

Futures Education: A Gift for Our Times

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It is startling to realise that the first attempts to teach in a specifically futures-oriented mode took place some fifty years ago. Back then, far-sighted individuals could clearly see some of the challenging issues and problems that are now daily news. What is striking, however, is that despite many attempts to bring futures education (FE) fully into the mainstream of educational thinking and practice, it still remains surprisingly rare. This article takes a fresh look at what FE can offer schools, teachers and students in the early 21st Century.

Futures ‘of’ or futures ‘in’ education?

Over these decades one thing that became clear was that government departments, bureaucracies, decision-makers in school systems are much more comfortable with initiatives addressing the futures *of* education. The basic reason for this is that such exercises are largely extrapolative and neither question nor challenge existing practice. Futures *in* education introduces dynamic new features into present-day administration, theory and practice. Thus, overall, it tends to end up in the ‘too hard’ basket (Gidley et al 2004).

What does futures education offer?

For young people ‘the future’ is a topic of continuous fascination. All are, quite reasonably, interested in the unfolding of their own lives and not a few can see that there are a number of issues that give rise to concern, if not outright fear. Unfortunately, however, it has long been the case that young peoples’ images of futures are largely derived from the mass media: films, computer games, TV and Internet subcultures. While such images are certainly not without value when considered carefully, they also tend to exert a distinctly negative influence. Hence many young people grow up fearing the future, learning to avoid it, and unaware of either its positive potentials or the many ways that they could act to address issues of concern. On the other hand, FE provides the perspectives and understandings that provide a basis for many long-term solutions to the human predicament: active foresight, sustainable cultures, stewardship of the Earth.

What’s currently missing from educational thinking and practice is a specifically futures discourse. It is absent from the highest levels of executive decision making, from universities and professional associations and also from classrooms. Yet it is growing mastery here that actually provides the symbolic starting points to move ‘the future’ from being a domain of fear and avoidance to one of agency and personal power. And here there’s some very good news indeed. The starting points for a futures discourse are simple, straightforward and well within the capacity of every young person. Given the chance, all young people can understand concepts such as the following:

- the use of foresight in everyday life;

- the use of different time frames for different purposes;
- exploring the extended present (stretching ‘x’ years back and forward);
- the use of simple tools such as time lines and futures wheels; and
- how to change fears into motivation (Slaughter and Bussey 2006).

Futurists have had long practice in ‘reading’ signals of change from the global system, interpreting them and deriving policy recommendations from them. Governments and corporations regularly make use of this constantly up-dated knowledge in their strategising and forward thinking. The term ‘strategic foresight’ is now used to describe this increasingly vital ‘pathfinding’ function (AFI Monographs 2003-6). Is it not odd, therefore, that school systems, which are embedded in a world of flux, challenge and change, have not seen the need either to use or teach these abilities? Generations of young people have therefore ‘missed out’ on some of the critical vital skills of active citizenship. But this state of affairs can be changed very quickly when educators understand why it is important.

The futures domain

At first sight the futures domain can appear to be an ‘empty’ one. Yet anyone who looks at daily life carefully enough will soon discover that without it none of us would get up every day. We’d never go to school or work because we’d have lost all motivation and purpose. It’s the fact of having an open future that makes it possible - indeed, requires us - to think, evaluate and plan ahead in virtually everything we do.

Exploring the futures domain provides some of the most valuable opportunities to get to grips with human life and culture in time. Indeed, it is so central that it makes little sense to create a new school subject (though that has been tried and can have value, see below). Forward thinking should be a core skill, requirement and focus at every level of every school system. Executive decision-makers need it so that they can become attuned to the meaning of signals of change in the wider world. Teacher educators need it because successive generations of teachers are preparing young people for a progressively altered world. Young people themselves need it because they face a number of powerful systemic challenges, any of which could bring the species to its knees (Slaughter 2006).

The story that connects

Over the last thirty years a reliable and, one might say, ‘scientifically informed’, series of publications has appeared that describes the human predicament with increasing clarity and precision (Steffan et al 2004). These publications describe how our species has grown fundamentally out of balance with its world, and how it needs to understand this and discern wise and informed ways of responding. I call this ‘the story that connects’ because the perspective brings together hitherto separate pieces of information, creating the clarity that precedes action.

The perspective not only allows us to propose actions to preserve the environment. It also gives us the tools to understand deeper issues like the fallacies of endless economic

growth and locating some of the more subtle drivers of unsustainable outlooks within the heart of the Western worldview itself (Slaughter 2005). Is this too difficult for young people? Well, expressed in that form, perhaps. Yet, as suggested earlier, we must all start somewhere and the starting points are genuinely straightforward.

Curriculum innovation or deep paradigm change?

As suggested above there have been many curriculum innovations directed at bringing futures thinking and perspectives into educational thinking and practice but hitherto they have generally been marginalised. The Queensland trial subject in Futures is a case in point (BSSSS 1995). Now, however, ‘signals’ from the global system regarding conflict, climate change, water supply, our chronic over-dependence on cheap oil – these and many others – are confronting everyone with facts that can no longer be ignored.

To deal with global change we need to understand it. We also need time to respond. It is only through the careful use of informed foresight that we can create time and space to deal with complicated and challenging issues. So we’re not speaking here merely about a curriculum change but a change in the deep structures of our understanding of the world (Slaughter 2005).

Conclusion

School systems have been run, by and large, as if the future remained open and unproblematic. This is no longer the case. The future of humanity is, in fact, truly under greater threat than most are yet willing to admit. Yet as the costs of *not* understanding the ‘great transition’ progressively mount, so the rationale for thinking ahead becomes increasingly obvious.

School systems need to face these facts. They need a more dynamic structure, including their own environmental scanning systems that are different from, but as good as, those routinely operated in commercial environments. They need to value and use the frameworks and tools that have been available for some years. Beginning teachers need to be introduced to futures concepts and tools suitable for classroom use. They also need to develop their own specifically futures-oriented understanding to much higher levels than ever before.

It is only when changes of this kind are well under way that school systems can legitimately claim that they are preparing young people appropriately for their future lives. It is only then that young people will begin to be properly equipped for the manifestly challenging tasks ahead.

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