

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

BUBBLE-HOPPING

A METHOD TO BRIDGE DIVIDES BETWEEN
PEOPLE IN A FRACTIONED SOCIETY



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A concrete plan of action for me personally is to actively expose myself to new bubbles and seek new perspectives at least once a month. I would have liked to see this applied on the macro level to a greater extent, by, for example, companies deliberately exposing their employees to completely new perspectives on a regular basis. These kinds of initiatives can help counteract the negative trends that exist in society and instead increase understanding and empathy between social groups, reduce "we and them" feelings, and help develop our listening. It will not magically help us reach the global goals for sustainable development, but it will help and hopefully challenge the status quo. One thing that is certain is that continued polarization and contradictions between social groups will not solve the problems we face.

SSE student

So far, 410 undergraduate and graduate students from the Stockholm School of Economics have met with imams and priests, artists and activists, drug dealers and prostitutes, people from affluent and marginalized suburbs, homeless people and millionaires, in an exercise called "bubble-hopping".

Why? Because we believe the students will benefit from broadening their perspectives, while at the same time learning useful skills such as asking questions and listening. This will also benefit the organizations they will later work for, as well as society at large, where we need to find ways to bridge the divides.

A Divided Society

One effect of the current pandemic is that it might deepen the divides that are already tearing society apart. Between urban and rural, pro- and anti-government, cosmopolitans and localists, old and young. Between nations, between regions. Between rich and poor.

These divides constitute risks for countries, companies, other organizations, communities, families, and individuals. They might lead

to political instability and populism as well as to trust deficits and high conflicts, where groups of people show hatred towards each other.

It is time to start using tools that can bridge the divides, in order for society to come out stronger, instead of more divided, after the pandemic. And there are seeds for that in the current pandemic, when we have come to realize our need for human connection and that crises can also bring us together.

Bubble-Hopping as a Method

At the Stockholm School of Economics (SSE), we are developing a tool for bridging divides called "bubble-hopping". The term is borrowed from Max Hawkins, a former Google engineer, who now creates algorithms to help us break out of our bubbles.

We start with teaching about filter bubbles on the internet, under the topic of "the attention economy". We discuss the sophisticated technology and business models behind the attention economy, and how it affects us. The benefits are there, but there are also dark sides. Social media platforms, like YouTube and Facebook, create problems with mental health, breakdown of truth, social polarization, and political manipulation.

Then we move on to "reality bubbles", bubbles in real life. Students reflect – through various exercises and exposure to art – on their own bubbles and identities, before they are assigned to jump out of their own bubble and into a different one.

There we ask them to explore what they could both contribute with and learn from each other. In particular, we want them to look for similarities, since that has been shown to be important to bridge divides.

Jonathan Haidt, the social psychologist, who encourages bubble-hopping in his influential book *The Righteous Mind*, gives the following advice: "Don't just jump right in. Don't bring up morality until you found a few points of commonality or in some other ways established some trust."

Afterwards the students are asked to share their experiences with

each other, to further enhance learning, and to reflect on them in a written essay.

Overall, the experience is considered as very valuable. Most students experience that they learn both about themselves and how to communicate with different-minded people. The experience broadens their perspectives and makes them more self-aware, which is in line with SSE's larger ambition for education, called FREE¹.

Many students also say that they would like to implement bubble-hopping in their future working life, and they see many uses. It could be used to create better understanding between departments and hierarchical levels within an organization, or between different stakeholders. Companies could use it to better understand their customers, municipalities to reach across sectors, and universities to collaborate between disciplines, to name a few examples.

Some already do it, of course. One example is MIT Sloan School of Management and their graduate course "Bridging the American Divides: Work, Community and Culture — USA Lab", where students conduct fieldwork in rural regions and small cities across the US.

But there is room for more. Bubble-hopping can help us to grow as human beings, bridge divides in society and be valuable for companies and other organizations.

However, in order for bubble-hopping to succeed, you need to equip yourself and your team with crucial skills, such as asking questions and listening.

Ask and Listen

In the spring of 2020, we kicked off an initiative called MindShift². The background is that there is a need for human development, if we

¹ FREE means that students should develop a Fact & Science-based mindset and become Reflective & Self-aware, Empathetic & Culturally Literate, and Entrepreneurial & Responsible. Bubble-hopping is one example of how that ambition is translated into educational practice.

