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Beyond 'the future of...' Responding to the civilisational challenge



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Abstract

Among an array of desirable 'skills for life and work' are those that relate to understanding the global context, the challenges visible there and the specific ways young people can be prepared for actively responding. Educators at every level need to move beyond tokenistic treatments of 'the future' (singular) to understand the 'civilisational challenge' facing us. In so doing, futures concepts, tools and other resources will be invaluable.

This paper draws on some aspects of recent scientific research and sources within the broad futures literature to highlight aspects of the near-future environment. It then suggests a number of tasks for educators that need to be undertaken and applied. Due to the limitations of the format, such tasks are not spelled out in detail. Rather, more appropriate in-depth sources are provided for those wishing to explore this fascinating area further.

Introduction

On the rare occasions when educators turn their attention to 'the future' they tend to do so in terms that are either rhetorical or extrapolative. 'The future of X' and 'the future of Y' can certainly be interesting and productive if you happen to live and work in world x or world y. But such approaches, and especially those that begin with conventional taken-for-granted assumptions, are of limited value, serving mainly to 'spin the wheels'. They're mainly about the appearance of addressing 'change', not its reality. Unlike those in business and, to a lesser extent, in government, educators seldom develop strategies that actively deal with the forward view and the emerging issues that it contains.

To get beyond this stereotypical and, I'd argue, increasingly untenable position, educators need to do at least two

things. First, they must stand up for what they believe in as professionals with a remit to nurture the young and prepare them for living and working in a globally connected but unsustainable society. Second, they must look beyond their traditional concerns to understand how the global context has changed, and will continue to change. Close attention to the forward view brings us face to face with what I call 'the civilisational challenge'. In turn the latter hinges on what I call 'the story that connects' (which is essentially a view of macro change) (Slaughter, 2008). In what follows I draw on several sources from the broad futures literature, and very briefly sketch out some educational implications.

The story that connects

Over the last 30 years an authoritative series of publications has appeared that describes the human predicament with increasing clarity. For example, beginning with the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows, 1972) and currently ending with *Beyond the Limits: A Thirty Year Update* (Meadows, 2005) the Meadows team provides an evolving perspective that tracks our growing understanding of global change and what this means for human life and culture. More recently the International Geosphere Program (IGP) sponsored another series that brings together the work of many scientists from around the world. One of these is called *Global Change and the Earth System* (Steffan, 2004), a work that provides vital new in-depth understanding about the context in which human life is framed. Here is a sample:

Many human activities that reached take-off points some time in the 20th century have accelerated sharply towards the end of the century. The last 50 years have without doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural

world in the history of the species (p. 258). As a consequence:

The Earth is currently operating in a no-analogue state. In terms of key environmental parameters, the Earth System has recently moved well outside the range of the natural variability exhibited over at least the last half million years. The nature of the changes now taking place simultaneously in the Earth System, their magnitudes and rates of change are unprecedented. (p. 262)

Overall, works of this kind describe how, over the last 100 years, our species has grown fundamentally out of balance with its world. It follows that we need to understand this process in some depth and discern wise, informed, society-wide strategies of response. I call this 'the story that connects' because the perspective brings together hitherto separate pieces of information, creating the clarity that necessarily precedes action. But, of course, what has been called the 'blizzard of change' confronting us is not limited to humanity's many impacts upon the external world, significant as these are. The range of change processes can appear bewildering because they operate across many different domains. That is why change analysts and foresight practitioners have adopted various methods for managing this complexity (Slaughter, 2005).

Two other works provide a flavour of the rich web of understanding that has arisen in relation to global change processes, including social, economic and political processes. The first is by Mikhail Gorbachev, former President of the Soviet Union. His book, *Manifesto for the Earth*, sets out a brief but coherent analysis of the global situation along with some clear recommendations for change (Gorbachev, 2006).

Gorbachev is no idealist. As one who lived through the multiple privations of life in war-torn and post-war Russia, his view of the world is grounded in the

realities of life as seen from a small farm in the Stavropol region of the North Caucasus. He is known for initiating as Russian President certain democratic reforms that opened up the Soviet Union, bringing it forward out of the totalitarian era. He is therefore well qualified to state that 'the opportunities on offer at the end of the Cold War were for the most part not taken up' (p. 31). And he is clear about why: lack of vision, lack of political will and the spread of economic liberalism around the world. This was demonstrated at the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development where a variety of progressive measures (such as investment in renewable energy by the OPEC countries and measures to curb excessive consumption in the rich West) failed to be taken up and implemented. For these and related reasons he considers that global politics is in a genuine crisis.

