Robert Twigger: Why is polymathy shunned in many public educational areas? Why do writers on polymathy prefer to avoid the term?

Richard Martin: I wonder if one of the issues is about the definition of the term. In the OED, a polymath is defined as ‘a person of wide knowledge and learning’. Some will find the apparent emphasis on study, intelligence and intellect off-putting. Others seek practical application. A frequent challenge is framed as follows: It is all very well acquiring all this knowledge and learning, but where is the evidence of its being put into practice.

When Kenneth Mikkelsen and I were researching our book The Neo-Generalist, only one interviewee expressly stated a desire to become a polymath. It was an aspiration, the objective of a learning journey they had embarked upon. Several others, however, indicated an unwillingness to associate themselves with the term. Partly, this was motivated by humility despite their obvious mastery of serial disciplines. Partly, it was the result of fear – fear of being misunderstood, miscategorised. It was something we found with much of the terminology associated with polymathy and generalism. Over time, these terms have been transformed into ones of dismissal and abuse.

What had initially started out as a study of what might loosely be termed ‘polymathic generalism’ ended up being something more sweeping and inclusive. Our term neo-generalist is intended to span the whole spectrum from polymathy to hyperspecialism. Our insight was that few individuals remain static on that continuum, which we visualised as an infinite loop. Everyone can specialise or generalise. What they do at a given point in time is largely governed by context. But it is the curious, responsive and connective who are the most comfortable with these constant shifts.

The polymathic generalists we were initially drawn to had much in common with the micromasters you explore in your own book. What was remarkable about them was how they had varying levels of depth in multiple disciplines as well as huge breadth across diverse industries, hobbies and interests. There was both macromastery as well as
micromastery. Most are combinatorial in their approach, picking and mixing, hybridising knowledge, experience and practice across multiple domains.

It is this magpie approach, which defies easy categorisation or labelling, that presents problems to our academic institutions and places of work. Their models have been fine-tuned for the deep specialists, and have their foundations in the approaches to work and education that were encouraged in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. A polymath does not fit in our line-and-box conception of corporate organisational structures. They are bored by the hermetically sealed approach to classroom study, in which a subject is isolated from all others. Music and mathematics are separated, geography and history, physics and philosophy.

**Robert:** Are some cultures more polymathic than others? Which can we learn from?

**Richard:** I’m not convinced it is a case of cultural differentiation so much as temporal. When people talk of polymaths, they often start with figures from the pre-industrial era: the ancients of China, the Middle East, North Africa and Southern Europe; the shining lights of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. But there is a radical shift after that. After the Industrial Revolution, there seems to be greater compartmentalisation, separation of functions and emphasis on specialisation. The polymath becomes the exception rather than the norm of an educated or inquisitive person.

I come back to the consideration of context and need. Over the past year, I have been working as ghostwriter on a book about Nordic leadership. One aspect it explores is the legacy of the Vikings on the Nordic region. The Vikings were essentially a network of small communities in which people had to be multidisciplinarian. Without it, you simply would not survive the harsh winters. So any given individual on a long ship, for example, might be a combination of warrior, sailor, craftsman and/or farmer. These multiple talents were put in service of the community, the multidisciplinarity evidenced individually and collectively.

**Robert:** In your book *The Neo-Generalist* – a fascinating read – is there one point you’d like to summarise as being of most urgent importance for people today?

**Richard:** Relevance. Without multidisciplinarity, fuelled by curiosity, and enabled by a willingness to adapt to ever-shifting contexts, it is unlikely that you can retain it.
Many specialist tasks no longer require humans to perform them. So, it is important that we exercise our creativity and ingenuity, our capacity to mix up different interests and skills, in order to address the problems and leverage the opportunities that AI and robotics cannot. But such an outlook really requires dismantling our current approach to education and how we think about recruitment, employment, career progression and organisational structure.

**Robert:** We live in a culture in which the physical is increasingly absent from our work. Should we think about integrating that into intellectual endeavours? How?

**Richard:** The physical is absent from a lot of office work, or jobs that require a lot of screen or wheel time. But I think it is still evident in the way many work whether that is in service roles, retail, healthcare, education, agriculture or manufacturing.

When I was a commuter, I spent a lot of time sitting: on a train, on a bus, in the office, stuck in meetings. Now that I’m a freelance writer and editor, I still experience much time at my desk. But I seek out and require personal locomotion to help me think and create too, whether that is walking on the beach or in the woods, venturing out into the Kentish countryside on my bike or doing a few household chores.

Activity frees my mind. The mechanics of motion actually shakes loose and helps organise my ideas. I often say that I do my best writing on my bike, drafting and re-drafting in my head while I ride. The observation of action by other people I also find essential. I have gained more insight about people, roles and organisation by watching professional cycling and rugby, for example, than from any business conference or book. You see abstraction put into practice, made visible and tangible.

**Robert:** What sort of connections do you make between polymathy and storytelling?

**Richard:** Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights* is the narrator as polymath, demonstrating an immense breadth and depth of knowledge. In addition to sport, I filter my understanding and appreciation of the world around me through the arts, in particular fiction and film. I’ve learned more about the great scientific advances of the 20th century, for example, from novelists and poets than from any formal study of physics or chemistry.

The art that emerged in the early decades of the last century was as much a vehicle for new ideas about time, anthropology, the mind and quantum physics as it was

In chapter 9 of *The Neo-Generalist*, we make the case for the polymathic generalist as someone who is adept at both sense-making and storytelling. We use the metaphor of the detective for this, as well as the investigative journalist. People who draw on wide sources of information, mash it up, analyse and internalise, then present it back out to others, influencing them and their actions. The detective and journalist have this ability to cross borders, moving between worlds. Their stories have a catalytic effect, bridging across the divides. They bring together the polymath’s multiple domains of mastery.