

Empowering Africans - Education - MLC 21

Delivered by Mr Patrick Awuah, Founder and President - Ashesi University and facilitated by Dr Dumi Magadla, Executive Coach

Opening remarks by Dr Dumi

If the village elders do not educate the children, the village idiots will certainly do.

Nelson Mandela once said, education is one tool you can use to change the world. And if you're involved in education, you are involved in transformation of a remarkable kind. Theodore Lumumba said Africa is the youngest continent on earth and he is right hence if you are educating the youth, you've got the future of the continent in your hands.

Introducing Patrick Awuah

Patrick is the founder and president of Ashesi University in Ghana. This is a private not for profit institution that has quickly gained a reputation for innovation and quality education in Ghana. and dare I say across the continent. In 2012. Ashesi University was ranked as one of the top 10 most respected companies in Ghana, and was the first educational institution to win this award. Think about that. In the same survey, Patrick was named the fourth most respected CEO in Ghana. Before founding Ashesi University, Patrick worked as a program manager for Microsoft. So he has a good understanding of innovative technology work. He spearheaded the development of dial up internet working technologies at Microsoft. He holds bachelor's degrees in engineering, and economics from Swarthmore College, and MBA from UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business and honorary doctorates from Swarthmore College, Babson College, and the University of Waterloo. And finally, Patrick served on the advisory committee on voluntary foreign aid of the US Agency for International Development from 2010 to 2016. He is a fellow of the African Leadership Initiative of the Aspen Global Leadership Network and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. And he is also a member of the Tau Beta Pi Honor Society for excellence in engineering.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us listen to Patrick, talk to us. Over to you, Patrick. Thank you for being here again.

Presentation by Patrick Awuah

I wanted to center my remarks around education on two things. One is **ethics and character formation**. And the second is **courage**. If our educational systems imbibed these two characteristics in our students, we would go a very long way. And to make my point I want to first start with a thought exercise on two societies. Let's call them utopia and dystopia. So in the dystopian society, imagine a society where everybody lies, everybody is dishonest. Nobody ever tells the truth. Everybody steals from everybody, whenever they get the chance, and everybody is corrupt. So just imagine a society like that for just a minute. In this society, parents will steal from each other. Children will steal from their parents, friends will steal from each other. Nobody has honest agreements or contracts and nobody trusts anybody. Now in such a society, just ask yourself, what

could they accomplish together? If you can't trust anybody, can you start a business with anybody? If you can't trust anybody, can you lend money to anybody? Can you get together with anybody to build a house to live together in that house? Could you get together to build a school, a hospital, run a government, in such a society, where nobody trusts anybody, and everybody has criminal intent all the time? Such a society would not be able to advance as far as hunter gatherer societies. So in a society of maximum dishonesty, it's everyone for himself or herself. And nothing important gets done. We could not have modern civilization, as we know it today. In such a society, we could not get together, to build, to develop any technology, to develop transport systems, to develop right of ways for roads, railways, waterways. Such a society wouldn't let me just put it this way, would not advance at all, in the way that we see human society advanced over the years.

Now imagine another society, let's call that utopia. Everybody's honest, everybody tells the truth. Everybody does what they promise that they're going to do. Everybody is honest about contracts, they show up on time for meetings. You don't even need signed documents or contracts for people to live up to their word. You don't even need law enforcement or a criminal justice system. You don't need courts to enforce contracts, insists in such a society. People easily get together and do really big profound things together.

Now the difference between these two societies; dystopia and utopia, I would say is a difference in social capital. I define social capital as a sort of that capital that makes any collection of people able to work with each other in a society. If you need to take a loan from a bank, you wouldn't even need a loan agreement, and you would get the funding you need. And you would go to your startups, venture capitalists and everything just moves a lot smoother. Social capital is the kind of capital that is so important for actually enabling all the other kinds of capital; financial capital, intellectual capital and human capital. If you don't have social capital, you cannot even build a school to educate people to develop human capital the way we do today. So social capital is really fundamental for human progress and human thriving.

