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Futures is a Quest for Meaning: Richard Slaughter's Contribution to Futures Education

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Highlights

- Richard Slaughter's contribution to Futures Education over 30+ years; a personal recollection of his influence on me.

Background

Richard Slaughter's name is synonymous with Futures Education. For more than four decades, Richard has contributed numerous papers, books, conference keynote presentations and sat on advisory boards to lay the groundwork and forge the development of this critically important educational field. From deeply and rigorously argued theoretical considerations of its conceptual and values bases, to on-ground practical tools and techniques, Richard's pioneering passion has brought Futures insights and thinking to educators at all levels around the world.

As evidenced by his early career as a primary teacher, Richard's work is based in a deep love and concern for young people, which continues to shine through his work to this day. Slaughter frames Futures as a critical and emancipatory social capacity (1986, 1987, 1996), departing from the more linear, quantitative notions of forecasting and prediction. In his 1994 paper, "Why we should care for Future Generations", he explores the idea that caring for future generations is a legitimate ethical concern that arises from our common humanity, and that humans have an innate capacity for foresight (1997). These key insights give full reign to the imagination to conceptualise and plan the future we want, at the same time, challenging and exploring taken for granted beliefs. It is this that makes Richard's work of such immense value to educators. Futures is, as he puts it, a "quest for meaning" (2019).

Richard's own interest in Futures had started in the 1980s at Lancaster University, where his PhD was one of the first in the field. He joined Hedley's Beare's department at the University of Melbourne in 1989 as a 'lecturer in futures and social education'. As Richard writes in his appreciation piece on Hedley, "Hedley understood the rationale for this particular description and did everything he could to encourage and support it" (Slaughter, 2010a, p.1). As well as researching and developing units on Futures Education, Slaughter and Beare's collaboration culminated in the first and still very important book on Futures Education, "Education for the 21st Century", published in 1993. This proved to be the forerunner of a period of intensive and ground-breaking work for Richard as he and his colleagues developed the both the theory and the on-the-ground practice of Futures Education.

Despite the acknowledged success of all that he and Hedley had achieved, after three years, Richard's time at Melbourne University came to an abrupt end. His Head of Department was philosophically opposed to his work; in her view, the Futures field "had a tenuous relationship to education" (Slaughter, pers comm), and she made the decision not to renew his contract. For Richard this was a bitter blow, but as one door closes, another opens. In 1999 he was invited by the then Vice Chancellor of Swinburne University of Technology to establish the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) as inaugural Professorial Fellow. The Hon. Barry Jones, who had set up the Commission for the Future in 1986, was patron. This proved to be a fruitful time of growth and development for Richard. In collaboration with Adolph Hanich from the School of Business, he developed a three stage program, from Graduate Certificate to Masters, to teach and research Social Foresight. The program attracted mostly mid-career professionals from a range of fields, who were "actively looking for something different" (Australian Foresight Institute).

The 1990s and 2000s were to become the heyday for much innovation and development in the Futures field, and especially in Futures Education. This was driven, I believe, by an increased concern that the world was becoming increasingly unsustainable on many fronts. Many educators and researchers were inspired to enter the field; the time was right. An influential early contribution to the field was Richard's two volumes "Futures Concepts and Powerful Ideas" (1991a) and "Futures Tools and Techniques" (1991b). These were an invaluable compendium and synthesis of ideas, concepts, tools and techniques that provided the theoretical and practical underpinning for educators to develop Futures Education. 1993 saw the launch, at the World Future Society Conference, of the first edition of Richard's extraordinary compendium, the 'Knowledge Base of Futures Studies' (KBFS) (2005; 2020), an exhaustive collection of futures thinking and practices. Of particular interest to educators was *Part 3: Futures in Education*, that covered the evolution of Futures in education as well as principles and practices that were taking root in schools.

Futures Education - my own journey

My own collaboration with Richard began during this time. In the mid-1990s a few of us in the Faculty of Education at Australian Catholic University had been mulling over the question of what sort of world would our students be living in into the 21st century, and how we might best prepare them for what was clearly, even in those pre-9/11 and climate emergency days, a rapidly changing world. We decided this should be the focus of our next staff planning day, and I was tasked with finding someone versed in the field who might be able to offer a keynote address. The search led me to Richard who was then at the University of Melbourne, and my journey through the field of Futures Education began.

Richard delivered an outstanding address to our Faculty, introducing concepts that were then quite new to us all, even though I had an interest in environmental education and realised the business-as-usual track we were on was unsustainable. My colleague Lyn Carter and I were inspired to pursue the field further, and the decades that followed saw the development of units on Futures Education at both the undergraduate and Masters level, professional learning for teachers, articles and presentations at conferences. One of our Masters students, Debra Bateman, went on to achieve one of the few PhDs in Futures Education (2009), and is now considered a leader in the field.