Gorbachev's personal solution is to put his energy into initiatives like the Earth Charter, Green Cross International and the Earth Dialogues process. He's accepted that governments *per se* and the UN simply will not act in the ways that will achieve sustained change. Therefore the only route left is direct engagement with people around the world and, especially, through the NGO movement. He does, however, overlook the vital role of that could be undertaken by future-focused educational innovation (Gidley, Smith & Bateman, 2004).

A final example is a work that explores the dilemma of the United States of America and, by extension, other technically developed societies. *The Long Emergency* is a challenging book that employs an uncompromising cultural analysis of the USA to take issue with nearly all of the underlying myths and cultural assumptions that have become widely accepted, not only there, but also around the world (Kunstler, 2005). Kunstler, a US citizen,

suggests that the USA has been 'sleepwalking into the future' for many decades by adopting and promoting a short-term, exploitive and self-defeating set of policies and practices that will cost it dearly. These include:

- the 'fad' of globalism and a 'magical' market economy
- present-day profiteering at the expense of future wellbeing
- what he terms a 'colossal mis-investment' in suburbia
- the creation of an unsustainable economy
- dishonest government where vital trends are dismissed as 'unthinkable'
- overall, a Las Vegas-type culture of dependency and purposeless dissipation.

Underlying all this are issues of modernity and the projected decline of fossil fuels. Kunstler is not alone in suggesting that the former is much more dependent upon the latter than anyone is prepared to admit. He points out that the peaks of US and world oil discoveries were in the 1930s and 1960s respectively. The significance of subsequent oil 'shocks' and temporary shortages was overlooked due to an inherent American complacency, its belief that it could secure supplies from overseas and then by the emergence of new fields in Alaska and the North Sea. But the figures from the Middle East are uncertain and the growth of China has helped to accelerate demand right at the point when supply is fully stretched. In this view, we have already reached the period of 'peak oil', and the ride 'down from the peak', as it were, will be far more difficult than current decision makers realise. There's also a deeper and more vexing issue that is seldom considered anywhere. Kunstler views the oil era as having permitted the world's population to rise

to its current level, a level that cannot possibly be sustained. He writes:

The current world population of 6.5 billion people has no hope whatsoever of sustaining itself at current levels, and the fundamental conditions of life on earth are about to force the issue. The only questions are: what form will the inevitable attrition take, and how, and which places, and when? (p. 61)

About half of the book deals with the post-oil world that he believes will occur before mid-century. He suggests that eventually all nations will have to contend with the problems of the Long Emergency: the end of industrial growth, falling standards of living, economic desperation, declining food production and domestic political strife. A point will come when even the great powers of the world no longer have the means to project their power any distance. Even nuclear weapons become inoperable, considering how much their careful maintenance depends on other technological systems linked to the fossil fuel economy (p. 98).

Unlike some other commentators he believes that, with the possible and temporary exception of nuclear power, there are simply no viable alternatives to oil. For a variety of reasons, the so-called 'renewable' sources of energy, such as solar, wind, wave, hydro and hydrogen, will not replace oil and gas. Nuclear power may produce some base load electricity but this will fail to serve the wider spectrum of energy needs. The underlying theme of the book, therefore, is that of a culture that has lost its grip on reality, created a fantasy world predicated on cheap, easily transported energy, and is now faced with chronic entropic decline. Clearly this is a powerful and challenging thesis. There is, however, one very significant omission: he says virtually nothing about the many sources of vitality, creativity and depth of innovation within US culture,

including those found – or that could be created – within educational settings.

What we have in these brief samples from a much wider literature are some of the elements of a diagnosis of the 'state of the planet' in the early 21st century. I suggest that it is absolutely vital that educators at every level begin to take this work seriously, assess its veracity and work out the consequences in some detail. I take the view that, equipped with such resources, it is well within our capacity to respond. A well-grounded and informed futures perspective goes a long way beyond allowing us to propose a variety of actions to preserve the environment, vital as this is. It also provides the tools to understand deeper issues like the fallacies of economic growth and to discern some of the more subtle drivers of unsustainable outlooks within the heart of the Western worldview itself (Berman, 1981; Slaughter, 2004).