The second point that I want to make is that when you look at the advances of societies, over centuries and millennia, there is this other factor that has played a very key role from the very beginning of discovery and invention, the discovery of fire, of artificial and artificially created energy. That's all dependent on curiosity. They've all depended on exploration, sort of a sense of searching or seeking something, seeking to understand more deeply, the natural world and to understand how human societies work. If you think about ancient philosophers across all societies, they were observing, they were questioning, they were having debates with each other. It was really all about curiosity. What is it that makes our society tick? You think about one of the biggest discoveries in human society over the last few centuries, actually, let's say over the last 100 years alone, penicillin, antibiotics. penicillin, literally doubled, human life expectancy. Even in

the most advanced societies, it used to be that small infections, like a cut by a stick, you'd get an infection, you died, it didn't matter if you were a king. Or if you were a lowly subject, it didn't matter who you were, it didn't matter if you're a rich person or a poor person, bacteria could kill you, just like that. Now, penicillin was discovered by accident, by Alex Fleming, who was studying bacteria, because there was now an understanding that bacteria causes illness. And in his lab, he was culturing bacteria. For a few days he came back and in one of his petri dishes, there was a mold growing on it. Now, without curiosity, he might have just taken that petri dish that had mold growing on it and thrown it away. But because he was curious, he took a look at it. And so what is this mold, and not only that, he looked at it under a microscope and discovered that the bacteria that he was culturing, in the dish that had the mold, the bacteria had died. But then the other dishes that didn't have the mold, the bacteria were alive.

And this is how penicillin was, or, the mold that kills bacteria was discovered. It was just pure happenstance. But I would say it was really about curiosity. What is this thing? What is this strange mold growing in one of my petri dishes? And if you look through history, at major discoveries like the discovery of electricity. The experimentation about recognizing that lightning was electricity, and figuring out how to harness it, how to create it, how to use it, if you look at all the things that are going on around us today in computing, and so on, underlying all of that involves deep curiosity of some small group of individuals, and the courage to explore. And I would say that, although we do have education, if we can build these two characteristics of ethical citizens and courage then we can have a profound impact on the trajectory of our society. And this is something that underlies everything that we do at Ashesi University.

Now, in the thought exercise that I did, where I said, Look, let's consider a society where everybody's dishonest, and a society where everybody's honest, these two societies do not exist, right? There is no pure dystopia. There is no pure utopia on earth today. But just by doing that thought exercise, we can tell that we want our society to tilt in one direction, we want it to tilt towards utopia, not towards dystopia. So if there's a very high level of corruption in your country, you should see corruption as a real impediment to progress. And I've been involved with debates, by the way, I mean, I've had debates with, even professors. Well, one professor we had a debate with said this about corruption. If people are willing to pay bribes to get things done, then bribery and corruption is just a lubricant in your economy. And of course, this is wrong, right? Because it is like pouring sand into your machine. It is very far from the lubricant. But people sometimes miss that, because they don't do the thought exercise of trying to figure out the extreme boundaries of this phenomenon that we're looking at. The extreme boundaries of total dishonesty, or total honesty, are a way for us to understand the importance of ethical behavior in a society, or, as I said, to understand the importance of social capital.

Now, because pure utopia does not exist, many countries have other systems to try and

build social capital, you have security services, you have a criminal justice system, you have contracts, you have all these other mechanisms and institutions that you build, to try and steadily move towards a high trust, high social capital society. And you see this all around the world. But those institutions are run by people, too. And it is important that we take seriously the idea that we have to educate people by programming their minds. That part of programming, which is what education is, is programming the human mind to include this notion that you should be a part of trying to drive your society towards a high social capital. And to the extent that you're able to accomplish that, you're then able to achieve other kinds of capital, like financial capital, human capital.

