfetched – I could not find better words for the four Dutch ones “toegang, diepgang, omgang & vooruitgang”>

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