Why Schools Should be Scanning the Future and Using Futures Tools

In a settled period characterised by low rates of change there would be no need to scan the future. Yesterday's solutions would continue to fit today's problems and needs. However the late 20th century is a period of rapid structural change and social/cultural/environmental transformation. The future scenarios in prospect differ greatly from all previous historical experience. While there are many viable scenarios to aim for, many futures worth living in, others are less attractive and some spell the end of the human race as we know it. The single most important insight to emerge from the quality futures literature is that we must not drift passively into this period of profound civilisational challenge. Rather, we should look ahead with all the means at our disposal, interpret what we discover and integrate these understandings into the present in a continuous cycle or process (W. Ashley & J. Morrison, 1995).

Enabling the shift from past to future

All organisations must monitor their environment and adapt to changing conditions. Schools are in a particularly 'exposed' position because they were created during the industrial period to serve the needs of that time - to provide basic literacy and numeracy for an industrial society. The culture of schools, teaching and education is therefore grounded in the self-understandings of that earlier time and as a consequence they assume a fairly static outlook. Unlike many commercial organisations, schools, school systems and universities lack basic environmental scanning and strategic direction-setting capacities. This means that the institutions of formal education continue to be products of the past and are failing to respond to the emerging picture of the near-term future. This is a recipe for educational decline and social decay. It is not possible for educational systems to fulfil their individual and social functions so long as they remain based on past ideas, assumptions and worldviews. They need to change - but educators should be controlling and directing the process (D. Snyder, 1996). At present schools, and school systems, are largely passive. They get caught up in responding to change, in crisis management, because they do not take charge of the agenda. There is a dearth of forward-looking leadership. But this can be developed.

Whatever else they are for, a major purpose of schools at the end of the 20th century is to prepare their students for active citizenship in the early 21st century. A working knowledge of the character of this time is therefore essential to the work of schools. The future cannot be predicted and there are no future facts. However, a coherent body of knowledge has emerged from futures studies and associated disciplines. This provides a 'structural overview' of the coming decades. This overview is collective, not individual, and it evolves over time as historical events take place and our understanding develops. Such an overview is possible because of the work of countless people in many professions: people who detect signals, read trends, monitor change processes, study global problems, provide early warnings of future dangers and alert us to future opportunities. Futures studies interprets such material according to the standard rules of scholarship and offers the resulting insights to wider constituencies through books, journals, databases, internet dialogues, workshops, seminars and conferences (R. Slaughter, 1996).

If schools and school systems were properly fulfilling their responsibilities they would not be waiting for futures workers to offer them help - they would be demanding it. However, not only do schools not routinely use futures tools and methods; in most cases they do not even know that they exist. So it is vital to bridge boundaries, move across the disciplines, facilitate cooperation between many different people, and find ways to develop school-based expertise in the area of futures studies. Only by so doing will schools be able to engage with the forward view and integrate the

insights so gained into everyday practice. Since governments are absorbed by the demands of the immediate present and bureaucracies are preoccupied with the procedural necessities of system-maintenance, the vision and the capacity to look beyond the present can only arise from within the teaching profession itself: from principals, principals' associations, co-operating schools and other professional groups.

Using the Futurescan technique

The Futurescan technique is one way to begin to utilise futures expertise in education. It is based on the QUEST method developed by Burt Nanus in the early 1980s. It is a 'low-tech' method that employs several standard tools: SWOTs, brainstorming, cross-impact analysis, simple scenarios and the testing of strategies (B. Nanus, 1982). I have used Futurescan successfully in Australia in a range of contexts and organisations, including that of schools, colleges and universities. But it is still far from being seen as a standard option. It provides a way for participants to detect signals of change in their own operational environment, to consider these carefully and to evolve a range of strategic responses. It is a facilitated and systematic process which derives its core content from the knowledge of the participants. Hence it is a method which is inherently keyed to the perceptions, needs and requirements of those using it.

I first ran Futurescan for a group of deputy vice-chancellors and others in a four day residential format. Though the evaluations were satisfactory, this approach created two problems. One was that the unit of analysis under consideration became the higher education sector, which was too general for some. The other was that there was precious little time to process the outputs of the first stages before we plunged into the latter. This placed the facilitators under great time pressure. So when I next used the technique (this time with a prestigious business college) I ensured that there were two workshops separated by a period of a week or two. This time is needed to allow for careful analysis of the master cross-impact matrix that emerges at the end of the first day's work. I also found that it was much, much easier to work with a single institution because it provided a more coherent focus.

