

Reflections on Education for the 21st Century

The book began as a series of informal discussions between Hedley Beare and myself during 1990-91. I'd been appointed in 1989 as a Lecturer in Futures and Social Education in the then Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne. It soon became apparent that, while our background and experience were markedly different, our worldviews were closely aligned. While many – if not most – of our colleagues had reservations about Futures Studies (FS) as an area of disciplined enquiry, Hedley had long appreciated its significance, read some of the classic works and clearly understood how vital it was to bring 'futures' and 'education' together. He'd already written about this subject on a number of occasions. So as our discussions continued he suggested that we put the idea of a book on educating for the 21st century to the editor of an 'education and management' series. Approval duly arrived; we were invited to write a formal proposal and duly sent it off.

Once we'd signed a contract our work on the book began. During one of our first meetings we brought printouts of some of our most recent work, sat at a table and assigned specific pieces to several themed 'boxes.' We soon had a reasonable picture of where material in hand might be used. Next we divided up the task of putting chapters together. We each took one, wrote it as a draft and then passed it on to the other with a free hand to edit as each saw fit. I have to say that this was a wonderfully collaborative process. The only issues that ever arose were minor ones that had to do with timing. Hedley, as a full Professor, simply could not work as quickly as I could. That said, the process of collaboration was certainly one of the high points of my professional life. As I've noted in the 2011 Introduction, the book was well received within the teaching profession and we were sometimes hard-pressed to respond to the many subsequent invitations that we each received. Hedley and I went on to write other books. But this is the one that helped me to get established and, in time, to edit a further series on *Futures in Education*.

Re-reading the book in early 2011, it seemed to me that nothing that we wrote back in 1992 had been completely contradicted by subsequent events. Inevitably, perhaps, there were some topics that we could have handled differently. For example, some of our comments on the industrial worldview were a bit too repetitive. We over-estimated what schools could actually do and underestimated the continuing power of an economic context increasingly dominated by 'economic rationalist' imperatives. We were therefore over optimistic about the potential for constructive change. One might say that schools are severely 'constrained' in what they can attempt to do, but we did not address those constraints very clearly at all. So if there was an omission in the book it may well have resulted from our implicit belief in the power of ideas to affect more instrumental kinds of power. In other words, we needed a broader and deeper analysis backed by more sturdy and penetrating forms of critique. Still, we did what we could with the tools then at our disposal. So it's fair to say, I think, that we made a start on what is, in fact, a longer-term process than we realised at the time. That, in turn, justifies making the work available in this revised and updated form.

If we turn to what one might call the ‘underlying message’ I feel that it has become clearer and more urgent over the intervening years. The themes that we addressed included the following.

- The nature of the Western worldview, especially its defects or ‘faulty programming.’
- The growing interconnectedness of the world in relation to a rapidly globalising world order.
- Re-establishing a sense of ‘depth’ in the world, in part through careful use of a hierarchical metaphor allowing for distinct levels of existence and appropriate ways of knowing within each.
- A pivotal shift of focus and perception away from the past (but obviously not involving any simple-minded ejection of history) toward the emerging future.
- The need to be aware of the nature of schools as organisations.
- The related need to not ‘get lost in theory’ but to ensure that the ideas and suggestions we were putting forward were practicable, i.e. that they’d been tested out in practice, did not make unreasonable demands and were do-able.
- The proposition that what teachers and schools did would help to decide whether the 21st century would tend toward renewal or disaster.
- In that connection we stressed the need to shift our values and concerns from those attending the quest to possess material things, i.e. ‘to have,’ toward a focus on what it means ‘to be.’

In critiquing the Western industrial worldview we were of course taking on an immense and challenging task. We were neither the first nor the last to do so and neither of us was delusional to the extent that we’d imagine a small book by a couple of academics would necessarily change the world. But what we *did* believe was that we could influence some of the ways that people thought about schools, understood their role and, indeed, operated school systems. So we were encouraged by the many affirmations we received from the profession. Over time, however, what we did not get was any real ‘buy-in’ from those remote persons of ‘high office’ who ultimately control and operate educational systems. By which I mean the top echelons of decision-makers, administrators, ministers, economists and their equivalents within university hierarchies. While it’s unlikely that such roles or professions entirely lack any progressive thinkers, it seems to me that they are remarkably thin on the ground at these elevated levels. One result is that well-meaning books (projects, proposals, curriculum innovations and the like) such as ours may, for a while, attract some measure of superficial assent but are then set aside and ignored.

Why should this be?

It seems to me that the answer lies within the very worldview we were critiquing, and in the associated values and assumptions that, even now, continue to drive human civilisation toward ‘overshoot and collapse’ futures no sane individual would choose. It’s now painfully clear that those who are most

committed to that earlier worldview, with its heroic assumptions about growth, resources, the conquest of nature and so on, will not relinquish it until they are absolutely forced by circumstances to do so. Among the many consequences are that schools may not be resourced to engage in ‘the shift from past to future,’ universities may not commit to placing the global emergency at the very top of their agendas and governments may not turn aside from their disastrous growth-at-all-costs policies until it is too late.