So that for me, I think, these are the two most important things that we should be doing in education. Now the example that I gave about Alexander Fleming was not only about curiosity, and exploration, it was also about skill, right? He was a skilled scientist. We have to actually educate people with specific professional skills. It could be science and technology, it could be philosophy, engineering, there are so many things that people can provide. In a society, they can be chefs and bakers, they can be farmers, we need all of these people, we need people who know how to drive a bus or train, we need people who know how to maintain complex systems. And so the educational system, as we all rightly understand, is also about giving students specific skills, so that they can be productive in society. And, that skill set is what I would call the human capital of our society. So you need social capital, you need human capital, and of a certain kind. And based on that, all the other forms of capital will emerge. Now at Ashesi University, we have programmed this into our curriculum and into the way we run the institution. And so all our students take courses on leadership and ethics. We ask the fundamental questions about what is a good society that we would like to see and we can achieve that society? And what role will they play in achieving that society.

We have a set of rules, a code of conduct that we enforce, but it's not us enforcing that code of conduct by ourselves as administrators or the faculty, we've invited the students to be part of that. So the students also understand that they need to be active participants in building the social capital that will make our institutions strong. And that will make them a force for good when they graduate from our institution. And then, of course, we also teach them very specific skills around engineering and business management, and so on.

In 2006, we were still a very young organization, four years old, and the faculty and the administration got together and asked ourselves a simple question. ***What is it about our institution that we wish was not true?*** But it's like what is the most painful or embarrassing thing about our institution today. And that self reflection led us to a conclusion and an agreement that we at that time had an institution where students did not own the mission, or did not feel any ownership for the mission of the institution. And that many, far too many students were willing to cheat if they could get away with it. And too many students would keep quiet, if they saw their colleagues cheating. They just say

it's not my business to intervene. And so we had significant numbers of students cheating on exams, and we had faculty and administration, policing, exams and so on. And we thought that if this remained true, then it meant we were failing our mission because our mission was supposed to be about educating ethical leaders in Africa, ethical, entrepreneurial leaders in Africa. And people who are ethical only when you're not watching are not truly ethical. You want people who have ethics built into them, something they feel in their belly. It's something that they care very deeply about. And so in 2006, we decided that this was a truth that needed to change. And the way to change it was to invite our students to a conversation about this, which we did. And after a year and a half of debate, our students eventually enacted an honor system. And in this honor system, they pledge two things, one was they would individually conduct themselves in an ethical way, and not cheat in exams and assignments and so on. And the second was that they would hold their colleagues accountable. And in return, we, the faculty, no longer needed to invigilate exams. Now, when the students voted this into force, we agreed to do that, and we stopped invigilating exams for students. And it's something that every year when the first year students arrive, they're not on the honor system. And they're not presumed to be on the honor system, they have a year to be at the university to debate and discuss. And then at the end of the year, they vote whether they want to join the honor system. And if the vote passes by two thirds, majority or greater, then we stop invigilating the exam and by doing so, we give them a tremendous power. They have the power to either destroy their alma mater, by cheating when we're not looking. But they also have the power to make their alma mater excellent, by not cheating. And by holding each other accountable. This is tremendous, this is a tremendous power to give students, you can either destroy your alma mater, or you can make it great. And it turns out that when you give them that choice, they choose the latter. But what it has done is that it's also improved, actual performance.

So when students no longer see cheating as a viable option, to get a good grade, or to pass a course, then the only option is actually to do the work and to seek help early if you're struggling with the work. So you join study groups, work with your friends, in a different way to help you understand the material and master the material. Rather than ask your friend to help you with an answer in an exam. Because you know, if you ask them, they're going to hold you accountable, they will report you to the faculty and there'll be consequences. And the Judicial Committee that adjudicates these cases also includes students. So I would say that this is one of the most powerful examples of how we are nurturing ethical thinking and ethical behavior on our campus. But of course, it's all sort of layered on top of deeper discussions that have occurred in the classroom as well. Think of it as philosophical debates where we're asking them to engage the question of ethics in an intellectual way, not in terms of us preaching at them, and telling them what is right or wrong, but having them really peel and understand why a certain way of doing things would be better for them, and ultimately better for the society they live in.