

Education Futures: Painting a New Picture

Hedley Beare is breaking apart the framework of educational structures, and the picture within

Education is a key agent of social continuity. Yet it, and the society it serves, are being undermined by some serious, unanswered questions about underlying cultural assumptions, present trends and future directions.

The subject has been aired by politicians and academics alike, and wide-ranging reforms are undertaken every few years. The field is faced with a bewildering array of structural changes, growing unemployment and the decline of traditional blue collar jobs in the face of new technologies and labour market restructuring. Such issues cast a long shadow over traditional means of teaching and learning.

It also gives credence to the study of futures in schooling which potentially places the tools of self-mastery and responsible citizenship into the hands of young people and shows them how to be involved in creating their own future.

Given these changed conditions, the status and potential of educational systems have been addressed by a number of futures-oriented organisations and groups throughout the world. While the role of futures study in education may once have seemed obscure and theoretical, a quiet revolution has been taking place for two and a half decades. That revolution is centred on the way that teaching and learning are inherently futures-oriented, on the educational viability of futures approaches and on the practical value of futures concepts, tools and methods in education. This slow process of innovation has recently received a welcome boost from UNESCO.

UNESCO has been developing a program of 'future-oriented studies' since 1984, a program which entered a decisive new phase during 1992 at a conference in Vancouver. The conference provided a focus for innovative work from around the world and helped consolidate leading research and teaching from places as widely distributed as Mexico, Hawaii, Germany, Korea and Australia. Several members of the Asia/Pacific futures community are interviewed in issue 9 of 21•C.

In the present issue, Ashley Crawford profiles education specialist Hedley Beare from Melbourne University, and Richard Slaughter, co-author of *Education for the 21st Century*, looks at the role of futures in secondary and tertiary education.

The publication in December of *Education for the 21st Century* by Professor Hedley Beare and Dr Richard Slaughter may establish some fresh ways of looking at the problem of how education can respond to the emerging world picture. The book may also cause as much controversy as it does guidance with its suggestion that before effective reforms can be implemented the entire existing structure of educational institutions and philosophies must be profoundly questioned.

Beare, a gentle, thoughtful man, in some ways fits the traditional image of an educator. Quietly spoken, lightly built, with an avuncular manner and a ready smile, he looks

much like university professors the world over. However in terms of attitude and viewpoint, Hedley Beare is anything but traditional.

The subject of educational reform brings a light to Beare's eye and one is left with a distinct sense of passion about his mission; "Throughout the 1980s there was a spate of activity to try to reform schools around the world, but it was particularly severe here in Australia." He adds that "Every state and territory restructured its administration and there was an attempt to consider what the curriculum was and to push for a national curriculum."

The interesting thing, says Beare, is that this has been paralleled in both the USA and UK. "So obviously something was worrying people about schools. Clearly politicians and those who are managing education policy knew there was something wrong. "However, this reform is neo-conservative. It's tending to say let's build on what we've got and make it better." It is this approach that Beare so strongly resists.

Beare and Slaughter, both based at the Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne, found they had been writing, researching and speaking along similar lines: both felt that reforming the current system was not really the point – that what in fact is wrong is the very framework that system is based upon. "Many of the assumptions are wrong," says Beare bluntly, "we need a different framework to guide theory and practice.

"We were coming at it from different angles. I was coming at it from the macro-level, looking at systems and people in stress. Richard was saying, "why is it that the future looks so challenging, but educators are not routinely addressing it? What are all the so-called 'futuristic' images in kids media actually saying? And why are so many depressed about the future? " We said, if we're designing education for the 21st century we need to start now - partly because the kids in schools will be just out of school by the turn of the century, and partly because it's quite obvious that there are major issues to be dealt with by society before they become full-blown crises."