For me, Richard's influence has not only been to open my eyes to a field and ideas I never even knew existed, but also his unfailing generosity and willingness to support and mentor me and others as we developed our expertise as Futures educators. He encouraged Jennifer Gidley, Debra Bateman and me to write a monograph "Futures in Education in Australian primary and secondary schools: Mapping current principles and practice", published by the AFI in 2004. The work reviewed the then state of Futures Education in Australian schools, finding that though appeared implicitly in areas such as sustainability, civics and globalisation studies, it was rarely couched explicitly as in personal, social, and global futures. The monograph also discussed factors that we believed would enable successful implementation of Futures in schools, finding, unsurprisingly, that it depends on a whole of school approach - from enthusiastic leaders and informed teachers to acceptance by the wider student, parent and school community.

Richard's insights had crystallised and given expression to thoughts that had for some time hovered in inchoate form on the periphery of my consciousness, and added an intellectual rigour and clarity to my work. For me, the most profound and enduring impact of Futures education is that it enables people to recognise that the future is not something that passively happens to them and over which they have no control, but that it is actively created. Our often unexamined notions of the future are constructed in our unconscious by the influences we are exposed to, especially the hegemony of political ideas, philosophies and images mediated through the media. Our futures have been colonised and we hardly know it.

These insights open up the imagination to a vista of alternative futures as young people begin to see themselves as actors in imagining and creating their futures. There is not just one but many futures, and it is the decisions made now that create the future that unfolds. This awareness is immensely empowering and, as Debra Bateman (2009) and David Hicks (2002) have also shown, can be introduced even to students of primary school age.

As a practitioner, the teaching tool known as the '3Ps', or possible, probable and preferable futures, is the key to opening up the futures imagination in profound ways. It not only presents a deep conceptual challenge, but it can also be intensely emotional and personal. More than once have my pre-service education students been brought to tears as they imagined, often for the first time, what the world of the future might be like for them and their children. In linking these insights to the concept of the 200-year present, the present becomes not an instant but a span of time, intimately linking the past, the now and the future. Seen this way, the panorama of human values and ideologies that have shaped the now, come into clear focus. This thinking links readily to the concepts of *incasting*, where possible futures can be imagined and explored in depth, and *backcasting*, whereby in working backwards from a future to the now, the pathways that lead to alternative futures can be considered (Slaughter, 1991a,b). Using these and other key concepts, education students have been able to design units of work for primary school students across the curriculum that include a range of futures concepts and tools.

Allied to the 3Ps is the notion of personal and global futures. Again, for most of us, these are unexamined, and may even unwittingly be contradictory. I well remember a Futures day held for Year 10 students and teachers at a girls' secondary school where we asked the young people to imagine their lives in 10 years' time. Their views tended to be somewhat conventional, centring around a good career and a family. Then they were asked to draw their image of the future which is more likely to be drawn from more global influences such as the media. These images tended towards the dystopian, thus exposing the conflicts and paradoxes between the generally positive personal futures drawn against the backdrop of a global dystopian future. These and other tools and concepts are able to open up deep veins of Futures thinking to be explored, challenged and reconciled.

Futures in Curricula

Richard's active promotion of explicit approaches to Futures and the enthusiastic uptake by many teachers had begun to come to the attention of curriculum authorities. During the 1990s, the Australian states of South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland, as well as the Northern Territory, decided to include Futures to varying degrees (Gidley et al., 2004). Of these, the 1995 Queensland New Basics Project "Futures Personal, Social, Global" (Slaughter, 2008) was the first curriculum to include Futures as a new subject for Years 11 and 12, and its story is worth examining here. Excerpts from Richard's preamble to the course encapsulate the clarity of his thinking regarding the importance of Futures Education for young people:

Citizens of tomorrow need to be prepared for a world which will be significantly different from the world of the 1990's ... Futures is intellectually stimulating and empowering, drawing on the innate [human] capacity to engage in foresight, or futures thinking enhanced by concepts, tools and techniques Futures can contribute substantially to social and economic well-being. Students ... will be encouraged to transform their view of the world ... As they develop foresight ... they may experience many shifts of value, focus and attitude and ... discover that most fears, negative attitudes and 'doomsday' images of the future rest on misperceptions. In learning how present actions will shape future consequences, students gain access to new sources of understanding and action... Futures also address the critical issues of late adolescence and provides a valuable preparation for working life ... instead of looking ahead to the world beyond school with anxiety and fear, students will be able to look ahead with much greater clarity and confidence... attitudes and skills [which] clearly provide a sound basis for decision making... [and] provides the

opportunity ... to develop the skills that will enable [students] to develop leadership in shaping their own future and Australia's. (2008, pp. 15-16)

Richard was certain that given the chance, young people could understand a range of Futures concepts, and as he observed, “clearly this one was going to be a success” (2008, p.19). Instead, following its successful trial, and for reasons still never openly explained, the Queensland authorities abandoned the new subject.

This, sadly, appears to be often the norm for such innovations. In similar vein, in 2000 in Tasmania, a new curriculum, the Essential Learnings Framework, was developed for Years K-10 (Tasmania, Department of Education, 2002). This was the first system-wide curriculum change in the state for nearly twenty years. Futures featured strongly and were explicitly framed as essential learnings: personal futures, understanding the past and creating preferred futures, world futures, and creating sustainable futures. While also popular among teachers, like the Queensland curriculum, this curriculum suffered a short lifespan. In discussing its demise, Watt (2007) observed that it seemed to be due to a combination of lack of understanding or recognition of its importance, lack of professional learning for teachers and pre-service teachers, and conservative political pressures, something Richard would have agreed with wholeheartedly. It is also evidence of the ongoing education culture wars which had been raging since the 1960s, representing the struggle between those advocating integrated enquiry-based student - centred pedagogies, and teacher-centred traditional subject-based approaches. Richard recognised this as a foundational problem in education (Slaughter, 2008).

