Creating Positive Views of Futures with Young People*

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The dilemma of the young

The late 1990's are imbued with a sense of things falling apart, of a radical loss of certainty and vision. Young people, growing up and maturing at a time when many of the old certainties have broken down, have inherited difficulties from the industrial era, which have few or no historical equivalents. The term 'global problematique' - or interlocking set of social, economic, political and environmental problems - coined by the Club of Rome to draw attention to this, has recently been varied to 'resolutique', to draw attention to possible solutions. Clearly, however, solutions are difficult to find and even more difficult to implement.

In this context, it is easy to feel cynical, depressed or fearful - avoidance strategies are commonly available through a range of increasingly compelling media. Yet young people continue to have fears about the future. They worry about unemployment, family breakdown, personal security and overall life prospects. These fears arise in the context of wider concerns about the state of the planet, and, in particular, long-term environmental deterioration. Young people are aware, for example, of living through powerful, often disturbing, historical shifts. Sunbathing in Australia, for example, is no longer the carefree hedonistic experience it once was. The AIDS pandemic introduced new anxieties into teenage relationships.
Examples such as these are only the tip of the iceberg; at a deeper level, young people know that there is much more to come.

It follows that their fears and concerns should be respected - they are not illusions. On the whole they are based on reality. There are, however, many ways of helping the young move toward more positive, creative and empowering views of futures, for themselves and their society.

The problem

Two decades ago, Donald Schon, described how social systems tend to move disconnectedly from one period to another: we are living through such an interregnum: the old era falls apart before the new comes together. Those trapped in the transition, however, are often unable to grasp the new picture and see only the old one being lost. Hence, there is a tendency for great anguish and uncertainty in those involved, simply because the old system provided identity and purpose.

We have left the industrial era and its unquestioned belief in material growth, progress, scientific and technical optimism, materialism, and the careless exploitation of natural systems. That world is over, though

its effects will continue to be felt for centuries; the era we are moving toward is still taking shape. Many old certainties have gone, but, on the whole, they have not been replaced by new ones. The result is a frightening social and spiritual vacuum, felt, at some level, by everyone.

It's hardly surprising that young people turn away from uncomfortable realities to a wide range of avoidance strategies: sport, video, tv, drugs, music, and a mostly vapid, chronically oppositional, pop culture. Within this glittering arena of media and marketing there are many compelling diversions, but little in the way of penetrating insights into the grounds of the condition experienced by young people. Computer games become more sophisticated each year, virtual reality is on its way, and so the technological screen between young people and the world becomes more opaque and more difficult to penetrate or understand. It is a confusing time, where powerful forces working within the human system and the wider world are often out of sync., adding up to less than a coherent whole. Mystification is rife and some resort to desperate solutions.

One might expected educators to deal with this bleak outlook effectively, and, to be fair, some have tried. But, they are up against powerful system imperatives that continue working in a different direction. While many talented and dedicated teachers work hard to serve their student's best interests, they can do little to overturn the basic assumptions structured within - or inscribed into - educational systems. The latter continue to be driven by the past, focused on the short-term present and unresponsive to the future. During settled times, such a stance would be appropriate as yesterday's solutions would apply today, sufficient to meet current needs. But, in unsettled times, when everything is at stake, short-term thinking is dangerous and unproductive.

In the late 1990's, futures thinking and futures methods are routinely employed in some government and many commercial enterprises. Yet, in most cases, educators, even at the highest levels, do not use them and do not even know they exist. Without wishing to paint the entire educational enterprise as a failure, it is fair to say it has failed to understand the implications of futures as a principle lying at its heart, and is badly positioned to deal with the range of futures-related concerns now becoming real social crises: drugs, violence, meaninglessness, unemployment, and the rest. The system is ill-equipped because it is crippled by the paradigmatic limitations of prevailing politics and economics. Metaphorically, it has had its head in the sand for too long. However, futures concepts, ideas, teaching methods, and so on, can be implemented quickly and easily, once the threshold barriers - explaining the point of the exercise - are surmounted.

