

Chapter 3.1

What is Futures Education?

Introduction

Everyone knows the future is important, which is why we spend many millions of dollars on education, defence, power stations and environmental conservation. Every large organisation discovers the necessity for planning ahead to understand future conditions. Otherwise, mishaps are inevitable: a stock of essential parts runs out and production stops, market conditions change and a product or service is no longer saleable, competitors develop a better product or an enemy's contingency plans are better. Futures Studies (FS), as a field of enquiry, has emerged in response to demands of this kind. With all this activity one might have expected FS to be a natural and inevitable part of education. After all, much of our teaching and learning focuses upon the future. Unfortunately, we are a long way from realising the full integration of futures thinking into educational theory and practice.

Futures education is a direct response to change and uncertainty; it embodies a recognition that there are problems, dangers and choices ahead which have few, if any, historical precedents. This chapter takes a brief look at the origins of futures work in education, at the rationales which have been put forward, and at some patterns of innovation and implementation.

The substance of futures study

Much discussion about futures begs the question: What is being studied? This raises genuine concern since, in crude empirical terms, it has sometimes been suggested that 'the future' does not exist. How, therefore, may one study it? When this line of argument is raised at least three comments arise: empiricist approaches tend to focus on the tangible and the measurable, the argument overlooks the primacy of ideas, values and meanings, which are in no way diminished by their non-material status, and, that there is more than one meaning to the word 'future'. In one restricted sense it does indeed stand for that which is beyond - out of reach - yet to come. But rather than stressing notions of separateness, distance and the problematic aspects of futures, it useful to stress the way that futures concerns permeate the present. The underlying purpose of futures study is not to predict the future, but to enrich the present.

Briefly, futures study divides into an examination of perceptions of futures and an attempt to come to terms with processes of continuity and change. Figure 1 suggests that futures study draws on a wide range of human capacities, deploying a number of specific concepts and methodologies in pursuit of these two streams of understanding. The results of this activity give rise to a wide range of issues, themes and

applications including futures in education.

(Figure 1 about here)

Futures study as a forward-looking matrix

It is crucial for futures in education that the resulting relationships are recognised. A field which raises questions about its subject matter and methods must be able to show that it is properly grounded, comprehensible and useful. It's also important that those who are engaged in teaching futures actually utilise futures concepts and tools. Often futures teaching fails to use these concepts and tends to over-emphasise extrapolation (i.e. 'the future of...' approach). If futures in education is to thrive then the work must be at least as well-grounded (perhaps more so) as other curriculum foci.

A sample of futures concepts is included in Figure 1. These, and others, have been discussed fully elsewhere. ¹ There is a reciprocal relationship between such concepts and the human capacities noted. One could say that the former 'enables' the latter, and that the latter 'drives' the former. The combination of concepts and capacities helps create a forward-looking perceptual field shaping the futures enterprise and providing part of its subject matter. Methodologies arise from each of the above, representing the active development of futures concerns at all levels.

Futures methodologies focus on the past, present and possible future states of structures and processes. Frequently the concern is with change: social, economic, technical, environmental, and - sometimes - value changes. However, continuities of language, tradition and meaning are equally important, and, with increasing interest in alternatives to economic growth, the 'steady-state' side of the equation is receiving more attention.

This focus on structures and processes lends FS an empirical dimension that many of its critics have not noticed. In order to say anything of value about the possible future states of dynamic systems it is necessary to know a great deal about their past and present. This is partly why futures has sometimes been characterised as a 'summarising discipline' - necessarily drawing on a very wide range of sources. Finally, the whole structure gives rise to a number of characteristic issues, themes and applications, some of which are shown in Figure 2.

(Figure 2 about here)

The futures field: tools for managing change

The major implications for futures education are two-fold. The futures field is a serious field of enquiry which can stand up to the most exacting and rigorous investigation, therefore providing a sound basis

for educational work. Also, the value of the field to education in terms of its symbolic and methodological contribution is considerable. The concepts and methods involved are capable of much wider application and use than they currently receive.

The origins of futures in education

Futures per se is an ancient concern. Stone-age tool-makers clearly imagined the purpose their tools would fulfil, which guided their work. The earliest dwellings and villages were constructed according to plans which reflected present and future communal needs. Agriculture only became practicable when changes of season could be understood and predicted with assurance. The person who plants seeds must believe a subsequent crop will be reaped; otherwise, the effort is wasted, and, moreover, the family could starve.

