

# Why schools should be scanning the future and using futures tools

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**S**chools continue to function as products of the past, writes Richard Slaughter, and find it difficult to respond to the emerging future. This, he says, is a recipe for educational decline and social decay. He regards futures studies as a core discipline of education itself...

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. The late 20th century, however, 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, individuals and organisations need to look ahead with all the means at their disposal, interpret what they find and integrate these understandings into the present in a continuous cycle or process. The keys to the future are not found through forecasts, predictions or media gurus, but through patient, careful futures work. Schools need strategies to integrate the resulting insights into everything they do.

## 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 therefore refers back to the self-understandings of that earlier time and as a consequence assumes a fairly static outlook. Unlike many commercial organisations, schools, and school systems, lack basic environmental scanning and strategic direction-setting capacities. This is a structural oversight. It means that schools continue to function

as products of the past and find it difficult to respond to the emerging picture of the near-term future. This basic lack of capacity is a recipe for educational decline and social decay.

It is not possible for schools to fulfil their responsibilities to individuals and society so long as they remain so thoroughly immersed in past ideas, assumptions and worldviews. The 'safe' world of the past provides a comforting image in times such as these, but the apparent security of the past is an illusion. This is a particularly cruel trap for private schools whose ethos often deliberately evokes the past. The past provides a starting point; but neither individuals nor schools can remain there. They need to shift their focus from past to future. Schools need to change—but educators should be controlling and directing the process. 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 proactive 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 propositional or interpretative 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 interpret such material according to the standard rules of scholarship and offer the resulting insights to wider constituencies through books, journals, databases, internet dialogues, workshops, seminars and conferences. It is not secret, privileged knowledge. The resulting propositions and insights can be examined and checked by anyone.

## Developing new forward-looking insights

If schools and school systems were properly fulfilling their

central tasks, they would not passively wait for futures workers to offer them help—they would demand it. I regard futures studies as a core discipline of education itself. It is as essential to the tasks of teaching and learning as physics and chemistry are to engineering. However, not only do schools not routinely use futures tools and methods; in most cases they do not even know that they exist. So there is a significant gap both of theory and practice. Hence it is vital to breach boundaries, move across the disciplines, facilitate cooperation between people in different locations, 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.

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. Futurescan has been used successfully in Australia in a range of contexts and organisations, including that of schools, colleges and universities. 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.

The 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 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 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. It will not be very interested in competitive advantage. Rather it will be alert to the global forces that are dismantling the industrial worldview. It will see where these trends are leading and understand what they mean. It will also understand the cultural 'growth points', the new understandings, approaches, myths etc. that are creating a new worldview. In other words, proactive leadership will be keenly aware both of the danger we are collectively in and, most importantly, of the many ways out of the trap humanity has cre-

ated for itself. Such in-depth understanding becomes increasingly vital as we move into the early 21st century. There is no safe path into the future that relies solely on 'rear-view mirror driving'.

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.

## 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, they cannot remain viable by implementing innovations based solely 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 civilisational challenge that we face will be superseded, to our collective cost. ■

## References

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