² MindShift is a collaboration between the Stockholm School of Economics, the Center for Social Sustainability at The Karolinska Institute, and Ekskäret Foundation. The aim is to encourage human growth to meet organizational, societal, and global challenges. Read more at: hhs.se/mindshift

are to tackle organizational, societal, and global challenges, such as COVID-19 and growing social and political divides.

For the first webinar, we invited experts whose theories we use to prepare our students for bubble-hopping. Among them were Amy Edmondson, Professor at Harvard Business School, who emphasized the importance of asking questions.

The first step is to *cultivate our curiosity*. We cannot learn what we already know. If we want to bridge divides, we have to be curious. And curiosity is also the foundation for asking good questions.

Secondly, we need to focus on *things that matter*. We should not ask everyday, routine-questions, like "How are you?", but questions that deepen our understanding. Instead of just asking what somebody thinks, we could ask: "What leads you to think so?". Looking for the motivation behind a strong opinion or belief is especially important when we meet people with different points of view than our own. And they are the ones who can teach us the most.

Finally, good questions should *generate energy and point towards the future*. If correctly phrased, they can create hope and serve an important role in bridging divides. In Amy Edmondson's words in the webinar:

"Good questions are one of the most important tools you have to create psychological safety, because you are automatically asking someone for their voice. And it is very hard to resist speaking, when someone is asking you a question."

She also pointed out that "good questions need to be responded to with good listening", which Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management, and another source for inspiration behind bubble-hopping, developed further in the webinar.

He stated that "listening is the most important and the most underrated leadership skill today", before he explained his model.

At the first level of listening, we pay attention to what *we already know*. We are looking for confirmation and nothing new penetrates our bubble.

At the second level of listening, we notice *disconfirming information*, things we did not know before. It is the typical mode of listening in science, but not enough if we want to understand different stakeholders.

Then we need to shift our listening to the third level, *empathic listening*. There we see the situation through the eyes of the others and try to understand their perspective. Reaching this level is the base ambition of all bubble-hopping.

However, if we want to bridge divides, we probably need to shift to the fourth and final level, *generative listening*. It connects us with what is about to emerge and activates a co-creative energy, where we share visions of the future. This is what the world needs to get through crises.

The Final Piece – Self-Awareness

Asking questions and listening are two crucial skills, useful not only for bridging divides, but also in life – and leadership – in general. They improve our relationships – and what can be more important?

There is, however, a final piece that is missing and that is to start with ourselves. What questions are you asking yourself? What do you hear when you listen to yourself?

It is easy to condemn others for being narrow-minded. But what about ourselves? The final piece that is needed is self-awareness.

In Conclusion

Whether the effect of the pandemic will be that we grow further apart or that we come together is not yet known. Still, bridging divides will be an important task for anyone who wants to contribute to a socially sustainable society.

It can also be beneficial to bring an organization together, create cohesion between different departments and levels, and better understand customers, voters, members, students, or other stakeholders. And it is one of the best ways to broaden one's own perspectives and grow as a human being.

My recommendations are therefore:

Jump out of your bubble. If not possible in real life, it can be done online. What is important is to try to understand people from other bubbles. Encourage team members to do the same and share experiences. Assign someone to be the CBO, the Chief Bubble Officer, with the task to break as many bubbles as possible.

Find similarities. We spend a lot of time pointing out differences between ourselves and others, but if we want to bridge divides it is more important to look for similarities. And it also makes our own identities less rigorous and more complex, which increases our ability to communicate with people from different walks of life.

Ask questions. Practice how to ask good questions. Get feedback. Collect good questions that you hear. Ask for the motivation behind instead of beliefs and ideas. Cultivate your curiosity.

Listen, listen, and listen. Practice listening whenever you get a chance. Notice when you shift between different levels of listening and what causes those shifts. Notice how it feels to be listened to, and not listened to. Listen to yourself.

Be self-aware. What prejudices do you have? How locked are you in your group identity? Ask questions also to yourself. And listen. How do you sound when you communicate? Perhaps you even want to ask someone you trust to make a secret recording. And help others to become more self-aware, as well.

Because if we all grow as human beings, we will become better at tackling the many challenges we face, including the bridging of divides.

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