In this way the future is organically bound to everyday life. In other words, futures can be described as constitutive of the present. Take away the futures dimension and what remains is not worth living in, because the 'space' needed for plans, purposes, goals, meanings, intentions and so on has been removed. We all require a future (or futures) in order to live. I have often asked teachers to imagine they are taking a foreign trip. I asked them to consider the way they would go about it. They thought about climate, clothing, transport schedules, money, insurance, maps and so on. We applied these thoughts to school curricula and the ways they embody purposes and meanings which relate to the future. Usually such forward-looking concerns take the form of aims, objectives, goals and, more distantly, some notion of how present activities contribute to the development and evolution of society. All, of course, are true futures concerns, which is remarkable in the sense that educational institutions are already in the futures business - though many are slow to realise this.

The first school courses with an explicit futures label were taught in the USA and Canada in the mid-1960s. They drew upon the wider field of futures research which had itself developed in the context of the cold war and its military scenarios. That, in turn, was rooted in the strategic need to move military personnel and materials in a co-ordinated way, and in conditions of great uncertainty, during the great wars. The techniques of planning, forecasting, war-gaming and scenario analysis were seen to have value well beyond military applications. With a number of other techniques they were quickly assimilated into government, business and industry.

Even today, when futures study and research is a global concern, the USA remains the heartland of futures work. It has more forecasters, consultants, futures researchers, marketing analysts and science fiction writers per head of population than any other country. So, when the first school course was taught there in 1966, futures study developed because people had already seen dramatic changes and knew that the

future could no longer simply be assumed. Whereas once it extended unproblematically ahead, now there were more and more possibilities, some of which were not particularly pleasant.

Several pilot projects were funded by what was then called the Office of Education and these led to the establishment of centres where futures are studied and taught. The University of Houston at Clear Lake City still offers the most comprehensive masters program in FS. The World Future Society entered the picture, and, by the early 1970s, its education section had a professional membership of several thousand. Conferences, publications and seminars followed, spreading all over the USA and in other countries. By this time a number of international networks and organisations had sprung up. Perhaps the most productive and durable of these is the World Futures Studies Federation.

In virtually every Western country groups of innovators based in schools, colleges and universities began to learn from each other and to perceive that they were part of a wider shift. It was shift away from immersion in a taken-for-granted past and present toward a conscious evaluation of possible, probable and preferable futures. While the futures education movement in the USA seemed to falter under increasingly unfavourable political and economic conditions, others took up the work which had been started there and improved upon it. Today, on a global scale, there are thousands of teachers, lecturers and researchers with an interest in futures education. With over twenty years work completed, it is clear that while FS in this context may sometimes appear new, the approach is certainly not untested in practice.

Elements of a rationale for futures in education

Rationales take different forms in various places and the most commonly cited suggestions include:

1. Rapid change means that many past assumptions, meanings and purposes are no longer valid and self-evident. In this context, past knowledge, and earlier modes and methods of representing knowledge do not command automatic support. Past experience becomes less and less reliable.
2. Actions and decisions have consequences. In a world which is physically and socially interconnected, many consequences are displaced in space and time (for example, acid rain, ozone depletion and terrorism). Futures thinking therefore becomes a strategic imperative.
3. 'Preaction' or careful forward thinking is preferable to 'crisis management'; it represents a saving of the energy which would otherwise be expended clearing up the mess.
4. Images of futures condition the present. Both positive and negative images feed back into the present and affect what people consider worth

doing. These images are being continuously negotiated at all levels of society, though often in implicit, hidden ways (advertising for example). Many images are ambiguous in that the human response to the image is crucial; not the simple fact of the image itself.

5. Futures are not abstractions as they have sometimes been represented. Since they cannot be measured, they have been illegitimately dismissed by empiricist frameworks of enquiry. But the future (as a category) is a principle of present action, without which we could not act at all. The human capacity to articulate plans, purposes, goals, intentions and meanings relies upon an open and undetermined future.

6. The taken-for-granted present does not indicate a specific period of time because the mental present has no firm boundaries. Aspects of past and future are enfolded within the present and schools can be much more explicit about what this involves for teaching and learning.