Educational responses

From the point of view outlined here the single most significant omission from educational thinking and practice is the absence of any kind of effective futures discourse. This has become indefensible. 'The future' is no longer an abstraction, a metaphorical 'empty space'. It has real and comprehensible content, major challenges and inspiring opportunities that go to the very heart of social life. In other words, we might say that intelligent forward views have become indispensable (Steffan, 2004).

If this is accepted then the first and core requirement is that educators look beyond their studies, offices and classrooms and inform themselves not only about the dimensions of the global challenge but also their implications for overdependent societies. These include the broad arena of positive resolutions to these fundamental issues (Brown, 2007).

A second requirement is that they begin to seriously build on the wide range of futures work and initiatives that have occurred in various educational environments, both here and abroad (Beare & Slaughter, 1993; Gidley, Smith & Bateman, 2004; Hicks, 2002, 2006; Page, 2000; Milojevic, 2005) The profession as a whole must ensure that all beginning teachers have a grasp of the global context and what it is telling us, as must curriculum coordinators, school principals, executive decision makers and ministers.

Third, the profession needs to seriously evaluate some of the emerging ideas that bring with them the potential for societies to re-equip themselves for the turbulent period ahead. At the top of this list I would like to suggest not merely an abstract notion of 'social foresight' but a deep appreciation of how it builds on our own individual capacities for dealing with the 'not here' and the 'not yet'. The pathways to implementing social foresight are much less esoteric than one might think (Slaughter, 2006b). Next on the list might be the principle of 'intergenerational equity' which would help us to understand – and begin to reverse – the process by which current populations constantly defer the full burden of the costs of their activities to our children and theirs. An ombudsman or council for future generations might not be a bad idea to apopt. A final example concerns problematising conventional notions of economic growth and reconceptualising it within an 'economics of permanence' (Henderson, 2008). Clearly there's a great deal of work to do.

Within schools there are many options for including a futures emphasis across the curriculum. At the primary level it can be achieved by the inclusion of a sample of futures concepts and tools wherever they are deemed appropriate. At the early secondary

level a variety of teaching strategies are available to deepen and extend young people's appreciation of futures concerns (Slaughter & Bussey, 2007). At the upper secondary level there are worked examples in Australia showing how this work can be carried out. In fact, proof of concept was achieved with a trial futures subject for Year 11 and Year 12 in Queensland – although the changing political circumstances of the sponsoring body meant that the subject, while successfully trialled, was never implemented (Board of Senior Secondary School Studies Queensland, 1995).

As in all such cases it's obvious that teacher capacity and teacher response is crucial. When given sufficient time and support to achieve a level of familiarity with futures approaches, most teachers are more than happy to incorporate them in their work. Furthermore, and this is the clinching argument, perhaps young people jump at the opportunity to explore the futures domain for one very obvious reason – they are intrinsically interested in prospects affecting the unfolding of their own lives. Crucially, having an early grounding in futures concepts and tools, grasping the beginnings of a futures discourse and beginning to understand the pattern of threats and options in the near-future view all serve to assist young people in their transitions to life and work (Board of Senior Secondary School Studies Queensland, 1995). With these foundations, they are better equipped to develop active and informed responses to futures that most adults can still scarcely bring themselves to imagine.

Conclusion

When educators use the term 'work' they are usually referring to the emergence of the young from educational environments to 'the world of work', that is, earning a living, becoming citizens, raising families and

so on. I support the focus on these vital social processes wholeheartedly. Yet underlying them are expectations of smooth continuity into the future that cannot and will not be sustained. A number of very specific discontinuities lie ahead. Metaphorically they constitute an approaching 'perfect storm' comprised of climate change, regional environmental collapse, peak oil disruptions and economic crises, all exacerbated by continuing strife between different worldviews. If, on the other hand, such prospects received timely, careful and sustained responses, their worst effects can be moderated and perhaps resolved (Slaughter, 2006a).

So the purpose of this paper is to challenge educators to see these issues as intimately bound up with all aspects of teaching and learning. Beyond conventional notions of 'work' we need to explore those that deal explicitly with the various aspects of our civilisational challenge. They need to be taken very seriously indeed by the whole profession.

I promise you that, in the main, young people will not object!

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