So, in summary, the great problem for young people is being born during

a time of transition, inheriting a technically powerful culture, which is humanly weak and spiritually desolate. It is a 'thin' culture; one which has lost sight of limits, values, meanings, myths, rituals, commitments and principles. All of which are needed for a robust, healthy and wise society. In the age of 'the fast buck', of compulsive merchandising, legalised insanity, chronic derivative fantasy and the endless fictional rehearsal of disaster, it is genuinely difficult to grow up sane.

Six Strategies for Young People

* Develop an understanding of the effects of young peoples' media.

* Change fears into motivations.

* Explore social innovations.

* See the future as part of the present.

* Use futures concepts, tools and ideas.

* Design your way out of the industrial era.

1. Understanding the effects of young peoples' media.

Young peoples' media includes books, films, comics, tv and video, computer games, arcade games, fantasy games, simulations, and, before long, virtual reality (VR). While there are many fine books for the young, the decline of print-based literacy is matched only by the rise and rise of the image. We are, as J.G. Ballard has observed, ‘obsessed with the image’. And with the advent of cheap computers, TVs and video machines we have access to a richness and variety of images without precedent.

In a futures context, three major concerns arise from this media-rich environment. First, representations of futures, whether overtly fictional or otherwise, exhibit a familiar and stereotypical constellation of qualities. First among these is violence, emerging from an openly dystopian context that is the dominating dynamic in many films, videos, comics and games. Second, 'the future' tends to be represented externally through the display of things: computers, mega-cities, robots, space stations etc. As noted above, one must look long and hard to find credible images of people as people - rather than servants of the machine - in these images. Clearly, such futures are built externally through science and technology - rather than through human decisions. This is a spurious and unhelpful view. Third, the future is not seen as a dynamic field of potential interpenetrating the present, but, rather, as a kind of blank screen, somewhere 'out there', upon which contemporary hopes and fears are projected. The array of

alternatives that arise from the study of futures, and translate into present options and choices is obscured, and the young are thereby disempowered.

The portrayal of the basic polarities of life, such as good and evil, right and wrong, science and magic, is a second concern that can be explored through the structuring of categories in futuristic media. Studying this material brought forth the conclusion that these important categories were irretrievably scrambled at the epistemological level (see previous Chapter). The argument is not that young people are helpless or incapable of responding, rather, that a significant amount of popular culture in these modes is trivial, diversionary, and, in the first instance, confusing. There is a prima facie case for considering much of this material as detracting from young people's attempts to make sense of the world and to feel at home in it. This contrasts dramatically with more positive uses of some mainstream literature, and, say, traditional fairy stories, which arguably rehearse more viable life strategies.

The point, however, is not to rail against 'the media'. Having outlined the problem, we can draw attention to the need for a strategy of response. The real problem, perhaps, is that a great deal of low-quality material is experienced by young people with minimal filtering, thus by-passing the critical faculties and going straight into the subconscious. I doubt if anyone knows just what the consequences are - and that alone is cause for concern. Are young people being subtly - and not so subtly - moulded in unknown ways? A lot more research is needed before we can be sure of the answer. There may, however, be a surprisingly simple interim solution.

If some of the more questionable material was intercepted before passing into the subconscious, I have no doubt that most young people would be able to assess its significance, understand its uses and limitations, and begin to develop some critical insight into cultural imaging processes. In other words, parents, teachers and others working with young people should try to ensure that there are plenty of opportunities to process media experiences. This would mean, for example, that tv would stop being 'wallpaper' and be regarded far more critically as the very powerful symbolic medium it really is (analogous in many ways to a powerful drug), and, therefore, used with similar attention and care. Early work in this area has shown some promising results.

2. Change Fears into Motivations via the Empowerment Principle

When the question of attitudes arises, many people tend to think in terms of polar opposites: optimism and pessimism. This is fine because, as far as it goes, it is far better to adopt an optimistic attitude than a negative one. However, optimism and pessimism are too simple to be applied uncritically to futures problems. In fact, both terms are ambiguous. An optimistic person may believe there is no cause for alarm,

when in fact there may be very good cause for it. Similarly, a pessimistic person may get so concerned about a particular problem they will be motivated to do something about it. So, importantly, it is not a person's starting disposition that matters, but what - if anything - then follows. The key to dealing with issues, concerns and fears about futures lies in the nature of the human response. I call this 'the empowerment principle': an important part of futures education.