The same was true of other similar curriculum innovations. The futures-focused curriculum document ‘Education for Sustainability’ entered the school system in 2009; one of its key principles was ‘Envisaging a better future’ (Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2009). Now, this innovation has become subsumed into the curriculum as a ‘Cross Curriculum Priority’, which in reality has meant it can be safely ignored, and generally is (Smith & Watson, 2019). Richard sums it up thus: “if there is a summary statement that describes the predicament of school systems today it is that they are still caught up in ‘past perceptions of problems’” (2008, p.21).

If the Queensland debacle were not enough, the Vice Chancellor of Swinburne University retired five years into Richard’s appointment, and in ways eerily reminiscent of what happened at the University of Melbourne, the new VC abolished all the institutes within the university. While the AFI was not specifically targeted, its value and associated status slowly diminished, and Richard decided to leave in 2004. He moved to Brisbane and found that he could not only survive but actually thrive outside of formal institutions. Here, Richard founded Foresight International where he continues his advocacy, writing and research to this day. Foresight International publishes a range of important pieces that may not be able to gain traction commercially, including the 2020 update of “The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies” (Slaughter and Hines 2020), ‘Biggest Wake Up Call in History’ (Slaughter 2010b) and ‘To See With Fresh Eyes: Integral Futures and the Global Emergency’ (Slaughter 2012). The KBFS update is particularly welcome, re-energising this generative work for a new generation.

Very recently, Richard has accepted a position in the Centre for Workplace Research and Futures Studies at the University of Southern Queensland, where his prodigious experience, talent and insights may once again stimulate progress in Futures Education.

Futures Education- what have we learned?

Looking back over some 30 years, other than in isolated pockets, it is somewhat depressing to realise that Futures has not really established itself in mainstream education at any level, either in Australia or the rest of the world. With their own lack of foresight, education authorities seem to have actively rejected the opportunity to embrace socially vital innovations like Futures Education, even as their rhetoric continues to maintain that their function is to prepare young people for living in the 21st

century. The business-as-usual side of the education cultures wars seems to have won for now, which Richard regards as “no less than a scandal and an embarrassment to the teaching profession” (2008, p.21).

Indeed it is a sad indictment that with all the groundwork that has been so rigorously and authoritatively put in place by Slaughter and others, the reality on the ground at both university and school levels point to the extraordinary difficulties of embedding innovations like Futures into their work. Even though teachers and students, once exposed to Futures, embrace it enthusiastically, it is clear that the real problem lies at the systems level. As Slaughter puts, ‘as soon as one moves beyond particular schools and classrooms to the system level, everything changes and futures in education initiatives seem to ‘vanish like smoke on a windy day and are seen no more’ (2008, p.18). Short-term thinking, and lack of awareness combined with bureaucracy, institutional inertia and the powerful forces of politics and economics, engender an ideological framework that produces an unexamined, or maybe deliberately unproblematised, business-as-usual future. This a dysfunctional habit means that bureaucracies, as agents of government for social administration, do not welcome innovations from outside the system (Slaughter, 2008; 2019). For Slaughter, such innovations are unable to prevail against the dominant growthist neoliberal paradigm that the ‘madness that our generation has lived through (and, of course, benefitted from)’ (Slaughter, pers comm). It is no accident that the neoliberal field of STEM education is now in the ascendancy, and threatens to impose a further narrowing of the imagination (Smith & Watson, 2020).

The Future of Futures Education

Although he believes that the dysfunctional neoliberal ideology that has been so damaging globally is in decline, today Richard sounds a somewhat pessimistic tone. He believes that we are rapidly running out of time to counteract these still dominant forces and our collective human failings have allowed things to become as dark and dangerous as they now are (Slaughter, pers comm). The window of being able to envisage a more sustainable and just future appears to be rapidly closing and along with it, the collective imagination to bring forth a better world. In this rapidly deteriorating world, the need for Futures Education could not be clearer, and schools need to develop their own specifically futures-oriented understanding more fully 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; only then will young people begin to be properly equipped for the manifestly challenging tasks ahead (Slaughter, 2008).

The turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic may, ironically, provide an opportunity for the Futures window to open a fraction. People everywhere are waking to the stark realisation of how parlous state of the world is. With renewed vigour many are pondering and exploring other, more ethical ways of being and imagining sustainable, flourishing futures, and acting to bring them forth. New generations of young activists are calling for urgent change, and it may be that educational institutions find themselves marginalised and increasingly irrelevant if they cannot respond quickly enough. Many of the foundational tools, concepts and research that can help bring about a better world about have already been laid, thanks to the pioneering work of Richard Slaughter and his colleagues.

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