7. Education is a major institution which has strong roots in the past. Yet it cannot simply try to reproduce the past. It requires credible future alternatives in order to make sense of the present and to establish appropriate strategies and directions.

8. It is not possible to change the past, though the past is continuously re-interpreted (because we never stand at the end of history). Our relation to the future is different. Humans exert their will and intentionality upon it, attempting to shape it according to perceptions and needs. This is a much more active stance than we can adopt in relation to the past.

9. The implicit model of personhood applied to schooling affects the way we view futures. If students are viewed as interpreters of culture and makers of meaning (agents), there is a direct connection between futures and the curriculum. This connection is obscured in more instrumental views.

10. Students are already alert to futures. Hence, they do not need to be coerced into considering it further. They are naturally interested in the unfolding of their own lives. Many have fears about unemployment, pollution and the environment. It is important to help pupils channel the energies which support these fears into strategies that address the source of the fear.

Futures in education within the UK

So far as I am aware there has never been a centrally funded curriculum development project in Britain in the futures area. A number of individuals and individual institutions have developed their own initiatives locally and there have been a few attempts to integrate these. The World Futures Society has not developed a large enough membership in Britain to sustain meetings of the kind common in the USA.

(The WFSF is a true global network and holds its meetings all over the world.) The pattern of innovation is therefore a decentralised one, with people making changes and taking initiatives wherever they happen to be.

For example, a group of teachers at Pocklington school in Yorkshire developed a sixth-form general studies course entitled 'Possible futures' focusing on such issues as the nature of humanity, urban areas and knowledge versus wisdom. The Design Faculty of the Open University offered a course entitled 'Man-made futures' for several years. The course materials were among the best produced anywhere. A number of other universities have offered courses with titles such as 'Alternative futures' as part of a humanities degree - but Oxbridge appears not to have noticed.

A couple of individual projects, however, can be mentioned. One is Simon Nicholson's 'Children in futures' project, which aimed to give children access to media in order to explore their own interests and their own images of futures. Nicholson was based at the Oxford Research Unit of the Open University and has carried out participatory workshops in many countries. Another was my own post-doctorate research program, 'The implications of critical futures study for the theory and practice of curriculum', which surveyed futures work world-wide, developed a systematic basis for curriculum innovation and rendered some futures tools and techniques into a form teachers can use.²

Conferences and workshops have been few and far between. A potentially important two-day invitation workshop co-sponsored by the UK Futures Network and the University of London Institute of Education was held in February 1985 but was not followed up. Conferences on futures-related themes (such as technology, work and information) are common, but none, to my knowledge, has explored the centrality of futures as a coherent intellectual, academic or practical focus within education. The nearest to this are the occasional meetings sponsored from outside the formal system. Examples include, the 'Education for life' conferences organised by the Mediating Network in Brighton, in 1986 and 1987, and, the 'Education for the twenty-first century' meeting held at the Findhorn Foundation, Forres, Scotland, during Easter 1986. Both were true 'futures' gatherings, though both were grounded in futures movements rather than the wider field (embracing futures research, futures study and the futures movements, see Figure 3).

In the 1990s, there have been significant developments in the tertiary sector, including the appointment of David Hicks as Britain's first 'professor of foresight' at the Bath Spa University College, and the initiation of a Masters program in Foresight and Futures Studies by Graham May at Leeds Metropolitan University.

Content and process in futures education

During a survey of curriculum units, modules and materials I found a wide variety of work from around the world. Some was of a very high

quality indeed, but several things stood out clearly.

1. Very few curriculum offerings were clearly and explicitly grounded in a specific theoretical framework, this meant they were often perceived as marginal and therefore vulnerable to changing conditions.
2. A wide variability between the foci chosen for study drew considerable attention toward futures methodologies and to specific issues, while concepts, creativity and real-world connections were relatively rare.
3. Almost none of the materials studied were broad or balanced (in the sense that they covered the full range of the field in a coherent way).
4. There was very little evidence of sustained treatment of specific foci over a period of time that used a succession of approaches and methods.
5. No agreed framework of analysis of evaluation could be found.
6. No comprehensive view of the content and process of futures in education was then available (other than in books referring specifically to the USA, and these had characteristic drawbacks).