Figure 8.1 about here

Matrix for dealing with fears

Figure 8.1 is a matrix that can be used to explore a variety of responses to whatever fears arise. The matrix has two main purposes: to place negative associations in a wider context and to focus attention upon what may be meant by 'high-quality' responses (See below). This approach can be used in a workshop situation, as a counselling tool, or by individuals working alone. Whatever the method, it is often helpful to begin by listening to the fears or concerns and recognising that they usually have a sound basis in reality. In all but a small minority of cases they are likely to be rational responses to a drastically altered world.

The next step for students is to hold the images, associations, feelings or responses out before them, in a relaxed and non-judgemental way. Four sets of responses are then explored by following the matrix.

1. Accept the possibility that what is feared will come to pass, and explore low-quality responses.

2. Accept the possibility and explore high-quality responses.

3. Reject the possibility with low-quality responses.

4. Reject the possibility with high-quality responses.

The acceptance/rejection distinction is not clear-cut in all cases and can generate ambiguities; in this context, they are not important enough to waste time considering. The first point is that the exercise generates up to four sets of strategies for comparison. Possible solutions emerge across each of the four categories. At this point, further questions arise: what appeared to be the 'best' solutions? What resources, changes, commitments and/or support would be needed to put a preferred strategy into practice?

It may be helpful to consider some of the criteria that may be applied to decide if a response is 'high-quality' or not. To begin with, they can be seen in a wider context - there is always a wide range from which to choose. Second, many fears are overstated and can be scaled down to a less over-blown status. Third, fears which are linked

to images or concerns about futures are both provisional and negotiable. They are not set in concrete, but represent opportunities for engagement, choice and purposive action. Concerns about the future depend on human vision, perception and understanding, and, as such, the locus of power lies in people, and not in a disembodied vision beyond human influence. Finally, a high-quality response is, above all, creative; it has the capacity to go beyond the given and break new ground.

Young people who begin moving away from a preoccupation with optimism or pessimism, will view their initial responses in a wider context, considering the nature and grounds of high-quality responses, and will find themselves fashioning a fundamental and important shift of perception. It is a shift away from having things happen to one, to a position where one takes greater control and makes things happen. In other words, a big step towards personal empowerment.

3. Explore Social Innovations

A social innovation is something someone has created out of a perceived need. Human societies are made up of countless social innovations: courts of law, bike helmets, credit cards, insurance, group therapy, franchising and institutions of foresight.

The best way to begin with young people is to consider local examples of such innovations, and, if possible, to draw on the experience of local people who, perhaps, had a hand in getting them adopted. The actual focus is less important than the principle involved, which is, that if enough people care about something, there is a good chance that it can be made to happen (or, if appropriate, avoided).

How do enough people begin caring sufficiently to create a long-term change? Usually, one person - or a very small group - has made a long-term commitment and worked hard over a period of time convincing others. The big social movements: women's rights, the environment, peace, and so on, all started in small ways. But, in time, they stir governments and alter public perceptions in major ways. So, it is worth taking a close look at such innovations and movements and attempting to understand how they work. It is generally a mistake to proselytise on behalf of such entities, but it is responsible to make sure that they are included on the significant map of knowledge.

Young people can try out the process of social innovation easily and safely. There are basically just a few simple steps:

1. Get informed about something important (environmental scanning).

2. Investigate the topic for a period of time (research).

3. Develop some initial conclusions about it (analysis and reasoning).

4. Discuss these conclusions with advisers (check for safety and appropriateness).

5. Construct a project and present a proposal (project formulation).

6. Expect indifference, opposition etc., but don't give up (social process).

7. Evaluate the outcomes (evaluation).

By following this kind of approach, young people learn about ways societies respond to attempts at change. They learn about barriers to change, about the uses of power and authority, the importance of clear thinking and communication skills, and so on. The main thing they will learn, however, is that in a very positive sense people are powerful; if they decide to something constructive - and do it carefully - there is a very good chance that their efforts will be rewarded. Such grassroots efforts have the potential to profoundly affect the present, and, therefore, the future also.