"Our first three chapters deal with the nature of the paradigm shift which is now under way. We're taking the picture frame apart – we're not only changing the picture – but the frame around the picture. It's a bigger frame which reflects the fact that people across a number of disciplines are asking very similar questions. Across a range of fields, from medicine, physics, politics, economics, education, social sciences, people are looking for a broader, more viable view. So we've tried to outline some aspects of this bigger picture because this is the frame, or worldview, that surrounds education and powerfully affects the ways we think and function in this context.

"For one thing the economic determinism and unbridled economic development which has been rampant for at least this decade in part emerges from a certain approach to scientific enquiry that has marginalised other forms of knowledge and secularised nature. Economic determinism arises from that context. Yet both give a false view of the world, not to say ideas of progress and social development. For example, it's one thing to say a country is industrialised – and therefore earning wealth. But we haven't asked about what happens when the second wave of industrialisation comes along and then the third and then the post-industrial phase. What does that do to a society? The question surfaced at a recent job summit. The unskilled jobs which kids had ten years

ago no longer exist and may never do so again. There's no point in talking about re-creating those kinds of jobs – this type of society simply won't support them. Solutions don't lie in incremental change, so much as in seeing the world differently, seeing different options. And that requires a different, a deeper, approach.

“Even within the economic paradigm as it is, people are beginning to question the nature of industrialisation and what stems from it. By pursuing that limited view of reality, we've created a lot of damage on the planet: ungovernable and impersonal mega-cities, a de-stabilised atmosphere, ravaged landscapes and the extinction of many wild species. If every country were to blindly follow that route, the future for humankind would be very bleak indeed.

“The second facet we deal with is ‘globalism’, that is, thinking of ourselves as part of a once neatly balanced set of ecological forces, and viewing the whole globe as a living system. When we realise that human beings aren't just sitting on an inert rock, when we see ourselves as part of that balance and understand that we affect not only other people but the broader environment, that's a very different proposition. It's more like the Eastern view where you see yourself, human activity in general, in a balance of forces. The Yin/Yang view is much more compatible with a living world than the materialism which stems from reductionist science.”

However, most Eastern countries have taken the Westernised path of industrialisation. Beare cites Manila as a particularly distressing example of urban sprawl, poverty and out-of-control industrialisation, alongside such disasters like Chernobyl, Bhopal and acid leaks into the Rhine which, he says, “prove that national borders don't exist any more when it comes to these issues”.

“If you regard global awareness as important, then it leads on to a view in which kids have to learn through education how to join in the global community, to learn how our lives are interlinked with a lot of other lives.”

Education for the 21st Century came close to being called *Ways of Knowing* because it also considers the ways in which particular types of knowledge were developed over the last three centuries and how this process has powerfully shaped “which things we take as legitimate data and which not.”

“The scientific movement over the last 300 years has taken only observable, quantifiable data as the evidence used to build up knowledge. But we know very well that that science is based on measurement and reason. It actively excludes religion, myth and contemplative forms of knowledge. Yet these 'ways of knowing' have been important since the beginning of the human race, and they remain important. They emerge, for example, in the perception of awe and beauty as well as in human relationships. They help to protect the environment, other species and other people from over-exploitation.

"Many have shown that contemplative knowledge actually belongs at the peak of human experience. But, since science works in a different mode, this kind of knowledge has been ridiculed and largely set aside. This loss helps to explain the great spiritual vacuum in modern societies - a vacuum which people unsuccessfully try to fill with sport, drugs, television - you name it! What we are saying is that we should expand the

way in which we develop knowledge by recognising other levels and modes which emerge from the great stream of human history.”

Beare cites such sources as Joseph Cambell whose explorations of mythology over various cultures throughout history reveal surprising consistencies of belief systems and rituals; “whichever tradition you come from the same sort of images start to emerge” from Celtic myth through to Shamansim, he says. “You just can’t dismiss that body of evidence. Just because you can’t put it on the scales and weigh it doesn’t mean it is inadmissible. Maybe the empirical scales are just too limited.