It was clear that the decentralised pattern of innovation in Britain also applied on a wider scale. People tended to create innovations in a vacuum, as it were, with very little knowledge of work carried out elsewhere. Hence, in an attempt to provide some sort of standard outline of the range of existing work, the notion of a 'Model futures curriculum' was developed. This sketched in some of the basic categories of work under a variety of headings.

Given the variety of approaches noted - some leaning heavily toward methodology, others toward local issues, and still others toward student participation and creativity, it was hard to generalise about curriculum process. However, on the whole, teachers tended to utilise pupil-centred approaches rather than more formal methods, and to engage students in matters of concern to them. The few evaluations available strongly suggest that students find 'futures' enjoyable and in some sense 'liberating' or 'empowering'. This was certainly the case with teachers in the Lancaster area who took the Masters course module 'Futures Study and Curriculum Design' as well as later tertiary courses. 3

Reliable accounts of classroom and university practice remain uncommon. There are still far too few researchers and scholars working in the field. Yet two anthologies that have surveyed the area suggest very clearly that well-grounded futures study injects a new sense of purpose into obsolescent curricula. 4 The latent demand for this work therefore appears considerable. (Also see chapter 2.5, below, Critical Futures Study as an Educational Strategy, for an account of three university

futures courses.)

Implementation in schools

Basically, there are three approaches to implementation.

1. The introduction of discrete futures units or modules into an existing curriculum program.
2. The introduction of futures as a dimension of existing subjects and curriculum foci.
3. The reconceptualisation of a school's modus operandi according to futures concepts and methods.

Approach three is the most ambitious and it has not been tried in many places. However, examples such as the Montclair Futures School in New Jersey, show that it is a viable option where resources, staffing and support are available. It does presuppose that adequate training, materials and leadership are present locally, and this is clearly not often the case at present.

Approach two requires that a 'prime mover', such as a head-teacher or curriculum director, take on the task of facilitating a school-wide shift in content and process. Given the right environment and support it represents a viable way forward. When teachers are given the time to familiarise themselves with futures concepts and approaches, most tend to change what they do in small but significant ways. Since futures is a cross-curricular dimension it can be approached in this way. Schools and colleges are therefore increasingly using 'futures weeks' and professional development forums for this purpose.

The first approach is the most common since it means that highly-motivated individuals can innovate in their own classrooms without disturbing established procedures elsewhere. Increasingly, general studies, social and life skills, careers, domestic science, languages, drama and design, include an explicit futures component and several new courses have been recently designed along those lines. Elective courses in futures per se will be more common as suitable course materials become available.

Conclusion

Insight rarely illuminates a new perspective on the taken-for-granted world. It did so regarding the theory of evolution, quantum theory and the view back to the planet Earth from space. In a more modest way futures in education represents another paradigmatic shift of perception. The weaknesses of some early approaches have now been corrected and a systematic basis for futures work in education is now available. This means that schools can take up the available tools and

understandings, and integrate them into every aspect of their work. 5

FS is not simply another subject or curriculum focus entering into competition with an already overcrowded curriculum; it is a true metaperspective grounded in a coherent body of theory and practice. A thumbnail definition of FS is that of a forward-looking equivalent to history. If the latter studies where we have come from in some collective sense, then the former considers where it is we may wish to go. The two are closely linked and accounts of 'good' history teaching are often equally applicable to futures. However, at the end of the twentieth century, a new shift is needed: a shift of consciousness and perception that understands the past is indeed past. It has much to teach us; yet it cannot be altered. Humanity will, intentionality and responsibility, face in the other direction - toward the emerging future. As Ziegler has noted, the future is less a realm of knowledge, than of action. 6

At this particular point in time it is the future which should command our attention - not least of all because of the many unresolved difficulties and problems associated with our transition from the industrial era. Far from being a distant abstraction the study of futures has now become indispensable within education, as elsewhere. To draw fully on this field of enquiry is to open up quite new options for innovation and development. It is to bring into schools the means to participate fully in the transition process and thereby properly fulfil their obligations both to individuals and to society at large.

A cynical view asks 'what has posterity done for me?'. Jonathan Schell is probably correct with his devastating assertion that 'formerly the future was given to us - now it must be achieved'. 7 But my preference is for Kenneth Boulding's insightful observation that 'the future is the means by which I can repay my debt to the past'. It captures what is perhaps the underlying theme of much futures work: our inextricable involvement in a universal process embracing past, past and future.

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