4. See the Future as Part of the Present

The tenses of the English language create three distinct 'boxes' for past, present and future, thereby creating false boundaries between each and confirming an illusion of separateness. It is true they are different, but it is not the case that they are separate - as Figure 8.2 shows. Here there is a flow of relationships, which cannot be separated or assigned to individual 'boxes'.

Figure 8.2 about here

Connections between past, present and future

The connections are richer, however, since the 'flow' is not all in one 'direction'. For example, hopes or fears about futures may not just affect the present, they may also cause one to reconsider aspects of the past which led in such a direction. Similarly, any projects which one may elect to undertake do not spring fully-formed from the present; they arise from the historical and cultural matrix in which we exist.
Thus, while the body may be constrained within a fairly narrow present, the human mind and spirit are able to range at will across very broad spans of time and space.

Figure 8.3 suggests, therefore, that boundaries between past, present and future, are, in fact, fluid and open; instead of being 'stranded' in a narrow and restrictive present, there are other creative and cultural choices available. In fact, normal living requires a fluid and easy movement between past, present and future. Only the brain-damaged, with impaired memories, lack this capacity; they are locked into a confusing,

and deeply frustrating, moving present, which they can neither remember nor foresee.

Figure 8.3 about here

Weaving the present from past and future

Mental processes, centrally involved in constructing the present, divide between the interpretation of past experience and the anticipation of possible futures. These two processes are not in opposition; one cannot be considered more or less important than the other. Both are mutually reinforcing and mutually necessary to support normal consciousness. It is risky and escapist, however, to attempt to remain in the imagined past or future for any length of time, because of a failure to re-connect with the present; futuristic fantasies, historical novels, films and costume dramas, may fulfil this function.

The present is not a fixed period of time; it varies according to perception and need. Whatever notion of the present is adopted, however, it is possible to see it at any time as, in some sense, 'woven' from past and future: from memory and prevision; from experience and goals; from identity and purpose. Figure 8.3 makes this clear. The 'here-and-now' may indeed represent a very restricted span of time, however, the materials imported into this arena may come from far and wide. In other words, young people need not be, in some sense, 'locked into' a narrow and alienating present; if they begin journeying more widely into past and future, they will discover many of the resources they need to survive and prosper in difficult times.

5. Use Futures Concepts, Tools and Ideas

To be active in politics one needs a political discourse, in economics an economic discourse, and in futures - a futures discourse. None of these is exclusive, yet each tends, first of all, to develop in a particular context. The most useful linguistic, conceptual and symbolic resources subsequently become public property. This is beginning to happen to futures concepts; they may have developed in isolation, but they are now used more widely.

Futures concepts have been widely overlooked. But they are important because they provide part of the means by which to consider futures. Like the language and symbols of any area, they give substance to what may otherwise seem vague and unreal, providing clarity and definition to bring hitherto obscured ideas and possibilities into sharper focus. In other words, they augment the natural capacity of the human brain/mind system and raise its power to engage in futures work to new levels. (Some examples of futures concepts are given below.) Futures concepts and methods are the most important tools for teaching futures. They are not used merely to forecast or predict 'what will happen' (a

self-contradictory enterprise that rules out the active role of humans in creating their history), but, rather, to elaborate our understanding of futures in the present. This is a more interesting and educationally productive task. Here are a number of futures concepts and methods in wide use.

Figure 8.4 about here

Concept map of the futures field

The Futures Field

It's useful to begin with some kind of 'map' to provide an overview of the field. Figure 8.4 provides an example. Using such maps as starting points, one begins to locate some of the methodologies, processes and, most importantly, people who work in the field. The work of outstanding individuals represents a legitimate way of introducing futures to students. Clearly, this is a multi-disciplinary area, so it can take a little time to feel 'at home'. Yet this broad structure gives access to a very wide range of conceptual, intellectual, practical and human resources.