Such a view has enormous implications for the future because a one-sided culture will have a limited view of reality, nature, human nature and therefore tend to be disaster-prone. On the other hand, a recovery of 'ways of knowing' opens up quite new personal and cultural options. So it is a recovery in this deeper sense, coupled with a re-orientation of educationalist's outlooks from past to future, that Beare and Slaughter identify as the two major conceptual shifts which, they believe, could alter the whole picture.

Several chapters of the book are devoted to exploring what that involves. "We've both been involved in teaching futures and policy-related courses for some years, so we've both had many opportunities to see at first hand how teaching explicitly about futures works out in practice. It's really a question of familiarity. Once people have had time to look at the futures literature, try out some of the teaching techniques and monitor the responses of students, they become enthusiastic about including a futures dimension in what they already do. So it seems to us that teaching about futures actually expresses a central purpose of education generally, that is, it puts the tools of self-mastery and responsible citizenship into the hands of young people and shows them how to take part in creating their own future."

“If we take the themes I've outlined: rejecting economic rationalism, changing our patterns of thinking about and perceiving the world, developing a global view and shifting from a retrospective to a proactive outlook; and if we then begin to design an education built around such premises then the outlook for education and society in the 21st century begin to look very different. That's partly why our conclusion is called 'The Promise of the 21st Century', for we believe it is there. But there’s a lot of work to do before it becomes available.”

“What we take as teaching has been far too cerebral up to now. Yet there are teaching techniques which we could use and which may be very effective, that teachers have not felt able to use.” Beare cites meditative techniques, while acknowledging that meditation and non-traditional maths teaching may cause a jolt to the average parent.

“Of course that leads to another problem – dividing maths from physics from chemistry is again part of the earlier scientific approach. The irony of this is that some of the breakthroughs in areas like quantum physics have actually helped to explode the old paradigm. Fritjof Capra, Paul Davies and Stephen Hawking are among those who are pushing us back toward metaphysics and theology, by way of physics and mathematics. They are in effect saying that our science has reached the edge of the universe, yet it is still inadequate.”

The difficulty with a neo-conservative approach to education, says Beare, is that it pays most attention to what was known in the past, and either ingores the future or naively extrapolates it. None of this makes sense in a dynamically interrelated world. What emerges is a stereotypical curriculum. It's a "head-based" approach, says Beare, with competencies defined and tested by traditional 'industrial' means. The problem is that in order to define competence it is again scaled down to something which can be easily described and measured; "You'll be reading to decode a passage of text, you won't be reading to get a warm heart or a transcending insight which are, of course, very hard to assess."

"We're really saying that if you continue to educate within the paradigms currently established, you should not be surprised that the kids come out depressed and disempowered. But if you adopt a strong proactive stance, and a less constricted worldview, then other outcomes are possible. Inspired by a living, 're-enchanted' universe and a broader view of knowledge, I think that the education system, even marginally changed in such ways, will have a fairly powerful impact.

The 'downside' is that such changes can take a long time to achieve. But, more optimistically, educators are, on the whole, well-equipped to make them happen. Moreover, the message of our book is positive: we believe that after three hundred years there is not just light at the end of the tunnel but accumulating evidence that the industrial age is nearly over. What will follow it is anyone's guess, but we believe that the outlines of a more sustaining, and sustainable world view are finally emerging. That provides the grounds of hope for many people, not least of whom are the educators who, perhaps uniquely, are charged with the well-being of the following generations.

Hedley Beares' 'mission' is an ambitious one, but it comes down to the issue of conveying a sense of informed hope and personal control over the future to students. If the current systems continue then future generations may well suffer from a severely constricted view of culture, knowledge and time. Beare and Slaughter are proposing radical change, but change that could effect the view of the future being taught, and thus the future itself.

Note

This interview was conducted by Ashley Crawford and it appeared in *2IC* 8, Summer 1992, pp. 78-81. *Education for the 21st Century* is out of print. A new edition, however, reconstituted from original files, and with new appendices, is available from: <http://richardslaughter.com.au>