How can one be so sure? This whole dilemma sprang into sharper focus when I read an interview with Gus Speth, Jimmy Carter’s one-time environment advisor. When asked about why the profoundly serious issues raised in his book *The Bridge at the End of the World* had not been dealt with sooner, when various policies and actions would have been that much more effective, he said words to the effect that ‘we were up against a much more powerful system.’ That was the nub of the issue then and it remains so today. Despite financial scandals and economic ‘downturns’ of worldwide significance, the interconnected system of power, profit and systematic degradation of the world’s resources continues on its destructive path. The rich – and especially the ‘super rich’ – continue to dominate social and economic agendas, dictate consumer ‘wants’, and they will not be easily convinced to desist. That, fundamentally, is why ‘futures in education’ remains an idea, a distant dream, rather than an accomplished reality. That is why books like ours – and there are many of them – are tolerated, read by some, but are ultimately ineffectual.

The recognition of these uncomfortable and disconcerting facts could be viewed as a reason to despair and to perhaps give up, accept the inevitable. Yet if that were the case there would have been little point in making this book available to a new generation of educators. Two very different developments have occurred in the interim period and, in my view at least, hold out real prospects for the kinds of changes we put forward. The first of these is highlighted in the final paragraph of the book and it’s worth reproducing here for two reasons. First, it reveals our overall intentions rather clearly; second, it suggests a way forward that has proved more productive than we could ever have imagined. We wrote that:

This book has been informed by the view that the outer world is an expression of the inner one. The biggest step forward would be re-establishing a map of culture that includes more than the material and the instrumental. We can then use the new map, the new worldview, both to frame and to define futures that breach the bounds of instrumental rationality and see human life as a self-aware part of the whole. (P. 166)

Among the publications that we referenced and occasionally quoted from were three early works by Ken Wilber so, clearly, we must have sensed that his efforts had relevance to our own. What we could not have known then was that within these works lay the beginnings of the Integral perspective that indeed gives us exactly the kind of ‘map of culture’ that we knew was needed and, indeed, were aiming towards. And that, as they say, is a whole other story.

In my own case I've followed Wilber's career and work, read many of his books and even met with him on a couple of occasions. I've never been a 'Wilber groupie,' never subscribed to the podcasts and other spin-offs of his emergence as a globally significant thinker and philosopher. I've neither become an uncritical admirer or an Integral theorist *per se*. While I've no objection to any of the above, my interest is in carefully and selectively *using* aspects of the Integral perspective. The reason is simple: used well, it brings clarity where there was confusion, light where there was darkness and ways forward when these seemed few and far between. So any serious consideration of my work since co-writing *Education for the 21st century* with Hedley will acknowledge the influence that this perspective has had. Readers can draw their own conclusions from the companion volume to this one as well as from other recent works.

The other significant development since is the enhanced clarity and renewed sense of motivation and purpose that attends the dawning realisation that humanity as a whole is indeed facing a true global emergency with no easy exits or 'cost-free' solutions. While the rich and otherwise privileged may continue to inhabit their zones of affluence for a while longer there are, in fact, no escape routes from this emergency other than those that arise from directly confronting it and comprehensively dealing with it. I would now go as far as to say that no approach to 'educating for the twenty first century' can afford to ignore the great global challenges that increasingly confront us. In other words the 'shift from past to future' that we wrote about looks less and less like a 'take-it-or-leave-it' option that can be safely ignored and more like an imperative to which all involved in education must respond if they are to retain any vestige of credibility.

This returns us to a dynamic that I first described in *The Foresight Principle*, back in 1995. I called it the 'dialectic of foresight and experience.' If we continue to deny the increasingly obvious then our modes of social learning will have little to do with schools. They'll be imposed by devastation and disaster as the feedback from breaching global limits turns back upon human (and non-human) communities in ways that can neither be prevent nor controlled. To the extent that we take up and use our capacities for intelligent foresight there's still time to moderate this process and find less costly ways forward. By the same token, education still has a key role to play in equipping new generations for an increasingly challenging world. But the game is changing and time is no longer on our side.

As ever, the choice remains with us, here, now.

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E21C Revisited Appendix

Elements of a Rationale for Futures in Education

Rationales take various forms in various places. But among the most commonly cited suggestions are the following.

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 that 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. Foresight or careful forward thinking is preferable to crisis management. It represents a saving of the energy that 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 to be worth doing. These images are being continuously negotiated at all levels of society, though often in implicit, hidden, ways (for example through advertising). Many images are ambiguous in that it is the human response to the image that is crucial, not the simple fact of the image itself.
5. Futures are not the abstractions they have sometimes been represented to be. 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 it 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. Different time frames can be matched with appropriate activities.
7. Education is a major institution with 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. We exert our will and our intentionality upon it and attempt to shape it according to our perceptions and needs. This is a much more active stance than can be adopted in relation to the past.