Alternatives and Choices

These are two key concepts of the field; each suggests no single, deterministic future, rather, a range of options and possibilities, which invite a range of human responses. How can one conceptualise alternatives? They emerge from engaging with the subject matter over a period of time, from looking beyond the obvious, from examining assumptions and, perhaps, using some of the major futures techniques: environmental scanning, the cross-impact matrix, cultural critique and the analysis of cycles of change. Since each can be approached at a range of levels, they can all be adapted for educational use. Understanding alternatives creates a decision context for considering choices.

Creating Futures

The central point of teaching about futures is to show that we are all involved, all capable of pursuing ends and purposes, which lead away from some outcomes, and toward others. It helps individuals feel capable of contributing to ends which matter, and not feel intimidated by vast collectivities of power, prestige and profit, which may sometimes seem overwhelming.

Futures are scanned: routinely and informally by everyone, and routinely and systematically by forecasters and strategic planners. Futures are created - or avoided - by the sum total of formal and informal processes by which important social decisions are made, and acted upon. All these processes can be clarified, studied, and subjected to careful and informed analysis. Moreover, individuals are free to participate.

Carefully reviewing the work of citizen action movements, shows that governments are often the last to know when a major shift is under way. Many such shifts developed, grew and gained legitimacy because people cared enough to get on with the necessary work. Hence, there is a notion of active and responsible citizenship at the centre of futures teaching. It is realised, in part, through simple teaching methodologies, several of which are outlined below.

Environmental Scanning.

Key to an implementation of foresight is the certainty that one is receiving the right messages from the environment, being alert to information about relevant matters. Students can be assigned the task of monitoring specific areas over a period and begin to develop the necessary skills. Clearly, this ties-in with other curriculum areas: philosophy, english, media studies, and so on. Environmental scanning is an activity that need not remain the province of large organisations Individuals, too, can learn some of the skills involved: being alert for precursors (or early signals); sorting information from propaganda; discerning trends; summarising data and keeping it organised in an accessible and useable form. These skills can all be taught and learned in schools and other contexts.

Futures Wheels

Futures wheels are one of the most flexible and useful tools available. Students begin with a large sheet of blank paper and ask a 'what if' question: "What if cars were banned? What if the human life-span doubled? What if wars ended?", etc. This possible future event is placed at the centre of the paper. The next question is "If this happens, what would happen next?" In this way, a ring of immediate consequences is placed around the original event. The ring can be extended by considering secondary consequences, and so on. The result is a pattern of judgements. There is no 'right' or 'wrong', simply an incorporation of assumptions, both positive and negative, which dictate how patterns could develop. The futures wheel can be "re-run" according to different assumptions. It can be regarded as an end in its own right or as a starting point for further work. Often the outer edges of the pattern throw up fresh ideas. They can be created with students of any age and level of sophistication. With very young children teachers can write responses on a wall board, while, with older people, the exercise can be developed and extended in various ways.

Critique

The dominant Western/industrial worldview has at least two kinds of major systemic defects concerning futures educators: underlying assumptions (about technology, growth, progress, the environment etc.) are proving wide of the mark and a number of core meanings and commitments are breaking down. This suggests attention be paid to major

shifts in areas such as: work, leisure, health, defence and, indeed, education. Careful futures work in each of these areas reveals both a loss of coherence and a number of alternative interpretations vying for attention. Careful attention to what is happening here reveals grounds for informed optimism via the outlines of a renewed worldview. As this becomes clearer and better understood, so it will be realised that no teacher or pupil need ever feel helpless; critical world-view analysis and positive critique leads directly toward empowerment.

Acting

One of the most common responses to futures work is a feeling that the world's problems are too great to be addressed by individuals. Students may see the point of something, but they will often respond by saying: "OK, but what can I do?" This is a legitimate question that every teacher, youth worker and parent should be able to answer.

Figure 8.5 about here

What can I do?