With this background I was able to apply Futurescan within a number of local schools. In all cases they have been large secondary schools, both state-run and private. Here considerable preparatory work was needed, since the schools lacked any real background in strategic thinking or the use of futures tools. It was also important to not 'over-claim' what the technique could deliver. So in most cases I took part in several in-depth meetings to prepare the ground, help select the teams, have briefing materials collated and so on.

Each time I have run Futurescan I have found that a series of micro-decisions are necessary in order to 'tailor' it to the particular mileau in which it is used. For example, for a large private school, politics dictated that I had to invite the Dean of Education from the university to speak, even though this took up precious time and contributed nothing tangible to the workshop process. Alternatively, at a government school I was asked to run the technique in a 'participatory' way. This meant including parents and teachers. So, although the ideal number of participants is only about 12-15, I ended up running dual sessions with a co-facilitator for over 60 people! The process was chaotic at times, but it was certainly participatory. Another set of micro-decisions relates to the way one actually uses the cross-impact matrix, constructs the scenarios and interprets the output from each.

In all cases I have found the technique to be robust and flexible. It can be adapted in many ways to a variety of circumstances and needs. I particularly like the way that, toward the end of the second workshop, leading strategic options can be tested against the preliminary SWOTS analyses to model the pattern of impacts that the former could be expected to have on the organisation. I don't see how

one can obtain these insights without some such technique. So I would like to see it being taken up and taught, for example, in university Masters courses and leadership seminars. It is partly for this reason that I wrote up the technique for the journal Futures; it can certainly be extended and improved in various ways (Slaughter 1990). Perhaps the biggest gap in our present knowledge is the lack of research to assess the long-term implications of using such techniques in schools and educational systems.

The immediate results of Futurescan emerge in terms of processes and products. For example, as a process it facilitates team building, collegiality and the development of futures-related skills. The products include an enhanced view of the dynamics of the present and near-future environment, a range of locally significant strategic options and, as noted, a first-run analysis of the consequences of implementing particular options. These process and product outputs are directly relevant to the framing and execution of a wide range of educational tasks, including: policy formulation; local initiatives and projects; professional development; curriculum innovation; and proactive leadership.

Proactive leadership

Proactive, or forward-looking leadership is particularly vital. While there are many cases of educational leadership in which clear gains have been made for a particular institution in competition with others, there is a great need for the kind of leadership which develops in the light of the global change process and the evolving picture of the near-term future. Such leadership will pursue quite different ends.

After 20 year's immersion in futures studies I find it indisputable that we cannot understand, or operate effectively within, the present without also understanding the futures that emerge from it. Therefore, the key shift that we should attempt to make during this time is one from unreflective immersion in a taken-for-granted present with its many hidden dangers, to a disciplined and deeply aware exploration of the wider spatial, temporal and cultural context. The latter embraces the near-term future, with its particular pattern of opportunities and dangers. The 200-year present is a useful device for framing this shift (R. Slaughter, 1995).

Taking the lead in the early 21st century context

A combination of economic trends, emerging technologies and complex social/cultural shifts will mean that the functions and roles of schools that became 'traditional' within the industrial context and worldview, are unlikely to persist unchanged and unchallenged. It is therefore to their own benefit to understand the driving forces within the international, national and local environment, to discern the significance of these and other factors, and to find ways of integrating a range of new insights and practices into their *modus operandi*.

My own personal view is that schools are, and should remain, vital contexts for personal development, socialisation and social cohesion into the distant future. However I doubt that they can implement adaptations and innovations based on the 'push' of the past or the pressures of present-day short-term politics. It is up to the schools to develop new capacities and new functions if they are to prosper and thrive in the new millennium. Hence they should begin to take on board some of the futures concepts, tools and strategies that have been in wide use in other areas for some years and bend them to their own socially vital needs. That choice remains entirely possible in the late 1990s. But as time goes by, schools that are unresponsive to the challenge will be superseded, to our collective cost.

References

W. Ashley & J. Morrison, Anticipatory Management, IAP, Leesburg, VA, 1995.
D. Snyder, High Tech and Higher Education: A Wave of Creative Destruction Is Rolling Toward the Halls of Academe, On the Horizon, Vol 4 No 5, September/October 1996, p 1-7.
B. Nanus, QUEST - Quick Environmental Scanning Technique, Long-Range Planning, vol 15 no 2, 1982, p 39-45.
R. Slaughter, Asssessing the QUEST for Future Knowledge: significance of the quick environmental scanning technique for futures, Futures, Vol 22 no 2, March 1990 p 153-166.
R. Slaughter, Mapping the Future: Creating a Structural Overview of the Next 20 Years, Journal of Futures Studies, Tamkang Univ., Taiwan, Vol 1 No 1, Nov. 1996, p 5-26.
R. Slaughter, The Foresight Principle, Praeger, San Francisco, CA, 1995.

(1996, 2002)