Figure 8.5 provides a way of beginning to deal with this question; it suggests there is a wide range of resources to be drawn upon. In a futures context, first and foremost are an individual's own capacities and perceptions. Both can be looked at and consciously developed. Next are futures concepts and methodologies which articulate futures concerns and provide ways of approaching them. Finally, there is the study of real-world processes, describing what is happening in the world and providing starting points for an infinite variety of projects.

If there is a single answer to dealing with the problems of a world in transition, it is learning to act effectively and to persist until constructive changes are achieved. One reply to the question "What can I do?" is "the answer is a journey." This short summary statement is useful because it points people in the most promising direction of all: the development of their own capabilities. It is a journey of inner discovery, as individuals come to know their own capacities and purposes. It is also a journey of exploration, research and action in the wider world. This twin journey identifies a central purpose of education at any level; but futures education gives it both substance and direction.

6. Design Your Way out of the Industrial Era

After opening out a new range of alternatives in terms of ideas, visions and options, the next step is to look at other possible changes in the ways things are understood or done. To some extent this is already happening in areas such as energy conservation and re-cycling. There are many other ways, however, of applying the notion of 'design'. Figure 8.6 relates it to several key aspects of the cultural environment. In this way, the idea of social innovations can be extended, challenging us to

find new ways of applying creative imagination.

Figure 8.6 about here

Aspects of cultural design

Design is routinely applied to the technical system and, indeed, with many uses. As we move into the 21st Century it will be necessary to re-think and replace many technical and infrastructural systems that were founded on old assumptions (rapid growth, unlimited fossil energy, high environmental impacts). In their place we will need to adapt, re-fit and create new systems based on different assumptions (steady-state, or qualitative growth, energy conservation, low impact). There is scope for a great deal of innovative design work, some of which can be carried out by young people. As the Figure suggests, however, the notion of design can also be applied to other domains including: the language system, the spatial system, the regulatory system, the temporal system and the ethical/moral system. There follow some key questions that may be asked in relation to each.

The Language System

What ideas, images and metaphors from the past are no longer helpful? How can language accurately represent the interconnected global system and the major defects which impair its operation? How can language (and imagery) be used to explore a wide range of future options and alternatives? What types of humanistic and artistic productions are suggested by the above?

The Spatial System

What assumptions about space have been inherited from the past? How has land-use been conditioned by cheap petroleum, and city layouts by the private car? What changes might be foreshadowed by using different assumptions and different drivers of change? Similarly, how do patterns of housing, transport, industry and mining reflect industrial priorities? What kinds of spatial design solutions will be needed in an information, image-rich society attempting to move toward sustainability?

The Regulatory System

How can a regulatory system based on precedent and past practice begin to deal systematically with new problems and dilemmas? How can it be modified to give a voice to the disenfranchised, and to future generations? Is there a role for an ombudsman for future generations? How can one mediate between a productive system hooked on growth and the need to preserve the environment's integrity? How can regulation actively encourage closed-loop processing and ecological restoration?

The Temporal System

Western cultures seem to pay much more attention to space than time. Yet time is culture-bound and powerfully conditions the social order. How can time be studied? What models are useful for understanding it? How do linear and cyclic models affect social processes? What is future-discounting and how does it operate to 'make the future vanish'? What are time-frames, and how are they used? How might we use time-frames more consciously, matching them with particular activities?

The Ethical System

Our ethics are badly in need of an overhaul. The diminished 'ethic' of marketing and consumerism have become system imperatives, yet, they are patently destructive. How can they be changed or replaced? What other sources of value and meaning are available to us? How can they be accessed? What is the grounds of a stewardship ethic? Could this play a more central role in a society of the future? How might we begin to activate the notion of a wise society? What might a wise culture be like, and how would its operating assumptions differ from present ones?

Such questions can stimulate young people to look beyond the obvious for insights and materials that lead away from the abyss to new and renewed ways of life.

Limitations of the Strategies

Each of the above provide a number of starting points that can be used successfully to deal with many fears and concerns. But we should not pretend that they exhaust the field or that all problems have solutions. Many problems do not, in fact, have solutions on the level at which they are first understood or experienced. A qualitatively different approach is needed for dealing with systemic difficulties and deep-seated world-view assumptions and commitments.

*Note

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